



**(MIS)APPROPRIATIONS OF NATURE: POLITICAL AND
POSITIONAL ASPECTS OF THE “NATURE” IN SELECT
ADVERTISEMENTS**

Abhirami Jayaraj
Central University of Kerala, Kasargod
aameejayaraj@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper attempts to problematize the portrayal of nature in the advertisements of non-natural or industrial products. The chosen advertisements for detailed study are the automobile commercials of Mahindra & Mahindra Limited – “Mahindra Live Young Live Free” (2013, 2017), Mahindra Marazzo (2018) and Kia Stinger (2018), television commercial of Blossom Lingerie (2017), Idea Cellular (2010), and print advertisement of Artic Designer (2018). They will be examined by focusing on its multiple dimensions; political and positional aspects. Political dimension deals with the relative stand taken by these advertisements, the way in which they present nature; its relation with the context and texture of the product advertised and ultimately discovering whether they comply with the ecological responsibility they present. Positional aspect discusses about the realm that the advertisements consider themselves to occupy within the ecological frame; their eco-centric or anthropocentric alliances.

Keywords: Advertisement, Commodity, Consumer, Product, Environmental Consciousness, Nature, Television Commercial, Eco-centrism

The American Marketing Association defines advertising as the process of introducing to public an idea, product or service through a paid announcement from a non-individual and identifiable source to encourage the public to make use of what is introduced. It is a promotional activity for marketing a commodity in the present day world of mass production and distribution. It serves as a powerful tool in the marketing machinery. In the words of C. H. Sandage and V. Fryburger, “advertising is multidimensional; a powerful marketing tool; a component of economic system; a means of financing the mass media; a social institution; an art form; an instrument of business management; a field of employment and paying profession ”(Gupta 4). Advertising can also be considered as a marketing tactic for establishing a brand identity in consumers’ minds.

Nowadays, advertisements upholding environmental claims and green or natural imagery have become a frequent sighting. Along with the peculiarities of the products, company’s environmental consciousness is also highlighted in most of these advertisements. The tendency to foreground nature in an equal ratio to the product in the west can be seen as early as 1962 and 1971 in the print advertisements of Philip Morris Cigarettes and Chiffon Margarine respectively. This trend became more prominent and acceptable worldwide in the later years. The way in which the concept of ‘nature’ is presented differed in each advertisement with respect to theme, visual background, taglines, etc.

Cars and the Canyon – Automobile Commercials

Images of nature have become recurrent signifiers in the automobile commercials. They subsume most distant and striking sites in their commercials in order to captivate the viewers’ attention. Mostly advertisements, whether visual or print, showcase visuals and taglines related to the texture of their product for better promotion and establishment of brand identity. Even though the correlation between nature and automobile products is perplexingly opaque, nature imagery and related taglines are said to be a consequential element in automobile commercials. What makes

the role of nature crucial, how are they making use of it and how it makes an impact on viewers are the reasons for the repeated vehicle commercials in same fashion.

One of the first vehicle advertisements came out with the question, “Looking to get away from it all? Escape the pressure of urban living”. Some years later another advertisement appeared with the visual of a couple swimming in a lake, with the caption, “With every splash, you can feel the city washing off you”. In 1999, Ford Motor Company (Automaker Company) initiated a marketing campaign with the caption “No Boundaries”. They incorporated many green and nature images as a new strategy. In 2001 Ford published a magazine with the title “No Boundaries”. In Ford press release their agenda behind the publishing was mentioned as, “...to spark emotion and encourage readers to explore the natural world (by featuring) seasonal editorial coverage of outdoor adventure activities, gear and travel”. They also started a reality show with the same name where participants were supposed to partake in a wild trek which starts from Vancouver Island and ends at Arctic Circle. In 2002 they sponsored an all-woman group to climb Mt. Everest and after 10 months Ford launched its brand new model ‘The Everest’.

Mahindra & Mahindra Limited can be considered as one of the automobile manufacturers who depicted or utilized nature in a crafty or more fittingly in a cunning fashion. The commercial ‘Mahindra: Live Young, Live Free’ was first published on January 24, 2013. It portrays a gang of people who travel in their SUVs through contrasting landscapes such as mud-caked, grubby roads, deserted lands, grassy hillsides, sea shores, other adventures sites, etc. One of the initial visuals in this advertisement is the entry of the vehicle to a deserted area by spreading a copious amount of dust deeply from earth. It is followed by another visual of the same vehicle running through a grimy road splashing mud and water. These visuals provide a powerful, unparallel ingress for the viewers or the consumers to the advertisement and to the product. They repeatedly included many

attractive and powerful images from nature with respect to their product. Here the technological advancement of their product is shown with the aid of the ferocity, tranquility and powerfulness of nature.

Even though the primary agenda behind all these commercials is a swift raise in marketing, the underlying motive behind the strategy in which they promote their product should be analyzed through different aspects. The way in which they portray urban life is a crucial element in these advertisements. As Shane Gunster observes “images of nature are among the most common signifiers of utopia in commercial discourse, tirelessly making the case that a certain commodity or brand will enable an escape from the malaise and drudgery of urban existence” (2). The life and space other than the common human environment is highlighted throughout the advertisement. The tagline “we live young, we live free” is included as a repeated chant, which easily enters to the viewers’ unconscious and establishes the concepts put forth by the commercial. The technological advancement, urbanization, consumerism, pollution and such modern stratagems have made the urban life more destructive. Even though the commercial is not trying to point this notion directly, it attempts to instill this supposition into the viewers’ minds. People have a great tendency to prefer the outer environment in which they usually see features opposed to those of the city. And they are manipulating the concepts of consumers on nature by highlighting human freedom and the wildness of nature and finally equating them to the experience given by the vehicle. Brian O’Reilly, in his article “What in the World is That Thing” mentions the answer of a driver from Los Angeles to the question why he bought his truck: “I call this my urban escape vehicle; fires, earthquakes, riots, I am ready”. So Gunster observes correctly that, “nature remains a rugged, spectacular and sublime paradise, a utopian alternative to the crowded dystopian banality of urban and suburban life”. (13) Considering the impact of nature on viewers, these commercials are also trying to adapt the natural world into their products. They portray themselves as a lens

through which the consumer can explore and experience nature. According to Gunster, “SUV is offered as a technology for the redemption of nature, a lens through which we might glimpse its secret aesthetics and truly experience and appreciate its sublime majesty” (7-8). Their self-marking as an agent to converge man and nature reaches its peak when their 2017 commercial also falls into the same pattern. In this, viewers/consumers are urged to witness a similar delineation of nature, but with respect to considerable changes. In all of these advertisements, the technical advancements or the characteristic features of the vehicles are not described directly. But at the same time all these features are explained in a periphrastic manner, by providing a direct comparison with nature.

The television commercial of Kia Motors, released on March 22, 2018 also follows the same pattern by seeking the aid of nature. In the initial part of the advertisement they explain the technical features of the vehicle directly and in the second part they include visuals from nature attesting to the initially described features. The commercial includes visuals from different landscapes such as Death Valley in USA, Nurburgring in Germany, Arjeplog in Sweden, etc. Death Valley is one of the hottest places in the world. The cracks in the road, temperature of the place and the other natural characteristics of that place are shown as easily overcome by the vehicle. Even though the snow covered landscape of Arjeplog creates a challenge in the viewers’ mind, the vehicle easily accomplishes and succeeds the challenge put forth by nature. One of the most crucial visuals in the advertisement is the passing of the vehicle through a glacier archway and how the roof of the vehicle demolishes the arch for its smooth passing. The challenges and threats produced by nature are shown as easily tamed and overcome by the product. Its competence to vanquish and dominate nature is foregrounded throughout the commercial. Here nature is portrayed as an enemy, with rough and ferocious characteristics. Such visuals were also present in the above mentioned Mahindra advertisements. One of the most powerful visual from Mahindra

commercial is the gushing of the vehicle through a pastureland. The vehicle's wheels have squashed a large amount of grass and plants growing in that spot. And the cleared route made by the vehicle by decimating the pastureland is highlighted and is exhibited with the aid of extreme wide shot. The visual of how this vehicle is driven through a dry deserted land and the way in which it pulls out soil and spreading it is also shown in a long and an extreme long shot.

Subjugating nature, by throwing a protector like mask to man-made products can be considered as a common notion appearing in advertisements from a long time. The executive vice president of Penta Mark jeep advertising firm once said that, "no matter what nature throws at you unexpectedly, you are still protected. It takes care of you. Once you are in a jeep, you are safe and secure and you can get out of it. We try to hit on those emotional connections". (19) The advertising tagline of Suzuki, which appeared in *Motor Trend* in November 1995 says, "Conquer just about anything the landscape throws at you". "Put the world at the mercy of your whims" advertisement caption of Isuzu came out in 1998 in *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. "Get out of here and show Mother Nature who is boss" was an advertisement of jeep which appeared in *Canadian Geographic* in September 1998. "Let nature worry about you for a change" was another notable advertisement caption which was taken from *High and Mighty*.

The television commercial of Mahindra Marazzo released on September 4, 2018 pictures the manufacturing process of a new model. It is designed with reference to a ferocious, untamed shark. The grille of the car is compared to the shark's teeth and shark's fin is also recreated in the car. The final visual of the advertisement is the entry of the new model car from water to land, initially highlighting the car's fin to create the image of a shark. The inner sea world is pictured as something shadowy and exotic. The manufacturing process and designers are positioned in a closed area, a separate realm inside the sea itself, having complete privilege to watch around and

control what all are happening around. The entry of a shark to that space is indicated by the tone of red alarm, initially creating a sense of danger and then showing how it is easily handled by human beings. The tendency to portray the undersea habitat in opposition to the earthly environment is a visible practice that can be picked out from this advertisement. The non-human and alienated space of the undersea environment is portrayed as a place that can be easily colonized by human power and intelligence. How this advertisement unbolted an intimate channel between humans and marine creatures is another manipulative element in this commercial. In the opinion of Nicole Starosielski, “the oceans could simultaneously be revealed to science and still remain in the realm of supernatural and the exotic”. (151) Here the features of the ‘cannibal shark’ and the ‘monstrous roam’ are attributed to the newly designed vehicle. One of the initial models of Dodge Durango was also designed by resembling the characteristics of a jungle cat, with the grille representing teeth and large fenders, the muscles. The designer of the particular model said that the first image they searched for the manufacturing of the car was that of a strong animal. The underlying animal imageries encompass several cognitive and emotional components. The attempt to adapt the natural world into their product is another unconscious yet conscious attempt put forth by these advertisements. Robin Anderson in his work *Critical Studies in Media Commercialism* says that, “these vehicles occupy the wilderness in the same ways animals do... within the depiction they attain the status of a biological phenomenon. No longer machine or the product of human endeavor, they become a natural part of the ecosystem”. (160)

Even though all these advertisements highlight the tranquility, aesthetics and wildness of nature, the havoc caused by their product on nature is easily masked. The contradiction between how these vehicles are marketed and how they are actually used form an irony, eventually leading to the meaninglessness of these advertisements apart from the idea of marketing. The juxtaposition of the images of pure nature and the excessive amount of pollution caused by them marks the

manipulation of nature by highlighting its own qualities. Thus nature plays a crucial part in establishing a promotional atmosphere for these vehicles in a more penetrating mode.

Set the Scene with Green - Blossom Lingerie

The television commercial of Blossom Lingerie was released on 26 January 2017. It accommodates only two characters; nature and a woman. This advertisement celebrates calm and pleasant nature imageries. Every shot is filled with attractive and serene images from nature. The whole advertisement is a montage of scenes; collecting water lilies, sitting in a wooden raft in the middle of huge lotus plants, picking lotus flowers, flies flying around the flowers, etc... A lady sitting calmly amidst flowers is the most common and highlighted depiction in this commercial.

The correlation between nature and women is portrayed charismatically throughout the advertisement. The usual method of objectification of female body in lingerie advertisements is absent here. Instead of that, woman-nature relationship is highlighted. The advertisement can also be considered as a vindication of female body, power and sexuality. Carloyn Merchant in her *Feminism and the Philosophy of Nature* observes that, "Women and nature have an age-old association- an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language and history." (294) Nature is always illustrated as a woman, by relating to the 'pre-established' feminine facets- body, subjective, emotional, private, etc... It is suggested that the characteristics attributed to women and nature are constructed by males. Pat Brereton mentions Chai Heller's observation, "The construction of Mother Nature as 'damsel in distress' has sprung up from 'a romantic tradition' broadly based on a pervasive male fantasy of 'the ideal woman'- a fantasy which leaves woman and nature little room to be anything but become 'idealized victims'". (86) The chosen advertisement also gives viewers a sense that the particular natural scenes and feelings evoked by it provided an escape for the woman shown in the commercial from her tiring habitual activities. The commercial is actually trying to strongly affix woman- nature bond, thereby providing a direct

relationship between nature and the consumer. When examining both of the characters in the advertisement, nature plays a more crucial role than the woman. Thus the reason behind the significant role of nature in this advertisement is contentious.

In current scenario, a large group of people has reduced their direct access to nature and its bodily, spiritual or inner advantages. A direct exposure to natural environment is always a pleasing experience. Nature imageries depicted in a commercial can also possibly induce the same effects of exposure to nature. This advertisement has the ability to make the viewers feel immersed in the nature and positive responses to visuals in advertising generate an approving effect on the attitude towards the advertising brand.

Use Mobile, Save Nature – Idea Cellular and Artistic Designer

The television commercial of idea cellular, 'Use mobile, Save Paper' was released on January 2010. 'In this advertisement brand ambassador and actor Abhishek Bachchan is presented as a personification of a tree. It starts with Abhishek Bachchan's voice over explaining how usage of paper destroys nature. In the initial part of advertisement itself they tried to attract viewers' attention by giving attention to the foremost social issue- deforestation. The commercial shows a long series of situation where papers are replaced by mobile phones and thereby safe guarding nature. People reading news paper through mobile phone, waiter taking orders through mobile phones, boarding passes of flights being made available on mobile phone, graduating students holding mobile phones in the place of their degree certificate, etc... In between these visuals the changes that happen in nature are also shown. The advertisement closes with a shot on the piece of a land where the tree stood. New green leaves are seen sprouting out from the branches and nature is shown in full bloom again.

Any theme can be attractive, if the thought behind it turns to be novel. The message 'use of mobile phones can avoid deforestation' is brand new and crafty. It gained viewers' attention because they discussed about the preservation of nature, which can be considered as a relevant and most discussed topic of the time. Messages will be successful only if they contain the same opinion of the receivers. To attract a bigger audience, the message has to be designed in a manner that should be acceptable to a larger crowd. The concept 'nature' has the ability to capture people's attention without any boundaries.

The Print advertisement (in the form of brochure) of Artic Designer- Sink Cock Manufacturers and Suppliers, shows a close relation to the commercial of idea Cellular mentioned above. The taglines in the advertisement of Artic Designer are "A Tribute to the World's greatest Designer - Nature" and "A Touch of Class, A Slice of Nature". In both these advertisements, the relation between nature and their product is undiscoverable and obscure. Still they highlighted the presence of 'nature' in their advertisement rather than the illustration of their product. When Idea portrayed their product as a remedy for deforestation, Artic designer dedicated their product itself to nature. While the above mentioned advertisements focused on how to increase their marketing, Artic Designer used nature to establish a brand identity. Information about their place of manufacturing, retailer shops, outlets, varieties, price, etc... are not given in their brochure. Their tagline is the only thing that is highlighted.

Both these brands use nature as a commodity for the wide acceptance of their product. On one hand they proclaim environmental protection and celebrate nature's beauty and uniqueness. On the other side they hide the depletion caused by their products on nature. The constant updating of mobile phones has created a huge amount of e-waste, which ends up in nature itself, where harmful chemicals leaking to ground and other resources and affecting the equilibrium of nature.

The manufacturing of plastic taps and other materials also end up in same way, destroying fragile eco system.

Conclusion

Nature has taken a determining part in all these advertisements, most of the times rising above the product. Automobile commercials depicted nature mainly in three divergent manners. They pictured nature as a succor to the industrialized urban life and portrayed their vehicle as a channel which connects man to nature. Some of the commercials presented nature as an enemy to humankind and pictured themselves with all the abilities to fight with nature. An attempt to adapt the natural world into their product was also visible in some of the commercials. Even though nature has a very significant role in these commercials, the eco centric elements are lacking. The survival, power and establishment of mankind are celebrated throughout these advertisements. At the same time an environment conscious attitude can be witnessed from Blossom Lingerie commercial. There humankind becomes only a part of the nature apart from the controller of nature. They gave primary focus to the visual beauty and tranquility of the outer environment. Advertisements of Idea Cellular and Artic Designer took nature as a material reality and portrayed it by highlighting a false eco consciousness and hiding the imbalance created by them in nature. Even though all these advertisements revolve around nature, none of these products have any direct or indirect associations with nature. So apart from their 'eco consciousness', the primary agenda of all these advertisements is the increased position in marketing.

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