

# Exploiting Non-Western Women in Media Representations

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**ABSTRACT.** Media representations and advertisements serve as visual mediums through which cultural values are projected and reinforced. Western capitalism relies on Eurocentric media representations that exploit perceived differences of non-white and non-western cultures to sell western products. This paper analyzes recent advertisements from Kellogg's and Suit Supply as examples of media representations that employ Eurocentric perspectives of non-western cultures to uphold white masculinist and colonial power structures. Therefore, I suggest that the non-western cultures in the Kellogg's and Suit Supply advertisements exist within a western capitalist vacuum. This way of consuming and representing serves to reinforce western ways of knowing as superior and natural.

A feminist critique of Eurocentrism exposes the colonial power structures that serve to validate patriarchal and western ways of knowing. Eurocentrism applies western social and political systems and meaning to non-western cultures and communities. This disempowers preexisting cultural wisdom as well as social, political, and economic institutions of non-western countries. Through media representations and advertising, western capitalist corporations utilize Eurocentrism to normalize and reinforce cultural and imperialist authority over non-western cultures. These representations replicate colonial frameworks by exploiting perceived Otherness, a concept that serves to validate western ways of knowing as superior, and alienate nonwestern peoples and ideals from seemingly advanced western values.

Nowhere is the exploitation of Otherness more visible than in American advertising. American media representations exemplify the way capitalism exploits Otherness by sexualizing and exotifying perceived non-western women. These advertisements reinforce white masculinist and colonial systems of power through the objectification and commodification of non-western women and cultures exclusively for western consumer capitalism. Thus, such advertisements are contemporary manifestations of colonialism reproduced to maintain colonial histories of oppression.

This paper will analyze two advertisements from Kellogg's and Suit Supply as prime examples of a much larger and pressing disclosure of the maintenance of white colonial and masculinist systems of power. Predominately targeted towards heterosexual westerners, Kellogg's and Suit Supply exploit non-western women and cultures in order to project heteronormative gender roles and expectations as natural. Therefore, the non-western women and cultures depicted in the advertisements exist in what I define as a western capitalist vacuum. Western media employs this mechanism of consumption as a capitalist technique to ensure that westerners and western consumers operate within the white colonial and masculinist framework. This process relies on the reiteration and normalization of Eurocentrism as a way for American consumers to comprehend the non-western cultures portrayed in the advertisements. Within this context, Kellogg's and Suit Supply emphasize racialized and colonial notions of female sexuality through the de-contextualization and commodification of non-western women to reinforce western ways of knowing as superior. Thus, Kellogg's and Suit Supply's representations of exotic and sexualized non-western women prove integral in preserving colonial power structures, and validating westerner's sense of self and culture as legitimate, exceptional, and progressive. This way of consuming and representing functions to maintain global power structures in the domain of white western and patriarchal authority.

### **Commodifying Non-Western Cultures**

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, feminist author bell hooks further clarifies this racialized colonial framework that decontextualizes non-western cultures in mass media for the visual pleasure of western consumers. hooks argues that, “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (hooks, 1992). Western consumer culture exploits perceived cultural differences in order to enhance the monotonous nature of white media. In other words, whiteness lacks the mystery, diversity, and exoticism that the Other seemingly embodies. Viewing the non-western cultures within this context allows western consumers to experience the Other from a distance without transgressing beyond western values and ideals.

In Kellogg’s Special K advertisement, an alleged non-western woman dons a red Sari that contrasts against a stark white background. The woman’s exposed abdomen displays her slender physique, compelling the consumer to assume that she achieved her slim figure by eating Special K cereal. However, her non-western attire allows western consumers to immediately identify the woman’s exoticism and perceived Otherness. The advertisement lets consumers passively observe the woman without any information about the non-western culture depicted. The lack of cultural context reinforces the woman’s Otherness, reflecting the Eurocentric ideology that western consumers do not need to understand the non-western culture depicted to grasp the western product being marketed. Instead, the non-western woman is a capitalist landscape in which American ideals are reinforced through perceived Otherness.



Suit Supply Advertisement<sup>1</sup>



Kellogg's Advertisement<sup>2</sup>

Her Sari invigorates white media without transgressing or questioning the legitimacy of white colonial systems of power. In this way, the woman's Sari functions as a commodity, a costume to attract the attention of western consumers. Even though traditional Indian dress varies based on climate, region, and community, the woman's cultural difference serves as a captivating spectacle for western consumers.

Similarly, Suit Supply's advertisement also capitalizes on representations of the exotic Other to promote their menswear product. The advertisement portrays a non-western black woman topless and wearing African jewelry. The woman's near-naked body is striped with white paint, accentuating her dark skin and mimicking the pattern of Suit Supply's collection of menswear being marketed in the advertisement. Her black body and tribal attire signify her Otherness as no further information is provided, or apparently needed, about the non-western culture depicted. The image, produced for Suit Supply's "Like Skin" campaign, lacks cultural context because her tribal attire serves to exude exoticism for western consumer pleasure. Consumers

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.amsterdamadblog.com/2011/03/25/suit-supply-fits-like-skin/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://newsactivist.com/en/articles/gendered-world-views-fall-2016-section-9/advertisement-will-make-you-look-again>

can buy suits that fit like skin, or like the attire of the seemingly primitive nonwestern culture depicted, which seemingly has not yet advanced to the modern world of western material culture.

Depicting Kellogg's Special K cereal as well as Suit Supply's menswear alongside nonwestern women functions to attract western consumer attention because of their cultural differences. Author Julia Williamson in the article, "Woman is an Island," highlights western consumer culture's destructive obsession with utilizing non-western peoples for American capitalism. Williamson argues that, "Women and foreigners—who are so valuable in reflecting capitalism's view of itself are robbed of their own meanings and speech, indeed are reduced to the function of commodities" (Williamson, 2006). The women, the Sari, and the African attire all serve as commodities meant for the western consumer gaze. As such, their non-western attire exists within a western capitalist vacuum, because their cultural significance is devoid of meaning within the western colonial and capitalist framework. Instead, the women in the advertisements function as a cultural playground within the western imaginary, a land of culture and meaning colonized by American values and customs.

### **Reinforcing Colonial, Racialized Notions of Female Sexuality**

In the western imaginary, the female body is largely understood through a masculinist lens which relies on western gender dichotomies to justify notions of male/female, femininity/masculinity, and other gender differences as real and biological. Since femininity is believed to be the weaker embodiment, a woman's body and identity are compared to and distinguished from seemingly superior masculine attributes. Therefore, colonial histories and power structures have delegated patriarchal meaning to both western and non-western women's bodies. These androcentric interpretations associate bare female flesh with sexual allure or desire, especially women's breasts, legs,

and abdomen. Catherine King argues that in western images women are often represented according to patriarchal notions of femininity and gender expectations (King, 1992).

Accordingly, Kellogg's further abuses their representation of the Sari by sexualizing the non-western woman's naturally exposed flesh, an inevitable byproduct from the design of her traditional attire. Kellogg's patriarchal perspective capitalizes on the woman's exposure by exploiting the Sari to reveal her cultivated flesh through western notions of desirable female sexuality. The woman is reduced to and defined through masculinist ideologies about the corporeal female body. Her body objectified and her culture commodified, the non-western woman exists solely for the superficial consumption of westerners. The cultural significance and non-sexual nature of the Sari within Indian cultural context is disregarded in favor of promoting and reinforcing western messages and expectations about femininity.

Within this patriarchal and colonial framework, non-white women's sexuality signifies a distinctly different meaning. Non-white women are considered more erotic which often rationalizes their sexual exploitation within western media (Collins, 1990). Historically, magazines like *National Geographic* have offered western consumers nude images of non-white women that reinforce western stereotypes about non-white women's sexuality. Feminist anthropologist Catherine A. Lutz suggests that such representations characterize non-white and non-western women as hypersexual and seemingly more embodied than white women. Lutz explains that *National Geographic* readers "vary in how they portray the personal or cultural meaning, or both, of this nakedness, some noting it was an aid to masturbation, others claiming it failed to have the erotic quality they expected" (Lutz, 1993). As such, Suit Supply displays the non-white woman's exposed breasts alongside her cultural attire to gratify westerners' often prurient infatuation with black bodies. This portrayal of the hypersexual black woman relies on white patriarchal

histories of oppression and stigmatization to manifest new forms of colonialism that seem invisible to westerners insofar as this racist framework and way of consuming prevails.

Kellogg's and Suit Supply exploit the exposed flesh of the non-western women by applying western and masculinist meaning to their bodies based on racialized notions of female sexuality. Although uncovered flesh may not be associated with eroticism in the actual nonwestern cultures depicted, the Eurocentric lens through which they are consumed defines the westerner's perspective. Moreover, the western capitalist vacuum absorbs pre-existing cultural meaning. It functions to objectify the non-western women according to stereotypes created by patriarchal and colonial frameworks which seemingly justify western ways of knowing as superior. Therefore, circulating representations of racialized female sexuality upholds white colonial and masculinist power structures as they serve to rationalize both western and nonwestern women's subordination as natural.

### **Heteronormativity in Media Representations**

In order to attract western consumers, both Kellogg's and Suit Supply capitalize on heteronormative gender expectations—a western concept that relies on gender dichotomies to validate and privilege heterosexuality as essential to natural order. This notion also suggests that women need to highlight the qualities men find attractive to be considered desirable. Cultural historian John Berger asserts that women within the western colonial framework observe and critique themselves through a masculinist lens (Berger, 1972).

In the Kellogg's advertisement, the non-western woman's Sari is supposed to accentuate her physical body, suggesting that the exposed nature of her Sari functions to attract male attention. A man, located in the background of the advertisement, is seen gawking at her shapely figure which seemingly confirms and validates her success at

achieving a slim physique, or in other words, attaining masculinist ideals of female beauty. The woman's accentuated makeup, slim physique, painted nails, and glowing hairless body reinforce western patriarchal notions of beauty and femininity as desirable, natural, and integral for male attention. The non-western woman's newfound sexual desirability is further evident from the image's text that proclaims Special K gave her "The look that makes him look again." The advertisement's text illustrates the normalization of heteronormative rhetoric as well as a reliance on the notion that women buy Kellogg's cereal with the intent to attract male attention.

Thus, the woman in the Kellogg's advertisement functions as a medium through which heteronormative representations of female sexuality are reiterated for western consumers. Her body serves as an economic opportunity to reaffirm western female beauty ideologies that keep heterosexual women buying their product. Orienting the consumer gaze to operate within the patriarchal and colonial framework normalizes and reinforces these beauty ideologies as inherent to womanhood. This mechanism of consumption projects American values onto non-western cultures in order to maintain dominant western social structures and sentiments about female sexuality.

Suit Supply also reinforces heteronormativity even though the advertisement predominately targets heterosexual men. Their company website labels Suit Supply as menswear and their clothing advertisements display men wearing the products, suggesting they predominately market to cisgender men. Therefore, Suit Supply depicts a topless woman because they presume the male consumer should and would want to gaze at the woman's bare breasts. Her tribal attire, which rendered her topless, is not a form of cultural appreciation, but a way to highlight her naked body and exaggerate her perceived Otherness. Combined with western notions of black hypersexuality, the woman's body exists for the visual pleasure of the assumed western male



gaze. Suit Supply assumes the heterosexuality of the western consumer and normalizes the objectification of the non-western black woman to preserve white patriarchal heteronormativity, illustrating the exploitative and oppressive nature of capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

Feminism's analytical lens discloses the exploitative relationship between western capitalism and non-western women as well as the contemporary manifestations of colonialism that exists within advertising. Through non-western women's exploitation and commodification, Kellogg's and Suit Supply serve as testaments as to how western media upholds masculinist and colonial frameworks of power. The western capitalist vacuum decontextualizes non-western cultures and instead projects the Other in a way that reaffirms western ways of knowing. The non-western cultures and traditional attire become meaningless costumes that function to emphasize western patriarchy and heteronormativity as intrinsic. The women's perceived exoticism and physical bodies become colonized landscapes to invigorate white consumer culture and project values that maintain the authority of western ideologies and power structures. Thus, the alleged non-western women in the advertisements are both exotic and familiar as western capitalism exploits their cultural differences while simultaneously applying western masculinist meaning to their non-western bodies. These mechanisms of consumption can change, but not without challenging representations of non-western women within the white colonial and masculinist framework. Doing so would directly question the legitimacy and superiority of western ways of knowing as well as the authority of those it serves to keep in power.

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