Colonial Legacies and the Politics of Skin Tone: Colourism, Whiteness and Postcolonial Feminist Resistance in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper examines colourism in Bangladesh as a socially and historically produced form of inequality that is deeply tied to both colonial and gendered systems of power. While hierarchies of skin tone existed in the region prior to European intervention, British colonial rule intensified and reshaped these distinctions by linking lighter skin to whiteness, modernity and social value. In doing so, colourism became more than a cultural preference and evolved into a structural condition that continues to shape how bodies are valued, particularly those of women. Focusing on Bangladesh as a case study, this paper explores how these colonial legacies are reproduced in contemporary society through everyday practices and institutions, including the widespread use of skin-lightening products, discriminatory norms in marriage and employment and the internalization of beauty standards that privilege fairness. These dynamics are examined through a qualitative discourse analysis of academic literature, media and cultural narratives and personal accounts, treating these sources as forms of cultural data. At the same time, the paper engages with postcolonial feminist perspectives to highlight emerging forms of resistance that challenge dominant beauty ideals and create space for alternative representations of brown and dark skin. By situating colourism within broader structures of power, identity and lived experience, this study moves beyond simplified explanations and instead offers a more nuanced and critical understanding of how colonial legacies continue to shape gendered experiences of beauty, value and belonging in contemporary Bangladesh.

Keywords: Colourism, Colonialism, Whiteness, Bangladesh, Postcolonial Feminism, Media Representation

Introduction

Colonialism is often understood as a system of political and economic domination, but its effects extend far beyond formal rule. It continues to shape how identity, value and belonging are understood within everyday life, operating through social norms, institutional structures and cultural expectations. In South Asia, one of the most enduring legacies of British colonial rule is the persistence of colourism, where lighter skin is associated with beauty, success and social mobility, while darker skin is marginalized. Although preferences for lighter skin existed prior to colonization, British rule significantly intensified and reshaped these distinctions by linking lighter skin to whiteness, modernity and broader structures of racial hierarchy (Wolpert, 2024; Kullrich, 2022, pp. 59, 80). In doing so, colonialism did not simply impose new ideals but reorganized existing social hierarchies in ways that continue to influence how bodies are valued. In this context, skin tone became more than a physical attribute. It functioned as a social marker, where proximity to lighter skin came to reflect proximity to power, privilege and opportunity. This shows how ideas about skin tone are tied

to deeper systems of power in which value is distributed through racialized hierarchies tied to colonial and postcolonial power structures. In this sense, colourism can be understood as part of a broader system of racialized power that continues to structure social, economic and symbolic hierarchies.

Postcolonial and feminist scholarship helps to frame this process as more than a cultural preference. Frantz Fanon (1967) argues that colonial systems produce internalized hierarchies, where proximity to whiteness becomes associated with worth and desirability. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2007) explains how whiteness operates as an invisible norm that shapes everyday spaces, influencing who is seen as acceptable, desirable and successful. These perspectives highlight how colonial power persists beyond formal rule, shaping not only institutions but also perceptions of beauty, identity and belonging. Within this framework, colourism can be understood as a historically produced and socially sustained structure of inequality that intersects with gendered expectations, where women's bodies often become key sites of evaluation and control.

While these dynamics unfolded across South Asia, their effects are not uniform. Treating the region as a homogeneous cultural space risks overlooking the specific ways in which colonial legacies are experienced and reproduced in different contexts. This paper therefore focuses on Bangladesh as a primary site of analysis, where colourism continues to shape social and cultural life in distinct ways. In Bangladesh, fairness remains closely tied to ideas of beauty, marriageability and social status, disproportionately affecting women and reinforcing gendered forms of discrimination (Jensen, 2020; Nambiar, 2023). These norms are not only maintained through institutions and economic structures but are also reproduced through every day cultural narratives, including media, advertising and storytelling traditions, which normalize associations between fairness, desirability and success.

This paper examines how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary experiences of colourism in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to gender, social positioning and access to opportunities. It asks how colonialism restructured colour-based hierarchies, how these hierarchies operate within present-day Bangladeshi society and how postcolonial feminist movements are working to challenge and redefine dominant beauty standards. Drawing on a qualitative discourse analysis of academic literature, media and cultural narratives and personal accounts, this study treats these sources as forms of cultural data to explore how colourism is both reproduced and contested. By bringing together structural analysis and lived experience, the paper seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of how colonial histories continue to shape beauty, value and belonging in contemporary Bangladesh.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how colourism is produced, reproduced and challenged within Bangladeshi society. Instead of measuring colourism through numbers, this study focuses on how it is expressed through language, representation and lived experience. For this reason, the paper uses a qualitative discourse analysis to explore how colourism operates across different social and cultural contexts.

The analysis draws on a combination of academic literature, media representations and personal narratives. Academic sources provide the historical and structural grounding for understanding colourism, particularly in relation to colonialism, whiteness and gender. At the same time, media texts such as advertisements, popular culture and storytelling traditions are treated as cultural sites where colour-based hierarchies are both reflected and reinforced. Personal narratives,

including blogs and online testimonies, are also included as they offer insight into how individuals experience and make sense of colourism in their everyday lives. These sources are not used simply as illustrative examples but are analyzed as forms of cultural data that reveal broader social patterns and meanings. While these sources are analyzed together, this study recognizes that academic literature and non-peer-reviewed sources carry different levels of authority, with scholarly work forming the primary analytical foundation while media and personal narratives are used to illustrate and contextualize lived experiences rather than to establish theoretical claims.

This paper engages with a range of sources, including scholarship and narratives by women of colour; however, limitations in available literature on Bangladesh-specific colourism reflect broader gaps within academic production.

By bringing together these different types of sources, this approach allows for a more layered understanding of colourism as both a structural and lived phenomenon. It also makes it possible to examine how dominant narratives around fairness are maintained, as well as how they are questioned and resisted within contemporary discourse. At the same time, this study acknowledges its limitations. As it relies on secondary sources and publicly available narratives, it may not capture the full diversity of experiences across different regions, classes and communities within Bangladesh. However, the aim of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive representation of all experiences, but to critically analyze the patterns, meanings and power structures that shape how colourism is understood and sustained.

Colonial Foundations of Colourism

Colour-based distinctions in South Asia did not begin with European colonization. Social hierarchies tied to caste, class and labor had already shaped perceptions of skin tone, where lighter skin was often associated with higher social standing. However, these distinctions were not uniform or rigidly structured across the region and operated within localized cultural contexts rather than a formalized racial hierarchy.

British colonial rule significantly altered these dynamics. Following the consolidation of power after 1858, colonial governance introduced new political, economic and social structures rooted in a framework that privileged lighter skin as a marker of status and advancement (Kullrich, 2022, pp. 59, 80). British colonial rule operated within a broader global system that constructed whiteness as inherently superior and entitled to power. Rather than creating hierarchies from nothing, colonialism intensified and racialized existing social distinctions, embedding them within a broader system structured around whiteness.

This process can be further understood through theoretical frameworks that conceptualize whiteness as a system of power rather than merely a cultural preference. Charles W. Mills (1997) argues that modern societies are structured through a "racial contract," in which political, social and economic systems are organized to privilege those considered white. In this framework, racial hierarchy is not incidental but foundational, shaping who is granted full status, rights and recognition. Similarly, Aníbal Quijano (2000) describes the "coloniality of power" as a lasting structure in which colonial forms of racial classification continue to organize global and local hierarchies. Within this system, whiteness becomes a benchmark of value, authority and modernity, while darker bodies are positioned as inferior.

This shift extended beyond governance into everyday social life. Skin tone became increasingly tied to ideas of aspiration and success, where proximity to lighter skin came to reflect proximity to power. These associations were gradually internalized within

society, shaping how individuals understood beauty, value and social mobility. As Kullrich (2022) argues, colonial racial logics not only reinforced earlier caste-based distinctions but also redefined them through a more rigid and visible hierarchy linked to whiteness and desirability (p. 92).

While these transformations occurred across South Asia, their effects were not uniform. In what is now Bangladesh, colonial legacies became embedded within specific cultural and social contexts, interacting with local norms and practices. As a result, colourism in Bangladesh cannot be understood solely as a continuation of pre-existing traditions or as a direct imposition of colonial ideology. Instead, it reflects a layered process in which colonial structures amplified and reshaped existing biases, producing more entrenched forms of inequality that continue to influence social life.

This perspective is important because it moves beyond simplified explanations of colourism. Rather than viewing it as either purely cultural or entirely colonial, it highlights how systems of power operate through reinforcement and adaptation. Colonialism did not act in isolation, but it played a crucial role in shaping the meanings attached to skin tone, linking them to broader hierarchies that continue to affect how identity, value and belonging are experienced in Bangladesh today.

Colourism in Contemporary Bangladesh

Colourism in Bangladesh today reflects a complex continuation of historical hierarchies, shaped by colonial legacies but sustained through contemporary social, cultural and economic practices. It is not simply a remnant of the past, but an active and evolving system that intersects with patriarchy, class and globalization. As Kullrich (2022) argues, colourism in South Asia has become deeply embedded within everyday life, where lighter skin is consistently associated with beauty, success and social mobility (pp. 17, 104).

In Bangladesh, these associations are particularly visible in the ways fairness is tied to social value, especially for women. Skin tone continues to influence how individuals are perceived in both personal and public spaces, often shaping opportunities related to marriage, employment and social acceptance. Jensen (2020) highlights how colour-based preferences are normalized within Bangladeshi society, where lighter skin is often treated as a desirable and expected trait, while darker skin is viewed as a disadvantage. These biases are not always openly acknowledged as discrimination but instead operate as accepted social norms that influence everyday decision-making and interactions.

From a feminist perspective, this normalization reflects how women's bodies become central sites where social expectations are enforced. The pressure to conform to light skin ideals is not only about beauty but also about meeting broader expectations of femininity, desirability and respectability. Women with darker skin tones often face disproportionate scrutiny, where their worth is evaluated through appearance rather than capability or character (Nambiar, 2023). This dynamic highlights how colourism operates not only as a racialized system but also as a gendered one, reinforcing unequal power relations within society.

These norms are further reproduced through cultural and media representations that consistently privilege lighter skin. In both local and global media, lighter-skinned individuals are more prominently featured and associated with success and attractiveness, reinforcing the perception that fairness is a requirement for social advancement (Kullrich, 2022, pp. 104, 164). This pattern is not incidental but reflects a broader system in which visibility and desirability are closely tied to skin tone. As a result, colourism becomes normalized through repeated exposure, shaping perceptions from an early age and embedding itself within everyday cultural narratives.

At the same time, the contemporary landscape of colourism in Bangladesh is also shaped by economic forces, particularly through the expansion of the beauty industry. Skin-lightening products are marketed as tools for self-improvement and social mobility, often targeting women by linking fair skin to confidence, success and acceptance (Kullrich, 2022, pp. 116, 135). As Fatemaa (2023) critiques, the beauty industry capitalizes on deeply rooted insecurities, promoting products that promise transformation while reinforcing the idea that darker skin is something that must be corrected. These marketing strategies do not merely respond to existing preferences but actively reproduce and intensify them.

Together, these dynamics demonstrate that colourism in contemporary Bangladesh is not a static or isolated issue. It is maintained through the interaction of historical legacies, social expectations, cultural representations and economic interests. Understanding colourism in this way allows for a more critical examination of how it continues to shape lived experiences, particularly for women, and why it remains such a persistent and deeply rooted system of inequality. These patterns become especially visible in cultural and media representations.

Cultural Reproduction of Colourism in Media and Popular Culture

Colourism in Bangladesh is not only sustained through social and economic structures but is also continuously reproduced through cultural narratives and media representations. These cultural forms don't just mirror what society values; they help shape and reinforce those ideas over time. Through repeated exposure, ideas about fairness, desirability and success become embedded within everyday life, influencing how individuals come to understand beauty and value from an early age.

One of the most visible ways this occurs is through patterns of representation in media. Across both local and global platforms, lighter-skinned individuals are more frequently portrayed as attractive, successful and desirable, while darker-skinned individuals are often underrepresented or confined to limiting roles. As Kullrich (2022) notes, media industries across South Asia consistently privilege lighter skin tones, reinforcing a narrow and exclusionary standard of beauty (pp. 104, 164). This imbalance is not neutral. It shapes who is seen and who is overlooked, gradually constructing a visual hierarchy where fairness becomes tied to visibility and worth.

These representations are further reinforced through everyday cultural messaging, particularly in advertising and popular discourse. In Bangladesh, these messages are not confined to elite or urban spaces but circulate widely across different social contexts. Fatemaa (2023), writing in the *Dhaka Tribune*, recounts an interaction involving NGO worker Aloka Talukder during a workshop in a rural Bangladeshi village, where an anonymous young girl, instead of asking for snacks like other participants, requested Fair & Lovely cream, explaining that lighter skin would improve her chances of marriage. This moment is not simply anecdotal; it reveals how colourism is internalized at a young age, where even children begin to understand their future value in relation to their appearance. The fact that this interaction takes place in a rural setting further highlights how deeply these ideals have penetrated across class and geographic boundaries.

From a feminist perspective, this internalization reflects how women's bodies become central sites through which social expectations are enforced. The desire for fairness is not only about beauty but also about meeting broader expectations tied to femininity, desirability and social acceptance. As Nambiar (2023) suggests, colourism significantly shapes how South Asian women experience their identities, often positioning appearance as a determining factor in their social opportunities. In this way, colourism

operates not only as a racialized hierarchy but also as a gendered system that regulates how women are seen, valued and treated within society.

At the same time, contemporary media also reveals tensions within these dominant narratives. While traditional representations continue to privilege lighter skin, there is growing critique around the lack of authentic and diverse representation of South Asian identities. Agiwal (2024) highlights how South Asians are often reduced to tokenistic portrayals in global media, where a single character is expected to represent an entire community. These representations fail to capture the diversity of South Asian identities, including variations in skin tone, and instead reinforce narrow and often stereotypical images.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that media is not a passive reflection of society but an active site where cultural meanings are produced and reinforced. By shaping how beauty and desirability are defined, media plays a central role in maintaining colour-based hierarchies. At the same time, it also offers a space where these hierarchies can be questioned and challenged, making it a critical arena in both the reproduction and resistance of colourism in Bangladesh.

Fairness Industry and Societal Indoctrination

In Bangladesh, the desire for fair skin is widely treated as a normal and expected part of social life. Ideas about fairness extend beyond media and advertising and are embedded in everyday conversations, family expectations and social interactions. Fair skin is consistently associated with success, desirability and acceptance, making it appear less like a preference and more like a social requirement.

The expansion of the fairness industry reflects how deeply these ideas are rooted. Skin-lightening products are widely available across both urban and rural markets, often priced to remain accessible across different income groups. Their marketing connects lighter skin to life outcomes such as marriage prospects, professional success and confidence. Kullrich (2022) explains that these products are framed as tools for self-improvement, reinforcing the perception that fairness is tied to upward mobility (pp. 116, 135).

These expectations become visible through every day experiences. Fatemaa (2023) describes an interaction involving NGO worker Aloka Talukder in a rural Bangladeshi village, where a young girl asked for Fair and Lovely cream during a workshop, explaining that lighter skin would improve her chances of marriage. This example reveals how colour-based ideals are internalized early in life. The rural setting further shows that these expectations are not confined to urban spaces but circulate across different social and geographic contexts.

The beauty industry and social expectations feed into each other in noticeable ways. The industry draws on existing preferences, while also strengthening them through repeated messaging. Advertising consistently presents fairness as desirable and achievable, encouraging individuals to see lighter skin as a goal. Fatemaa (2023) argues that the industry profits from insecurities that it simultaneously reinforces, turning social pressure into economic demand.

These pressures affect women more directly. Expectations around beauty, marriage and social acceptance are closely tied to women's appearance, making fairness a key factor in how they are evaluated. Nambiar (2023) shows that colourism shapes how South Asian women experience their identities and opportunities, often placing appearance above other qualities. In this context, the use of fairness products reflects an effort to navigate social expectations rather than simply an individual choice.

The consequences of this system also appear in physical health outcomes. The World Health Organization (2019) reports that many skin-lightening products contain harmful substances such as mercury, which can cause kidney damage and severe skin conditions. In Bangladesh, investigations by the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution found dangerously high mercury levels in several widely used creams, leading to the banning of multiple products (Ahamed, 2023; Fatemaa, 2023). Despite these risks, continued demand reflects the strength of social pressures surrounding fairness.

The fairness industry operates within everyday life rather than outside it. It connects cultural expectations, economic systems and personal experiences in ways that reinforce colour-based hierarchies across different levels of society. As a result, ideas about fairness are sustained not only through belief but also through routine practices, making colourism both a social norm and a lived reality in Bangladesh.

Discrimination and Lived Experience

Colourism in Bangladesh is not limited to cultural representation or economic systems. It is experienced directly in everyday life, shaping how individuals are treated within families, communities and institutions. These forms of discrimination often begin early and continue across different stages of life, influencing social relationships, opportunities and self-perception.

In many cases, bias appears within the family itself. Preferences for lighter skin can be expressed through everyday comments, comparisons and expectations, particularly toward girls. Jensen (2020) documents how colour-based preferences are normalized in Bangladeshi society, where lighter skin is often treated as an advantage rather than a bias. These attitudes can shape how children are valued from a young age, influencing their confidence and sense of belonging.

These patterns extend into broader social structures, especially in relation to marriage and employment. In Bangladesh, marriage remains a significant social institution, and women's appearance often plays a central role in determining their perceived suitability. Jensen (2020) highlights how skin colour can influence marriage prospects, where lighter skin is associated with desirability and higher status. In some cases, darker skin is treated as a disadvantage that must be compensated for, often through increased dowry expectations (Sameen, 2022). This creates a system where a woman's value is closely tied to her appearance, reinforcing unequal social standards.

Discrimination is also visible in professional spaces. Preferences for lighter skin can influence hiring decisions, particularly in roles that involve public interaction. Jensen (2020) notes that individuals with lighter complexions are often overrepresented in such positions, suggesting that appearance can take precedence over merit. These patterns show how colourism operates within institutional settings, shaping access to opportunities and reinforcing social hierarchies.

The impact of colourism is particularly severe for marginalized groups. A study on Dalit women in Bangladesh found that darker-skinned women experience multiple layers of discrimination based on both caste and appearance, leading to social exclusion and limited opportunities (Rifat-Ur-Rahman et al., 2021). These experiences highlight how colourism intersects with other forms of inequality, intensifying its effects for those already in vulnerable positions.

Beyond structural outcomes, colourism also affects mental and emotional well-being. Personal narratives provide insight into how these experiences are lived and internalized. Mudabbir (2020), writing in a personal blog reflecting on her experiences growing up in a South Asian context, describes how comments about her dark complexion from family members and peers shaped her self-image from

an early age. She recalls constant comparisons and criticism, which led to feelings of inadequacy and a desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals. These experiences show how colourism operates not only externally but also internally, influencing how individuals come to see themselves.

Similar patterns appear in other accounts. Sameen (2022) discusses how dark-skinned women in Bangladesh often face heightened scrutiny in matrimonial contexts, where concerns about skin tone can affect both their own prospects and perceptions about future children. In some cases, these pressures contribute to significant psychological distress. Some reports suggest severe emotional consequences, including instances of suicide linked to persistent colour-based ridicule in South Asia (Pandey, 2019; Mitra, 2023; India Today, 2014). These cases reflect the depth of emotional harm that can result from sustained social stigma.

These experiences show that colourism is not only a social preference but a system that shapes how individuals are treated and how they understand themselves. From a feminist perspective, this system places disproportionate pressure on women, whose bodies become central to social evaluation and judgment. Appearance is often used as a measure of worth, limiting how women are perceived and how they navigate opportunities within society.

At the same time, these lived experiences also reveal the persistence of colourism across different spaces, from private family settings to public institutions. The continuity of these patterns shows how deeply embedded colour-based hierarchies remain in Bangladesh. Understanding these experiences is essential for recognizing colourism not only as a structural issue but also as a lived reality that affects individuals on a daily basis.

Postcolonial Feminist Resistance in Bangladesh

Colourism remains deeply embedded within social and cultural life in Bangladesh. Across different spaces, individuals and communities are actively questioning and challenging the standards that have long defined beauty, value and belonging. These efforts are shaped by postcolonial feminist perspectives that seek to confront both colonial legacies and the gendered inequalities that sustain them.

One important form of resistance emerges through personal narratives and everyday acts of refusal. These responses are often grounded in lived experience, where individuals begin to question and push back against normalized forms of colour-based discrimination. Mudabbir (2020), for example, reflects on her own experiences with colourism within family and social settings and describes how she chose to confront derogatory comments rather than accept them. Her response illustrates how resistance can begin at the level of everyday interaction, where challenging normalized behavior becomes a way of disrupting broader social patterns.

At the same time, collective efforts are also reshaping how colourism is understood and addressed. Postcolonial feminist thought in South Asia emphasizes the importance of storytelling, representation and community engagement as tools for change (Tyagi, 2014). By creating space for marginalized voices, these approaches challenge dominant narratives that have historically privileged lighter skin. This shift is particularly visible in digital and media spaces, where individuals and groups are using platforms to share experiences, raise awareness and build solidarity.

Representation has become a key site of this resistance. Writers and commentators have pointed to the lack of authentic portrayals of South Asian identities, particularly in relation to skin tone. Agiwal (2024) highlights how South Asians are often reduced to tokenistic representations in global media, where diversity is limited and superficial. In response, there has been a growing effort to produce

more inclusive and nuanced representations that reflect the diversity of South Asian experiences.

Critiques of representation extend beyond media into the beauty industry itself, where South Asian women often find their needs poorly served by mainstream products. Suhrawardi et al. (2021) describe how the beauty industry's failure to address the specific needs of brown skin, from foundation shades to skincare formulated for melanated skin, reflects a broader pattern of exclusion, one that mirrors the same Eurocentric standards being challenged elsewhere in media and advertising. This critique reframes resistance not only as a matter of visibility but also of material access, highlighting how postcolonial feminist pushback operates across both symbolic and practical dimensions of beauty culture.

Creative and community-driven initiatives have also played an important role. Malala Fund (2022) highlights Nila Varman's project "Brown Is," which centers the visibility of diverse South Asian skin tones and challenges narrow beauty standards through visual storytelling. Similarly, the Bangladeshi initiative AmaderSkin represents a community-driven effort to challenge colourism and body shaming through storytelling and digital engagement. As documented by Gani et al. (2023), the platform creates space for individuals to share personal experiences related to skin tone, appearance and social pressure, fostering dialogue around acceptance and self-worth. By centering these narratives, AmaderSkin challenges dominant beauty standards and promotes alternative understandings of identity that move beyond Eurocentric ideals as a measure of value. This form of collective storytelling highlights how resistance can emerge through every day experiences, transforming personal struggles into shared awareness and social critique.

From a feminist perspective, these forms of resistance are significant because they shift the focus from conformity to self-definition. Rather than accepting externally imposed standards, individuals and communities are redefining beauty in ways that center diversity, cultural identity and lived experience. This process does not occur in isolation. It involves ongoing negotiation within social structures that continue to privilege certain appearances over others.

At the same time, these efforts also reveal the limitations and challenges of resistance. While awareness has increased, deeply embedded norms around Eurocentric beauty standards remain difficult to change. Social expectations, economic pressures and institutional practices continue to reinforce colour-based hierarchies, making resistance an ongoing and uneven process. However, the growing visibility of these counter-narratives signals a shift in how colourism is being understood and addressed.

Postcolonial feminist resistance in Bangladesh does not offer a single solution to colourism, but it creates space for alternative ways of thinking about beauty, identity and value. By centering lived experiences and challenging dominant narratives, these efforts contribute to a broader transformation in how individuals understand themselves and others. In this sense, resistance is not only about opposing existing structures but also about imagining and building more inclusive possibilities for the future.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how colourism in Bangladesh is shaped by a combination of historical, cultural and structural forces. While preferences for lighter skin existed prior to colonial rule, British colonialism intensified and reorganized these distinctions by linking fairness to whiteness, modernity and social value. These associations did not disappear with the end of colonial rule. They continue to influence how beauty, desirability and success are understood within contemporary society.

The analysis has shown that colourism operates across multiple levels. It is reinforced

through media and cultural narratives that normalize Eurocentric beauty standards as desirable, sustained by the beauty industry that turns these preferences into economic demand, and experienced directly in everyday life through discrimination in families, social institutions, and professional spaces. These dynamics are particularly significant for women, whose bodies are often evaluated in relation to appearance, shaping their opportunities, relationships and sense of self.

At the same time, colourism is increasingly being challenged through postcolonial feminist efforts in Bangladesh and across South Asia. Norms like colourism are increasingly being questioned through storytelling, representation and community-based initiatives. These forms of resistance do not eliminate colourism, but they create space for alternative ways of understanding beauty and identity, where value is no longer tied to fairness alone.

Understanding colourism as a layered and ongoing process allows for a more nuanced perspective that moves beyond simplified explanations. It highlights how colonial legacies continue to operate through everyday practices, shaping both structural conditions and lived experiences. Addressing colourism therefore requires more than individual change. It calls for broader shifts in how beauty is represented, how value is assigned and how social expectations are constructed and maintained. This also requires recognizing how whiteness continues to function as an invisible standard within these systems, shaping both institutional structures and everyday perceptions.

At the same time, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and publicly available narratives, which may not capture the full diversity of experiences across different regions, classes and communities in Bangladesh. Future research could build on this work by focusing on more localized or intersectional experiences, particularly those that remain underrepresented in existing literature.

Despite these limitations, this paper contributes to a growing conversation about colourism by bringing together historical analysis, contemporary examples and feminist perspectives. Addressing colourism requires challenging not only individual perceptions but also the structural and cultural systems that continue to assign value based on skin tone.

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