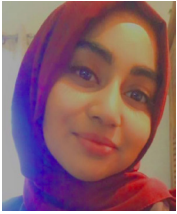


Fair Tones & Unfair Standards

Colorism, Beauty and the Media



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“How is your mom so much lighter than you?”

“How can you be darker than her, she’s from Africa?”

“Try these natural remedies, they will make your skin look fairer and pretty!”

“Don’t play outside for too long or else you will become darker!”

“You would be prettier if you were lighter.”

These are just some of the comments I have heard as an Indian American about my complexion. Although these comments do not affect me much now, hearing them as a child from my peers and relatives definitely impacted my self-esteem and created an obsession with how to lighten my skin in order to fit in. Colorism is a deeply rooted issue with a complicated past that affects many women of color across the world, and manifests itself into the eurocentric beauty standards which are pushed by the media today.

The National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) defines colorism as a form of discrimination in which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin. Colorism causes the marginalization of a group of people solely due to the amount of melanin in their skin. This practice is a product of racism in the United States in that it upholds the white standards of beauty and benefits white people in the institutions of oppression. To put blatantly, colorism is the child of racism.

In early America, enslaved people with lighter skin were assigned domestic tasks while those with darker skin were forced to work outside in the fields, doing much more grueling tasks according to Leaders Igniting Transformation. Enslaved people that were lighter-skinned were favored because they were often the product of an slave owner raping an enslaved person, thus creating a lighter-skinned child.

The NCCJ outlines techniques, such as the paper

bag test, which was utilized in Black spaces for hiring Black people, where one would be allowed to work only if their skin was lighter than a paper bag. This limited a dark skinned person’s ability to provide for themselves and their family simply by how their skin color compared to a paper bag. Today, this issue spans beyond our nation.

The effects of colonialism in countries like India have direct negative impacts to colorism. Colorism in India has been around for ages, according to the Borgen Project, and first began when the Aryans, who were from Europe and Central Asia, came to India. They typically had lighter skin complexions and ruled the natives, perpetuating a cycle of colonization.

India’s long history of being colonized and conquered by light skin oppressors such as the Persians, the Mughals and the British has led to the systematic belief that light skin and even eurocentric features are better and can be associated with power. This harmful ideology seeped into India’s hierarchical social caste system. Lighter skinned individuals are higher up the caste as they were indoors whereas darker skinned individuals were performing physical labor outside, according to research conducted by Neha Mishra at Washington University Global Studies Law Review.

Slavery and colonialism’s historical impacts have translated into today’s media and the standards that are pushed toward women with darker skin, especially Black women. Georgia State University’s research shows how darkness is typically and inaccurately connected to negative connotations such as aggression and violence that are attached to hyper masculine ideals. This is harmful to darker skinned women as they are seen as more aggressive and defeminized. In 2018, renowned athlete Serena Williams was the subject of a racist cartoon that played to the power of colorism; portraying Williams’s reaction to losing a tennis match, artist Mark Knight’s culturally insensitive depiction—an exaggerated and offensive portrayal of Williams—was based on the fact that she had

darker skin than her opponent.

According to the National Survey of Black People, among magazine advertisements targeted to Black readers, studies indicate that Black men are typically depicted as substantially darker than Black women. This shows that for Black women, light skin tones can be used to adhere to eurocentric notions of femininity and whiteness.

On the contrary, women of color in the media are also hyper-sexualized, exocited and objectified on the basis of colorism, as well as face intensified whitening. Research conducted by Minnesota State University (MSU) revealed that out of 278 magazines, 52 covers displayed women of color. Of those covers, 90% of these women of color were in hypersexual positions and whitened to a certain degree. These covers—which young girls, teens and women all see—mask women of color with whiteness and degrade them through sexualized objectification.

Hence, so many American women of color like Keke Palmer, Normani and Mindy Kaling have to work extra hard to not only make it in the industry, but survive and maintain relevance in the face of dehumanization by the media and degradation over their skin tone.

But average women also face challenges and pressure to lighten their skin. The Fitzpatrick Scale is a spectrum used by dermatologists to calculate the melanocytes in a patient and determine their susceptibility to skin cancer, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. Lighter skin, with the highest risk of ultraviolet (UV) exposure is ranked one, while darker skin, that is least susceptible to UV damage, is ranked six. According to the Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology (IJDVL), the average population in India falls under the 4-6 range. However, when Maybelline's "Fit Me," a slate of 40 foundations promising to match any consumer's skin tone, was introduced in India, only 17 shades were released and nearly all were for lighter complexions. Maybelline's earnest attempt for inclusive and accessible foundation was undermined by showing preference toward lighter skin

tones.

In order to fit into societal expectations, many darker skinned individuals turn toward drastic methods such as skin bleaching creams and lighter foundations that not only alter a person's physical appearance, but also cause harmful psychological and physical conditions. According to Healthline Media, bleaching creams, such as Fair and Lovely, contain high amounts of ammonia, mercury, sulfates, parabens and carcinogens that cause irreparable damage to the skin and self-esteem of users.

Yet in 2017, the global skin lightening market value amounted to about 4.8 billion U.S. dollars, according to Statista, and is forecasted to reach some 8.9 billion U.S. dollars by 2027. This dangerous trend has extorted billions of dollars from dark skinned women, by encouraging them to buy into the idea that success, beauty and love come from light skin. Monetizing fair skin came from both subliminal and overt messaging over years, leaving darker women with the choice between being discriminated against because of their skin tone or being sexualized because of their "ethnic features."

In her book "In Search of our Mothers' Garden," author and activist Alice Walker explains colorism as prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people, based solely on the color of their skin, and pays specific attention to the objectification of darker skinned women. Walker poetically and personally addresses the divide between lighter and darker skinned Black women, and argues this split—between people within the same community—is of the utmost danger.

Colorism is born out of white supremacy, and this has been evident through the British Empire's imperializing of South Asian nations, America's treatment of enslaved Africans and the inaccurate beliefs passed down from mothers to daughters. The correlation between fairness and beauty is false: dark is beauty.



In Indian mythology, Lord Krishna is depicted as blue, instead of the darker complexion that many native Indians are. Krishna, interestingly, means "dark."