

Nature vs Culture in Advertisements

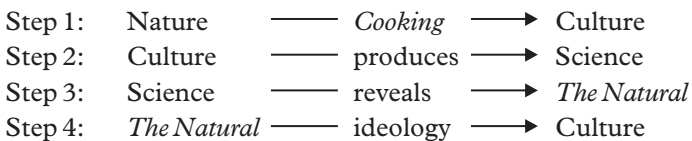
- Jerry Jean

Abstract: Most advertisements try to portray their products as refined and 'new.' The recurrent mantra is on the latest, the most fashionable and sophisticated. However, recent ads have shown a disdain towards excessive modernity and a predilection for a return to nature and a lack of artifice. Nature has begun to figure as an important trope with positive or favourable connotations in advertisements. It can signify a pure, untarnished and unblemished state. It can refer to a freedom from mundane social rules, a wild state. In both ways, nature is positioned opposite culture. The nature vs culture dichotomy has been greatly discussed and debated in sociological circles. It is implied by the title of Claude Levi- Strauss' work – *The Raw and the Cooked*. If nature is the primary referent for all human endeavours, culture seeks to tame and domesticate unruly nature. Culture refines nature. This transformation is termed as 'cooking' nature. Judith Williamson terms this as a primary referent system, as an ideology and a source for many signs in advertisements. This paper looks at some ways in which nature appears in ads and of its positioning opposite the more sophisticated culture.

Keywords: Nature vs Culture Dichotomy, Advertisements.

The recent trend to go back to nature or the natural is especially pronounced in relation to ads concerning food and body care products. This is because what we consume and what we use on our body, is closest to our personhood. We like to protect that which is closest to ourselves before protecting anything else. Therefore the skepticism towards too much of artificiality is reflected in the marketing strategies surrounding articles for personal care – food and body care.

Judith Williamson illustrates the 'ideology of the natural' using a diagram (135). The diagram is replicated here as a series of steps:



The above steps gleaned from Williamson's diagram "charts the production of *images*, the relations of symbols and not material things" (135). Nature is cooked to produce culture. Science is one of the most prestigious products of culture. Science reveals the workings of nature or the ideology of the natural. This ideology of the natural is also held in great esteem by culture. Instances of this last step are explored in the paper. Williamson reiterates that the relation between nature and culture is a real one (135). It is not ideological or a figment of illusion. However she distinguishes between nature and the natural. The ideology lies in 'The Natural.' Though, nature and the natural are related, both are

irreconcilable because the one is real and the latter is a symbol; the former is the referent and the latter, the sign. The natural as a sign of nature, is thus an ideology. Williamson elaborates further on this ideology :

'The Natural' is the meaning given by culture to nature; that it is socially determined and not a fixed quality is shown by the change in what constitutes the 'natural' from age to age, throughout history. It becomes the justification for whatever society approves and desires. But precisely because of this reference to Nature as the determinant of what is good, as though it were an independent arbiter, 'the natural' becomes the meaning given to culture, by nature – although it is culture that determines 'the natural' anyway. (123)

'The natural' is a symbol, which can have various meanings. Some of the meanings explored in the paper are natural as pure and natural as free.

The Freshness and Purity of 'The Natural': The following are instances of advertisements where the natural connotes freshness and purity, as distinct from the artifice of processed goods.

Ad 1 - Minute Made: The ad tries to impress upon viewers that Minute Made is 'made with nature.' People have gathered around a huge tree, waiting for it to yield fresh fruits. These fruits become the containers of Minute Made. The contents of Minute Made are 'made with nature' with no human mediation. The tree which stands for all nature is like a goddess, a 'She,' who has to be worshiped by its faithful, and to whom tributes have to be paid. In return, 'she rewards your respect and patience with the earth's most beautiful fruits.' Like a goddess, she will bless them with the bounties of fruits.

Ad 2- Airwick Aqua Mist: Here the freshness of nature has literally been contained in bottles and brought back to the zones of human culture - the apartments and cities. The cultured human beings have to move from their present dwellings to a place that is untarnished and undefiled by human civilization to 'collect' freshness.

Ad 3- Fruttare: This ad represents *Fruttare* ice creams as sourced directly from nature, directly from trees. The trees yield various fruits which ripen and peel open naturally into Fruttare popsicles, complete with the printed paper wrapping.

'The Natural' as Free: Culture domesticates the passions and wildness of human beings. Civilisation and urban life renders human life mundane and monotonous. In psychoanalytical terms, the id is tamed by the more cultural aspects of the mind – the ego and the moral superego. Thus to rediscover our wild id, we should go back to nature. This seems to be the message of many ads. Many ads use aspects of nature to portray a freedom from 'culture' and social restraints.

Ad 4- MRF Wanderer: MRF Wanderer ad tries to equate the tyre with the stallion. The stallion represents freedom and is an aspect of 'the natural' – it leaps beyond the confines of the fence and gallops into the wild forests. The SUV with MRF tyres can match every step of the free-spirited stallion, whether through jungle or water. No place is

inaccessible to the stallion's hooves or the car's tyres. There is no restraint or taboo. The stallion's hooves is shown in a close-up shot. The viewers are to equate the hooves with the MRF tyres which can 'tread anywhere.' The ad begins with an establishing shot of 'culture'- an area that humans have cleared from the jungle or nature. There is a house, a fence, a tractor, stacks of hay. The horse jumps beyond this stifling zone of 'culture.' There is a shot of a window with a view of the horse running away. All of this portrays the movement from culture into nature or rather our ideal of nature, which is 'the natural.'

Ad 5- Kerala Tourism: The ad portrays Kerala as a place to rediscover 'nature'. The woman is undergoing the Ayurvedic treatment of *shirodhara* – oil massage of head. The camera shots reveal that she experiences this as a return to nature- one shot shows her in the massage parlour, the next shot shows her lying in green grass under the sky, in the open. This juxtaposition of shots codes Ayurveda as a return to nature. (See section on Ayurveda in this paper) She is then shown walking through a small passage which passes through the greenery of Kerala – she sees a man practising the facial expressions of an indigenous dance form in his house. She sails on a snake boat through the water bodies of Kerala. She sees a group of boys sitting on a tree, that has grown wildly, with its branches meandering through the air in all directions. She listens to a tribal dancer murmuring into her ears. She embraces an elephant.

All of these images signify a freedom from conventional urban lives. She is carried away into blissful 'nature' by Ayurveda. The self absorption and oblivion of the practicing dancer, the meandering growth of the tree branches – all of these refer to the lack of concern with social restraints, the norms of civilisation. The boys are at one with the tree – they sit on it fearlessly. The woman embraces the 'wild' elephant. She is unperturbed by its seeming wildness.

In many ways, the portrayal of Kerala echoes globalised consumerist images of Africa-the jungles, the elephants, the tribal dances, the background music. Africa is synonymous with nature and the wild. The ad imports this semiotic imagery to signify Kerala. Even the tourist-consumer woman, has African features – she is dusky and thick lipped. The ad transposes the more 'international' African aura onto Kerala and exoticises the landscapes of the state to appeal to urban middle class tourists all over India and the world. It becomes clear that Kerala is being marketed for its natural vegetation and beauty, when one compares this ad with that for the region of Gujarat. The ad for **Gujarat (Ad 6) Tourism** has less of natural imagery and more of 'heritage' imagery

Ad 7-Mahindra XUV: The ad shows the contrast between the mundaneness of urban sophistication and the passion and adventure of the natural. The protagonist sits in a restaurant and is about to be served a meal of carrots. Suddenly he panics and declines the meal. He explains to his friend, the reason for his dislike of carrots. He had once been to the jungle, where he met some beautiful jungle girls. Mesmerized by their beauty, he follows them but before he realizes, he is lying in a huge cauldron, about to be boiled alive and eaten along with carrots. An SUV

(Mahindra) suddenly arrives and rescues him from the seductive cannibal girls. And this is how, he explains to his friend, he came to hate carrots. The friend is skeptical of his tale but is stunned when he sees a beautiful girl approaching the story teller - protagonist. She seductively caresses his cheek and admits breezily that she is hungry. The friend realizes that the girl is a remainder from the story teller's jungle escapade and is stupefied.

The urban 'cultured' setting is no place for adventure and passion. The protagonist has to travel to the jungle for adventure, for 'stories.' The jungle is the place for the free play of basic human instincts and appetites, be it the appetite for sexual encounters with jungle girls or the appetite for devouring human beings. The voice over at the end also wishes the viewers 'a life, full of stories.' The XUV 500 is inspired by the 'cheetah' - a creature which symbolizes speed, energy and again 'wildness'.

Ad 8 & 9: Slice Aam Sutra: There have been a series of Slice ads which have Katrina Kaif drooling over a mango. Two have been specially chosen in this paper – the 2010 ad (Ad 8) and the 2011 ad (Ad 9). The ads are charged with the Biblical myth of the fruit as temptation. Katrina Kaif is the 'Eve' who is getting tempted. Katrina's approach to the mango is also charged with sexual tension – her lips, her swaying body movements, the lusciousness of the succulent yellow mangoes, the word play in 'aam sutra.' Here again, the fruit is an aspect of nature which stands for the raw, uncensored and uncontrolled energies of the id.

In the 2010 ad, Katrina and a man are seated on a boat on a stream in the middle of a forest. They are flirting with each other. Katrina is dressed in a red sensuous dress, which visually echoes the passion of the moment. The forest around them is fresh and green.

In the 2011 ad, Katrina is alone in the lap of nature drooling over a mango, waiting for it to ripen. The voice over narrates a *sutra* from the *aam sutra*: Stay your passions, to get the best from the final union. The lines are sexually charged, however everything refers to the innocuous mango. The 'wait' implied in the above *sutra*, refers to the wait for the mango to ripen. The union refers to the oral encounter with it, ie eating the mango. The male presence in the 2010 ad is absent in this one and so there is no physical presence to consummate Katrina's passion. The absence of a male is compensated for, by the words from the (*k*) *aam sutra* which is the bible of eroticism.

Both these ads are set in verdant forests –scenes that echo the Biblical paradise, where Adam and Eve dwelled. Paradise was the 'natural' state which preceded civilization, the stage before God admonished Adam and Eve to live by the sweat of their brow and multiply.

Culture as Artificial:

Ad 10 - Lakme Absolute: Make up is an aspect of culture. It hides the naturalness of the human body. It implies that the natural body is not worthy to be seen. It has to be masked. Yet, this ad portrays 'make up which doesn't seem made up'. The make up is not glaringly artificial or entirely of culture. It is soft – it is gentle in its masking of nature. As Judith

Williamson says, this is a typical example of human beings wanting to have the cake and eat it too. They want culture, yet they want it to be natural too. The voice over, supposedly Kareena's, describes the makeup as being 'real' and as being 'absolutely me.' So the make-up does not hide Kareena's real self, her natural self, unlike other make up.

Science as Pinnacle of Culture:

Judith Williamson observes that Science is the “most prestigious . . . of society's 'cooking' processes” (110). Science represents the pinnacle of human ability to control their environment and to make it kowtow to human needs. Many ads represent science as a referent system. It is exemplified by ads where testimonies from 'experts' are solicited. It is also referred in ads which show the scientific, internal structure of various objects.

Ad 11 - Sensodyne: The ad is a testimony by a dentist - the scientific expert in the field of tooth care. The question- answer format of the ad signifies rationality. The diagram of the structure of the tooth can be sourced from a medical textbook. These instances attempt to relate the ad to science, the pinnacle of culture.

Ad 12- Sunsilk Keratinology: The ad introduces a supposedly new science 'keratinology,' which is derived from pico technology and is 'one thousand times smaller.' The implication is that, Sunsilk is always associated with cutting edge technology, which will keep salon treated hair looking fresh for longer.

Ad 13 & 14- Panasonic Econavi: Katrina Kaif plays hide and seek with her kid friends. She is able to find them using the 'smart' air conditioner in every room, which can detect presence and absence. The AC is anthropomorphically represented by a robot which accompanies Katrina across the rooms during her search. The setting is very sophisticated and urban – a high rise building with glass exteriors. The robot is a personification of science. In another ad for Panasonic Econavi (Ad 14), there is a scientific diagram of the internal structure of the a/c.

The internal structure of the wheat grain in the McVities ad (**Ad 16**) and the reference to 'no sugar' and 'no calories' in Real Activ ad (**Ad 15**) are instances of significations of Science. They borrow from biological and health sciences.

Viewers are not expected to truly understand the exact meanings of the words and the scientific jargon. All these ads just give a feeling that Science is involved. For instance, viewers need not know the meaning of 'keratinology' or understand the internal structure of the a/c. Science is the reigning ideology of contemporary times. Whatever is scientific must be true. Whatever is not scientific is regarded as retrograde and outdated. In earlier times, the sacred scriptures was Truth, today Science is Truth.

Science Going Back to Nature - Part 1: Eco Friendliness, Healthy Lifestyles: Science is a process of 'cooking' nature. This means nature is refined for cultural or social use by science. The direction is from nature into culture. But in recent times, science has been mediating a reversal of this directionality. Science is becoming a reason to go back to

nature from culture. This is seen in discourses such as eco-friendliness, going organic and in green technology. Ayurveda is an Indian science which has gained prominence due to its closeness to nature. This will be discussed later. This section looks at instances of Western science going back to 'the natural.'

Ad 15- Real Activ: The ad features Bipasha Basu cycling on the neighbourhood road and keeping an eye out for young people eating junk food. She forcefully replaces their unhealthy foods such as French fries, *parottas* by throwing them each a Real Activ fruit juice. She announces that the juice does not have any extra calories and added sugar. The setting here is not natural. It is a suburban neighbourhood, with beautiful houses and well laid roads. Bipasha herself is riding a bicycle in a sleeveless top and shorts – a symbol of an urban health freak. From this highly, 'cultured' urban space she proclaims a return to nature. But unlike, the Minute Maid ad, or the Fruttare ad, there are instances of medical health discourses here, such as 'no extra calories' and 'no added sugar.' These are instances from the referent system of science.

Ad 16- McVities Digestive Biscuits: Bipasha Basu is an employee in an office and she is eating biscuits. The people around her, in the office are also eating biscuits. However, their biscuits explode into a burst of white *maida*, while she continues leisurely sauntering around the office. The ad tries to impress that ordinary biscuits are made of refined wheat or *maida*, which is unhealthy. But McVities Digestive biscuits is made of healthy whole wheat. The ad even shows a scientific diagram of the structure of the wheat grain with its component parts – endosperm, bran and germ. The voice declares that whole wheat contains fibre, energy and nutrients. These are references to the Science discourse. The setting is extremely urban, with sleek white interiors. The men and women are dressed in Western formal wear. Bipasha herself is dressed in a blouse and knee length skirt.

Ad 17- Amway Nutrilite: The ad is a testimony by various people, both young and old, to the 'control' that Amway Nutrilite has over its various 'natural' products. It has organic farms and centres to produce dietary supplements. Nutrilite is also a nutrition expert. In this ad, nature is accessed through Science. Organic farms and the production of dietary supplements are discourses from health and nutrition sciences.

Unlike the Minute Made, AirWick Aqua Mist and Fruttare ads, the three ads - Real Activ, McVities and Lakme Absolute - are set in extremely 'cultured' zones. Urban spaces represent the zenith of mastering natural environs. There is no natural ambience in any of these. But, in one way or the other these ads suggest a return to more pristine lifestyles – eating fruits (or rather fruit juice) instead of junk food, eating whole wheat biscuits instead of *maida* biscuits and not looking 'made up.'

Science Going Back to Nature – Part 2: Ayurveda: The previous section looked at certain trends such as going eco friendly and organic and of watching health. Advertisements for Ayurvedic products also blur the clear divide between nature and science (culture). While Allopathy and modern medical science is relatively young (about three to four

centuries), Ayurveda is a science that goes back to the time before Christ. So much so that, it has become like second skin to Indians. Because of its relative age, Indians tend to trust Ayurveda, just as they glorify their past, heritage and traditions. Many Indians are even skeptical of Allopathy as being 'conniving' and Ayurveda as being more 'trustworthy.' It is a case of the 'old is gold' feeling. Although Ayurveda is a science, it is closely related to nature. This is implied in a number of ads for Ayurvedic hair care products. They boast that the Ayurvedic formula allows hair to grow 'naturally' from the roots. Also they imply that the product does not cause any side effects. Many Ayurvedic products discuss their scientific formulas by detailing its ingredients.

References :

- Williamson, Judith.(1993). *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*. 1978. London and NewYork: Marion Boyars . Print.

List of Advertisements

- Ad 1: Minute Made: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsibV5l0ovU>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 2: Airwick Aqua Mist: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bX1hwNmtt0c>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 3: Fruttare: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrDdLi1RWWQ>. Accessed on 11 March 2013.
- Ad 4: MRF Wanderer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR2vjnp1P-g>. Accessed on 13 March 2013.
- Ad 5: Kerala Tourism: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFedfnR5seI>. Accessed on 15 March 2013.
- Ad 6: Gujarat tourism: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWfQtohcals>>. Accessed on 11 March 2013.
- Ad 7: Mahindra XUV: < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJue4VKbWUk>>. Accessed on 11 March 2013.
- Ad 8: Slice Aamsutra 2010: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eltx5D7bHwg>>. Accessed on 11 March 2013.
- Ad 9: Slice Aamsutra 2011: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaXhtqVcffI>>. Accessed on 23 March 2013.
- Ad 10: Lakme Absolute: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD-CMIDwfYc>>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 11 : Sensodyne: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8sW6eWFBKA>>. Accessed on 1 March 2013.
- Ad 12: Sunsilk Keratinology: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VK1tbEG-NwU>>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 13: Panasonic Econavi: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuDaItiN6ig>>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 14 : Panasonic Econavi: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpTv5ms7ico>>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 15: Real Activ: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvdApoIrgbc>>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 16: McVities Digestive Biscuits: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc251PBPVZk>>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.
- Ad 17: Amway Nutrilite: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_y3ZKMD2qyg>. Accessed on 21 March 2013.

