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Vanita Reddy

THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE GLOBAL INDIAN WOMAN
Geographies of Beauty in *Femina*

This article examines various image-texts of Indian female beauty in *Femina*, India’s most widely circulating English-language women’s magazine. It argues that in *Femina*, race (calibrated through whiteness, brownness and even Indianness) and gender (calibrated through normative femininity) intervene in certain epistemologies about India, the West and ‘the world’. In order to posit these ‘geographies of beauty,’ the first part of this article shows that *Femina* maps the Indian woman’s body within nation-space, that is, as definitively ‘Indian’. The second part of the article turns to the re-articulation of the nation through and against the ‘West’ as a geography that must be designated and disavowed in order to claim the globality of this Indian body. In *Femina*, ‘beauty’ is more than a physical attribute; it is a telos toward which the female subject, transformed into a consumer subject and also essentially Indian, moves through these decades of globalisation and national chauvinism.

The Matrix of Global Beauty: Miss India, the Beauty Industry and *Femina*

In an article on five Miss India titleholders who went on to win international beauty titles from 1994 to 2000, a stylist for the Miss India pageant told a reporter that organisers of the pageant ‘started picking women with international contests in mind. We told the judges: Don’t look for a Miss India, look for a Miss World.’ The stylist’s comment obliquely references the construction of Miss India as a symbol of India’s consumerist economy, the hallmark of India’s globalisation. The reporter, in turn, uses the stylist’s comments to praise Miss India’s ability to draw global attention—and, by extension, global capital—to India through her bodily display on the pageant stage. However, his comment also crystallizes an implicit paradox in contemporary constructions of Indian female beauty: even as Indian beauties are sought for their ‘Indianness,’ they also must be ‘more than’ Indian. In other words, to be Miss India today is to exceed the very terms of that title.

This paradoxical placement of the beautiful Indian woman within and outside the boundaries of nation points to her position as a globalised subject. These locations of ‘inside’—the nation—and ‘outside’—the negative constitutive space of nation that will surface in my analysis of globalisation as ‘the West’—constitute ‘discursive
geographies of beauty’. As Foucault reminds us, discourse solicits its explanatory power from spatial metaphors: discourse is always part of a discursive formation, ‘a system of a regular dispersion of statements’ (emphasis added). In *Femina*, a popular South Asian women’s magazine, discourses of beauty are part of a larger dispersion of statements—nationalism, globalisation, orientalism, and (post) colonialism, for example—about certain geographies—namely India and the West—through which we as readers are asked to register middle-class Indian female beauty. ‘Geographies of beauty’ also points to something more pointedly epistemological, in so far as it always cites the gendered and racialised relations of power within which discourse and geography are situated. The various image-texts of beauty in *Femina* allow us to consider the ways in which race (calibrated through whiteness, brownness and even Indianness) and gender (calibrated through normative femininity) intervene in certain knowledge about India, the West and ‘the world’. Discourses of beauty reproduce and transform existing geographies, even as they are shaped by them. *Femina*’s ‘writing of space’ is concomitant with its spatialisation of the beautiful Indian woman’s body. In what follows, I argue that as a popular South Asian women’s magazine, *Femina* maps the Indian woman’s body through discourses of beauty: new or competing geographies of India, the West and ‘the global’ emerge through various articulations of the ‘body beautiful’, and they become lodged within the popular imaginary.

The global currency of the ‘Indian’ woman’s body depends upon its status as a ‘site’ of geographical contestation, one that (re)produces and is the repository of complementary and contradictory place-images—India and the West as spaces of modernity, India as the space of tradition, the West as a space of contamination and artificiality, to name just a few. In *Femina*, India is both a national geographic (the bounded nation-state), and a global space outside the territoriality of the nation-state that requires for its maintenance the global significations of the beautiful Indian woman. The first part of this article examines the ways in which *Femina* maps the Indian woman’s body within nation-space, that is, as definitively ‘Indian’. The second part of the article turns to the re-articulation of the nation through and against the ‘West’ as a geography that must be designated and disavowed in order to claim the globality of this Indian body.

India’s opening up to the world ‘outside’ in the current economic climate of globalisation finds a symbolic parallel in the beautiful Indian woman who has become linked to the world outside through the global currency of her beauty. At the same time, in the Miss India stylist’s comment quoted above, the Indian woman’s global beauty contains a crucial—if unarticulated—caveat: her beauty must be linked back to the nation through an essential ‘Indianness’. As feminist scholars of globalisation such as Jacqui Alexander (1997), Leela Fernandes (2000), Rosa Linda Fregoso (1999, 2000), and Aihwa Ong (2000) have shown in various national contexts, the crucial project for nation-states like India, is to negotiate the desire for and participation in the accumulation of global capital with the preservation of national identity. In the Indian context, specifically, the liberalisation of India’s economy in 1991 brought with it the ‘threat of Westernization’. This particular threat of globalisation may be linked to an early nationalist imaginary, which coalesced around Indian anti-colonialist struggles. Partha Chatterjee and other scholars of Indian postcoloniality have shown that 19th century nationalism was legitimated through the construction of the West as
a space of contamination. Thus, the construction of India as ‘not West’ in today’s
globalised economy finds an historical precedent in the initial imaginings of the nation-
state. Indeed, the negotiation of global capital and state power within third-world
nation-states like India often emerges through new nationalisms that instantiate a
hierarchical East/West dichotomy. Quoting Ong, ‘Globalisation … has national and
transnational forms of nationalism that not only reject Western hegemony but seek to
promote the ascendancy of the East’. 11

Drawing generally on the feminist theories of globalisation mentioned above, and
more specifically on Ong’s construction of globalisation as producing nationalisms that
take on a binary construction of ‘East vs West,’ this article will interpolate the
contours of recent Indian nationalist intensifications through a popular cultural text on
middle-class Indian female beauty, Femina. If to be Miss India today is to exceed the
very terms of that title, then the ‘Femina woman,’ whose beauty is registered through
the global iconicity of the Indian beauty queen, is a site of cultural contestation: her
reconstitution as a national subject depends upon the designation and disavowal of
both ‘India’ and ‘the West’.

My reading of Indian beauty in Femina through the rubrics of globalisation and
nationalism is informed by several pivotal shifts in India’s political, economic and
cultural landscape over the past 15 years, which is now a familiar story: the
liberalization of India’s economy in 1991; the overlapping trajectories of the rise of
middle-class consumer culture; the Hindu Right’s rise to power in 1996; and the
heightened discourse around Hindutva in the women’s movement; all of which have
coaesed into a popular discourse of Indian womanhood that reflects a ‘Hindu
modernity’. 12 Indian womanhood thus becomes a bodily site upon which discourses of
Hindu nationalism are produced and reinforced. These discourses around gender,
class and nationhood have emerged in complementary and contradictory ways,
culminating in a moment in which ‘Indianness’ by the late 1990s constitutes the
erasure of class, caste and religious differences.

Femina is a particularly salient archive for my inquiry into ‘geographies of beauty’
because of the magazine’s vibrant participation in India’s ‘beauty boom’. 13 Based in
Bombay and published bi-monthly by the Times of India Media Group, Femina is
India’s largest circulating English-language women’s magazine, and ranks among one
of India’s oldest and most established. Since its inception in 1959, Femina has a long
history of promoting image-text concepts of beauty for a middle-class consumer
subject. Femina is described as ‘contemporary in tone and treatment, it spans the
spectrum of subjects from fashion and beauty to relationships, health, self
development and literary pursuits … with a wide angle view of the Indian woman’s
world’. 14 Femina thus seeks to engage a particular kind of ‘Indian’ woman, one who is
English-speaking, middle-class, and who has the time and desire to attend to her own
‘self-improvement’. In promoting this national subject, Femina occupies a singular
place within a vast field of Indian popular media—including feminist, regional and/or
vernacular print and visual media—to which we might look for representations of
contemporary Indian womanhood.

I have chosen to isolate representations of female beauty from other facets of
Indian womanhood to which Femina lays claim, since they all bear the mark of ‘the
beautiful’ as a prevailing feature. Femina regularly features Miss India pageant winners
on its covers, advertises for the contest, and as a sponsor of the contest, claims part of
the pageant’s title: *Femina* Miss India. More importantly, *Femina* participates in the commodification of beauty through its placement of advertisements for popular beauty products, fashion layouts and articles on beauty. As a magazine that both sponsors and advertises for the Miss India contest, *Femina* actively participates in the negotiation of globalisation and national(ist) identity through various ‘texts’ on middle-class Indian beauty—columns, editorials, ads and articles. This study is limited to issues of *Femina* from 1997–2002, a period defined in part by the time frame of the events outlined above, and in part by available resources. Within this time ‘Indian-ness’ depends upon a subsumption of difference under a specifically Hindu middle-class consumer identity. I here turn to *Femina*’s complex and contradictory construction of Indian womanhood—one that is ‘feminist,’ nationalist and middle-class—in order to better attend to the magazine’s interpolation of female beauty through the rubrics of nationalism and globalisation.

**The New Indian Woman: ‘The Woman of Substance’ and ‘Generation W’**

In May 2000, *Femina* announced a new image of Indian womanhood, abandoning its four-decade-old motto, the ‘Woman of Substance,’ for ‘Generation W’. *Femina*’s editor-in-chief, Sathya Saran, addressed the new motto as the subject of her editorial that month. I suggest below that the change in motto and Saran’s explanation of it constructs on the one hand a liberal feminist prototype in which women are agents of social change. On the other hand, it incorporates particular injunctions of Hindutva, which promulgates woman as wife and mother and as the bastion of Indian culture. Both seemingly disparate and polarized political discourses—liberal feminism and Hindutva—are here collapsed, erasing class, caste and regional differences among Indian women.

The magazine’s old motto, ‘The Woman of Substance,’ identifies Indian women as a group of liberal individual subjects. The motto’s singular noun, ‘woman’ distinguishes the reader from other Indian women, affirming her individuality, and referencing an Indian womanhood that is heterogeneous, constitutive of various classes, castes, religions and regions. The motto further invites us to consider that as a woman of substance the Indian woman is valued and valuable because of her social location. That is, ‘substance’ identifies material (substantive) differences among women; at the same time, the motto effaces the ‘substance’ of the individual Indian woman by remaining silent about what these differences actually are. Perhaps nearer the point, ‘substance’ here is not simply a placeholder for substantive difference, but rather a placeholder for the only substance that truly matters in a global economy, material goods. Thus, ‘The Woman of Substance,’ different, heterogeneous, unique, maintains a semantic tension with ‘The Woman of Substance,’ homogenous, middle-class consumer.

The shift to ‘Generation W,’ however, dissolves this semantic tension and, along with it, the possibility of heterogeneity among Indian women, homogenizing them into a kind of ‘global Indian woman,’ who embodies a distinct Hindu modernity. Although ‘generation’ ostensibly links women across time, in Saran’s editorial it actually performs multiple homogenizing moves by linking women across class, caste,
region and religion. The multiple significations of ‘generation’ appear in conjunction with its modifier, ‘W,’ which functions as shorthand for ‘women’. No longer is the *Femina* woman merely a ‘woman of substance,’ but part of a larger ‘generation of women’ whose differences from other women are completely effaced.

Saran explains the shift to ‘Generation W’ first through an articulation of differences among Indian women, and then in her simultaneous subsumption of these differences under a ‘feminist’ generation of *Femina* women:

> Whether you’re 19 or 50, whether you’re career driven, home-bound or one of the many who walk the swinging tightrope, whether you are city-bound or townbred or live in the wide, open spaces…. If you are a *Femina* woman, you are part of Generation W. One of us.\(^{19}\)

The acknowledgement of differences in *region* and *age* expand into *class* and *caste* differences later in the editorial:

> I see you out there in the wide world, shelling peas in the second-class compartment, standing at bus stops in the hot Delhi sun, driving from airports in the dead of night after a long day’s work to prepare for a new day’s assignment. I see you working in the villages trying to teach health and spelling to women and children, or fighting AIDS in the slums. And I know that we are the hope of this world; that freeing women from the shackles of domesticity has placed on them the burden of saving their world.\(^{20}\)

Despite marking the differences between upper, middle and working-class women’s labour, Saran’s appeal to Generation W finally dissolves these material differences. It assumes that modernity—a ‘progressive’ space free from the ‘shackles of domesticity’—is available to all women, and that they all can perform ‘feminist’ work. Saran’s feminism surfaces in her rallying cries of ‘Generation W,’ (already a globalising move in its appropriation of ‘Generation X,’ the cultural shorthand for youth born after Civil Rights reforms in the US) and ‘women of India’ at the beginning of the editorial, and continues throughout the article: ‘change yourself and the world around you constantly,’ ‘join hands and make the difference,’ ‘bond as women of a nation,’ etc.\(^{21}\)

Central to Saran’s homogenizing pro-woman vision of Indian womanhood is its dependence upon a diametrically opposed vision of Indian *manhood,* in which difference occupies a definitively male domain: ‘Let the men fight their battles of caste and creed’ (emphasis mine).\(^{22}\) Differences in caste, class, religion (or ‘creed’) here have nothing to do with the real lives of women. By placing the ‘burden’ of difference upon men’s bodies, Saran limits the possibility for women’s bodies to signify differently. The *Femina* woman ‘covers real women in India, heterogeneous, various, of many castes and geographical regions’.\(^{23}\) Through the ‘feminist’ rhetoric of female empowerment, ‘Generation W’ essentialises women into a maternal ideal:

> we believe there is time to watch the colour of the rain and the leaf turning on the tree. To think of ways to ensure the skies and the earth around us will continue to be a source of delight for our children and their children’s children…. We women
know that, deep under the skin, all blood flows red and every creature that is shaped in a woman’s womb cries the same wordless cry when it is born. It is our mission to have and to hold … and in these troubled times, to hold together.  

Saran figures women’s bodies through the landscape of the nation-state and through its maternal significations. The Femina woman reproduces and maintains the nation through her marital status (‘to have and to hold’ in part alludes to Judeo-Christian wedding vows) and through the literal acts of reproduction that follow ‘naturally’. These reproductive acts, in turn, ensure the longevity of the nation-state through her ‘children’s children’. Indian women, regardless of class, caste, religious difference, are bound to the nation through their heteronormativity and essentialised maternity.

At the same time, the Femina woman’s ‘love of the beautiful’ emerges as a distinctly middle-class consumer aesthetic. Saran mentions beauty only briefly, but its appearance in Saran’s editorial is noteworthy in a magazine that is so closely linked to the industry of Indian female beauty: ‘her love of the beautiful transforms her … and she walks in step with the rest of the women of the world’. Like the makeup, skin care and hair care products discussed below, ‘the beautiful’ here contains magical powers that signal the desire for self-transformation. While Saran does not explicitly indicate the nature of the transformation (what Indian women are transformed into), I suggest that ‘the beautiful’ functions as what Arvind Rajagopal has called an ‘aspirational space’ of middle-class Indian womanhood where the Indian woman has the time, money and desire to attend to her physical appearance. ‘The beautiful’ exists as a space of social mobility, of ascendancy into a leisure class.

In advancing both the discourse of liberal feminism and Hindutva’s maternal and conjugal injunctions, Femina constructs the new Indian woman as both ‘the symbol of sacrifice and the symbol of progress within the discourse of modern nationalism. One signifies obedience and tradition and the other signifies liberation and modernity’. Shoma Munshi argues that India’s beauty industry is responsible for defining the ‘modern Indian woman’ in new terms: ‘the wife and mother who lives for her husband and children is morphing into the partner and friend who is carving out her own consumption and self-fulfillment space’. Within this shift, Hindu modernity in some ways opens up a space in which the Indian woman can understand herself as an erotic subject: while not explicitly sexual in nature, her investment in her appearance is aimed at fulfilling her own bodily and psychic pleasures. At the same time, she is never entirely free of her responsibilities to the nation as a wife and mother. While she may not ‘live’ for these duties, she is required symbolically to perform them, nonetheless. As Shakuntala Rao observes, Indian women ‘now more than ever embody deeply essentialised and mythologised feminine qualities’.

The new Indian woman’s consumerism is figured precisely through the tenuous link she must maintain between her erotic and her conjugal/maternal subjectivities. In a 2001 column in Femina titled ‘Shop-Shape,’ writer Benita Sen explicitly positions the Indian female consumer subject within an earlier nationalist discourse of domesticity. In a rhetorical question aimed at discovering why contemporary Indian women like to shop, Sen replies, ‘A consumerist compulsion? Nah. More than any other reason, it is living up to an archetypal image. Purchasing garments, whether for the man or for others in the family, has been a woman’s prerogative for a long time …’ (emphasis added). Shopping, then, is re-historicised into part of the Indian woman’s idealized
domesticity; it is a selfless act executed not on her own behalf, but for the well-being of her family. The article goes on to argue that Indian women currently plan their shopping trips *at home*, marking out their consumer identities in the public space of the marketplace but rather in private, within the confines of the domestic sphere. Sen’s column emblematizes *Femina*’s recent trend of linking explicitly consumerist self-fulfilment with female empowerment. Again, quoting Sen, ‘shopping lends a sense of power to the buyer; the power that expendable money brings with it. There is a sense of control over a vast range of commodities, over an entire establishment perceived as prosperous’. At this point in the article, the modern Indian woman breaks with her pre-modern predecessor by spending money not only on her family, but also on herself. She fulfils her own market-driven desires, and as such constructs herself as an erotic subject.

It is worth mentioning that in stark contrast to columns like Sen’s, *Femina* features articles on feminist issues such as communal and domestic violence, the economic plight of rural women, and female infanticide, all of which are situated under the subheading ‘Empowerment’. However, *Femina*’s stated commitment to advocating these feminist causes is constantly interrupted by its simultaneous commitment to the ‘female empowerment’ generated by middle-class consumerism in articles like Sen’s. Feminism in *Femina* thus becomes a kind of commodity for which Indian women can shop around to find the definition that best suits them.

In still other cases *Femina* attempts to ‘resolve’ the contradiction between a grass roots feminism committed to social change and a liberal feminism that is tied to a consumerist ‘love of the beautiful’ by invoking the iconic figure of the new Indian woman: the Indian beauty queen. In 2001, *Femina* began running a series of public service announcements for the *Femina* Little Princess Foundation. The foundation claims to ‘look into the nutritional, social and emotional needs of the girl child—in fact, to better the life of the girl child in India’. While the PSA includes few specifics on the foundation’s efforts to ‘better [the girl child’s] life,’ the foundation’s title constructs the girl-child as a miniature version of the Indian beauty queen: as a ‘princess,’ she at once contains the possibility of and is contained by the beauty queen’s global currency. Yet her ‘nutritional, social and emotional needs’ refuse her entry into this potential space of self-fulfilment and global reach. Instead, her multiple marginalities—poor, working class, girl-child—are co-opted by the self-fulfilment of the middle class Indian woman. As the offspring, or literal *product* of Generation W, she is inscribed simultaneously within and cast out of the next generation of *Femina* women whose global currency and purchase power are defined by their beauty.

Having established *Femina*’s construction of middle-class female beauty under the homogenizing vision of Generation W, I now turn to the global and nationalist significations of ‘the beautiful’. As part of the coveted relationship it maintains with the middle-class Indian woman, ‘the beautiful’ in *Femina* is positioned at once within and between discursive geographies: India and the West. *Femina*’s construction of ‘India’ as the nation and the world depends upon an undifferentiated ‘West’ as its key term of exclusion. The *Femina* woman’s nationality and globality—both of which constitute Indianness—depend, in part, on measuring and denying any trace of ‘the West’ in her bodily makeup. The West in *Femina* is discursively constructed as a place of colonialism, modernity and artificiality, one that is always in dialectic with these discursive constructions within notions of ‘Indianness’, as well. I suggest that the
Femina woman is both a figure of geographical excess and of interstitiality—that is, she is Indian in so far as she is not bound to the nation-state and in so far as she does not desire entry into the West.

Femina is invested, then, in negotiating strategies of emplacement and belonging for Indian femininity: Femina designates India and the West as the key geographies within and against which the Indian woman’s body can signify, even as it reveals an ambivalence about the stability of these geographies in energizing discourses of Indian female beauty. The middle-class Indian woman’s body is calibrated through the global image of the Indian beauty queen, and through this calibration always underwrites a national(ist) project of globalisation. In the following sections, I suggest that as a ‘woman of the world,’ the Femina woman, like Miss India, ‘belongs’ in/to India as long as she can signify the ‘symbolic realm’ outside the nation.

‘The Perfect 10’: Nationalizing and Naturalizing Indian Beauty

My choice of beauty texts to explore for this article is based on physical features of the beautiful Indian woman that appear most frequently as the subjects of ads and articles, and those that have been characterised by the Miss India pageant as definitively ‘Indian’: hair, skin (texture and colour), and eyes. Advertisements for the pageant and the physical resemblance of past winners to each other point toward these features as an Indian ideal. One such advertisement reads as follows: ‘if you have all the vital statistics, the perfect 10, to be specific, if you have beautiful hair framing that chiselled face, if you can speak with your eyes, if you turn on the camera … you are qualified to vie for the most coveted title’. The advertisement’s reference to ‘vital statistics’ designates beautiful eyes and hair as features that define women as particularly Indian. A photo of two Miss India (and Miss Universe and Miss World) titleholders, Aishwarya Rai and Sushmita Sen, on the cover of the 1 July 2000 issue concretizes and expands on this ideal (see Figure 1). The similarity between Sen and Rai is striking: large, almond-shaped eyes (Sen’s are blue, Rai’s are green), shiny long hair (though Sen’s is tied back), full lips and fair skin. I make three primary observations about this beauty ideal: beauty features become definitive of nation through their naturalization; the national ideal of beauty is a stereotype that depends upon stereotypes of ‘the West’ and/or ‘Western’ beauty; and the tension between the discursive geographies of India and the West positions the definitively Indian woman outside the boundaries of nation.

Gods, Goddesses and the ‘Modern’ Indian Woman

An advertisement for Samara (see Figure 2), an Indian line of skin and hair-care products, mobilizes Hindu mythological iconography when it opens with the following narrative: ‘In India, beauty was born in the gardens where Radha and the Gopis spent hours oiling, perfuming, and costuming themselves to express their love for Lord Krishna’. Next to this narrative (designated as such by the quotes placed around it), is a tiny painting of a woman dressed in sari, presumably Radha. Radha is staring at herself in a hand-held mirror, engaged in the process of ‘shringar,’ or...
self-beautification, presumably for her male lover, Lord Krishna. The last lines of the advertisement ask the reader to ‘celebrate the beauty in you’. Read against the painting of Radha and the Hindu narrative of erotic celebration, these lines ask
FIGURE 2  Samara Advertisement printed in Femina, November 1, 1997. Permission granted by Dabur Media to reprint image.
the reader to identify with Radha, who is preparing to ‘celebrate her beauty’ for Lord Krishna, and to leave the present and travel back in time to a ‘traditional’ past where beauty and spirituality are ‘one’. Radha beautifies herself not simply to please a man, but more precisely the deified Hindu male lover.

The capricious use of the Radha-Krishna myth compresses time and space, folding in a ‘past’ narrative of spirituality into a ‘present’ narrative of modernity. In one sense, Samara’s various requests—to celebrate female eroticism and to travel back in (mythological) time—reproduce an anti-colonial nationalist narrative in the linkages between tradition, heteronormativity and Hindu spirituality. Partha Chatterjee has argued that this nationalist narrative redefined ‘tradition’ not as an obsolete and oppressive set of practices to be remedied by colonization, but as a timeless and spiritual set of practices in which India was superior to ‘the West,’ ‘undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate’. Middle-class Indian women become the guardians, embodiment and promulgators of this traditionalism, in which ‘the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain … spiritual qualities’. Thus, ‘the formation of a hegemonic “national culture” was necessarily built upon the privileging of an “essential tradition …”’ with ‘woman’ at its spiritual centre. The Samara ad registers the Indian woman’s beauty through this nationalist narrative: the written and visual narratives of Radha and Lord Krishna, along with the command to ‘celebrate the beauty in you,’ present beautiful skin and hair as ‘natural’ features of the Indian woman, linked explicitly to her timeless and spiritual ‘essence’.

However, the figure of Radha simultaneously interrupts this reading of a Hindu ‘golden age’. In Hindu mythology, Radha is Krishna’s lover, whose eroticism is often posed in contrast to the domesticated chastity of Lakshmi, Vishnu Narayan’s consort. This distinction is crucial because Radha here signals the erotic potential of Indian femininity, and thus simultaneously embodies and diffuses a tension between the traditional and modern Indian woman. That is, the ‘tradition’ here is distinctly Hindu, but also constitutive of a legitimate and celebrated female sexuality in Radha, whose eroticism subverts Lakshmi’s domesticated chastity.

The modern Indian woman appears in the second part of the advertisement. The request to ‘celebrate the beauty in you’ appears next to a larger photo of a contemporary Indian woman staring at us with sultry eyes, wispy hair and glowing skin, dressed in what appears to be a bathrobe. This image contrasts sharply with and dominates by sheer size the tiny painting of Radha in the right-hand corner of the advertisement. In emphasising the woman’s hair, eyes, and skin, the photo reflects and reinforces the features of an ‘ideal’ Miss India, a national icon of Indian female beauty. The larger and more resonant image of the contemporary Indian woman, when positioned against the figure of Radha, ‘foregrounds [the contemporary woman’s] “modernity” … at the same time as it carefully respects her connections with “tradition.”’ Both visual texts of the Indian woman (Radha and the model), bound by the common request to ‘celebrate the beauty in you,’ construct a third narrative in which Indian beauty signals the mutual play of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ within definitions of the nation. Radha bridges the temporal and logistical gap between Hindu tradition and modernity, figured within the photo of the ‘Samara woman’ and the skin and hair-care products beneath her. The advertisement’s motto, ‘Beauty therapies for the Indian woman’ implicitly references this mutual narrative of tradition and modernity as it constructs the ‘Indian woman’ as continuous through time. The
contemporary Indian woman in the Samara ad is not so much a ‘new woman’ as an evolved woman, a woman whose celebratory beauty has an historical precedent. Both Radha and the Samara woman reinforce what Nalini Natarajan calls the ‘erotics of nationalism.’ Natarajan argues that ‘nationalism is one of the areas where uninhibited passion may be displaced’. Here female eroticism is nationalized both through the recuperation of Radha as a symbol of Hindu tradition, and through the commodification of the sensual Indian woman who is her modern descendant.

Naturalizing the Nation: The (Un)Production of Indian Female Beauty

In an article titled ‘Look East, Young Woman’ Femina celebrates a nationalist narrative of ‘natural Indian beauty’. In advising Indian women how to apply make-up, the article characterises eyes and lips as fundamentally ‘Indian’ features. The article claims that eyeliner ‘beautif[ies] and accentuate[s] the naturally large and lustrous eyes of Indian women,’ and that matte lipstick is suitable for ‘our Indian beauties [who] have full and well-defined lips’ (emphasis added). Full lips and large eyes here are fixed onto the face of the beautiful Indian woman. The use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ inscribes the Indian woman’s beauty within India (she belongs to ‘us’), and silently references India’s recent international production and display of beauty through the global currency of the Indian beauty queen. Writer Cory Walia informs the reader that the world ‘outside’ has legitimated the notion that beauty is ‘ours’ (India’s) to claim.

Femina, however, struggles to maintain the nationalist narrative of beauty around skin colour. In a special, two-page ad for Fair & Lovely fairness cream in the 15 June 2000 issue fair skin is cast as simultaneously natural and artificial. The first page presents the reader with ‘fairness facts,’ a question and answer information section on skin colour. The second page features an advertisement for Fair & Lovely that runs regularly in Femina. The advertisement characterises the ‘science of fairness’ as a singularly Indian enterprise, referring several times to the Hindustan Lever Skin Centre as the company responsible for conducting research specifically on skin lightening. Hindustan Lever is the Indian subsidiary of UniLever, a company with Dutch and British origins. Yet the advertisement suggests that as part of the ‘old guard’ of multinationals that entered India in the 1980s, Hindustan Lever has created a fairness formula specifically for ‘Indian skin.’ Fairness thus becomes a feature of Indian beauty through a multinational company that has transformed itself into a distinctly ‘Indian’ company.

Moreover, Hindustan Lever helps women ‘manage the colour [sic] of [their] skin,’ depicting Indian women’s (naturally dark) skin as out of control. Hindustan Lever takes on the patriarchal role of the nation-state by ensuring that female beauty is disciplined into its proper ideal; but here the nation-state cannot sustain the ideal of natural Indian beauty that we get in the beauty article, since Hindustan Lever’s job is rather to manufacture beauty, to ‘make’ dark skin fair.

At the same time, the advertisement paradoxically claims that achieving fairness is less a matter of production and more a matter of making visible the ‘hidden’ fairness that Indian women already have. Fair & Lovely ‘gets gently absorbed and supplements your body’s natural supply of … fairness vitamin in your skin’ (emphasis mine).
Fairness here lies within the skin of the Indian woman and is simply waiting to be made visible. The (fictional) testimonial on the second page of the Fair & Lovely advertisement similarly erases the production of fairness by claiming that, ‘I use new Fair & Lovely every day and nothing happens to my skin, except … a radiant glowing fairness’ (emphasis added). While the testimony ‘nothing happens’ advertises Fair & Lovely’s protection of skin from adverse reactions, this claim also suggests that Fair & Lovely does not make fairness happen, since it does not fundamentally change the ‘nature’ of Indian skin. While fairness is a manufactured beauty ideal in the beginning of the advertisement, by the end, fairness is naturalised, re-situated within the familiar nationalist narrative of ‘natural Indian beauty’.

The beauty texts discussed above link Indian beauty, woman and nation in a manner that naturalises all three, in doing so, exposes a tautology of beauty: the beautiful Indian woman is beautiful because she is Indian. As ‘a central site in which Indian nation is re-imagined,’ her national inscription is always dependent upon the threatening presence of an ‘other’ space outside these boundaries, namely ‘the West’. Or, in slightly different terms, Indian beauty in Femina is ‘essentially’ Indian only and in so far as it is not ‘Western’. This formulation of ‘the nation’ as ‘not West’ signals that the ‘Indianness’ of beauty in these texts depends on ‘the West’ as a key term of exclusion.

‘(Don’t) Look West, Young Woman’: ‘the West’ as the Negative Space of Nation

The advertisement for Samara silently references ‘the West’ when it defines Samara as the Sanskrit word meaning ‘to meet’. The objects of this meeting are ‘our rich Shringar heritage’ and ‘sophisticated research’. The advertisement ‘claims’ Shringar heritage for India through its employment of the pronoun ‘our’. ‘Sophisticated research,’ however, remains outside of this nationalist claiming, modified only by the article ‘the.’ Here, heritage is ‘ours’ (India’s) and scientific research is theirs (the West’s). I do not want to reproduce an overly facile and neocolonialist linking of ‘the West’ with the rational discourse of science, and India with ‘irrational’ discourse of spirituality. I perform this reading now in order to demonstrate the implicit instability of these geographic associations later, and because I think the advertisement asks us in some ways to make these linkages. While scientific research certainly is a component of the Samara product line—since it ‘meets’ with Indian heritage—science is nonetheless rendered as ‘other’. The ‘rich [spiritual] heritage’ of Shringar pointedly does not include scientific research. When coupled with the Hindu mythological narrative at the beginning of the advertisement, Shringar instead participates in and accentuates an eroticized spirituality that stands in sharp contrast to the implied presence of sterile ‘Western’ science.

The article on makeup invokes ‘the West’ much more explicitly, as the title itself is figured against this discursive geography: ‘Look East, Young Woman’ crystallises the presence of a ‘West’ from which young Indian women must look away. The article repeatedly reproduces this message of ‘looking away’ from the Western woman in order to achieve the ‘Indian look’. Its aim is to naturalise full lips and large eyes as Indian features. Yet it does so through the characterisation of ‘Western’ beauty as a ‘lack’ that these features of Indian beauty ‘fill’.

Unlike Westerners, whose lips are usually quite
thin, thus entailing a need for plumping up the lips [sometimes using collagen infusion to achieve a permanent effect], our Indian beauties have full and well-defined lips. ‘Western’ beauty here lacks what Indian beauty has and, therefore, must compensate for this ‘lack’ through artificial means, plastic surgery. Indian beauty is once again naturalised, this time through and against artificial Western beauty.

In one sense the West surfaces within these beauty texts through a gesture of reverse-orientalism in which the once nativised ‘other’—India—performs the act of ‘othering’ onto the colonizer—‘the West’. A reading of Western inferiority and Indian superiority in *Femina*, however, soon reaches its transgressive limits. In inverting the cultural politics of orientalism, the beauty texts of *Femina*, (particularly the article on makeup), rely on certain stereotypes of ‘the West’ and ‘Western’ beauty that in turn produce a stereotype of India and Indian beauty. The beauty texts discussed thus far implicitly or explicitly link ‘the West’ with scientific rationalism and artificiality in a way that creates a competing stereotype of a spiritual and natural Indian beauty. To borrow from Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the racialised stereotype, Indian beauty ‘requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other (Western) stereotypes’ (parentheses added). A reading of reverse-orientalism would also have to consider the neo-colonialist violence at work in re-shifting the Indian woman’s objecthood from the colonialist to the nationalist gaze.

Finally, the West, through its critical exclusion, is constitutive of nation; it is a space that cannot and does not remain completely outside the discursive geography of India. As a ‘constitutive outside,’ the West is, to borrow again from Bhabha, ‘tethered to, not confronted by’ the Indian nation.

**Bodies in Motion: Destabilizing Discursive Geographies of Beauty**

By imagining India and the West as tethered geographies, the following discussion shows that in some of these texts the designation and disavowal of ‘the West’ is an implicit designation and disavowal of ‘India’ as a stable geography, as well. The beautiful Indian woman becomes a geographical hybrid, resisting ‘placement’ both within nation and completely outside the West. I identify geographical hybridity in several overlapping ways: through these beauty texts’ de-naturalisation of beauty; through their dislocation of the *Femina* reader; and through their characterization of beauty as mimetic.

The beautiful Indian woman’s dislocation from both the nation and the West is immediately evident in ‘Look East Young Woman,’ as the command to ‘look east’ raises the issue of where the addressee currently is located. While the title commands the reader to look away from ‘the West,’ it also contains the possible command to leave ‘the West’. Read this way, the Indian woman is already in the West. At the same time, the article goes on to position the reader firmly within India, claiming full lips and large eyes as ‘our’ features.

If the article essentialises the Indian features of large eyes and full lips by positioning them against Western lack, then it paradoxically also expresses a desire to mimic Western beauty. The article even provides a photo of what ‘the West’ looks like when figured through an Indian female body. The photo on the first page features a presumably Indian model with fair skin and (dyed?) blonde hair, wearing smudged eyeliner beneath her eyes. The photo’s caption reads, ‘The smudged look may not suit
all Indian women’. Implicit here is that some Indian women, such as the one in this photo, may be able to mimic Western beauty trends if they are ‘white enough’. In other words, the photo makes possible the ‘whiteness’ of Indianness, rather than assigning whiteness exclusively to the West. At the same time, when read against the title of the article, the photograph reinforces the title’s implicit message not to look like this, since ‘blindly aping contemporary Western trends can have disastrous effects on the Indian colouring’. The image thus seems to suggest that the ‘beautiful’ Indian woman—when calibrated through whiteness—is located within and outside of the Indian nation.

Moreover, the article ‘confesses’ that Indian eye makeup is based on trends in ‘the West, (from where we copy quite shamelessly)’. Specifically, the article notes that Western women use ‘black, brown, [and] grey definition [sic] around the eyes …’ and that Indian women modify this eye definition by using eyeliner and kajal. This Indian modification draws on the ‘Western’ trend of eye definition, but achieves this definition through the specific use of black eyeliner or kajal, rather than the various methods used by ‘the West’. In a slightly different way, the article acknowledges that Western matte lipstick ‘still lives’ in India, but that it has been replaced by ‘glossy, dewy and frosty lips’ in ‘the West’. Indian lips and eyes are cast as both a copy, and, through their differentiated appropriation of the copy, an original.

The article’s construction of Indian beauty as a mimetic process, that which ‘repeats’ Western beauty with a ‘difference,’ produces its own ambivalence about the authenticity of Indian beauty. As Bhabha has argued about the colonial mimetic text, ‘in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference … mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal’. The mimetic process that Bhabha outlines as a practice of colonial power, however, requires a revision in the narrative of postcolonial femininity presented in ‘Look East,’ as both India and the West are designated as disavowed as ‘original’ geographies of beauty. Mimesis always contains the ‘threat’ of a disruptive re-articulation; it contains—both possesses and delimits—racialised feminine difference, making this difference something that is ‘almost the same but not quite’. The makeup article differentiates performances of Western beauty through the Indian woman’s cultural re-appropriation of matte lipstick and eyeliner. Yet Indian beauty’s mimicry of ‘Western’ trends with a difference finally cannot sustain the essentialist notion of Indian beauty that the article endorses in its description of ‘Indian’ eyes and lips. The article exposes the tension between two competing discourses of beauty: one of nationalist naturalization (Indian beauty as definitively Indian) and one of cultural appropriation (Indian beauty as ‘Western’ beauty). As the article attempts to negotiate culturally hegemonic constructions of beauty, both India and ‘the West’ lose their status as the place of beauty’s ‘origin’.

In the Fair & Lovely advertisement, the nationalist narrative of Indian beauty is an inherently unstable one from the outset. The advertisement figures the nation first as an Indian company whose job it is to produce fairness and then to ensure the erasure of that production. The 1 September 2000 cover article, ‘Chocolate & Cream’ explicitly contradicts this naturalized fairness ideal (see Figure 3). Far from being ‘natural’ to Indian women, fairness in this article is depicted as an imposter, introduced into India through the Western ‘other’. The article describes the bias towards light skin and the demonising of dark skin in India because of explicitly ‘Western’ influences: ‘Why … have we let ourselves, for centuries, believe that dark
skin is a curse? … Some say it is a result of days of exploitation by the Aryans … and then the Colonists’. Whether the writer understands ‘exploitation’ as sexual (miscegenation) or simply as an assertion of white racial superiority, or both is unclear. Regardless, fairness in this article is an alien presence in India, threatening to contaminate the ‘naturally’ dark skin of Indian women. Skin colour is recast into a colonial scenario, in which fairness belongs—somewhat insidiously—to ‘the West,’ while darkness belongs to India, ‘where 95% of the population has dark skin.’

Furthermore, the article depicts darkness as not simply definitively Indian but desirably so. The advertisement describes darkness as ‘the colour [sic] of sensuality, exotica and intense emotion’. Clearly, such significations of darkness are embedded in their own neocolonizing assumptions, in which the colonialist equation of darkness with ‘inferiority, stupidity, laziness,’ is replaced by a modern-day fetishistic equivalent. Yet my point here is to draw attention to the inverse relation of darkness and fairness to the national beauty ideal in Fair & Lovely. Fairness in ‘Chocolate and Cream’ is neither natural nor desirable. The article unwittingly
ironizes the desirability of fairness in the Fair & Lovely advertisement by claiming that ‘peaches ‘n’ cream is passe, light ain’t lovely any more…’ (emphasis added). Fair & Lovely’s second term, ‘lovely’ is here levelled against fairness as ideal and definitive of Indian beauty. The terms ‘passe’ and ‘any more’ signal a narrative of cultural progress, one that gets folded into a postcolonial narrative of liberation from colonial racism. Darkness is not only, de facto, writ large upon the bodies of ‘most’ Indian women who should no longer be ashamed of it, but in fact is part of a fashion trend that is ‘ahead of’ outdated Western standards of beauty.

Yet worthy of notice is that skin lightening/bleaching ads appear in the issue of Femina that features the skin colour article, and that, with the exception of a handful of women, dark-skinned models are virtually absent from the pages—and covers—of Femina from 1997–2002. Fairness may well be associated with the colonizing influences of ‘the West’ in ‘Chocolate and Cream,’ but many beauty texts in Femina indicate that such ‘Western’ influences are nevertheless desirable as an Indian ideal. The title of a February 2001 article ‘How White is Too Bright’ suggests that like ‘Chocolate and Cream,’ it will interrogate fairness as an Indian ideal. Yet the article actually endorses and ranks the effectiveness of skin lightening creams, arguing that:

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

The increasing number of articles and ads on skin lightening in Femina produces a growing ambivalence about the ‘Indianness’ of fairness. Femina continually invites and rejects the fairness ideal as definitively Indian and as a Western import. Fairness thus ‘belongs’ nowhere, and instead oscillates between discursive geographies of beauty.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to track ‘beauty’ not as a physical attribute, but as a telos toward which the female subject, transformed into a consumer subject and essentially Indian, moves through these decades of globalisation and national chauvinism. In the ads and articles discussed above, Femina attempts to spatialise female Indian beauty by appropriating and reconfiguring geographies of India and the West. Identifying the disruptive discursivity of these geographies depends upon the reconstruction of Femina’s various beauty texts as a dialogic set that both designates and disavows discrete geographies of beauty. Out of this hybrid text, emerges a hybrid space, in which India and the West are ‘tethered’ to each other, as the West becomes the negative constitutive space of the Indian nation-state. Femina’s positioning of the beautiful Indian woman within and outside of these discursive geographies identifies her as a global subject. She is highly mobile, slipping in and out of boundaries of ‘home’ and ‘the world,’ appropriating ‘Indianness’ and ‘Westernness’ in contradictory ways.
At the same time, her geographic mobility interpellates an Indian consumer subject, whose very Indianness is a product of her globality. Recalling Ong’s and Fernandes’ construction of globalisation as a form of nationalist intensification, the Femina woman is Indian because she is global. Her globality is registered through the Indian beauty queen, who must signify beyond India in order to be Miss India, and who thus reinforces the global significations of the Indian nation in a globalized economy. In turn, the global beauty of the Femina woman operates within and reinforces the logic of the free market: her beauty is attainable, held out as a possibility for emulation for a distinctly middle-class consumer subject. The availability of this global beauty fuels consumer desire and the ever-expanding Indian beauty market.65

Furthermore, the global woman exists as both the object and subject of Femina’s discourses of beauty. Femina hails its readers by their ‘love of the beautiful,’ as ‘women of India’ and as ‘women of the world’. The beautiful Indian woman maintains her Indianness through a complex relationship between her middle-class desire for self-beautification, her naturalized ‘Indian’ beauty, and the way this beauty defines her as a global subject. Femina’s long history of sponsorship of the Miss India contest, its appeal to a middle-class consumer subject and its construction of the Indian woman as a global woman all participate in nationalist intensifications around globalisation. For the Femina woman, ‘the global’ is not a signifier of a flexible space outside of the nation-state, but rather a distinctively nationalist production that negotiates her movement within and between discursive geographies of beauty. It remains to be seen how recent changes in Indian government will affect practices of manufacturing and regulating beauty, such as advertisements, articles and contests. These regulatory regimes of beauty will require further study as new economic policy is poised to re-examine liberalisation and the consumerism that attends to it.

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Notes

2 A similar global imperative accompanied the crowning of Miss Nigeria 2001. Desperate to draw global attention to Nigeria in 2000, the national pageant’s production company ‘carried out a drastic change of strategy in picking out Nigeria’s representative. ‘The judges had always looked for a local queen, someone they considered a beautiful African woman,’ Mr Murray (the company’s director) said. ‘So I told the judges not to look for a local queen, but someone to represent us internationally’ (Norimitsu Onish, ‘Globalization Makes Slimness Trendy,’ New York Times 3 Oct. (2002): A4). Agabani Darego became Miss World 2001 and was the first Miss Nigeria to win either the Miss World or Miss Universe pageants.
This paper takes up the particular racial, sexual and class identities that constitute this ‘global subject’. According to Foucault, ‘Endeavouring … to decipher discourse through spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power’ (Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980. 70).

I borrow the term spatialisation from Rob Shields, in his instructive synthesis of Foucault’s poststructuralist and Lefebvre’s phenomenological conceptions of space in *Places on the Margin* (1991). Shields argues for the term ‘social spatialisation’ instead of space: ‘The term allows us to name an object of study which encompasses both the cultural logic of the spatial and its expression and elaboration in language and more concrete actions’. It refers to ‘the ongoing construction of the spatial at the level of the social imaginary (collective mythologies, presuppositions), as well as interventions in the landscape’ (Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of modernity*. London: Routledge, 1990. 31).

From its inception, postcolonial theory has argued that geography emerges through flows of global capital. Said’s orientalism, for example, is centrally concerned with the ways in which the Orient emerges as a geography through colonial capitalist expansion.

This form of national belonging is elaborated below as a specifically Hindu, middle-class consumer identity.

In her study of contemporary Indian media images, Fernandes argues that debates around globalisation must shift away from the ‘question of how the nation is being reformed through the processes of globalisation to the question of how the production of “the global” occurs through the nationalist imagination’ (Fernandes, ‘Nationalizing the Global,’ *Media, Culture and Society* 22 (2000): 611). Similarly, Ong has argued in her study of transnational Chinese that to understand globalisation simply as a form of deterritorialisation does not account for the way in which ‘the nation-state continues to define, discipline, control and regulate all kinds of populations, whether in movement or in residence’ (Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*. Durham: Duke, 1999. 19).

Fernandes 623. In 1991, India faced an external debt crisis resulting from a series of economic liberalization policies in the late 1970s and 1980s in which India’s foreign borrowing increased while domestic output faltered. The following IMF-style structural adjustment programmes marked a moment of transformation in India’s economy, ending the era of trade protectionism and ushering in an era of foreign investment and global capital.

In his highly influential discussion of early constructions of Indian nationalism Partha Chatterjee describes the early nationalist movement in India as a rejection of the perceived materiality of the West, and the ‘ascendancy’ of India’s spirituality. This material/spiritual antinomy served ‘as an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of Western modernity’ (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton, 1993. 120).

Ong 18.


The beauty industry, according to some industry estimates, is growing at an annual rate of 22%, and advertising spending on industry products continues to double every year (http://www.corporateinformation.com). Part of this growth is due
to the entry of large multinational companies into the Indian beauty market that
now compete viably with domestic brands (Revlon, Coty, Oriflame, Chamber,
Avon, Yardley, Nina Ricci, Garnier Laboratories and L’Oreal) (<http://
www.corporateinformation.com>).

Femina online, <http://femina.indiatimes.com>. I have been unable to gather
specific and comprehensive demographic information about the magazine, such as
circulation size, advertisement revenue, sponsorship, and density of circulation
regions, etc. However, several international business journals have referred to
Femina’s iconic status as a leading beauty magazine among a largely middle-class,
English-speaking, Indian female reading public. According to the magazine’s
website, Femina is read by NRI (non-resident Indian) women, as well as Indian
women. Yet the website provides no information for US-based subscriptions.
Furthermore, Femina constructs India as the home space for the potential NRI
female reader: ‘[Femina] is read as well by the NRI woman who wishes to keep up
with the trends and changes in her country’ (Femina online, <http://
femina.indiatimes.com>, emphasis added).

Due to resources available at the University of California, Berkeley library, I was
restricted to studying issues of Femina from these years. For the purposes of this
paper, the restricted chronology of the magazine (1997–2002) nicely coincides with
the Indian beauty ‘boom’ as evidenced in the rise of the international pageant
and fashion scenes and the growing beauty industry in India. Within this time, five
Indian women have been crowned international beauty queens. India entered
the international fashion scene with its participation in the 2001–2002 Paris Fashion
Week in Paris, France, and it has since become a formidable contender in the
Western-dominated fashion world; and the current value of the beauty industry in
India has reached $3 billion, estimated to have reached $4 billion by 2004.

As Rajagopal observes, the difference between the Indian subject in an era of trade
protectionism and the current period of multinational capital can be encapsulated in
a slight semantic shift in nationalist ad campaigns: ‘from ‘Be Indian Buy Indian’ it
is now ‘To Buy is Indian’’ (Rajagopal 73). In addition to the materialization of the
consumer subject, the era of liberalization witnessed an increasing emphasis on a
distinctly Hindu subjectivity. ‘Indianness’ by the 1990s, in other words, relied not
only on the erasure of class difference, but also on the erasure of religious and caste
differences that resulted in the addition of ‘Hindu’ as a modifier to ‘middle-class’.

‘Generation W’ also draws much of its semantic power from ‘Generation X,’ which
designates a Western youth culture that is defined in large part by its relationship to
commodity culture. Generation W thus already contains ‘global’ significations in its
appropriation of Western cultural terms.

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana have persuasively argued that Hindutva’s
commitment to politicizing Indian women around the issue of a ‘Hindu culture’
must be distinguished from secular feminism.
26 Rajagopal 91.
29 Rao 322.
31 Sen 82.
33 Femina Miss India, advertisement, Femina, 1 October (1998): 1.
34 The advertisement re-deploys medical terminology in order to designate these beauty features. ‘Vital statistics’ no longer signify heartbeat, pulse, etc. but instead plays itself out in a ‘life or death’ scenario of Indian beauty. That is, without these features Indian beauty ceases to exist. The emphasis on eyes here also references Bharatanatyam, a South Indian classical dance, in which eye movement and expression, or drushtibhedha, is a key part of the dance.
36 Munshi has discussed ‘shringar’ within the context of Indian media: ‘Films sometimes, particularly those with stories of rich landlords, had the women doing shringar (dressing up) in long scenes: getting their hair braided by maids, wearing jewellery and expensive saris while waiting for their husbands to come home’ (Munshi 83).
37 Chatterjee 624.
38 Chatterjee 629
39 Chatterjee 632.
40 Chatterjee observes that nationalist writers at the turn of the twentieth century understood that ‘it is the spiritual, which lies within, that is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential’ (Chatterjee 624).
42 Natarajan 79.
45 Ibid.
46 Fernandes 619.
47 In Lacan’s psychoanalytic formulation, females enter the realm of the Symbolic, or achieve subjectivity, by recognizing that they lack a penis. Conversely, males enter the Symbolic when they realize that their possession of a penis fills this lack. The article attempts to articulate Indian beauty as that which fulfils what Western beauty lacks—large eyes and plump lips—and in so doing so, assert a beauty binary with ‘India’ as the dominant signifier.
48 Walia 38.
49 It is interesting to note that a 1 June 2000 article titled ‘Will That Boob Job Last?’ complicates the beauty article’s construction of India as a space of natural female beauty and the West as a space of artificiality. The article focuses on the uses of plastic surgery to remove body fat and increase breast size, explicitly de-naturalising Indian beauty, and implicitly linking India with the West in its production of artificiality.
Chatterjee describes an analogous colonial-national shift at the turn of the twentieth century, when the association of tradition with the Indian woman was removed from under the gaze of the coloniser and reconstituted under the nationalist gaze: ‘the new [Indian] woman … was subjected to a new patriarchy … the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalists placed the new woman was contrasted … with that of modern Western society … nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its cultural identity’ (Chatterjee 627).

Bhabha 25.


Walia 38.

Kajal is soot made by burning camphor and pure ghee, or a butter-like lipid.

Walia 38.


Bhabha, 86.


The recent furor over Sonia Gandhi’s appointment to head the Congress Party in the 2004 elections is a telling example of the insistence here that darkness is indigenous to India. As an ethnic Italian, the fair-skinned Gandhi embodied the ‘gauri memsahib’ whose ‘Indianness’ was repeatedly called into question.

Bose 13.

Bose 13.

Bose 13.


This kind of accessible beauty is markedly distinct from the inaccessible glamour, say, of Miss America, whose exceptionality and singularity are the hallmarks of her ‘American’ beauty. My point here is to emphasise the ways in which global beauty is class-marked in the Indian context, available to the middle-class consumer subject.

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