



**“India: Critics of Color An In-depth Analysis of the Psychological Causes and Effects of Colorism on Women and Africans in India”
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India: Critics of Color

An In-depth Analysis of the Psychological Causes and Effects of Colorism on Women and
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Introduction:

The rising sales of Fair and Lovely, a popular skin-lightening brand in India, reflect the idolization of fairness. Advertisements promoting this lightness cream typically portray a dark-skinned woman, who seems to have trouble finding jobs and getting married, whose unfortunate fate is overturned by the lightening of her skin. A well-known Indian matrimonial site, Shaadi.com, lists “fair” skin as a key factor, reinforcing the idea that light-skinned brides are more attractive and desirable. Nandita Das, an Indian actress and activist, is the face of the campaign “Unfair and Lovely,” which aims to transform India into a more accepting and embracing nation of darker skin tones. Unfortunately, her efforts do not seem to have a profound effect since the media and the Indian Film Industry use their far-reaching platforms to overpower any activist. It is not only Indian women who have suffered from the stifling societal pressures but also African men and women who reside in India in hopes of obtaining a better education and lifestyle. They are victims of scrutiny and judgement merely on the basis of their race and skin color.

In a society where light skin is awarded preferential treatment and is the determining factor for success, how does colorism, the discrimination against individuals of a darker skin tone within the same racial or ethnic group, and racism affect women and Africans residing in India? The Indian Film Industry, which is the ultimate promoter and perpetrator of colorism, fortifies the problem as celebrities prey on customers by endorsing skin-lightening creams and fundamentally spreading the message that “fair is better,” which can have dire repercussions on the mental health of those affected. The ubiquity of these discriminatory messages can lead to internalized colorism and racism, the conscious or subconscious acceptance of society’s colorist and racist views that can lead to internalized oppression, as the victim sees herself through the lens of the oppressor. Internalization of society’s demeaning views can lead to low self-esteem and psychiatric disorders

such as anxiety and depression, preventing an individual from becoming a productive member of society.

To reach a conclusion, this paper will thoroughly analyze the psychological causes and effects of the perpetuation of colorism and racism by utilizing multifarious theories, each with a unique purpose in providing a clear explanation for this complex topic. First, a brief history of India will provide context for the high desire for light skin. Next, by utilizing social cognitive theory and identity theory, which encompasses the self-verification theory, the first two sections will aim to analyze the impact of media in promoting colorism and the obstacles Indian women encounter. The last section will analyze how colorism can manifest itself into racism through the realistic identity theory and social identity theory and will analyze the mental health effects on Africans.

Brief History of Colorism and Racism

Colorism and racism in India can be traced back to three significant moments in the nation's history: British colonialism, the introduction of the caste system, and the Indian Ocean Slave Trade. First off, according to the myth of Aryan, light-skinned tribes with might and superiority moved from North India to South India with multifarious advantages: military power, technological skills, chariots, etc... These light-skinned tribes (from Eurasia) conquered the primitive South Indians, Dravidians, who were dark-skinned. The Aryans introduced the caste system, which is a rigid hierarchy that determines an individual's place in society. Brahmins (intellectuals and priests) are on top of the ladder, then Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), then Vaishyas (merchants and traders), then Shudras (servants and manual workers), and untouchables (workers who process animal and human waste) who are considered to be outside the caste system. Parameswaran and Cardoza explain that "the very term for caste, varna, which literally means

“color” and the coding of different castes in the epic story Mahabharata according to color - Brahmins (white), Kshatriya (red), Vaishyas (yellow), Shudras (brown), and untouchables (black)” (225). Thus, the struggle for upper-caste status could explain India’s desire for light skin. Women face a greater burden to be light-skinned because they are “charged with the responsibility of reproducing and maintaining the purity of caste, and hence a woman’s light skin symbolizes the potential for the continuity of upper caste status” (Parameswaran and Cardoza 225).

Africans are commonly referred to as the “untouchables” and it is important to understand the historical background of their arrival and presence in India. The Siddis, a small African community in India (settled across multiple states), comprise a population of 40,000. Contemporary settlements of Africans on the subcontinent are a result of forced migration from the African continent initiated by Muslim Arabs in the Indian Ocean Slave Trade. Jayawardene states that “Indian elites preferred Africans’ loyalty and skills as servants and soldiers over native laborers. Therefore, enslaved Africans were brought to the region as special servants in the courts of Muslim Nawabs and Sultans [as in the case of Siddis in India], while...others came as herbalists and midwives” (328). Thus, Africans were considered important in mercantilism as they were seen as raw material and were used for low status jobs.

Section I: Women, Colorism, Media

It is evident that “skin color discrimination or colorism, much like the standards of weight in modern beauty and fashion norms, is a gendered phenomenon that has affected women to a much greater degree than men” (Parameswaran and Cardoza 223). Thus, women feel more pressure to be beautiful than men. In an era where beauty is highly valued and coveted, women are constantly seeking ways to physically alter themselves in order to be accepted. “Advertising’s pedagogical doctrines of femininity - fairness, slimness, youthfulness, light skin, long legs, and

big eyes - in India's vibrant media landscape" penetrate the lives of women everyday, constantly telling them how to be beautiful (Parameswaran and Cardoza 223). When a message is frequently portrayed in the media, it becomes accepted as the norm; the media is the creator of a new reality, which is nothing but an illusion that unfortunately appeals to the general population. Beauty standards placed upon women are like laws: failure to obey them results in intense societal judgement and even marginalization. Being dark-skinned is treated as a crime, an obstacle one must overcome in order to lead a prosperous and successful life.

The social cognitive theory may provide one plausible explanation for the discrimination against dark-skinned Indian women. This theory relates prejudice to social categorization and stereotyping. Professor Augoustinos explains that "categorising people into their respective group memberships (such as race, gender, age) is seen to be driven primarily by our limited cognitive capacity and thereby our need to simplify the overwhelming amount of stimulus information we receive and need to process quickly and efficiently" (2013). Essentially, people tend to categorize because the human mind does not have the capacity to account for the immense diversity of human nature. In essence, humans tend to find shortcuts to organize the multitude of information they are surrounded by. However, grouping people into categories strips individuals of their identity as they become more of a prototype, which makes colorism, and thus prejudice, rampant. In the context of the Indian Film Industry, skin color seems to aid in the depiction of characters: light-skinned actors portray the protagonists while dark-skinned actors portray the antagonists or villains. When dark skin is constantly portrayed as an obstacle, society accepts it and, consequently, ridicules and devalues the women. As a result, the victims begin to believe that possessing dark skin inherently makes them inferior, resulting in internalized colorism, which is the taking of societal standards

and making them one's own. The effect of this internalized colorism on mental health will be further analyzed in the next section.

Section II: Obstacles of Colorism for Women

According to the identity theory, “self-esteem is an outcome of, and necessary ingredient in, the self-verification process that occurs within groups, maintaining both the individual and the group” (Cast and Burke, 1041). The self-verification theory, which is integrated within the identity theory, refers to an individual's desire to be seen by others the way she sees herself. Thus, the group (in this case, society) influences how the individual sees herself and if the group treatment is offensive to the individual, the individual can begin seeing herself through the discriminatory lens of society. This is detrimental to mental health as this internalization can affect her self-esteem. Cast and Burke assert that “verification of role identities increases an individual's worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem”(1041). Worth-based self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth and personal value and efficacy-based self-esteem refers to an individual's belief in her capacity to successfully complete tasks. These two concepts are bidimensional as one's worth-based self-esteem can influence her efficacy-based self-esteem and vice versa. Fundamentally, the group's opinion of an individual matters as it provides the individual with verification and assurance of her identity, consequently increasing her self-esteem. However, when the inverse is occurring, a lack of verification, this can lead to a low self-esteem, compromising the individual's self-image. This is prevalent in the Indian media and business. For instance, “61% of the dermatological products consisted of skin lightening products in 2011...these products capitalize on women's low self-esteem and cultural beliefs about fair-skinned beauty, as well as exploit the customers” (Sims and Hirudayaraj 42). The insecurities of Indian women are transformed into a profiting business, which only reinforces their low self-esteem and degrading

ideas about having dark skin. Next, we will analyze real life narratives regarding the evils of colorism and showing that it can result in internalized colorism, accepting and internalizing society's oppression and negative perceptions.

A woman's skin tone plays a huge role in marriage. Arranged marriages in India involve a dowry, a function of the bride's marketability, which the bride's family has to offer the groom's family. "Men's yearning to marry a 'fair' bride has objectified Indian women who often suffer from low self-esteem due to skin complexion issues. Social structures in patriarchal societies such as India's often reinforce and propagate male privilege while 'othering' women's experiences [and] those who do not or cannot fit into these stringent norms are likely stigmatized, marginalized, and devalued" (Utley and Darity 134). All in all, skin tone is a huge factor that determines the desirability of a woman in the marriage market and when men hold higher positions and greater power in the patriarchal society, women feel powerless, hopeless, and even afraid to speak up. It is normal for a man to desire a light-skinned bride and not even the dowry can increase a dark-skinned bride's desirability because women with light skin possess higher social capital than their darker peers. For example, the dowry murder is common occurrence where the husband murders the woman over a dispute regarding the dowry. One husband in India murdered a woman by the urging of his family. His mother told him to "leave this woman and we will get you another one...What her parents have given us is nothing. Moreover, this girl is ugly and she is dark" (Utley and Darity 134). The woman's appearance was used as a justification for her murder as the mother associates the woman's attractiveness with the color of her skin. The mother implies that because the woman is dark-skinned, she is not worthy of love, which makes it evident that women are treated more as products of a business rather than human beings.

Colorism can affect a woman's professional and career journey regardless of experience and talent. For example, in the Western state of Maharashtra, out of 100 tribal girls who were trained for jobs under a government scholarship program, most of them were denied because of their darker skin color. Eight of them received jobs but very low positions (Sims and Hirudayaraj 41). When colorism is entrenched in this extent, the women cannot gain a prominent position in society to combat the problem. By being prevented from becoming productive and independent members of society, they are essentially silenced. Data also shows that darker women have fewer opportunities to obtain a vocation in the entertainment field as models and actresses. In order to appear as such, the media suggests skin-lightening and women are manipulated into consuming such products even if they are aware of the problematic side effects. Such side effects include chemicals such as "hydroquinone, topical steroids, and toxic mercury [that can cause] cancer, thin skin, and damage to the kidneys and nervous system" (Sims and Hirudayaraj 42). As can be seen, these products are dangerous but women consume them regardless because the societal pressures outweigh the aforementioned consequences. Skin-lightening is a perilous journey to embark upon but Indian women encounter excessive pressure from society that most of them simply dismiss the problem and proceed with the process.

Women's efforts to abide by societal expectations indicate that these have shaped their identity. Society tells dark-skinned women that they are ugly, not worthy of love and affection, and undeserving of a reputable occupation. The suffocating expectations the woman has to abide by in order to be accepted are a burden on her life and a barrier to bliss. When a woman is not marriageable and is not employable, she becomes an outcast with no emotional release and no hope for change. Nadine Burnett corroborates that "colorism as a form of emotional abuse can be expressed directly (through word and /or deed) from peers, family members and caregivers or it

can be expressed indirectly via an unending chorus of negative stereotypes in the media” (2). When the woman is criticized in her own home and by society, she cannot find the solace and comfort needed to ease her emotional pain and suffering. For a developing woman, poor self-esteem that results from this type of discrimination “increases...vulnerability to psychiatric disorders [such as depression and anxiety]. These scars formed in early childhood will persist into adulthood, especially if left unaddressed” (Burnett 2). Withdrawal from society can be a natural response to such intense prejudice as a woman who is afraid of the social judgement is likely to hide herself from the demons of society. With the woman’s voice silenced and repressed, she internalizes the toxicity of the oppression as she has no form of emotional outlet. This can lead to psychiatric disorders that prevent her from functioning as a healthy member of society.

Section III: African Victims of Racism in India

Similar mental effects are experienced by Africans in India as well. When dark skin is already devalued, racism towards Africans residing in India is inevitable. In order to explore the racism targeted at this group, intergroup theories, such as realistic group conflict theory (RCT) and social identity theory (SIT), will be utilized to comprehend the reasons behind such discrimination. RCT “views intergroup hostility as arising from competition between social groups for economic, social and cultural resources” (Augoustinos, 2013). The Africans are treated as inferior, and “while issues of social marginalization are present in all societies, these problems are pronounced in formerly colonized spaces which are plagued by age-old colonial processes and institutional practices that mark cultural and social difference and also serve as the basis for economic and political exclusion,” (Jayawardene 325). Essentially, the past is used as a justification for the marginalization the Africans are forced to endure. The Indian people perceive Africans as a threat to their lifestyles and thus, exhibit hostile behaviors towards them in order to maintain their

superiority. When Africans immigrate to India, the Indian people view it as an attack on their national pride and a threat to their personal and professional lives. The African immigrants must utilize resources to make a living, which many Indians view as the taking away of opportunities from the people of the already overpopulated nation.

SIT fundamentally differentiates the in-group from the out-group as it stresses “the psychological importance of intergroup differentiation” and this mere categorization and differentiation can trigger prejudice (Augoustinos, 2013). This intergroup differentiation is causing the lack of acceptance and understanding of the African people as this minority has negative stereotypes associated with them: they are seen as carefree, untouchables, and only valued for their athletic abilities. The “untouchables” are shown no respect in society and constantly mistreated and Africans are instantly labelled as low-caste due to the color of their skin regardless of their intellectual capacities. Parameswaran and Cardoza state that “upper-caste Hindu nationalists seized upon the Aryan race theory as scientific proof of their racial proximity to European masters, thus fortifying their distinctive racial and religious identity and their superior status vis-a-vis lower castes and untouchables” (226). Intergroup differentiation essentially creates an us-versus-them mindset, which can be detrimental to the society and the population it encompasses, as it perpetuates stereotypes and discrimination. For example, a 33-year-old Nigerian lawyer and PhD student in India says that “She had given him [a first-year law student] a questionnaire for a piece of research she was conducting. He called her and said he would fill it out if she slept with him. "Are you seeing the insult?" she asks, angry hands gesticulating. "It's because I am black.”” (Prabhu, 2017). Even though the woman held a high intellectual position in society, she was treated less than human merely because of her race and the color of her skin. Instead of being recognized and appreciated for her individuality, she was reduced to a stereotype.

When a group of people are constantly reminded that they are outsiders, they are stripped of their sense of belonging and sense of community. As stated in the previous section, the internalization of discrimination to this extent can affect their worth-based self-esteem and efficacy-based self-esteem. Both types of self-esteem are augmented by the development of an individual's authentic confidence built by meaningful experiences (both positive and negative), which can teach him how to be resilient in the face of adversity. Li and Yang describe that "trait resilience is developed from experiences of successful adaptation to ordinary stressful situations" (320). However, when their lifestyle is characterized by solely negative experiences, the search for self-esteem becomes almost an impossible task because they have not been able to successfully adapt to this stress-inducing lifestyle. Instead of seeking help, many become accustomed to the mistreatment and reluctantly accept the marginalization as part of their lifestyle as they have no other choice, which can lead to emotional trauma. However, race-related trauma is often not seen as emotional trauma and when the victims cannot identify their feelings, it becomes difficult to fully comprehend the extent of the damage they are coerced to endure.

Counterargument

The previous sections have discussed the harm of categorization through various theories that reveal society's tendency to separate groups on the basis of skin color and race for the purpose of distinction. However, some may argue that social categorization may have its benefits to acquire information about the surroundings: "The description of social categorization as a heuristic is also true in another sense: we sometimes categorize others not because it seems to provide more information about them but because we may not have the time to do anything more thorough" (Jhangiani and Hammond, 2014). When one is apprehensive, categorization as a heuristic allows for simple and speedy thinking that is effective and functional, with the purpose of reducing the

complexity of human nature. Essentially, the identifier can acquire information about the identified individual and adjust his approach method based on his knowledge of the group, which he assumes to be reflective of all individuals within that group. However, this benefit is solely for the one who does the categorizing as most categorizations are based on stereotypes, which could be disadvantageous for the one being categorized.

On the other hand, ingroup favoritism, which aids in self-enhancement, benefits the individuals that categorize themselves within a group. When an ingroup is characterized by positive attributes, it provides an individual with feelings of familiarity and social identity, which is the positive self-esteem derived from group memberships. Jhangiani and Hammond state, “people express higher self-esteem after they have been given the opportunity to derogate outgroups, suggesting that ingroup favoritism does make us feel good” (2014). Thus, identifying oneself as part of a group can augment feelings of self-worth and “in some cases, we may be able to feel good about our group memberships even when our own individual outcomes are not so positive” (Jhangiani and Hammond, 2014). This type of categorization mostly benefits the people within the group as members tend to exhibit negative attitudes to the outgroup in order to maintain the positive attitudes of the ingroup. However, individuals can identify themselves with a group without devaluing the outgroup. For example, ‘Unfair and Lovely,’ a social media campaign that takes its name from the skin-lightening cream, ‘Fair and Lovely,’ aims to unify women of darker skin tones by “[encouraging] women to share selfies with an explanation of how colorism has affected them” (Hinde, 2016). This campaign does not derogate the outgroup and instead, it raises awareness of a serious issue with the purpose of uniting not only dark-skinned women with each other but also uniting them with light-skinned women. The mission of this campaign is to resonate with women of all skin tones and to spread the message that beauty comes in all colors.

Conclusion:

This paper aims to bring light to the prevalent issue of colorism and racism in India and its effect on the mental health of young women and Africans residing in India by providing a psychological explanation for the causes and effects. The social cognitive theory explains the human tendency to categorize in order to reduce the complexity and diversity of mankind. The identity theory and self-verification theory emphasize the individual's desire to be accepted by the group and to be perceived a certain way. The realistic group conflict theory stresses that intergroup competition arises from social, economic, and cultural differences and could provide a basis for the separation between Indians and Africans. The social identity theory explains the human need for the ingroup and outgroup distinction, which could potentially be a main trigger for the racism Africans are forced to endure. The theories explain the plausible explanations and triggers for the widespread discrimination and they were further elaborated on to analyze the effects on mental health. Dark skin is ill-favored due to the nation's history of British colonialism, the introduction of the caste system, and the involvement in the Indian Ocean Slave Trade. The problems that stemmed in the past are being perpetuated in the present by the powerful Indian Film Industry, which idolized fair skin and portrays dark skin in a negative light. When individuals are perceived in a negative light due to the intense societal expectations and is raised in a society that asserts the importance of white skin, they internalize the negativity and perceive themselves through the lens of society. Previous sections has discusses that discrimination to this extent can result in psychological issues such as low worth-based self-esteem, low efficacy-based self-esteem, and psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and depression. This discussion can be taken further to analyze and address the activism that exists to exterminate colorism and racism, which could be a step towards unifying the diverse skin tones of India.

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