

The Effects of Colorism in Asian Media on Society

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Colorism has origins that trace back to colonization efforts made by the Europeans on ancient Asian civilizations by disseminating their culture and social standards into South, Central, and East Asia. Centuries later, it has become incorporated into every aspect of Asian culture, influencing the concept of beauty. According to a study conducted in India by Evelyn Nakano Glenn from the University of California, Berkeley, 78% of males and 63% of females used the words “light” or “fair” to describe prettiness (283). It is important to note that genetically, the Indian population tends to have darker skin, but the standard of beauty is lighter skin tones. As a result of the impacts of European colonization, these regions have been subjected to a process known as occidentalisation, in which European influence has “white-washed” the local cultural and social beliefs establishing whiteness as a source of beauty (Chen et al. 447). Asian film industries are the most prevalent and established social determinant that sustains this stereotype. The preference for light-skinned female actresses and the lack of dark-skin representation in Bollywood and Korean TV further emphasize the occidentalisation of skin color. As films and TV continued to depict beautiful and socially superior women as fair-skinned, the general population began treating white skin as a symbol of a higher class and caste (Chen et al. 444). For example, in the Bollywood film, “Meri Surat Teri Ankhen” directed by R.K. Rakhan in 1963, the main character was shunned by society and his family because of his dark skin. Despite the blatant appearance of colorism and offensive stereotypical dialogue, the film was received fairly well by the general public and was a recipient of national acknowledgments and lyrical nominations. The success of the film is an indication of the deep-rooted assimilation of Indian cinema that transfers over to other regions. In Korean TV, one such example is the drama “My ID Is Gangnam Beauty”, directed by Choi Sung-bum in 2018 which romanticizes conformity to beauty standards and the societal gaze. By preserving the correlation between colorism and socioeconomic status, Asian film industries have created a standard of beauty that has consequences on Asian society.

The over-representation of light skin actors in film industries has created unrealistic expectations within society. In their paper, “Skin Lightening and Beauty in Four Asian Cultures”, Hyun Jeong Min from the University of Utah, Eric P.H. Li, and Russell W. Belk from York University establish “‘whiteness’ as an imperialist, racialized value of superiority” (Belk et. al 444). They conclude that the notions of Asian beauty are directly correlated to its contact with the West and the globalization of the beauty industry where white is associated with auspiciousness and black with misfortune, another indication of occidentalisation. Another paper that continues this conversation is “Occidentalisation of Beauty Standards: Eurocentrism in Asia” written by Toby Chen and other researchers states, “...also affects the pressure Asian youths may feel to conform to a beauty standard not inherent to their own culture” (2). Both papers emphasize the stark differences in the average skin color and the standard of beauty in Asian societies and acknowledge the societal correlation established here between color and

wealth. Neha Mishra, from Reva University, further affirms this correlation in her analysis “India and Colorism: The Finer Nuances” by surveying 100 students: “50% of the above-surveyed population affirmed fair-skinned people are rich...74% of the sample surveyed population agreed that fair people are more acceptable” (744). Taking into account these overlapping perspectives, one can conclude that the cultural implications of the occidentalisation of beauty standards have created subconscious socioeconomic status in society that further isolates and divides society by caste, gender, and economics. Furthermore, the implication this socio-economic standard has on individuals fuels the continued misrepresentation of skin color in Asian cinema and the urge to conform to these standards by Asian youth.

The foundation of the socio-economic standard is directly correlated to film industries and the impact, or lack thereof, that various mediums have on society. Researchers have studied the varying degrees of color representation and how they indicate social status. In her honors thesis for Feminist Studies at Stanford University “The Empire Strikes Back: Postcolonialism and Colorism in Indian Women”, Samra Adeni identifies numerous landmark songs in Hindu cinema that place fair skin as a status of supremacy and synonymous with beauty. Adeni pinpoints “Gore Gore O Banke Chhore”, released in the 1950 film *Samadhi* and “Yeh Gore Gore Se Chhore”, released in the 2004 romantic comedy *Hum Tum* as specific examples. Adeni concludes, “This connection between language and thought displays the power of perception...shaping how we consider the world today” (9). In a similar conversation to Adeni’s conclusion, Trina Jones deduces in her reflection, “The Significance of Skin Color in Asian and Asian-American Communities: Initial Reflections”, that “...almost every country in Asia, the celebrity class, and especially movie stars, are noticeably lighter...[t]he yearning to be light is a desire to look like rich Asians” (1115-1116). Historical influences have allowed films to maintain the connection between “whiteness”, beauty, and societal acceptance which creates the perception within the general public that socially accepted Asians should be light, although those very standards originate from a different societal gaze. In slight contrast, Jones acknowledges that whilst the standard is built upon hypocrisy, there are other unidentified factors leading to an increase in the usage of skin-lightening or skin-brightening products (Jones 1116). Jones continues to state how the usage of these products is troubling: “The demand...continues despite...some may contain dangerous substances like mercury...and cortico-steroids” (1118). Looking back at the deductions made by Nehra Mishra in conversation with Jones and Adeni, all the researchers establish a clear connection between media perception and social standards. The engrained history and usage of the stereotypes have resulted in conflicting opinions amongst Asian populations (Mishra 747). While many continue to debate the presence of prejudice within society, there is evidence of the impacts of said preconceptions on the social standings in Asian society.

The imperialist nature of Asia has unknowingly influenced the cultural environment by ingraining beauty standards into a nation whose beauty does not align with those stereotypes. These influences, mainly originating in the media from celebrities and movie stars, have resulted in a surge of damaging skin-lightening products in an attempt to conform to a certain



socioeconomic status (Jones 1119). Thus, a solution to combat these influences should begin with representation in the media. According to Toby Chen and his colleagues, "...found that the best way to diffuse eurocentric ideals in Asia was to focus on the media and how to portray beauty standards for youths all around the world" (Chen et al. 9). By diversifying the definition of the attainable beauty standard to align with the historically accurate standard, Asian societies will be able to combat the long-standing impacts of European occidentalisation. Another critical aspect of a solution toward more diversity and inclusion in media is education. Targeting adolescents that are the most impacted by these unattainable beauty standards is important. Teaching media literacy that helps adolescents think critically about media practices and reduce colorism among them encourages youth to be more connected with their local values and cultural lifestyle. According to Nadia Craddock from the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England in Bristol, UK, and her colleagues, "Media literacy...reducing the negative impact of colorism on an adolescent's life, as it relates to body image and the harmful practice of skin lightening" (475). There are many different avenues to explore in order to create a more inclusive and realistic environment for our future and it is imperative to take these steps to reverse the historical presence of colorism in Asian cultures.



Resources

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