

Fair is not lovely, it is discriminatory: A study of persistent colourism in Indian Media that perpetuates the idea that fair skin is lovely whilst dark skin is inferior

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the roaring Black Lives Matter movement that regained its force after the brutal murder of an African-American man, George Floyd, by the hands of white policemen, in the United States of America, we, as mere human beings, have been compelled to evaluate our thoughts and attitudes towards people of colour or people of different races in general, residing in our own country, India. The Black Lives Matter movement in America whose gravity runs alongside the cursing pandemic has cultivated unavoidable and uncomfortable questions in India regarding where we stand as Indians in our “unity in diversity” narrative, and how the path of continuing racial discrimination and ‘colourism’ stands persistent even today. Be it in media representations, films, texts, or daily ordinary conversations; there are several instances of discriminations that resurface in the form of micro aggressions or blatant statements, that necessitates us, Indians, to introspect our age-long obsession with fair skin. It is a societal necessity to hold the Indian media accountable for its regressive take on fair skin as superior and dark skin as inferior, and the subsequent representations of the same through films or advertisements.

Keywords: - *Colourism, Bollywood, Media, Fairness, Representation*

This research paper is meant to discuss the issue of colourism as a societal illness, the unending obsession with fair skin, that is persistent in India today, and how media perpetuates the same through their ‘mis’representations. The idea of this research is to draw a parallel between fair skin preference that the Britons may have brought along with their colonisation, to the preservation of this grossly bigoted belief by the mainstream media. I intend to analyse films of today with a sole regard to their attention on light skin and the preferential treatment it was given in the plot of the film, as well as research and find instances in media’s most popular mechanism- advertisements, to highlight the memorialisation of this rigid outlook. My hypothesis remains that India has lagged behind many miles in accepting all skin colours as mere skin colours, and not as a tool of success or a sign of beauty and purity, all of which have been furthered by the work of media.

The field of my research is Bollywood films in order to analyse the colourism that lingers in the entertainment industry in India. The constant casting of the fair-skinned actor or the skin whitening routine of the brown or dark-skinned actor is one of the few undertakings that go on in the cinema culture. I intend to draw out such instances with regard to Indian film plot lines, and the evident discrimination against the darker complexioned actor is creating a false and unjust narrative of the fair skin as the ruling skin. Just like the existence of “White Supremacy” in America, India, too, suffers from massive fair skin obsession that equates the colour of your skin to your worth and power. This research paper focuses majorly on media sectors, such as print or television advertisements, that perpetuate this portrayal.

Stuart Hall's essay on ‘Media and Representation’, highlights his concern with drawing attention to the complexity of communication as seen as downplaying the idea that the media has real and robust effects on the world, which is

not the truth. Hall understands that communication is always linked with power and that those groups who wield power in a society influence what gets represented through the media. Therefore, from famous fairness cream endorsements by celebrities that are considered “idols” and “role models”, to print media preserving this fair skin preference in their matrimonial advertisements making it evident that a fair-skinned man or woman is more deserving of love and full life, we can understand how the powerful help fuel the colourist narrative. My field of research can be summed up as research on media representations that perpetuate the age-old rhetoric of fair is lovely. The empirics that I have used in my study are primarily media representations, such as films and advertisements. I have traced the narrative from decades ago with an example of a 1986 film till recent times, i.e., 2020, and brought forth how the idea of colourism has seeped into media representation and the entertainment industry and prevails till date.

The 1986 film ‘Naseeb Apna Apna’, dealt with a highly colourist narrative where the protagonist, Chando, was neglected and condemned by her husband, Kishan, for she was a dark-skinned woman. The film starts with a family looking for an arranged marriage, and the scene ends with the family literally running away after their first glance at Chando, a potential bride. The male protagonist, Kishan, ends up as her accidental husband who is married to Chando against his will. The two marry due to parental pressure despite Kishan absolutely hating the idea of having to spend his life with an “ugly” woman so much that he escapes from her to live in Bombay. In the entire course of the film, Kishan evidently detests Chando for being “ugly” and later even finds himself wooed by a lighter-skinned woman, Radha, who he marries during the course of the film. In the entirety of the film, we see Chando as inferior, ugly, submissive, and deprived of a happy and satisfying life, all of which were associated with her looks. The association of skin colour to ugliness and unattractiveness is made clear in the film. When we see Radha, a comparison to Chando is inevitably made in our minds. This film released in 1986, which is more than three decades ago, but the establishment of colourism was made and perpetuated by the media and film industry over the years.

Thirty or so years later, colourist still prevails in films, for instance, ‘Bala’ (2019) is another film that successfully highlights the discrimination that a brown-faced woman, Latika (played by Bhumi Pednekar) faces at the workplace or in social situations, and how her life differs from that of a lighter-skinned woman. The narrative was essential and relevant, no doubt, but the problem lies with the casting. Bhumi Padnekar is a light-skinned woman, but in the film, she was darkened to significant levels to suit the role. The question that arises is, why did Bollywood decide to cast a light-skinned actor knowing that their script centres around dark-skinned women and their struggles? If Bollywood truly wants to engage in a dialogue about the struggles stemming from colourism, prejudice, and discrimination, why did they further perpetuate it by casting a light-skinned actor and forcibly darkening her skin? Bollywood is ironic in several ways, and this is one of many.

Similarly, in today’s times, the more contemporary films like *Uda Punjab*, or *Super 30*, evidently indulge in the concept of “brown face”. Brown face is when an actor’s skin is darkened to suit a particular role. The problem lies in the fact that if the skin colour is so essential to the part, why not hire a dark-skinned actor? Or, is the skin colour even crucial to the position in the first place? Award-winning film director, Neeraj Ghaywan, on being asked about brown facing in Bollywood, rightly said, “It’s actually racism. Let’s not mince our words.”

In colourism studies within the Bollywood industry, Swayamjit Saha and Akash Roy Choudhary’s paper titled, ‘Detection of racism in Bollywood movies’, explores whether colourism exists in Indian mass media like cinema by means of which, a lot of people get influenced. The results found during the course of this paper signify that sufficient amount of colour based variation exists in Hindi Bollywood films where heroes and heroines are found to possess lighter skin tone as compared to their respective gender’s side characters. The protagonists of the films are almost always seen to be of the fairer skin tone, while the actors who play their friends or sidekicks are seen in darker skin tone, inevitably drawing a narrative that light skin is of more importance and fits the criteria for the main plot line in any story, while darker-skinned actors are kept in the side to show support to the main character. Bollywood, thus, manages to perpetuate this archaic ideal of superior white skin and inferior or unimportant dark skin. If at all the actor is of a darker complexion, Bollywood has managed to lighten their skin in order to fit their look-book for the protagonist.

Bollywood also indulges in the association of dark complexion with a rugged look living rural lifestyles and having rebellious personalities. These are some stereotypes that Bollywood not only portrays but also perpetuates. Ranveer Singh’s *Gully Boy* character did not need to be brown-faced since his skin tone was not central to the storyline. The storyline was based on a village boy making it big in the rapping world. Bollywood has intense urges to do more

than what they are supposed to, and in that fiasco, they end up giving several nudges to age-old obsessions and prejudices.

While discussing colourism and its position in Bollywood, there are many songs that support the argument, themes that hint of colour bias. Singing proudly, “Gore gore mukhde main kala kala chashma” (A fair face coupled with a dark sunglass), or “white kalaiyan drives me crazy” (your fair wrists are attractive), are two Bollywood songs released over twenty decades apart, still perpetuates the colourist narrative about how fair is attractive. Popular Bollywood songs may have a considerable time gap in between, but in their colourism, they remain very close to each other’s prejudiced narrative.

Not just Bollywood, but print and broadcast media also perpetuate colour bias, with their advertising mechanisms and endorsements of everything fair and lovely. Fair and Lovely, a “beauty” brand for 45 years, endorsed proudly by Bollywood actor, Yami Gautam, reeks of constant hand-in-hand relation of fair skin and success and power. Every single commercial of this brand dismisses a woman’s worth and reduces it to their skin colour. The fairer you are, the more you are worthy; the fairer you are, the more love you will receive; the fairer you are, the more offices are desperate to offer you a job; all in all, the fairer you are, the more chances you have at a full life, these are just a few out of a myriad of ideas that are encouraged by these brands. Similarly, Ponds White Beauty advertisements, such as the one where Priyanka Chopra plays a dejected lover who has been betrayed by Saif Ali Khan, both of whom are top celebrities in the global sphere and goes on to reclaim her lover by changing herself to look more beautiful. The “change” comes from her usage of White Beauty products which give her a fair skin that instils confidence and builds an aura around her that tempts Saif Ali Khan to fall in love with her again.

Fair and Handsome is another product that has compelled men to use it to attain success as well as attract women. Endorsements by the King of Bollywood himself, Shahrukh Khan, and famous celebrities like John Abraham and Varun Dhawan, the media consumers have been made to believe that if their idols’ secret to success is these skin lightening creams, it is only mandatory that common masses use the same to achieve the personality and “skin tone” of a successful and globally liked person. The stemmed notion of light skin as superior and dark skin as inferior also projects itself in career aspects in real life. Not only has media furthered this ideology through advertisements and massive endorsements of skin whitening creams by mega Bollywood stars emphasising the importance of having fair skin in order to get the job of your dreams, but the ingrained bias has seeped into real-life events wherein many men and women have actually experienced being rejected or selected due to dark or light skin complexion respectively. Cynthia Sims and Malar Hirudayaraj in their paper, “The Impact of Colourism on the Career Aspirations and Career Opportunities of Women in India”, highlights how skin tone bias creates social and workplace inequities and negatively affects women of colour. In India, colourism is a customary practice perpetuated by cultural beliefs and values, social institutions, and the media, and this paper explores how these very aspects have led to the internalisation of colourism in India when it comes to career opportunities.

In light of fairness creams and proud endorsements by global superstars and celebrities, Natasha Shevde in her paper titled, ‘All’s Fair in Love and Cream: A Cultural Case Study of Fair & Lovely in India’, takes a close look at the issues related to skin colour in India by analysing how Fair & Lovely skin-whitening cream is situated in the context of Indian culture, is fetishised through media, and is distributed to consumers. The fairness cream market is flourishing in India, a country that represents a unique amalgamation of social, religious, and cultural stigmas and stereotypes. Two key factors, advertising and Bollywood, have played influential roles in the commodity fetishisation of fairness products, making it possible for them to perform a host of cultural tasks. These promotions of skin lightening creams since the past many decades have set us back many years in our progression and advance towards a more equal and humanitarian society.

The marriage market in India reeks of colourism as well, all of which have been encouraged by print and broadcast representations. The conservative outlook on marriage and the desperate need, even today, for the bride and groom to be of lighter skin complexions exists on a large scale. The Indian orthodox notion of “Gori, chitti bahu chahiye” (“we want a fair and glowing daughter in law”), and its reflection on matrimonial advertisements on the newspaper, or on matrimonial websites are to blame for having Indians internalise this view that fair is the way to go, that a fair daughter in law or wife is societally acceptable. The super hit and equally problematic Netflix show, Indian Matchmaking, also serves as a window into the colourism that is a part of the Indian marriage market. “They want tall. They want fair. They want from a good family,” says the matchmaker, Sima Taparia. In the very last episode of the season, a new client in San Diego, Richa, includes “not too dark, you know, fair-skinned,” in a list of preferences for her future partner. These may be subtle, but it clearly highlights the tendency of Indians on spending their lives

with someone who is fair-skinned. The marriage business with colourist narratives also gives birth to the idea of reducing a person's actual personality and nature to just the colour of their skin.

With global superstars like Priyanka Chopra lending a voice against violent and dangerous racism in America with regard to the Black Lives Matter movement, and then being criticised for her endorsement of “white beauty” products in India, to the sudden renaming of India's multi-billion dollar skin lightening industry, “Fair and Lovely”, to “Glow and Lovely” after forty-five years of success in making women believe that their worth comes from their complexion, we have been privy to an evolving culture in the entertainment and media sectors currently that may or may not be helping the eradication of colourism. However, the question remains that whether “evolving” is the first step towards change or just a roadblock to seek comfort in for our internalised ideals, about whether this growing involvement is enough to stop all kinds of racism, colourism, and the prejudices that it brings along. As for Bollywood and Indian media, after this research I can safely say that am not satisfied with their pace of “evolution”, and that we need more change in representations when it comes to darker-skinned actors being portrayed as whole human beings and not as their complexion. No human is merely his complexion, and India media needs to depict more of it to normalise all skin tones and to help stigmatise colourism.

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