

# Aesthetic Norms of Femininity and the Issue of Colorism in India

Debbie Lalrinawmi<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Shuchi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of BS & HSS, National Institute of Technology Mizoram (An Institute of National importance), Aizawl, Mizoram

<sup>1</sup>Debbierinawmi91@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>suruchi.kaprwan29@gmail.com

## Abstract

Even after seven decades of independence, the legacy of the British still continues to linger in the minds of Indian. This paper aims to deconstruct the notion of beauty and femininity brought about by colonialism. Both of them are the product of colonialism. However, colonization begins before the coming of the British and colorism happened before them; but the British had propagated the idea of colorism among the Indians. To begin with, the notion of ‘beauty’ in the pre and post-colonialism has turned to be distinct. The idea of colorism grew bigger and effected job opportunities and marriage as well. This paper presents how women are much more affected by colorism such that they are defined by their skin color and needs to have a fair skin in order to be desirable for men.

**Keywords**— Beauty, caste and color, colorism, femininity

## INTRODUCTION

The British ruled over India through the British East India Company from 1858 to 1947. There was hatred and abomination against the British by the generation who are affected by the wickedness of the British. Countless incidents happened which took the lives of many innocent Indians. One of them is the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar on April 13, 1919, where 400 unarmed civilians were killed and 1,200 wounded pupils were left unattended. General Dyer, who ordered the armed soldiers to fire into the civilians, did not showed an act of contrition. On questioning the matter, he simply argued that his actions were to help people learn morally admitting that he would have continued the firing if more ammunition were available.

One of the most effective tools employed by the British is ‘divide and rule’ policy. They divided the Indians on grounds of religion, caste and education. The western education was introduced to the upper caste which made a wider gap within the society. However, education gave a higher class and status to an individual in the society. The native people were getting oppressed more and more while

the guests got into the bowels of our conscience. They redefined the concept of beauty, good citizen and culture. The newer generations attached deep into the British. However, ‘culture’ could not be completed without any association with western things. Steps in the cultural dances have been modified, which reflected westernization. The British have been looked up with admiration. Their dress code, their language, their skin color, they way of doing things and way of living has been regarded as ‘good’ and ‘ought to be’. So brighter skin color is regarded as beautiful while darker skin tone is ‘ugly’. Lighter skin tones give higher status.

Neocolonialism has been the control of less developed countries by developed countries through indirect means. The term was first used after the Second World War. ‘Indirect means’ can mean a lot of things and is deeper than physical oppression. Internet, media and social media could be its useful instrument. As aforementioned, ‘beauty’ has been redefined in accordance with the admiration of the British. This redefinition introduced the issue of ‘colorism’ in the society. However, the Merriam-Webster dictionary explains colorism

as a 'prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin'. Indians looked down upon the original colors of themselves and admired that of foreigners who oppressed them. To put it simply, they are neo-colonized. Within neo-colonization, their concept and ideas, lifestyles, language and cultures are influenced by the British.

However, 'femininity' has also been redefined from the westernized lens. There is no doubt that colonialism opened doors for feminism. As Leela Gandhi declares, it is the encounter with feminism that led post colonialism to 'produce a more critical and self reflexive account of cultural nationalism.' Colonialism brought about the westernized version of patriarchy and feminism simultaneously. However, they contradicted each other. In the idea of patriarchy, women are expected to remain polite, submissive and nurturing towards men. Contrastingly, feminism constructed the idea of women being independent and getting equal rights as men. Still men got dominant in the social hierarchy.

The expectations on the beauty standard of women altered after colonialism. Women have to have light skin tone in order to meet the standard of beauty, which reflected the colonizers. A whiter skin tone is a much needed necessity in order to have an ideal husband, or an ideal job. An ideal woman is often expected to have a brighter skin tone which makes it a factor and norm of femininity. On the other side of the coin, the Indian colored women are rejected for not making to the standards of beauty. Therefore, the issue of colorism is brought about by colonialism.

Therefore, women have been the main victim of colorism. In this regard, they are the victims of colonialism. Colorism has many consequences and ill effects. It resulted in inferiority complex and various mental health issues. It is wrong to let someone feel less worthy just because of their skin tone. It spoiled the spirit of solidarity among the Indians. Rather it proposed a division based on the color of their skin. As aforementioned, media played a huge role in redefining beauty and femininity. They

portrayed lighter skin tone as the standard definition beauty. In addition, an hourglass is regarded as an expected figure of an ideal woman. These constructed aesthetic norms of beauty and femininity affected the society leaving behind the real identity of Indians.

## **THE HISTORY OF COLORISM IN INDIA**

Racism, and colorism is a common word in India. The ancient Indian texts like the Mahabharata and the Rig Veda praised and celebrated the dark skinned characters like Lord Krishna and Draupadi. In those texts, the characters tend to be both dark and light skin toned, and both were celebrated which tells that prejudice on grounds of skin color did not happen to exist in those days. However, it started with the Mughal dynasty. Inherently fair-complexioned, the Mughal rulers reigned over the darker-skinned Indian subjects and introduced power dynamics into the sphere of skin color. The Mughal dynasty ruled over almost every area of northern India from the early 16<sup>th</sup> to mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. These Mughal emperors were mainly Persian and Arabs having a fairer skin tone than most of the Indian subcontinent. Most of the Indians looked up to the fair skin toned rulers and believed that the notion of beauty slowly altered from these times. However, the Aryans who were a noble class had much lighter skin than the Dasyus and Dasas.

Then the British colonial rule continued. The British began to re-introduce the issue of colorism in their own ways. They built restaurants, clubs and institutions in which the dark skin toned people were prohibited from entering. However, they gave the idea of everything relating to them as superior than the colonized which is ingrained in the minds of the Indians. As for the employment sector as well, they gave more preference to the white skin toned individuals. It can be said that the white skin toned and the lighter skin toned individuals had more opportunities in every sphere during those times. In these colonial times, a pseudo-scientific concept called "social Darwinism" gained popularity. This concept is a reference to

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in which it states that factors such as skin colour, bone structure and facial features are the determinants of the level of intelligence and it is in which the British put their notion of superiority, on grounds of skin colour. A system of institutionalised segregation was established and, while some institutions segregated against all "[coloured] people", many segregated only against "black Indians", with signs clearly stating: "Indians and dogs not allowed". Conversely, lighter-skinned Indians were given preference over their darker counterparts and were hired more frequently.

Tracing back history, Indians are ruled over hundred years by the Mughals who possessed lighter skin tone, and Portuguese and British during colonial rule. So, in due course of time, darker skin toned individuals unconsciously tend to look up to the lighter skin toned individuals as their superiors. Even years after independence from the British, partition of India and independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the idea of colorism still remains deeply rooted systematically in our cultures throughout the subcontinent.

### **NORMS OF FEMININITY AND THE ISSUE OF COLORISM IN INDIA**

As aforementioned, colorism is a discrimination based on skin color. It normally preferred light skin tone and is known as shadeism. One of the main result of colorism is that skin color is used as a determiner of beauty, preferably lighter skin tone. The Indian National Museum conducted a study on skin color as a determinant of beauty in 2015. For the study, one hundred students were surveyed from across the country. 71% of the respondents describe "pretty" as having lighter skin tone including the word "fair" and "light". The media shares this idea such that dark-skinned models are hardly used for advertisements and Bollywood movies cast light skinned actors. It has its consequences such that females specially have the notion that one has to have a light skin tone in order to become successful in the sphere of entertainment. However, it is believed that there are bad chances and disadvantages for a

dark skinned actors and models in "hireability". This resulted in the market which presents skin lightening which marks a high health risks. The Tata Institute of Social Science (TISS) conducted a study where they surveyed 1,238 women and 746 men on the use of fairness creams. 59.6% of women and 46.1% of men reported that they had experienced using fairness creams. 31.2% said they used it to look "beautiful" on grounds that lighter skin tone is regarded as beautiful; and 36.2% used the fairness creams because they believed that being fair would make them "feel culturally accepted". Although these products have certain side effects that can cause health problems, they are always a hot seller in the market. The Food and Drug Administration released a notice in 2006 stating that the skin bleaching products are no longer regarded as safe and effective. But the skin lightening market in India seems to be growing even more. It is estimated that by 2023, it will raise as much as 700 million USD. Not only in the field of entertainment, colorism has its issues in the institution of marriages as well. It is worthy to mention that arranged marriage is still opted in India till date. But it is still complicated because of one factor- the longing for fair-skinned bride. In 2013, a leading matrimonial website conducted a survey of 1,000 women and men in which majority of them believed that a fair-skinned women made better partners. In addition, most men exclaimed that they prefer woman who is fairer than them to marry or go on a date with. Shaadi.com is an online platform for matrimony which is popular among the youths. On this platform, mentioning one's skin tone in the basic profile is a mandatory.

However, in the Indian National Museum situated in New Delhi, there sculptures of gods from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD which are made with black stones. In one of the shops within the museum premises, there are replicas of the sculptures that are for sale. The only difference is that these commercial ones are made from white stones. The reason behind the usage of white stones has been to grab the attention of buyers. It has been feared that no one will purchase the replicated sculptures if it

has been black colored; therefore, all are fair colored. Actually Lord Ram and Lord Krishna were dark skinned according to the Hindu mythology. On the contrary, new temples have showed them as fair complexion while the earliest temples have originally showed them as dark complexion. These incidents tell that common man perceives gods as white, and vice versa.

### **COLORISM AND CASTE IN INDIA**

The caste system is one of the biggest hierarchies that shape the Indian society. As such, people belonging to lower castes tend to have darker skin than the ones belonging to upper castes. Due to this, it can be concluded that the existence of colorism is there from ancient times in the face of caste differences. However, caste is the representation of colorism in India. The upper most caste such as the Brahmins led a much comfortable life as compared to Dalits, the lowest who have dark skin tone. Although there is little evidence before the British colonization the homogenization of skin color in the Indian continent, the rulers tend to have much fairer skin tone than the Indians. The Aryans who established the elite class have light skin, and the Mughals who ruled parts of India (including the Delhi Sultanate) for a long time have much fairer skin than the locals. So fair skin tend to become a sign of the noble classes which paves way for colorism in India.

As long as classification is concerned, caste takes a leading role in India. The earliest classification found in Rig Veda was that of hierarchy based on one's occupation. Even retracing the Ancient Indian society, there are two group which is determined by the color of their skin- the Aryans who are the immigrant noble people and the Dasyus and Dasas who are the tribal people of the region. It has further consequences such that darker skin tone are connected with low income jobs and occupation, so it is no wonder that lighter skin are looked up to by the darker skin tone who are regarded as the weaker sections of the society. Therefore, having said all these, region is one of the factors that determine skin color due to

temperatures and geographical locations. Jammu and Kashmir and northeastern states

### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Colorism plays an active role in the expectations of femininity. It is clear from the institution of marriage that women are expected to be fair in color to be desirable regardless of their nature. Though fair skinned men are welcomed in the Indian society, it is mainly women who are the victims of colorism. It is not a matter of choice, rather it is by nature one possessed a darker shade of skin.

However, it is worthy to mention that women have been much more affected by colorism than men. Women are regarded as the epitome of beauty and the centre of attention. In this regard, women not meeting the beauty standards are regarded useless in every arena in the society. 'Fairness' has been the highest component of beauty, so Indian women who do not have fair skin are not regarded as beautiful and pretty. On the contrary, most Indians have brown skin color so majority of Indian women have faced issues with not meeting the beauty standards and femininity because of their skin color. In regard to femininity as well, the Indian society measured women's desirability on her skin color. Brown women often experienced rejection in marriage and job markets. Due to their skin color, they are regarded unfit for entertainment and visual media. So many Indian women opted for bleaching and skin lightening solutions, regardless of the harmful ingredients. This perception of beauty has its roots from the colonization of the Mughal dynasty. It is a true color of neo colonization which has its effect till date.

The sad reality lies in the fact that colorism happened in the law making body of the country, but no actions were taken although it did harm to the mentality of its citizens. Rather it was regarded hilarious which is an ugly truth. The ideal of beauty, beauty standards and expectations of femininity all lies within skin color. It, however, violates the concept of humanitarianism. People who are born with a dusky and brown skin are not their choice. It does not even mean that they are ugly because

of their dusky tone. Therefore, it is significant that one must learn to appreciate its own self, such as color, culture, traditions, etc. Indian normally have yellowish and brown tone, so despising one's tone and obsessed over another is a way of forsaking one's family.

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