



## Framing Fairness: A Critical Analysis of Colorism in Bangladeshi Media Narratives (2000–2023)

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### **Abstract**

Colorism, a deep-rooted societal and cultural issue across South Asian countries, fosters prejudice against individuals with darker skin tones in favor of lighter ones. This study seeks to explore the foundations of cultural racism and trace its historical origins and influence on contemporary Bangladeshi society. Drawing on insights from various researchers, the analysis highlights how color-based discrimination has persisted across civilizations and continues to shape societal attitudes today. In particular, the Bangladeshi media—especially the film industry—emerges as a significant contributor to colorist narratives. Films often portray lighter-skinned individuals in leading or heroic roles while relegating darker-skinned characters to negative or villainous roles. Additionally, cosmetic and pharmaceutical companies play a key role in perpetuating colorism by marketing fairness products, thus capitalizing on insecurities linked to complexion. These industries aggressively advertise skin-lightening products, reinforcing biased beauty standards. Addressing this pervasive issue requires critical attention to media representations and corporate practices, alongside broader societal efforts to dismantle color-based prejudices and foster inclusivity for individuals with darker skin in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** *Gender; Sexuality; Racism; Color; Media Culture*

### **Introduction**

As the world embraces modernism and globalization, various forms of discrimination—such as gender segregation, color prejudice, and chauvinism—have emerged as some of the most pressing societal issues (Kurunmäki, 2018). Among these, racism and colorism are often misunderstood as synonymous, although they possess distinct characteristics in terms of their origins, definitions, and social implications. Racism refers to personal, societal, or institutional biases that oppress individuals based on race or ethnicity. In contrast, colorism is a form of intra-racial discrimination where individuals with

lighter skin tones are privileged over those with darker complexions (Vijaya, 2019). This form of bias is particularly prevalent in the media and labor markets.

Historically, color-based discrimination has manifested in disturbing practices such as the “paper bag test” in the United States, where individuals with skin darker than a brown paper bag were often denied employment or entry into certain organizations (Vijaya, 2019). While such overt tests are no longer practiced, subtle forms of colorism still persist in modern settings. For example, dark-skinned actors and actresses remain underrepresented in the American film industry. Even in supposedly diverse casts, individuals with lighter or mixed skin tones are often prioritized. The impact of colorism extends beyond missed opportunities, affecting access to resources and representation, and perpetuating systemic inequality (Tsunokai et al., 2019). In South Asian societies, colorism presents a deep-seated cultural and societal challenge. These regions, home to a blend of skin tones, often favor lighter complexions. Individuals with darker skin are frequently denied equal access to resources and opportunities in workplaces, academic institutions, and even within households (Bettie, 2020). Conversely, those with fair or light skin enjoy social privilege and visibility. Addressing this issue requires a critical examination of the roots and evolution of color-based discrimination across time and civilizations. Colorism in South Asia is not a recent phenomenon. Some scholars trace its persistence to the colonial legacy of the British Empire, while others point further back to the arrival of the Aryans around 1500 BC (Modi, 2016). The Aryans introduced a caste-based social order that ranked individuals based on religion, wealth, and skin tone. At the top of this hierarchy were the Brahmins—wealthy, fair-skinned elites—followed by other classes like the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. At the bottom were the Shudras—dark-skinned laborers and marginalized groups (Tsunokai et al., 2019). Despite being outlawed, casteism still exists in many rural areas, perpetuating class and color divisions.

During British colonial rule, this caste system was maintained and reshaped through a racialized lens. The British prioritized lighter-skinned Indians for administrative roles and white-collar positions, further institutionalizing color-based discrimination (Dhillon, 2019). Policies such as the Calico Act of 1721 devastated local economies—especially in Bengal—by banning Indian cotton exports to the UK, leading to unemployment among Bengali artisans. The British class system created enduring barriers to education and economic mobility for people at the lower end of the social spectrum. As a result, colonial legacies continue to influence social hierarchies and colorism in modern South Asian societies (Bettie, 2020).

## ***Methodology***

This research employs a qualitative approach based on secondary data analysis to investigate the prevalence and impact of colorism in Bangladeshi media culture. The study involves an in-depth review of existing literature, including scholarly articles, books, media content, and academic publications that focus on issues related to colorism, racial bias, and media portrayal in South Asian societies. To explore the influence of Bangladeshi media, particularly Dhallywood films and beauty advertisements, a content analysis was conducted on selected media materials from the year 2000 to 2023. This includes ten popular Dhallywood films where skin tone was used to define character roles or social status, and advertisements from five major Bangladeshi cosmetic brands that promote fairness products. Additionally, selected television talk shows and drama series were analyzed to understand the recurring narratives related to skin color preferences. The analysis focused on identifying common themes, patterns of stereotyping, visual representations, and language use. The research also draws upon postcolonial theory, media framing theory, and the concept of cultural hegemony to interpret how these media portrayals reinforce societal beauty standards and deepen the fascination with fair skin. By examining both the content and context, this methodology aims to uncover how color-based prejudice is constructed and sustained through media narratives in contemporary Bangladeshi society.

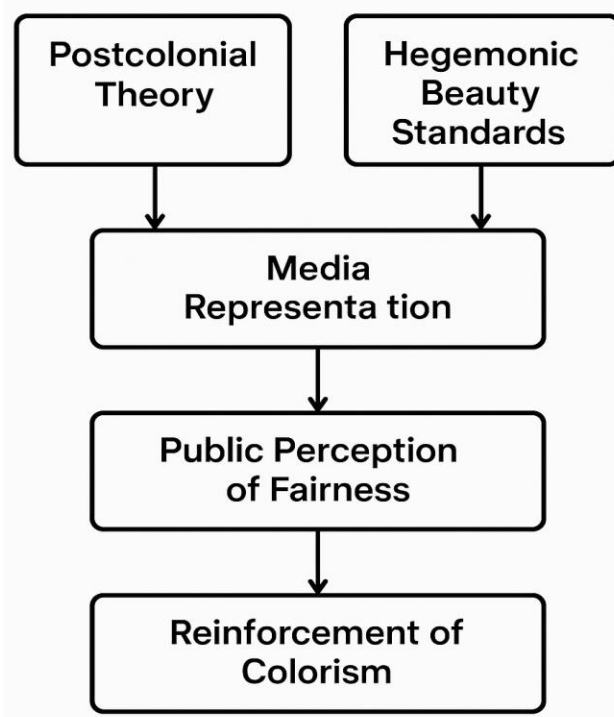


Fig 1. Flowchart Depicting the Research Methodology: A step-by-step representation outlining the data collection, thematic analysis, and interpretation process used to explore the impact of colorism in Bangladeshi media and popular culture.

## Results and Discussion

### ● Colourism issues in Bangladeshi societies

Societies of Bangladesh have been suffering from colour discrimination for so long as a consequence of the diversification of racial classes and inflexible systems of Bangladeshi societies. Moreover, Bangladeshi societies have induced some influence from British societies as Bangladesh has also been under the influence of British raj. All these developments have played a vital role in intensifying colour discrimination in Bangladeshi societies. Cultural perceptions reinforce colour discrimination in Bangladeshi societies by establishing darker skin tones as an indication of the underclass, backward caste, and poor ethnicity, which is controlled by different variations and structuralism (Geetha, 2021). Cultural perceptions reinforce Colourism by establishing darker skin tones as an indication of the underclass, backward caste, and South Indian ethnicity, which is controlled by different variations and structuralism. Moreover, colour discrimination is a strongly biased phenomenon in the Bangladeshi Society (Geetha, 2021). The consciousness of inferiority of black complexion in a Bangladeshi society forms their perspective and construction of knowledge in a cyclic scenario towards how racial identity constructs distinct personal experiences because of the standardization of individuals with white and fair coloured skin by mainstream press and racialization capitalist nations in modern Bangladeshi society.

As we have seen, there is a higher fascination for people with white and fair colour, and this factor has become hilarious and poisonous for people with black or brown skin colour. Many beauty conscious Bangladeshi women and girls try to stay at home and employ whitening skin treatments and apply makeup tones that are lighter as compared to their naturally enhanced brown skin tones (Mim and Tabassum, 2021). Unfortunately, this has been happening for so long because Bangladeshi and other

South Asian societies have always been judged on each and every aspect of their appearance, mainly their healthy, white, and fair skin. Many individuals in Bangladeshi have been preoccupied with light complexion because they have been appealing and desired, resulting in prejudice towards persons with brown and dark skin, incorporating young girls and women (Bell, 2019). “Colorism” is a kind of racism and prejudice that discriminates and gives preference to individuals with white and fair skin complexions over individuals with black and brown skin complexions.

Typically, there has been analyzed that individuals with white and fair skin complexions are perceived as associating authority, position, and attractiveness due to the generational and cultural coexistence of the “Mughal Empire” and “British Empire” in the past, as well as colonialist benefits granted to individuals with white and fair skin complexions (Philips, 2004). Many cultural theorists and historians believe that high colour discrimination among people in South Asian economies is a consequence of British culture because the British in the Indian Subcontinent possess white skin tones. They were usually highly wealthy because they were British bureaucrats who ran the administration of the Indian Subcontinent. Moreover, they have associations with British royal families, British people in business, and affluent British. Hence their culture and living characteristics have highly influenced the Indian Subcontinent or South Asia people.

“Colorism” remains firmly embedded in our traditions across Bangladesh, decades or centuries after the “British Raj” abandoned it. Tragically, several of the problems of colonization are still present in Bangladesh's Bengali culture and society. As “darker” somebody's complexion, the worse attractive individuals are generally thought to be. Such a mindset has been passed down through recent centuries (Mukherjee, 2020). In the time of British colonialism, Indians with dark complexions were forbidden from entering cafes and academic facilities, having entryway signs explicitly saying “dogs and Indians are not allowed to enter.” During colonialism, the United Kingdom demanded the human resources of India (Islam, 2019). Natives of India were almost often assigned to extremely strange duties as well as low-ranking positions inside the military. Indians with fair skin were employed more typically than their colleagues with dark or brown skin complexions.

## ● “Colorism” in the Bangladeshi movie industry

One of the main determinants of colour racism in modern Bangladeshi culture is the media industry. Dhallywood, the Bangladeshi film industry, is one of the major culprits behind spreading colour discrimination across societies of Bangladesh. “Dhallywood” has maintained to support chromatic values resulting in the colonization of India that was introduced under the British Raj from its very inception in the late 1900s. In Dhallywood films, the antagonists usually belong to a low class and possess a dark skin complexion, whereas the superheroes and lovers belong to a high class and possess light skin (Saha, Choudhury and Chatterjee, 2020). In Dhallywood, there is typical that individual of white or fair colour are hired and given high importance, while individual of black colour is typically ignored. Additionally, female actresses have to face some more challenges as desired actresses are expected to possess white skin colour with the slim and fittest body.

There is lots of diversification in terms of skin colour or complexion, but yet white or fair people are preferred by Dhallywood (that is a Bangladeshi movie industry) because they are presumed to have all appealing and alluring characteristics and features to work in the Dhallywood (Arif, 2004). Moreover, colour discrimination is exploited by the Bangladeshi makeup industries and pharmaceutical firms that profit from colour discrimination while also contributing to “colourism”. Moreover, different T.V. ads have been promoting colourism in Bangladeshi societies, such as skin whitening items and treatments like “Fair and Lovely” are frequently marketed in T.V. ads, commercials, social media platforms, and periodicals (Davis-Bundrage, Medvedev and Hall, 2021). Beauty product brands employ Bangladeshi film actors and actresses and other Bangladeshi celebrities like cricketers to showcase the illusionary and

bogus characteristics of using whitening and beauty creams such as "Fair and Lovely", "Garner", and "Ponds", etc. That is how the Bangladeshi film industry has been collaborating with these beauty brands, which has been resulting in a higher level of colour discrimination among people (Davis-Bundrage, Medvedev and Hall, 2021). Youth and young boys and girls try to associate and relate their appearances with T.V. actors and actresses who look appearance is bogusly enhanced. That results in an adverse influence on these young individuals in the form of mental and psychological stress among young girls and boys in Bangladesh and in other parts of South Asia.

Generally, female actresses have to face lots of discrimination as compared to actors because, unfortunately, to some extent, in our societies, females are seen through the lens of beautification and attraction. Many times, it has been seen that an actress with a brown skin complexion is given roles that depict low and middle-class families. Beautiful actresses and actresses with white and fair skin tone are given roles of having a background with affluent and wealthy families. There has been shown in movies that actually people with black and brown belong to the low or non-educational backgrounds (Davis-Bundrage, Medvedev and Hall, 2021). These prejudices and bogus depictions have been diminishing the living morals and standards of society. Additionally, this has been widening discriminatory gaps among classes and societies in Bangladesh. Moreover, lots of Bangladeshi girls and women have to face lots of restrictions in their marriages because of black and brown skin complexions.

The Bangladeshi film industry and other South Asian film industries, Bollywood, especially Tollywood, have been inspired and influenced by Hollywood (that is, an American film industry). Hollywood has been too inclined toward colour discrimination, especially towards people with black complexion. Actors and actresses who believe in colourism have tried to demotivate actors and actresses with white skin complexions. Even in the mid-twenties century, many Hollywood producers and directors directed actors and actresses to utilize "blackface" for acting with the appearance of black people (Leary, 2018). "Blackface" is a makeup technique generally utilized by filmmakers, actors, and video making industries to make an appearance of one's skin colour black or whatever colour is required. Moreover, Hollywood filmmakers and producers have employed colourism as a discriminatory tool for showing prejudices against black people. Such as Black Americans and Africans have been colour discriminated against in lots of movies in Hollywood. Similarly, the Bangladeshi film industry has also been employing narrative, tools, and techniques employed by Hollywood due to the advancement and Hi-tech features of the American film industry (Rahman, 2020). Moreover, narrative, high dimension, quality, popularity, and the large audience of Hollywood and Bollywood movies direct Bangladeshi filmmakers to employ such tools and techniques to make high-class movies.

Notably, the prejudice against darker skin tones in Bengali media is not related to caste or class of people. It is generally observed that individuals with relatively fair skin have enhanced approval, acceptance, and opportunity to be part of Bengali media, especially advertisements and movies (Bhattacharya, 2017). This social problem has become even more significant in the context of modern Indian cinema that has a strong influence on the overall Bengali media, including movies, T.V. serials, commercials, etc. As compared to the ratio of light-skinned and dark-skinned people in the country, Bengali media demonstrates a significantly high ratio of light-skinned and dark-skinned celebrities. It implies that only a few celebrities in Bengali media and movies can be seen having darker skins. A notable aspect of Bengali movies is that actors having dark skin tones usually get negative roles or have to portray as villains or weak characters that cannot be accepted morally or psychologically by the audience as their role models. As the influence of media, especially the mainstream movies, on people is immense and considerably alters their choices, the excessive priority is given to light-skinned individuals over the "others" has proved to be harmful to Bengali culture on the whole (Yeung, 2018).

Skin colour discrimination in the Bengali film industry can be understood further by considering the demand for specific getups to play different types of roles. For instance, Nandita Das, a famous



Bengali actress, stated that dark-skin tones are acceptable in the industry to portray characters such as those rural women, slum dwellers, etc. However, it is essentially not acceptable for a dark-skinned individual to attempt to play the role of an educated and affluent woman (Sheth, Jones and Spencer, 2021). The filmmakers immediately ask for lightening the skin tone. In this respect, it is noteworthy that defining oneself only by the colour of one's skin is not a valuable act at all. Instead, media managers must understand the fact that there is a lot more to human beings than mere skin colour to explore to highlight the positives of life and relationships. Another celebrity, Sudip Bhattacharjee, has made an appreciable effort by making a short film on the issue of colour discrimination, named 'Kalo'. The film addresses a range of colour discrimination problems by depicting the story of a dark-skinned girl who has to bear physical tortures inflicted on her by her boyfriend. The female protagonist has to have all suffering only because his boyfriend's mind is contaminated by his friends' negative comments about the girl having dark skin. The film's climax is open-ended, which gives enough room for the viewers to interpret the ending from their perspectives.

Specific marketing campaigns need to be run by media activists to alter the perceptions of the media controllers and the general public. For instance, it is recommendable that campaigns aimed at promoting diversity in media should be run by the top celebrities of Bengali media (Sultana, 2019). They can insistently emphasize the need to accept actors with diverse backgrounds having multiple skin shades. It would be helpful to make the hard choice between light and dark skin as the stakeholders will be welcoming a range of skin shades to play their role models in movies, serials, and commercials. Skin colour cannot be viewed as a significant discriminating factor in any way as it is the bare minimum. It does not have sufficient attributes to be considered as a determining element alone behind a particular opportunity offered to the candidates. Awareness campaigns regarding discouraging colour prejudices in media can also help mitigate the adverse effects of social discrimination on the minds of the affected persons, whether they are the individuals who have failed to struggle to become actors or models or they comprise the more significant number of individuals from the general public who have developed severe complexes about their personality.

## ● **Colourism and Bangladesh Beauty Brands**

It is primarily the Bengali media nowadays that is playing a pivotal role in governing beauty ideals. The media culture fosters positive attitudes toward lighter-skinned models and actresses and creates discrimination towards those with dark skin. It is vivid in the selection of models and actresses who are most gifted with lighter skin tones. "Fairness" products are strongly marketed by choosing light-skinned celebrities (including actors working in T.V. or movie industries) over dark-skinned celebrities. The prejudice against dark-skinned individuals is up to the extent that only white-skinned models and actresses get the opportunity to show up in the advertisements created for even the traditional Bengali products, including traditional clothing, Saris, and antique jewellery (Saha, Choudhury and Chatterjee, 2020). The craze for fair skin in Bengali culture can be estimated by the increasing growth of the market of fairness products by at least twenty to twenty-five per cent on a yearly basis. The adverse social impact of using fair-skinned images in media obsessively on society is that the general population develop their ideals accordingly and begins making every effort to become as "beautiful" as their role models by following the communication message(s) conveyed through advertisements or movies.

Businesses and beauty brands seem to favour actors and actresses having light skin tone; whether it is in paper or electronic form, they are perhaps the "most efficient means" to communicate an ethical statement to a broader audience. Contemplate a significant era of the most famous beauty products company that was ever launched in "Bangladesh" (Islam, 2019). Ironically, the advertising promoted racist views, yet few individuals spoke out against it. These advertisements are considered offensive since they transmitted messages such as having a yellow or white skin colour would assist you during employment or at the workplace, it would give you the confidence to interact with people at your

workplace and society because you possess a white skin tone (Islam, 2019). Consumers were therefore happy to admit such harmful notions because of societal context. Individuals nowadays are standing up for their rights, which has helped reduce the usage of advertising catchphrases.



Fig 2. Visual Representations of Colorism in Bangladeshi Media Culture: A conceptual illustration highlighting media preference for fair skin in films and advertisements, the promotion of fairness products, and the broader implications of color-based bias on societal beauty standards.

The leading products in the fairness products industry include Fair & Lovely creams and lotions, having a market share of more than seventy-eight per cent and Fair ever cream developed by “Cavin Kare” with a market share of eighteen per cent. Another parameter to know the value of lighter skin in target customers' markets is to assess the relative use of fair products by men and women in Bangladesh, ranging from twenty-to twenty-five per cent in men and from more than ninety-five per cent in women. It is also an evident fact that not only does the fairness products market promotes light skin, but more than ninety per cent of the advertisement industry is responsible for preferring light skin to dark skin (Yeung, 2018). In other words, it can be said that Bengali media portrays light skin as an inevitable parameter of beauty. It is the reason that famous “light-skinned” Bengali movie industry actors are frequently seen involved in the promotion of various beauty and fairness products such as Olay cream, Nivea day care fairness cream, L’Oréal White Perfect, Natural Glow Fairness Cream, and Ponds White Beauty.

There are lots of beauty brands that offer beauty products and creams that sell their products in public places, tourist shops, and grocery markets. These beauty brands are selling their products at higher and cheap prices. The people of Bangladesh are highly influenced by these beauty brands and their products (Mim and Tabassum, 2021). Excessive usage of these beauty products is not for the skin because these products have the capacity to create disease and deter your natural skin. Unfortunately, in the media, these same products are advertised in a very glamorous way by employing actors or actresses with fair and white complexion. This triggers people to purchase and use this product regardless of deter consequences and disadvantages.

It is indeed essential to understand that the people of Bangladesh possess an uncertain and unexpected attitude regarding fair and white skin tones. People of Bangladesh possess perceptual preference toward those people who have white and fair skin complexion. In a Bangladeshi culture and

society, interpersonal and colour discrimination is an embarrassment and a contentious issue (Jensen, 2020). Whereas lots of Bangladeshi people prefer not to talk about it, particularly inside the corporate world, lots of Bangladeshi people argue that "colourism" and dark skin prejudice no longer matters in a Bangladeshi society (Mim and Tabassum, 2021). However, beneath the facade of brown sympathy mistruths a cluster of perceptions concerning "skin tone" and characteristics, wherein relationships are defined by shades rather than persona; employment prospects are influenced by "skin tone" rather than knowledge and experience, and channelling for T.V. and movies is determined by "skin tone" rather than star power.

## Conclusion

Different forms of racism among individuals, entities, and even nations, such as sex segregation, colour discrimination, and patriotism, are becoming more prominent concerns in the modern world as the globe moves toward modernity and globalization. Colourism has been a tremendous challenge for many countries worldwide, and unfortunately, Bangladesh is among them. The media sector is one of the critical factors of colour discrimination in contemporary Bangladeshi culture. In the Bangladeshi film industry, Dhallywood is one of the main offenders of colour prejudice in Bangladeshi society. In Dhallywood films, the villains are typically from a lower social class with dark skin, whereas the heroics and partners are from a higher social class and have light skin. Individuals of white or fair hue are often employed and given considerable prominence in Dhallywood, whereas individuals of black complexion are typically neglected. Female actors confront additional hurdles since ideal actresses must have a white complexion and the slimmest and fittest bodies.

Moreover, Color prejudice is utilized by the Bangladeshi cosmetics and pharmaceutical industry, which benefit from it while also fostering "colourism." Furthermore, several Television advertisements have promoted discriminatory practices in Bangladeshi communities, such as skin lightening products and medicines, which are widely offered in Television advertising, advertisements, social media networks, and magazines. This perception and colour discrimination must have to be diminished and removed from the Bangladeshi film industry, Bangladeshi businesses, and Bangladeshi societies so that in a fury people of Bangladesh would not have to suffer more from colour discrimination and prejudice at their workplace, homes, and in their societies.

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