



Illusions of Beauty: The Impact of Media on Color Bias and Feminine Identity in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the construct of feminine beauty in Pakistani society, focusing on the media's role in idealizing fair skin. Advertisements for cosmetic procedures and fairness products perpetuate the notion that success, social acceptance, and attractiveness are directly linked to lighter skin tones. Utilizing postmodern theories such as simulation and hyper-reality, the research investigates how media portrayals shape women's self-perception and social experience, creating a distorted reality where skin becomes the societal norm. This study also explores the deep-rooted color biases affecting women in Pakistan while highlighting emerging movements that challenge these entrenched beauty standards through art, media, and social activism. Ultimately, this study concludes that dark complexion is not a standard set for beauty, light skin is beautiful in its way but this does not mean that dark is hideous or unworthy. Similarly, many famous people with dark complexions have faced difficulties and much more but we need to change this mind and the first step has to start from the time we groom our children in their childhood.

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1. Introduction

Media, as a powerful tool of mass communication, has introduced numerous ideas into society, that are frequently practiced as a consequence of which they have become a normality in our lives. One such pervasive concept is the media-constructed standards of beauty, which equates fairness of complexion with attractiveness, worthiness, and success. Conversely, the ones with darker or dusky skin tone are often portrayed as unattractive, undeserving, and most of all socially inferior. Now this concept is readily commercialized and used for own personal gains by creating fairness creams whitening facials and medical treatments regarding skin such as cosmetic treatments for women. Behind the scene Simulacra are copies of the original but not even close to reality. Jean Baudrillard explains this in his book Simulacra and Simulation where he explains that modern art is an example of simulacra where art is produced for commercial use to gain profits and this is done by creating hyper-reality which people of a society accept readily irrelevant to the fact that its true or not. According to Baudrillard art is manipulating reality to get commercial benefits. Modern art in his eyes does not have a lesson to learn from rather he criticizes that art has created a simulacrum for people where copies are made of the original repeatedly till the time it becomes reality but unfortunately is far away from reality (Baudrillard, 1981). An example of the fair-skinned commercial has been shown frequently till the time that now the people of Pakistani society especially women change their skin color using makeup and become fairer thus hiding their original identity and beauty with the fake idea of beauty that has been commercialized and widely spread by our media.

1.1. Feminine beauty as Simulacra

Beauty commercials are the main source of the idea that fair is beautiful while dark is ugly. Media through these commercials of beauty products such as Fair n Lovely Cream where the girl is not getting any proposals due to dark skin when starts using fairness-cream gets lighter complexion as a result of which she is now not on the shelf but rather going to get married soon, just because she no longer has a darker complexion. Now here simulacra have been created by these kinds of commercials i.e. the girl can be beautiful in her way based on her character, upbringing as well and appearance but to please other members of society she is going to use such fairness products to look beautiful in the eyes of others thus leaving reality and holding on to simulacra that has been already created and readily available.

1.2. Problem Statement

This research explores the Impact of Media on Color Bias and Feminine Identity in Pakistan.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How does media reinforce color biases and faire skin preferences in Pakistani society?
2. What are the psychological and social impact of these biases on women's identity?

1.3. Objectives of the study

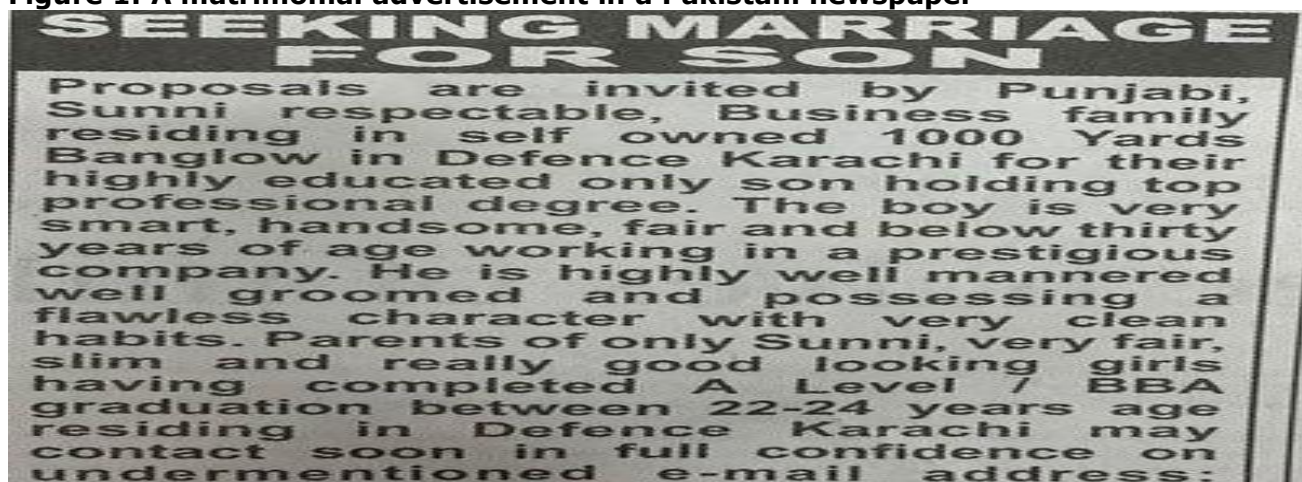
The following are the objectives of the study

- To examine the influence of media-driven concepts of feminine beauty in Pakistani society.
- To raise awareness about the multifaceted nature of beauty, emphasizing that it is not solely defined by skin color.
- To explore the role of artistic expression and social activism in challenging traditional beauty standards and fostering acceptance of natural beauty.

2. Literature Review

According to the literature, people have historically preferred fair skin in a variety of cultural situations, which is frequently connected to social hierarchies and colonial history. A woman from Sialkot writes about her story of being instantly offered whitening facials when she enters a salon and being rejected just because she has dark skin. Sartaj (2015) states that a disease known as *Kaala Rang* also the reason behind 'still being on the shelf'. According to her, women looking for daughters-in-law for their sons are only looking for fair-skinned ones, maybe they believe that a *Gori Bahu* will have *Goray* offspring as a result of which will have a Gora Pakistan; basically, she is mocking our thinking process. A fair girl just with her presence can impress the whole society while in contrast, the one with a darker complexion has to work double to come even close to her level (Ali, 2015).

Figure 1: A matrimonial advertisement in a Pakistani newspaper



<https://www.dawn.com/news/1174485>

"Many women have this obsession with being fair; lightning and bleaching is a multi-million-dollar industry. I grew up in the U.S., where we think pale is ugly, but Pakistanis feel the

same way about being dark. It's a taboo subject that bothers me because all skin colors have their beauty."(Saber)

Junaid Jamshaid released his song "Gore Rang Ka Zamana"

This created hype in Pakistani society, especially among dark-skin girls that he is racist and because of his praise for fair-skinned girls our society will now have even less acceptance for girls with dark and dusky skin. As a consequence, he accepted that they were right but he did not produce such a song intentionally as a result he released another song named "Sanwali Saloni" in which he praised dark skin and how it is unique and beautiful in its way.(Jamshed, 2015). On the other hand, Williams was the first African-American who fought against strong racism in his profession. In his high school days, his very own teacher told him that if your people don't own you then how can you think that white clients will hire you to build their homes, offices, etc. But he proved everyone wrong by being the only black architect in his field and later on even Denzel Washington lived in homes he had designed (Paul William et al 1993). Similarly, Samiya Arif is a staunch feminist trained from the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture. She painted digital illustrations of dark-skinned females on refrigerators depicting how dark skin is still a taboo in our Pakistani society. She designed a book cover with the title Brown Girls Are Ghosted that explains how brown girls are ignored in society.(Das, 2020).

Figure 1: <https://samyararif.com/filter/Digital-Art/Brown-Girl-Ghosted-Book-Cover>



2.1. Dark is Beautiful a Campaign in India

Kavitha Emmanuel, founder of Women of Worth, an Indian NGO that works against biased ideas regarding lighter skin. This NGO launched a campaign Dark is Beautiful in 2009 but it was not against white rather it was about inclusivity. It includes Bollywood actors such as Nandita Das and Sunil Bhatia who endorse the idea of inclusivity i.e. beauty beyond color. Cosmetics for skin lightening have been launched in markets across the world for example in Togo 59% of women are using skin whitening agents and 77% in Nigeria and the percentage increases as we move into the Asia-Pacific region. According to Emmanuel, this brainwashing is initially started at home when the color of siblings is compared afterward in school textbooks children are shown that a girl with fair skin is beautiful while the other one with a dark complexion is ugly. Sunil Bhatia is a professor at Connecticut College and a strong supporter of the Dark is Beautiful movement. He says, "This is not biased. This is racism" which has spread in countries where Europeans have ruled and left their traces in the form of ideas such as fair is beautiful, this deeply rooted racism based on skin color has been explained by Bhatia in his writing that he wrote for US News and World Report. This campaign not only fights against medical practices and habits but also the age-old preferences for the light complexion. There is an interesting whiteness traveling from the US to shopping malls in other countries, featuring white models," Abraham (2017)Bhatia says "You can trace a line from colonialism, post-colonialism, and globalization."

2.2. Dark is Divine a Campaign in Pakistan

Dark is Divine is a campaign launched by Fatima Lodhi, A young teenager, living in Karachi who says that I couldn't be a fairy in my school plays just because fairies are meant to be beautiful and white. Currently, she is giving sessions in schools spreading awareness among students about discrimination based on color. In her article she explains the idea of colorism; a global form of discrimination, which is an attitude that prefers lighter skin desirable and more appealing, and aims to achieve this goal using fairness creams. This campaign tries to eliminate the idea that beauty only comes in white from Asian countries such as Pakistan, Taiwan, etc., and wants to convert these regions to the point that they don't consider skin color at all rather a woman is judged based on her character and attitude. This is done by carrying out sessions at schools to educate the younger generation about how immoral it is to judge others based on their personal appearance or skin color. Dark is Divine not only acknowledges the people of Asia but also includes international communities by collaborating with other anti-colorism campaigns.(Waraich, 2015)

2.3. The Impact of Colorism on Self-Perception and Family in South Asia

Personal narratives provide an in-depth examination of how colorism impacts self-identity and familial ties in addition to academic discoveries. Colorism can start in the home, where kids may hear disparaging remarks to be compared favorably or negatively depending on their skin tone. Seema Hari, an artist and activist, talks about how she felt like an "outcast" from a young age because of the constant racist remarks she heard. Because darker-skinned family members are frequently singled out or harassed with derogatory nicknames, such encounters can have long-lasting psychological effects. These prejudices, which support colorism from an early age, are commonly reinforced in South Asian households, much like in Pakistani society.(Kalathara., 2023). The psychological effects of colorism are made worse by the billion-dollar skin-lightening business in South Asia and widespread beauty ads. Fairness is portrayed in advertisements as a means of achieving social and romantic success, which shapes ideals of attractiveness and self-worth, especially among young women and adolescents. Former Miss America Nina Davuluri talks about how these advertisements affected her as a youngster and made her look for skin-lightening lotions early in her TEDx Talks. In addition to being internalized by people, these signals are also reinforced by society as a whole, putting pressure on people to meet limited standards of beauty(Kalathara., 2023).

Many South Asians find it difficult to recognize and discuss colorism because it is a delicate subject in contrast to darker brown skin tones, which are linked to "badness", lower class and caste, poorer intelligence, and a lack of beauty, lighter brown skin tones are seen by many South Asians as being attractive, "good", powerful, status-oriented and competent.(Tummala-Narra, 2007). Colorism is the term used to describe the type of skin tone prejudice and the discrimination that results in the South Asian community. The South Asian community's long history of colonialism and casteism is a source of skin color stereotypes. South Asians who reside in nations that maintain a racial hierarchy may experience these misconceptions even to a greater extent. White supremacy, for instance, is engrained in socio-political structures in the United States(Shaikh, 2017). Fair skin is commonly portrayed in media ads as a prerequisite for social acceptance, hence redefining beauty in Pakistan. Fairness has become the "hyper-real" norm due to repeated exposure to such pictures, and people of color feel pressured to fit in. By implying that women with fair complexion are more successful and desirable in social and marital settings, products such as mixed Formula creams, whitening injections, Botox, fillers, and cosmetic surgery support this notion. According to Baudrillard's theory, the media creates an ideal of beauty that is not very similar to reality but is yet regarded as true because it is consistently reinforced. On the other hand, promoting genuine art and initiatives that support dark-skinned beauty, challenge these norms. Supermodel Winnie Harlow is one well-known example from throughout the world. She suffers from Vitiligo, a skin disorder that results in areas of pigmentation loss. Harlow pursued her passion for modeling despite industry constraints and social shame, accepting her skin condition as a part of who she was. After competing on America's Top Model, she became the first model to become the Vitiligo to appear on Victoria's Secret runway in 2018, marking a significant advancement in beauty standards. Harlow's success story demonstrates that unconventional looks are just as significant and legitimate, demonstrating how distinctive beauty qualities may be embraced rather than hidden(Glusac, 2019).

Figure 2: Winnie Harlow walks the runway at the 2019 Victoria's Secret Fashion Show



<https://www.businessinsider.com/models-breaking-barriers-in-fashion-industry-2019-1#supermodel-winnie-harlow-was-the-first-model-with-vitiligo-to-walk-in-the-victorias-secret-fashion-show-1>

The Dark-skinned woman in the painting analysis is dressed traditionally, emphasizing her unaltered attractiveness. Campaigns such as "Dark Divine" aim to change society's ideas and teach the next generation to embrace variation in beauty by challenging the colorism that is promoted by the media. Restrictive standards of beauty are being questioned and challenged by a new counter-narrative in Pakistani society. Known for her feminist artwork, digital artist Shehzil Malik challenges the way society monitors women's bodies and establishes "appropriate" beauty standards, especially in patriarchal societies. Malik's annoyance with international restrictions on women's appearance, such as the French ban on the burkini in 2016, brings to light the power relationships that underlie body politics and fashion in other cultures. Malik introduced Pakistan's first feminist fashion collection in 2017 to challenge these social constraints showcasing a wide range of Pakistani womanhood and beauty. Dark skin is viewed negatively by many Pakistanis. Shehzil frequently sought solace from a skin-whitening ointment that was later found to contain potent toxins during her adolescence as she struggled with feeling inferior to her lighter-skinned peers. She discovered that beauty comes in all forms, sizes, and hues while attending college and meeting strong women from around the globe (Mirza, 2018).

Figure 3: Illustration by Shehzil Malik



<https://www.dw.com/en/is-my-shirt-long-enough-artist-shehzil-malik-launches-pakistans-first-feminist-fashion-line/a-42069858>

2.4. Portrait of a Dark-Complexioned Girl from Sind

The main subject matter of the painting (see Fig. 5) is a dark-complexioned girl whose image has been captured when she slightly turns around with a smile on her face as if she has

heard something funny and is going to reply to the other person or like somebody has called her name and she has turned with a smile on her face. She's in a traditional get-up with bangles and a pot on her head may be going to someplace to get water, from her appearance it looks like she belongs to Sindh, Pakistan. This painting uses oil paint as its medium, a very vibrant color palette with the use of yellows and oranges but to balance them out while keeping the focus on the figure artist has utilized blues in her shirt and highlighting the face of the girl who is the main subject. The technique of applying paint looks like it is done by a knife but the texture is smooth and flat still the figure gives the impression of a detailed study by the artist as he even painted the flower earring that the girl is wearing. To highlight the figure, the background is painted dull with the use of greys and whites while to create a skyline it is painted with earthy colors like brown and green. The lighting in the painting is quite natural and side-lit as the highlights are on the right side of the painting. This dark-complexioned girl does not have a fair complexion nor has put on makeup to lighten her skin but still looks beautiful in her own way. The smile on her face and the shine in her eyes make her attractive and lively as if she is really happy and wants you to be glad too. Now in this painting, there is no simulacra created as she has been painted just how she is in reality which is beautiful. But the media is not endorsing this image, rather they are showing that light skin is preferred in any situation by showing commercials of fairness creams and soaps with fair-skin models and actresses.

Figure 4: Artist: Unknown, size: 20 x 30, Picture taken from the art gallery



Figure 5, Digital Painting printed on heavy 300gsm paper, unframed. Glossy prints are not individually signed by the artist. Artist Mahnoor Jamal, Size: 8" x 5.5",



https://www.pollyandotherstories.com/cdn/shop/products/Mehnaazpakistanartonlineshopping_1a3d623e-11af-4ec0-9465-0c3a24d74a99_672x992.jpg?v=1611565976

The dark-skinned female subject in Mahnoor Jamal's painting (See Fig. 6) radiates a deep and alluring beauty questioning and redefining traditional beauty standards in a culture frequently impacted by colorism. Through color harmony and contrast the woman's dark complexion and the delicate white flowers in her hair create visual celebrations of dark skin tones. These white blossoms, which contrast with the subject's rich skin tone, accentuate her attractiveness and stand for strength, grace, and purity, Elements that are sometimes disregarded or underappreciated in the depiction of darker skin in South Asian beauty standards. Darker skin tones are made more visually appealing by the color selection used in the painting. Viewers are drawn into the painting and encouraged to see the intrinsic beauty in deeper hues by the green accents, which lend warmth and depth to the subject's skin tone. The subject is given an almost regal aura by the use of stunning pink, which adds the vivid, contrasted explosion of color that envelops and highlights her face. Dark skin is positioned as a trait that demands attention and adoration rather than one that one should be muted by this unusual color combination, which turns the subject's presence into a dazzling focal point. By making these creative decisions, Jamal's painting boldly challenges colorism by showcasing black skin as not only stunning but also deserving of praise. In the end, this art piece contributes to an expanding collection of artworks that questions stereotypes in beauty standards and affirms that diversity enhances beauty rather than limiting it to those with fair complexion.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research to explore how the concept of fairness is upheld in Pakistani society. Analyzing relevant literature, media, and artistic creation. The study's main goals are to raise awareness of the negative consequences of colorism and track the influences of feminine beauty. Investigating artwork that features women with darker skin tones in their natural beauty provides different viewpoints that honor genuine beauty. Furthermore, examining individual accounts and anti-colorism efforts illuminates the persistent effects of these stereotypes on society.

4. Conclusion

Similar to commercial brands, art, and media frequently put profit ahead of society's benefit. Due to colonial ideology Pakistani society has been shaped by fair-skinned beauty standards, which have led to the submissive psychology that favours lighter skin tones. The first step in changing this perspective is to establish an inclusive sense of beauty in kids and teach them inner attributes over outward appearance. Modern art and media are based solely on concepts and these concepts are socio-cultural socio political or socioeconomic ultimately modern art is being sold as a brand just like Ferrari, Apple, Honda, etc. Now whatever is going to give them profit they start to produce those products irrelevant of the fact that how the masses at large are going to be affected by that product. Now the influenced (colonized) societies are the most vulnerable ones due to their submissive psychology where people when ruled by the fair ones still think that being fair-skinned in society is the ultimate goal to become successful as well as acceptable in society. Dark complexion is not a standard set for beauty, light skin is beautiful in its way but this does not mean that dark is hideous or unworthy. Many famous people with dark complexions have faced difficulties and much more but we need to change this mind and the first step has to start from the time we groom our children in their childhood.

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