

# Colorism and Stereotypes in Asia: A Post-Colonial Reading and Evaluation

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## Abstract:

Asia with its vibrant nature of different culture and celebrations, somehow portrays norms and ideas that would consciously become an integral part of cultural and societal values. As such, color consciousness is co-related in the very nature of Asia as a whole in numerous forms; of which allows into identity, beauty and social and cultural values. This study is investigating and evaluating the idea of colorism that of which has been in the deep-rooted ideology of each part of Asia from the landscape of history itself; colonial structure to class, identity, beauty and representations. The idea is constructed in various forms of class structure, thus formulated into beauty standards and stereotypes in Asian culture. Through postcolonial reading of theoretical practice in cultural artifacts makes it possible to examine this issue efficiently.

**Keywords:** Color, colorism, Asia, white, whiteness, hegemony, history, colonialism, identity, beauty, culture, idea, race, other, power, representation, ideology.

## Introduction

Asia is remarkable for its vibrant culture, food, people and society. From the historical artifacts itself, the richness in nobleness and structure of cultural values has been in upright to now days. As the vibrant culture of Asia, there are concerned factors of which influence the whole factors of society in disadvantages. The showcased richness of Asia belongs to every aspect of one's livelihood. To be precise, the number of highly educated individuals and billionaires are mostly from Asia, as the Hurun Global Rich List 2024. But this growth has not evaded cultural norms ranging from history to cultural production of certain ideologies; in fact, colorism.

The African- American community and Literatures of America has a widely facet over the concern color discrimination. In 2013 Black Lives Matter begun as a social and political movement in order to highlight racism, discrimination and racial inequality experienced by black people in America. As such the Asian community and overall, every part of Asia intentionally falls over to Whiteness, labelling black as impure or ugly and white as pure and beauty. Asian community as a whole value up into having white skin and there is invisible bullying to those who have brown skin. The stereotypical norms towards skin color are crucial in Asia, as such there are idolized representation of it. Through the analytical aspect of postcolonial reading of Ethnicity and Indigeneity, stereotypical aspect of race can be interpreted. In the *Postcolonial Studies Reader*, Stuart Hall quotes by embarking on *New Ethnicities*;

“Rather, they are two phases of the same movement, which constantly overlap and interweave. Both are framed by the same historical conjuncture and both are rooted in the politics of anti-racism and the post war black experience in Britian. Nevertheless, I think we can identify two different ‘moments’ and that the difference between them is significant.

It is difficult to characterize these precisely, but I would say that the first moment was grounded in a particular political and cultural analysis. Politically, this is the moment when the term ‘black’ was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities. In this moment, politically speaking, The Black experience, as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, became ‘hegemonic’ over other ethnic/racial identities-though the latter did not, of course, disappear.

The struggle to come into representation was predicted on a critique of the degree of fetishization, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject. There was a concern not simply with the absence or marginality of the black experience but with its simplification and its stereotypical character.”

The implication mostly relies on the ethnic and racial difference that of which claims to outline ‘other’. The represented ideologies of ‘otherness’ in color have its trace in history. The enslavement in Africa, and India is to be the primary example. The autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, published in 1789 of Olaudah Equiano describes his life in slavery. Twelve chapters of the book, consist of his turbulent life journey as being a slave and the horrors that he has faced along with other people. To this remark; slavery, it took its turn as the represented otherness towards people of black.

So, to the identification of enslavement is with the represented norms of color and of which has over time revealed in African- American writings. But otherness in Asia, has widely evaded, or else it could be imprinted within the social and cultural norms and ideas rather than showcasing it. Stuart Hall quotes the two phases of the idea; political and historical. In Asia historical conjecture embark with its hierarchical development. The ‘honorary Whiteness’ in America, can be seen in the Asian communities. The classification is portrayed in history, as of women in black toned skin considered as taboo in many regions of Southern Asia, in films and literary works, female lead always portrayed in brighter skin tone or white, and dark skin toned or black as secondary.

### **Historical construction of Colourism in Asia**

What is colourism in Asia? It is to be implemented from the very root of history rather than politics. The colonial history of Asia, is to be analysed in the matter, that of which begun the landscape. This colonial background relies to demonstrate that, in each colonial power has strongly implemented socio-economic class by the skin color of people. In British colonial India, working class people were lower in socio-economic condition and the fair people as upper class. This deep-rooted cause in colonial history travels into every ruling. This manner of represented ideology has taken its emergence within inferiority complex of Asian community. Stuart Hall, embark on the culturally formulated representation as;

issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category ‘black’; that is, the recognition that ‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category

The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity.

the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically—and the concept which refers to this is ‘ethnicity’. The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the

construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time (Hall, 225-226).

In the historical construction of Colourism, Indians and Europeans has popularised perceptions. The so-called caste system in several Indian regions, mainly in Sothern parts is the cause of color centred ideas as of in the formation of *Aryans* and *Dravidians*. Orientalists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries has held that ‘Aryan peoples had displaced indigenous Dravidians across the Indian subcontinent. From around 2000 to 1600 BC’. As such the formation of constructed ideologies and norms of Colourism roots back into the colonial regime of Asian countries.

Culturally and historically formed representation of ethnicity of color is to be found in the historical definition of demonstrating social class and to caste system in India, high value in marriage in Japan, beauty standard in Korea, China, Philippines and so on. Thus, the employed theory of colourism is historically constructed to ethnicity. The cultural production of color consciousness and stereotypes in Asia is proven from the historical background. Even after colonialism, people took their parts in following the implemented class with color. That of which proven in both southern and eastern part of Asia.

### **Power domination and stereotype in Asia**

Racial judgements and representations are thus rooted into culturally and historically formed ideologies. In the analysis of historical context, the colonial differentiation of people within skin tone, has gradually evolved and embarked in the very nature of Asian culture. This cause is evident in daily basis of every Asian; whether any of them being in East or South Asia as American ideology calls on. The broadcasting and film area of Asia is one among the main context where race being evaluated. Comin to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the entertainment industry and commercial strategies, evolved in portraying “light-skinned, pale or whitened standard of beauty”.

The overwhelming conscious for perfect whitened skin-tone is evident in Asia. From historical perspective, the demonstration of social class, depending on skin color has evolved into cultural aspects. the symbolic value of light skin is especially critical for women. Men who are not physically prepossessing, but who have wealth, education, and other forms of human capital, may be considered “good catches,” whereas women who are physically attractive may be considered desirable despite the lack of other forms of capital. Although skin tone is usually seen as a form of fixed or unchangeable capital, in fact, men and women may attempt to acquire light-skinned privilege. Often, especially for women, this search takes the form of using cosmetics or other treatments to change the appearance of one’s skin to make it look lighter. (Glenn supra note 37, at 166–67)

Both men and women take themselves into categorisation of inferiorities of color consciousness. This has its capitalized power over daily lives of Asians. The *good catches* of social norms and ideologies are in wealth and beauty, these contradicts to evaluate into the orientalist idea as of its creation in historical, political and cultural values. The force in ideas and cultures thus manipulates into a long periodical time to extent its emotions and conditions. Thus, colour consciousness among Asia, in the ‘oriental’ counterparts features to exploit from historical artifacts to present discourses. From the theoretical perspective, the force of represented ideas and maintaining of such culturally constructed norms, evaluates into one’s identity and choices. The power construction of various ideas elaborates through a series of interest;

ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.

The imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections....

A distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do or understand as 'we' do). (W. Said. 90-91)

Culture and power co-relate into deep rooted cause of ideas and perspectives. Through which, stereotypical concerns of Asia are thus examined with power construction, mainly the colonial impacts. As the emerging political and economical of Asia is emerging rapidly, cultural causes are still being neglected and more eventually manifested into much deeper ideologies and norms. Stereotypical 'other' in cultural formations of Asia, is thus traced back from the historical conditioning as discussed. The colonial construction of social class in matter of color, has eventually formulated into conscious concern of the colonised. Asia, and its rapid love and affection for fair skin and whitened features are the evident source of the colonial construction. The class thus developed into, higher value in society. Throughout Asia, having a whiter and fairer skin-tone is being labelled as pretty and beautiful; high demand of skin whitening cosmetic products in Asia, is truly the most intriguing fact of the issue. Oriental power, from historical artifacts and norms been evident in the hegemonial standards of colourism in Asia.

### **Brown to white and fair to glow: a hegemonical overflow**

Cultural hegemony of colourism in Asia, is to be systematically analysed, that of which trace back to the historical construction as mentioned earlier. To which question raises; does the cultural hegemony of colourism or racial discrimination is still evident? Well, it is true, to be precise, the overall consumerism of Asia briefly correlates into beauty standards rather than any other materialistic parts.

Implementation of power dynamics of colonial rules and ideas are being treated as high as possible in post-colonial regime, to that of which 20<sup>th</sup> century celluloid is to be sliced into the awareness of skin and body. Asia, with its immense artistic depiction of poetry, fiction, arts and cinema has developed a quality of entertainment throughout for the past century. From the very first celluloid and literature, emotions and drama did play its valuable efforts towards the spectators. And later, rather than emotions and plot lines of the literary production, twisted into beauty and farce. Each female and male leads of Asian cinema, is

representative of white-toned or more over pale skinned, and to where second leads or any character who display their status as poor or ordinary, they will be brown skinned or black. Well, this demonstrates the colonial power construction and which overflows in the present as a ‘normal’ thing in social and cultural discourses.

Indian celluloid, tracing back from 2000 to recent releases, highly anticipate in portraying characters in a colourful and vibrant way as possible. Many spectators divide Indian cinema by regional industries; to be precise as Bollywood, Tollywood, Mollywood and Kollywood. Each regional industries provide exceptional production with quality cinematography and storyline, but what is more stands out in all as the same is how vital filmmakers gives into depicting each character into a standardised class by what color they represent. Bollywood provides, the most showcased choreography, setting, extra elements that which attracts spectators’ eyes, lavish costumes of leads and so on. With all of these the represented idea of leading characters is mostly relying on their skin tone; to be precise, most film makers prefer having white skinned leads in their film rather than brown skin.

*Udta Punjab*, a most acclaimed Hindi movie, which depicted drug usage of Punjab, mostly connecting the social reality of the youth in a emotional way. The striking character of Alia Bhat, in the film, is a farmer, who runs away from home and tangles herself with crucial moments in her life and into other circumstances. What is striking is that, most of other characters she played is of from wealthy family backgrounds, who is a white skinned person, but here she represents a farmer from a poor family with dark skin. This come to the contrary of how the social class is being defined by skin colour. What does it conclude then? The deeper to look into, the cultural boundaries of this representation connect its dots with historical construction. The defined class of wealth and power, relies in what skin colour those who represent, and as such cultural artifacts, produce certain image of class by the colour of characters. In the article, *The Significance of Skin Colour in Asian and Asian-American Communities: Initial Reflections*, denotes on skin colour and class as;

Importantly, the connection between skin color and class status not only exists in Vietnam, it appears elsewhere in Asia.<sup>36</sup> Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn reports that, “Japan has long idolized ivory-skin that is ‘like a boiled egg’— soft, white and smooth on the surface.”<sup>37</sup> She suggests that this preference has historical roots dating at least to the mid-nineteenth century when upper-class Japanese men and women donned white-lead powder makeup to indicate their elite status.<sup>38</sup> Although most Japanese men no longer wear makeup, today middle- and upper-class Japanese women wear “traditional white-lead powder when dressed in formal kimonos for ceremonial occasions”<sup>39</sup> and they sometimes use light-colored modern facial powder when wearing Western clothes.<sup>40</sup> In their investigations of skin-tone discrimination among Asian Americans, Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard also attest to the importance of skin color as an indicator of class in Japan and elsewhere in Asia,<sup>41</sup> observing that “long standing preferences for light skin, especially in women,” exist in all Asian countries.<sup>42</sup> They note that in “almost every country in Asia, the celebrity class, and especially movie stars, are noticeably lighter and taller, with more angular features, than the general population.”<sup>43</sup> Importantly, while concluding that “colorism in Asia is a class imperative . . . to be light is to be rich, for dark skin comes from working outside in the sun,” (1114-1115)

The social class of skin colour is featured in cultural hegemony; of colonial power to cultural artifacts. ‘*Whitewashing*’, a term of which confirms this reality in cultural artifacts. Asian cinema and drams mostly cast, people with white skinned, creating represented ideology of which having white skin rather than brown is elegant and beautiful. Cosmetic products in Asia, advertise to present this idea by showcasing

models and actors by invisibly forcing to have white skin. *Glow and Lovely*, first called as *Fair and Lovely*, is a prominent cosmetic product, which showcase the idea of having white skin; the name of the brand even changed when all around the world kept fighting for Black Lives Matter. As such, Korean skin products, China, Japan, Middle East, has immense collection of fairness products and creams. The consumer good of Asia is increasing in the matter fairness products, the image of being white is highly incorporated with power dynamics of cultural artifacts in Asia.

The value of lighter skin is so high that the manufacture of products offering the prospect of lighter, brighter, whiter skin has become a multi-billion dollar global industry,<sup>53</sup> with Asia being a key market.<sup>54</sup> South Asian women, many of whom view lightness as a valuable asset on the marriage market,<sup>55</sup> are among the largest consumers of skin-lightening products.<sup>56</sup> The use of skin lighteners, however, is also prevalent elsewhere in Asia: a 2007 Nielsen survey found that 46% of Chinese, 47% of people in Hong Kong, 46% of Taiwanese, 29% of Koreans, and 24% of Japanese had used skin lighteners during the previous year.<sup>57</sup> By one report, Japan's market in skin lighteners exceeded \$5 billion dollars in 1999.<sup>58</sup> Estimates put the market for skin whiteners in China at \$1 billion in 2002.<sup>59</sup> The demand for these products continues despite the fact that some may contain dangerous substances like mercury, hydroquinone, and cortico-steroids. (1117-1118).

This demand of lighter skin is having a demand in unique identity, but its more of which indicate the hegemonical observed thought of colourism and class in society. Through celluloid, advertisements, and other broadcasting artifacts, features the identical beauty for women and men in every part of the world. As such, Asian entertainment industry produces, represented beauty for women and men in having a lighter skin, that of which features and enhances true beauty.

## Conclusion

Asian communities, defines their cultural values, in beauty and social class. Each region of Asia, embark on the matter of beauty and class differently, and most of it combines well enough with the desire for having a lighter skin colour and this have emerged to definite overflow of stereotypical concerns within Asia. The desire of specified skin colour embarks on attaining social class and praise, of which demands in the social values of gendered norms and ideas. from the analytical landscape of history, colourism and class has took its vital role in society. Power dynamics of class and role, from cultural hegemony to representation of recent time line itself evolved from the very nature of historical contexts.

From the colonial power, which has been in Asia for centuries, and the imitation of European style and ornamentation of life, took its root in the hearts of the whole Asia. Colour consciousness among Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesians, Indian and Middle East, is evolved from class structure, from colour, to represented ideas to roles and cultural hegemony of beauty standards. This ideal given distinction is evident cultural artifacts in production of ideology among people and to lend out stereotypical norms.

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