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### Stagnant Prejudice Against Dark Skin in South Indian Cinema

Shriya Penmetsa

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## Stagnant Prejudice Against Dark Skin in South Indian Cinema

Bollywood, one of the largest film industries in the world, is known for its energetic dance sequences, larger-than-life heroes and deplorable villains, and melodramatic storylines. Similar to Hollywood, it is riddled with scandal and problematic celebrities. When Bollywood and Hollywood crossover star Priyanka Chopra Jonas threw her support behind the Black Lives Matter movement in the first half of 2020, the internet quickly criticized her for being hypocritical by supporting an anti-racist movement while having previously endorsed skin-lightening beauty products. Of course, Chopra Jonas is not the only Bollywood public figure to come under fire for the combination of skin-lightening endorsements and support of Black Lives Matter--Disha Patani, Sonam Kapoor, and Deepika Padukone were also subject to criticism.

The issue of colorism is far-reaching within India and extends to its various film industries. Lesser-known to the western world is Tollywood, which encompasses Telugu and Bengali films and loosely includes films of other South Indian languages such as Tamil and Malayalam. Arguably, colorism runs much deeper in South India than North India, where Bollywood reigns, because light skin is sought after more in the South for numerous geopolitical reasons. A deeper dive into the issue reveals that, beyond the understanding that colorism is a lucid issue in Tollywood, it affects actors and actresses differently. While Bollywood has evolved to present Indian women as more than just damsels in distress with landmark films such as *Queen* and *Mary Kom*, Tollywood is still nascent in this regard. Sexism is omnipresent in the South Indian film industry, from females being oversexualized on-screen to their tenures in the industry being curtailed compared to their male counterparts. The imposition of Eurocentric beauty standards also disproportionately affects women in South Indian cinema; a dark-skinned actor can be paired with an actress of a fairer complexion than him, but he can never be paired

with an actress of a darker complexion. In fact, there have rarely, if ever, been dark-skinned females cast in positive lead roles (Prabhakar). The issue of colorism in South Indian films perpetuates sexism, but the ongoing conversation surrounding this topic has not resulted in significant or iterative changes in the last decade.

The social divides that have emerged between various regions in India — particularly North and South India — are long-standing and have been influenced by a multitude of factors, including skin color. However, as Neha Mishra explains in "India and Colorism: the Finer Nuances" in the Washington University Global Studies Law Review, the ongoing discrimination based on skin color in India didn't always exist. In her study, Mishra investigates "how and when colorism found its roots in Indian society" (725). Indians' physical features can largely be attributed to their geographical origin. Mishra provides examples of these distinctions: Indians from the northern parts of the subcontinent tend to have lighter skin; Indians from the northeastern region tend to have light skin with features that closely resemble Southeast Asian features; those from South India tend to have darker complexions (726). However, India's issue of colorism is inherently complex and can't be boiled down to the simple statement that "skin color differences cause discrimination." Several variables have influenced the perception of skin color in India, including, but not limited to, colonialism, casteism, and socioeconomic status.

With nearly 80% of India's population identifying as Hindu, many hold the erroneous belief that the presence of colorism erupted from religious texts. However, in the Mahabharata, a highly esteemed Hindu epic, the majority of notable characters are detailed to have dark skin (Allard). Beyond this, many Hindu deities are described to have dark complexions.

Mishra explains that one of the preeminent reasons for prejudice against dark skin in India is external influence from Muslim rulers and British colonizers. During the time of the Muslim

rulers, there was no textual evidence of prejudice against darker-skinned individuals. Still, it is important to acknowledge that Muslim and Mughal invaders had skin tones that were generally much lighter due to their geographical origins in the Arabian and Persian peninsula (Mishra 731). India was then colonized by the British, who declared themselves as superior to the darker-skinned Indians. A British Indian Army officer who detailed the history of the Indian Army during the colonial era wrote, "Reasons for preferring northerners were largely racial... the taller and fairer a native, the better man he was likely to be" (qtd in Mishra 731). The British ruled India until 1947, and as Mishra explains, a near-century of Anglo-rule "shaped the common man's association of white-colored skin with the ruling class, with power, with desirability, and also with beauty" (732). Colonialism promoted a Eurocentric beauty standard that North Indians could more closely emulate with fairer complexions, while fair skin has remained deeply sought after by South Indians. The various film industries in India have boomed since India's independence. As a result, prejudice against darker skin has become integral to casting choices and the asymmetric depiction of different skin tones on-screen.

While South Indian films should showcase actors with a range of skin tones, especially darker hues that would be more representative of some South-Indian regions, filmmakers and audiences alike began prioritizing actors who foremostly possessed fair complexions. Language proficiency, acting skills, and all other casting criteria became secondary. In Neeraja Ramesh's *Times of India* article entitled "How Cinema Stoked Tamil Nadu's Fair Obsession," she discusses consumer packaged goods giant *Unilever* and the recent discontinuation of its notorious skin-lightening cream "Fair & Lovely." The ban resulted from the colorism discussion sparked among South Asians during the peak of BLM protests across the world, and many other beauty corporations such as L'oreal followed suit. While many hold the beauty industry

responsible for the commercialization and perpetuation of colorism, Ramesh argues that the film industry is equally, if not more, responsible. However, unlike in India's beauty industry, no major strides have been made in its film industry.

Casting fairer-skinned women has been an established trend for several decades, but specifically, in the 1990s, there was a boom in recruiting actresses from Mumbai (city in North India) to play parts in South Indian films (Ramesh). As dubbing technology took off in these years, filmmakers realized that the actresses they cast didn't even need to speak the language of the movie, thereby minimizing women to their physical appearance. It's more common for women from North India to have lighter skin, so directors spent less time recruiting South Indian women. By seeing glamorized North Indians on-screen, audiences began perceiving features that were more akin to Eurocentric beauty as superior.

The promotion of Eurocentric beauty standards can be seen in Vamshi Paidipally's 2014 film *Yevadu*, in which the two lead Indian actresses Kajal Agarwal and Shruti Hasan, are both fair-skinned women who don't speak the language of the film—Telugu. Meanwhile, Ram Charan and Allu Arjun, the two male leads, were cast on a more equitable basis with regard to language proficiency and skin color. Both are native Telugu speakers and have darker skin than their female co-stars. Charan is revered in the film for an impressive monologue during a pivotal scene (*Yevadu* 02:29:19-02:29:50). However, both Agarwal and Hasan's voices are dubbed over in the movie, and despite their lack of Telugu language proficiency, they have spent 14 and 10 respective years starring in Telugu films. Audiences demand authenticity and relatability from male actors, but by not expecting the same from actresses, women become replaceable pieces of the movie that are valued more based on beauty standards than talent. However, colorism in male casting is also not devoid. In a scene where Charan is surrounded by commoners in a tyrannized

town, the majority of the townspeople have darker skin than him. Charan, the scene's hero, is noticeably lighter, while the townspeople, who are struggling and poor, are noticeably darker (02:12:14-02:13:16). The scene clearly associates paler skin with power and importance and darker skin with lower socioeconomic status.

The movie's problematic nature extends further and goes as far as a fully Anglo woman playing the role of a native Indian woman. In the film, British actress Amy Jackson plays Indian town-goer Shruthi, the lead female role for the first half of the movie. It's rather ironic that a part meant to be played by an Indian woman is portrayed by a woman from the landmass that colonized India and laid the foundation for white bodies to be viewed as superior in the subset of film and in Indian society as a whole. Like most actresses in South Indian cinema, Jackson has no language proficiency in Telugu or Tamil – the other language of films she frequently stars in. In a BBC interview regarding her Indian film career, Jackson went as far as to say Tamil and Telugu "sound a little bit like gibberish" ("Amy Jackson" 00:01:35-00:01:44). Despite the evident ignorance of Jackson's statement, she led a successful cinema career from 2010 to 2018, only now taking a brief hiatus to raise her son. Recent conversation about anti-racism has revived discussion among South Asian activists about the problematic nature of European and light-skinned Indian actors consistently thriving over dark-skinned actors in Indian film. However, the conversation among activists has remained circular; it hasn't translated into concrete action. Bloggers may occasionally discuss the issue of Amy Jackson profiting off Tamil and Telugu culture, but established media sources in India never cover it.

Part of the problem is that a vast majority of the Indian public doesn't bat an eye to callouts regarding colorism in films because the beauty ideal of fair skin is so ingrained in every aspect of Indian life, including the endogamous marriage and dating markets. Up until June of

2020, Shaadi.com, a matchmaking company whose core markets are in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, possessed a "skin color filter" for those in search of lighter-skinned partners (Ramesh). Shaadi.com and Unilever have discontinued their discriminatory features and products. The motivation for companies like these to terminate these problematic moneymakers, as disappointing as it is, is usually the fear of being labeled as racist—which mangles their reputation and cuts their profits.

The difference in the film industry is that the colorism, while not subtle, is interlaced with many factors and isn't as blatant as a skin-lightening cream with the word "fair" slapped on the label. While light-skin has become an unspoken but understood standard in South Indian cinema, filmmakers can attribute casting light-skinned actors to the individual's talent, their potential history of success, shared creative visions, and other imprecise qualities. Critical conversation regarding the system and privilege that allow fair-skinned individuals to earn opportunities over dark-skinned individuals—and why many directors and the public are complacent to them—is not as easy to unpack.

As novice filmmakers try to craft successful stories, their choices are influenced by those of the directors of successful films, which usually prioritize lighter skin. In a study entitled "Fair Heroes and Heroines, Dark Commoners — Colorism in Bangla Films," researchers with backgrounds in computer science and statistics investigate the existence and extent of colorism in Bangla or Bengali films. The study examined the highest-grossing Tollywood films from each year between 2009 and 2018. It used a color space model to quantify how often lead male and female characters were lighter in skin tone than supporting characters in the ten movies from selected years. They found that in 66.67% of the frames with male leads and supporting roles,

the lead had lighter skin. This blatant prioritization of light skin was the case in 74.73% of frames with female leads and supporting roles (Saha et al. 4).

The overarching implication of this study is that there is a power dynamic associated with skin color and how it is portrayed in cinema, and this dynamic affects female actresses more than male actors. Films have undoubtedly perpetuated colorism and solidified the long-brewing belief that lighter skin is not only more beautiful but more valuable and noteworthy. The research regarding colorism in Bangla films concluded that even in *Hoichoi Unlimited*, the highest-grossing Bangla film of 2018, the heroine had lighter skin than side characters in the majority of the frames considered. The male leads had lighter skin than the supporting characters in the majority of frames as well. This study's recentness highlights that the trend of holding fair skin in high regard is still ongoing (Saha et al. 13).

While the outlook for positive change in this industry has been bleak, individuals are still taking steps in the right direction. Tamil film director Bharathiraja is known for his sensitive portrayals of village life in India. Bharathiraja strives to introduce new actresses into the industry—ones that audiences can relate to because they can see themselves represented in terms of skin color and background (Ramesh). Bharathiraja, of course, isn't the only filmmaker to express these sentiments. It could be argued that moves like this one are foundational to making the South Indian film industry more equitable; however, often, baby steps like this get swallowed in an industry that has systematically repudiated Indians with darker skin.

More than verbal expressions, the industry needs those in the most influential entertainment positions to step forward and make measurable commitments to mitigating colorism. An example of a powerful commitment to anti-racism can be observed in the tech industry whose companies "have long been criticized for their broad lack of black leadership at

the highest levels" (Hatmaker & Lunden). In June of 2020, Reddit's founder and CEO Alexis Ohanian, stepped down from his position on the board for the company and urged for the vacancy to be filled by a black board member. Five days later, Reddit appointed Y Combinator CEO, Michael Seibel to Ohanian's former board position (Heater). This forward step was crucial not only for Reddit but other tech companies as well. News of Ohanian's resignation made headlines across the world, with people saying that his actions "could end up being a landmark moment in tech, inspiring a domino effect of attitude and policy shifts with regard to diversity" (Popomaronis).

This type of leadership by example could also revolutionize South Indian cinema. What's more important than a verbal expression of prioritizing diversity and inclusion is taking actionable steps to commit to it. If a front-runner in Tollywood filmmaking such as S.S. Rajamouli—who directed the highest-grossing film in all of India—came forward and publicly spoke about the issue of colorism and committed to solely casting actresses from South India and those with darker complexions to bolster equity in the field, the public would listen. No single figure is going to be able to rally together all of India behind a single mission. However, without gargantuan steps, an unabating industry has proven that it will not change.

Cinema, while problematic, is a paramount part of Indian culture and a profoundly influential part of Indian society as well. South Indian cinema is particularly afflicted by colorism due to colonialism that imposed white supremacy upon India for nearly two centuries and debased South Indians for darker skin. Although films do not contrive skin-tone based discrimination, they prop it up by reaching the masses. In effect, representation of dark-skinned Indians in positive and leading roles would not only rehabilitate the industry, but it could also mitigate societal prejudice against dark skin as a whole, which is a "deep-rooted problematic

practice embraced by both the oppressor and the victim" (Mishra 725). While conversation and efforts to reform the industry are not null and void, there has not been tangible improvement in the portrayal of dark-skinned individuals. To change a bias that has become so innate in India, potent leadership by entertainment giants and successive intent to change from the public are crucial.

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