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Colorism in India: Need for Assessing and Healing Perceived Color Discrimination

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A B S T R A C T

Skin color is an important aspect of one's identity, and shapes an individual's self-perception. Skin color also influences how an individual is perceived by others. This perception can be positive, neutral, or negative. Discrimination based on skin color is known as colorism, and is often experienced by men and women with darker skin tones. Colorism is closely linked with racism, and is known to co-exist with the latter across societies and cultures globally. Societies tend to view light-skinned individuals favorably, which is reflected in socio-cultural norms and representation of skin color in media and popular culture. In India, awareness of colorism as an issue is sparse, though its existence is widespread. This study is based on a systematic review of literature on research conducted in this area in the last few years, with a specific focus on the Indian context. The study aims to explore various themes surrounding colorism, how it affects one's mental health, and the non-existence of culture-specific treatment models and psychological interventions. Preliminary findings indicate that colorism's effects on the psychological health of Indians have not been studied adequately, and an intersectional therapeutic model to help cope with colorism doesn't exist. Coping strategies and therapeutic models developed elsewhere in the world may not be adequately relevant to replicate in the Indian subcontinent. Even within the subcontinent, colorism manifests in complex forms cutting across multiple factors such as pre-existing cognitive and emotional constructs, geographical, ethnic and sociocultural differences, prejudices and misconceptions, class identity, internalization of discrimination faced, and other factors. As a result, it is important to develop a culture-specific skin color satisfaction scale to identify risk groups, and a therapeutic model to help people accept one's skin color, cope with discrimination, and promote psychological well-being.

Defining colorism

Often a touchy topic in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere, colorism can be described as the individual, institutional, and structural discrimination towards a person of a particular skin color and skin tone, by people of the same ethnicity or race, usually towards people of darker skin (Hunter, 2007). Closely related to the concept of colorism is racism, which is the individual, institutional, and structural discrimination faced by people belonging to other races. It is possible for a society or an individual to be both colorist and racist at the same time. It is also possible for victims of racism and colorism to be colorist and racist themselves. Colorism and racism can also interact with each other, and with other socio-cultural factors, creating an intersectionality of discrimination, and unique experiences of oppression.

Historical origins of colorism

Instances of colorism can be found in virtually every ancient civilization. In India, the Varna system, which correlates with the caste system, is associated with colorism (Mishra, 2015). In Sanskrit, "Varna" means color, and there were originally four varnas, corresponding to the four castes. In an often contested theory, migrations and repeated invasions of lighter skinned people into mainland India probably displaced darker skinned individuals towards the Southern region of the subcontinent, giving rise to color prejudices (Basu *et al.*, 2003). The process could have been slow and gradual, and migratory patterns could be related to caste dynamics too, something that could be of interest to anthropologists. In agrarian societies, people who toiled under the sun tended to be darker skinned, giving rise to classist prejudices against darker skin tones. It may be argued that today, people who can

afford sunbathing and tanning beds tend to be more affluent, with access to leisure, but it could be counter-argued that tanning is more popular among light-skinned Caucasians, and not so much among members of other races, among whom skin lightening creams are more popular. European and Islamic conquests of Africa and South Asia resulted in people of lighter skin being in power, subjugating people of darker skin. The history of the Americas tends to favor this view too, as European-led slave trade brought darker skinned people as laborers and slaves into the American continents, while subjugating darker skinned natives of those continents (Gonzalez, 2009). Industrial revolution enabled people of European origin to succeed more, due to slavery and colonization. In colonized societies, Europeans tended to favor lighter-skinned natives such as Tutsis in Rwanda, mixed-race coloreds in South Africa and the USA, lighter-skinned upper-caste Indians, based on pseudo-scientific racial theories of that time.

Sociocultural context of colorism

Colorism is prevalent across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and among Black Americans (Hunter, 2012). Lighter skin is thought to equip an individual with proximity to whiteness, and individuals who form these lighter skinned communities within a society tend to be viewed as closer to the Caucasian "race", which enables them to benefit from various privileges (Hunter, 1998). As discussed before, both the caste system in India, and the Rwandan genocides may have had elements and dynamics of colorism interacting with various other sociocultural, political, and economic factors. Proximity to whiteness is reflected in popular culture, media, art, and movies, as white people and lighter-skinned individuals are often overrepresented. Indian film industries

across various regions, telenovelas of Latin America, and advertisements found in Eastern Asia (Saraswati, 2010) are all examples of this implicit bias against darker skinned individuals. These prejudices and biases against people of darker skin tones tend to be self-perpetuating to some extent.

Linguistic context of colorism

Many linguists and psychologists believe the way languages are structured, and their unique syntax and semantics may also affect the way we perceive the world around us. Most modern languages are biased against darkness, black, night, and similar concepts. While the color white is associated with purity, cleanliness, peace, etc., the color black is often associated with dirt, the unknown, mystery, mourning death, etc. Darkness and the colors of black and brown are also associated with the color of mud and dirt, giving rise to possible irrational prejudices against people of color (Burgest, 2015). Metaphors and similes such as black as night, darkest before the dawn, pure as white, etc. can be found in many languages including English, and these unfortunate color symbolisms and literary devices may spill over to human skin color perception, driving irrational prejudices and biases against darker skinned people.

A few examples of colorism across the globe

Brown paper bag test – Among African Americans of 19th and early 20th century, it was common for people to measure lightness of skin against brown paper, and those who passed gained entry into churches, nightclubs, etc (Mathews, 2013).

Blue vein society – Those whose veins can be seen under the skin were considered superior, being associated with proximity to

whiteness (Gasman, 2015; Obiagele Lake, 2003)

Preference for lightening creams in the Philippines, Geishas of Japan, drastic measures to lighten skin in African countries, etc.

Colorist and ethnic slurs are often used in India in the context of darker skinned people. Such derogatory slurs are found in various Indian languages.

Gender and colorism

Gender intersects with racism and colorism, and many studies reveal that skin color is an important predictor for black women's self-esteem (Thompson and Keith, 2001). However, the same study found that this is less important for black men. Another study by Hill (2002) found that gender may make a difference in skin tone perception. It is also important to note that across cultures, darker skin tone is associated with virility and masculinity, and thus, darker men may get away with lesser discrimination than women of the same skin tone. However, Sanchez *et al.*, (2011) found that skin color may be a factor in subjective experience of social class and upward mobility. While most skin-lightening creams are targeted at women, an increasing number of them have been marketed to men in India and elsewhere. This market need points to a desire for lighter skin among men too. It must also be noted that sexuality may also play a role in subjective desire for lighter skin.

Colorism in India

The presence and prevalence of colorism can be ascertained by the fact that almost every language in India has derogatory terms for darker skinned people. These

colorist slurs are popularly used in movies, music, and in everyday conversations. Media and entertainment industries reinforce negative stereotypes about darker skin, and perpetuate discrimination. Some of these stereotypes include questioning the characters of darker skinned people and their ulterior motives; that they could be inherently evil, violent, or aggressive, that they could belong to a lower socio-economic class or caste, etc. In fact, in India, colorism, classism, and casteism go hand in hand. Insensitivity towards people of darker skin colors are widespread and color discrimination is experienced from childhood to adolescence, and throughout adulthood. Stigma against darker skinned people and self-stigma experienced by darker-skinned individuals is so widespread that that it is almost a taboo to discuss skin color even among mental health professionals and academicians, as it makes everyone involved uncomfortable. Most importantly, there is a lack of awareness of colorism as a form of structural discrimination, and there is also a lack of assessment tools to measure dissatisfaction with one's skin color, appearance, or to measure coping difficulties of people who experience colorism. It is also interesting to note that there are no culture-specific body image assessment tools in India, which take into account one's skin color contributing to one's body image issues. There is a general lack of awareness of colorism as an academic term even among professionals and academics. The practice of treating what needn't be medically treated, by way of lightening skin pathologises dark skin, and may contribute towards low self-esteem and psychological difficulties.

Colorism's effects on mental health

A number of studies link experiences of colorism with low self-esteem (Noble,

2012), Body Dysmorphic Disorder and body image issues, social anxiety (Noble, 2012), depression, (Fegley *et al.*, 2008), other psychiatric and psychological difficulties (Chavez and French, 2007). This necessitates mental health professionals to acquaint themselves with colorism as a valid form of structural and institutional discrimination, that causes immense psychological distress to the victims. Clinical psychologists in particular, have a responsibility to consider body image issues and colorist experiences endured by their clients while treating various psychological disorders. In that direction, clinical psychologists can adopt following techniques:

Acknowledging colorism exists all around us, including among practitioners.

Exploring syllogisms and logical fallacies at play during therapy (ex: people who work in the sun is dark, so dark people belong to the working classes).

Challenging the aesthetic value given to lighter skin color

Exploring the core beliefs underlying bias and prejudice against dark skin, including self-stigma

A psychologist's role includes

Focusing on positive body image

Teaching to appreciate different skin colors, rather than focusing on white/light skin, and being color-positive

Teaching clients to separate aesthetic evaluation from one's skin color

Use cognitive behavior therapy to identify and evaluate underlying beliefs regarding dark skin, and challenge these core beliefs

Working on self-acceptance and on accepting others' skin colors

Helping acknowledge and cope with society's less-than-favorable realities regarding skin color perception

Treating repetitive negative feedback regarding darker skin color as noise, and learning to ignore it

Distress tolerance in the face of slurs, stigma, and discrimination

Explore how gender and sexual orientation may affect skin color and skin tone attitudes

Colorism has existed in the Indian subcontinent since ancient times, even before the region was colonized by Europeans. An inter-disciplinary approach to evaluate colorism in various Indian societies, and working with sociologists, educationists, medical and mental health professionals, advertising and media professionals, etc. are required. Currently, there are no culture-specific body image assessment or appraisal tools in India, and thus, it is very hard to ascertain the psychological impact of colorism in India. There is a need to develop a culture-specific body image tool with a focus on colorism. It may also help to develop a culture-specific skin color satisfaction scale. There is a need to understand the role of gender and sexual orientation in skin tone perception and discrimination. There is also a need to develop a therapeutic model specific to India to help clients accept their skin color, cope with discrimination, and promote psychological well-being. Professionals from diverse backgrounds need to acknowledge that colorism is real, and it exists all around us. It is also important to note that awareness and available toolsets to help people cope with colorism is lacking.

Currently, there are no Indian studies from a psychological perspective. Most importantly, there is a need to develop assessment tools and a therapeutic model, while focusing on an inter-disciplinary approach that takes intersectionality into account.

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