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Impact of Colorism on Women: A Study of Shweta Aggarwal's *The Black Rose*

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ABSTRACT

Colorism, the prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, especially within the same ethnic group, remains a deeply ingrained issue. In Indian context, it impacts social status, marriage, employment, and self-esteem, particularly among women. British Asian writer Shweta Aggarwal's The Black Rose shares her Truth against Colorism and her battle with skin whitening cream addiction, highlighting gendered color-based discrimination. This research explores how The Black Rose portrays the psychological, emotional, and societal effects of colorism on women, placing it within feminist and postcolonial discourse. Through the protagonist's experiences, Aggarwal critiques the fairness obsession and exposes internalized, normalized colorist biases. This paper examines the deeply rooted preference for fair skin in Indian society and how colorism—a form of discrimination based on skin tone—shapes identity, social perceptions, and relationships. It explores how fair skin is associated with beauty, status, and success, affecting individuals with darker complexions in areas such as marriage, employment, media representation, and social acceptance. The study highlights the role of media, cultural norms, and the beauty industry in reinforcing these biases, revealing how skin tone prejudice reflects and sustains broader systems of social inequality and class in urban India.

***Keywords**: Beauty Standard, Colorism, Globalism, Skin Tone Discrimination, Skin Bleaching, Self-Perception.*

Introduction

Beauty transcends language and touches everyone, yet it is defined differently across cultures and genders. For men, beauty is often measured by wealth and status—a big house, a good salary, and a luxury car signify handsomeness. For women, however, beauty is linked to physical traits such as good hair, fair skin, and a slender body, with fair skin being especially prized globally and in India. This paper examines the social implications of fair skin and the discrimination faced by women based on skin tone.

Colorism is a form of prejudice or discrimination where people with lighter skin tones are favored over those with darker complexions, often within the same racial or ethnic group. Unlike racism, which divides groups by race, colorism creates hierarchies based on skin shade, valuing lightness as a symbol of beauty, power, and social advantage. This affects how individuals are perceived, treated, and given opportunities, reinforcing inequality and exclusion.

This bias is deeply rooted in colonial histories that associated whiteness with power, authority, and civilization. During colonial rule, Eurocentric ideals were promoted through education, religion, and media as universal standards of refinement and attractiveness. Over time, these ideals became embedded in colonized societies, where fair skin came to symbolize not only beauty but also social mobility, respectability, and modernity.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* offers a powerful insight into this phenomenon: "The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level," (Fanon,1986, p. 11) reveals the damaging psychological effects of racial hierarchies. The first part reflects how colonized individuals internalize the belief that whiteness represents beauty and power, leading to a desire to conform. This is reflected in *The Black Rose*, where the protagonist struggles with feelings of inadequacy due to her dark skin, yearning for fairness to gain social approval. The second part critiques how whiteness itself is trapped in maintaining superiority by constantly striving to meet shifting standards. Fanon highlights how such hierarchies dehumanize all individuals by setting impossible ideals, causing fractured identities and alienation from one's cultural and physical self. These colonial legacies continue to shape self-worth and social value today, with fairness marketed as a key to success in relationships, employment, and social interaction, marginalizing darker-skinned people—especially women. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, in *The Location of Culture*, further explains this internal conflict. He writes,

"Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86).

This reveals how colorism, rooted in colonial ideas equating whiteness with superiority, causes darker-skinned individuals to mimic dominant beauty norms through skin-lightening products and media portrayals. However, this imitation is always incomplete, positioning the darker-skinned person as "almost the same, but not quite," which sustains racial hierarchies while exposing their artificiality. Colorism thus operates as a modern form of mimicry, perpetuating colonial ideologies through deeply embedded aesthetic and social expectations.

Lennard J. Davis, in *Constructing Normalcy*, argues that societal norms are historically and institutionally constructed rather than natural or universal. He notes, "The concept of the norm, unlike an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must somehow or other be part of the norm" (Davis, 1995, p. 29). This process of normalization creates standards that exclude those outside narrow boundaries. Within this framework, fair skin becomes the aesthetic "norm," institutionalized through colonial history, media, and cultural conditioning. Darker skin tones are consequently devalued, associated with inferiority, and marginalized in public discourse and personal relationships. Davis's theory helps understand colorism as a form of social control that defines "normal" beauty, marginalizing and maintaining existing power structures.

Margaret Hunter's research adds to this understanding by showing how colorism functions within racially homogenous communities, privileging lighter skin across and within racial lines by linking skin tone to social capital—affecting access to opportunities, status, and respectability. She states, "Although many people believe that colorism is strictly a 'Black or Latino problem,' colorism is actually practiced by whites and people of color alike" (Hunter, 2007, p. 238). For women, colorism intersects with sexism, compounding marginalization. Darker-skinned women often face increased social penalties due to beauty standards rooted in colonial and patriarchal ideals, limiting their access to resources, representation, and upward mobility. Hunter emphasizes the urgent need to challenge internalized biases and redefine social value beyond skin tone.

Shweta Aggarwal's *The Black Rose* personalizes the pervasive impact of colorism in India, tracing it from her childhood experiences of comparison to lighter-skinned relatives to adult discrimination in work and love. Her struggles with fairness creams reflect societal pressures discussed in Himika Akram's study on fairness cream advertising, which links fair skin to social acceptance, success, and romance—an idea rooted in colonial-era racial hierarchies. Aggarwal's story also connects to T. Jerome Utley and William Darity's analysis of matrimonial ads showing caste and color biases, and Itisha Nagar et al.'s research on media's impact on young women's self-image. Together, these works highlight how colorism is a deep, systemic issue that Aggarwal critiques while reclaiming her identity and beauty beyond societal biases.

Several scholars have examined the global implications of colorism, especially within African American communities, where skin tone has long been linked to social and psychological outcomes (Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2007). In contrast, the Indian context, despite its deeply rooted fairness obsession, has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, particularly in terms of empirical studies and literary analysis (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Indian media, matrimonial advertisements, and

beauty industries continue to reinforce the notion that fair skin is a prerequisite for success and desirability, yet this phenomenon remains underexplored in academic discourse. Shweta Aggarwal's *The Black Rose* presents a rare and necessary literary intervention, portraying the emotional trauma, social rejection, and identity conflict experienced by dark-skinned women in contemporary India. The novel not only critiques beauty standards but also reveals how colorism intersects with gender and class. This highlights the urgent need for more critical engagement with Indian literary texts that reflect lived experiences of skin-color bias. By analyzing *The Black Rose*, this research aims to address a significant gap in the literature and contribute to the broader discourse on colorism, representation, and social inequality in India.

Colorism and Gender: A Double Burden

In *The Black Rose*, Shweta Aggarwal vividly illustrates how colorism intersects with gender to produce a compounded form of marginalization for dark-skinned women. Unlike men, whose social worth is often linked to wealth or status, women are primarily judged by their physical appearance, with fair skin positioned as an essential marker of beauty and desirability. This expectation is deeply entrenched in South Asian society, rooted historically in colonial rule, which equated fairness with superiority, civility, and power. During British colonization, lighter skin was associated with the ruling class, while darker skin came to symbolize subjugation and lower social status. This racial hierarchy not only shaped political and economic systems but also seeped into cultural and social perceptions of beauty and worth. As a result, colorism became internalized within communities, families, and media narratives, perpetuating discrimination long after colonial rule formally ended. As quoted in Margaret Hunter's The Persistent Problem of Colorism, "Light skin color, as an indicator of beauty, can operate as a form of social capital for women" (qtd. in Hunter, 2007, p. 247). Aggarwal's personal narrative exemplifies this dynamic: she recalls, "I have mostly had a wonderful, blessed life… Painful because I happened to be dark-skinned, born to fair parents. And this was seen by some Indians as an open invitation for taunting and derogatory comments." (Aggarwal, 2023, p. 1) Her experiences highlight how gendered beauty norms intensify the impact of colorism, shaping her identity and opportunities in both personal and professional spheres.

Psychological Impact of Fairness Ideals

Aggarwal's memoir also reveals the profound psychological toll inflicted by the pervasive fairness ideal in India. From childhood, she internalized the message that dark skin was undesirable, leading her to use fairness creams for years in a desperate attempt to "fix" herself. This personal struggle mirrors Himika Akram's research on South Asian advertising, which demonstrates how beauty products exploit these insecurities by linking lighter skin to social validation. As Akram notes, "They show fairness as a prerequisite for success both in professional and personal life," (Akram, 2025, p. 2) reinforcing the belief that one's worth depends on conforming to narrow beauty standards. The emotional scars of such conditioning run deep; Aggarwal reflects, "For years I have tried to forget my painful past… But the remarks, even now, are relentless, leaving me festering like a sore." (Aggarwal, 2023, p. 1) Her words poignantly underscore the enduring trauma that fairness norms impose on dark-skinned individuals. These aren't fleeting comments or isolated experiences—they are repeated, normalized reminders that a person's natural skin tone is somehow a flaw to be corrected. Over time, such relentless criticism chips away at one's self-esteem, creating a persistent sense of inadequacy and emotional distress. Colourism, therefore, operates not just as a societal bias but as a psychological burden that affects how individuals view themselves and navigate their personal and social lives.

Social and Cultural Conditioning

Colorist attitudes in India are reinforced early and persist across generations through both familial and societal interactions. These biases are not merely external pressures but often originate from within the home, making them particularly difficult to challenge or escape. In *The Black Rose*, Aggarwal recounts painful memories of being unfavorably compared to her lighter-skinned cousins, revealing how family members—often unknowingly—become agents in the transmission of color bias. This intergenerational cycle of prejudice conditions children to associate lighter skin with success, beauty, and approval, and darker skin with failure, shame, and exclusion.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn's work in *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters* offers critical insight into this phenomenon. Glenn emphasizes that skin color preferences are not isolated or personal opinions but are embedded within family structures and sustained through everyday socialization. Within such frameworks, colorism becomes a mechanism for maintaining social hierarchies even among members of the same racial or ethnic group. A particularly telling anecdote from Aggarwal's childhood

encapsulates this normalization. When serving tea to a relative, she was told, "This tea is too weak… I want it as dark as the color of your skin," (Aggarwal, 2023, p. 77) as he pushed the cup away. On the surface, the comment might appear trivial, but its symbolic violence runs deep. By equating the undesirability of weak tea with her complexion, the remark reduced her to a visual insult—a metaphor for deficiency. What makes this interaction especially damaging is not just its cruelty but its casual delivery, signaling how normalized such language is within everyday conversations. These kinds of remarks, repeated and left unchallenged, become part of a child's self-image. Over time, they evolve into internalized oppression, where one begins to view their own body as inadequate. Aggarwal's account demonstrates how colorism in India is not just institutional or media-driven; it is also intensely personal, often rooted in the most intimate spaces of one's life—home and family. This makes the fight against colorism all the more complex, as it requires unlearning deeply entrenched beliefs and breaking cycles of inherited prejudice.

Media and Beauty Industry's Role

The Indian media and beauty industries play a central role in sustaining and commercializing colorism, reinforcing the belief that fairness is not just desirable but essential for a successful life. Television commercials and print advertisements frequently depict fair-skinned women as embodiments of success, romantic desirability, and professional competence. For instance, Parameswaran and Cardoza in "*Melanin on the Margin*" (2009) argue that despite the diversity of skin tones in India, fair-skinned women dominate advertisements and media, reinforcing fairness as a standard of beauty. These portrayals normalize the notion that lighter skin is a prerequisite for happiness and social mobility. As Himika Akram's analysis highlights, fairness creams are marketed with transformative narratives that promise to turn the "ugly duckling" into a "beautiful swan," thus linking fair skin directly to self-worth and personal achievement.

Aggarwal's own experiences strongly echo these cultural messages. She recalls being influenced by advertisements that played on her insecurities, stating, "It played on my insecurities with the image of the lady on the tube displayed in four different shades from kali to gori. An explicit message that only 'fair is beautiful'." (Aggarwal, 2023, p. 7) This striking visual metaphor illustrates the extent to which media can manipulate perceptions, particularly among young and impressionable audiences. By promoting a singular, light-skinned ideal of beauty, the media not only marginalizes those who do not fit this mold but also contributes to widespread psychological distress, especially among women. These industries, driven by profit, commodify insecurity and perpetuate systemic bias, making colorism a lucrative yet damaging cultural force.

Global Dimensions of Colorism

While The Black Rose primarily focuses on the Indian context, Aggarwal's experiences in Japan and the UK reveal that colorism is a global issue. In Japan, she encountered a wide range of products aimed at "brightening" the skin, while in the UK, she faced subtle racial micro aggressions that reminded her of her "otherness." These experiences reflect how ideals of light skin transcend cultural borders and persist across continents.

This aligns with Evelyn Nakano Glenn's idea of "transnational circuits," where global beauty industries and media spread Eurocentric ideals. In her essay "Yearning for Lightness", Glenn writes, "The yearning for lightness evident in the widespread and growing use of skin bleaching around the globe can rightfully be seen as a legacy of colonialism, a manifestation of 'false consciousness,' and the internalization of 'white is right' values by people of color, especially women." (Glenn 298) Aggarwal's story underscores this global pattern—colorism is not limited to one culture but reinforced by shared histories of colonialism and global consumerism. Her struggles resonate with the experiences of women of color worldwide, revealing how deeply embedded and far-reaching these ideals are.

Resistance and Redefinition of Beauty

Aggarwal's memoir concludes with a powerful act of resistance against the pervasive and damaging norms of colorism. She decisively rejects the use of fairness products that once symbolized societal acceptance, choosing instead to embrace her natural dark skin. By publicly sharing her personal story, Aggarwal not only reclaims her identity but also challenges the entrenched beauty standards that have long marginalized dark-skinned individuals. This courageous act of self-acceptance and vocal opposition disrupts the dominant narrative that equates fairness with worthiness and success.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her novel *Americanah*, emphasizes the importance of owning one's narrative as a form of rebellion against racialized beauty norms. Aggarwal's journey reflects this sentiment deeply. By narrating her experiences, she not only heals her own wounds but also empowers others who suffer in silence under similar prejudices. Her memoir becomes a feminist intervention that pushes for a broader, more inclusive definition of beauty—one that celebrates authenticity rather than conformity.

Conclusion

The Black Rose offers a poignant, personal, and critical examination of colorism, blending Aggarwal's lived experiences with broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. The memoir invites readers to reflect on the insidious nature of colorism and its impact on identity, self-worth, and societal participation. By intertwining personal narrative with academic research on colorism, media representation, and colonial history, Aggarwal's work contributes to a larger conversation on race, beauty, and social justice, offering a powerful reminder that even the darkest wounds can bloom into resilience.

This study contributes to a growing academic and social discussion about the damaging effects of colorism, especially on women. It contextualizes *The Black Rose* within both Indian and global frameworks of prejudice based on appearance. By critically engaging with Aggarwal's portrayal, the research underscores the urgent need to dismantle entrenched beauty standards and advocate for more inclusive societal narratives around skin color

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