

**Ab Gora Hoga Pakistan (now Pakistan will be white): A Study into the Phenomenon of Skin Lightening in Pakistan**

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**Introduction**

As a nation that arose from a partition in 1947, Pakistan is a relatively new country that is still in the process of establishing its identity. Like numerous other postcolonial nations it is often presumed that the effect of the British Raj still has a huge influence over modern day Pakistan. However, this essay will take a different angle to that of the common perception and look into how racism and discrimination regarding skin colour arise from areas of the nation itself, rather than a result of external factors. The primary focus will be on the practise of skin lightening and how this is promoted within the social fabric of the nation through various different ways. Whilst doing so the analysis will consider whether discrimination and racism in terms of skin colour is embedded in Pakistani culture and if as a nation it is inherently racist towards each other.

The practise of skin whitening is of course not an issue limited to Pakistan only; however, what is problematic concerning the case study of Pakistan is the lack of research and campaigns on the topic. Whilst many governments have released policies and regulations regarding the manufacturing of skin lightening products and the messages its advertisements give, Pakistan has not done so despite its large usage and demand for skin lightening products. Thus, it can be implied that Pakistan has either chose not to identify the issues regarding skin lightening practises or does not see it as a problem but simply a normal aspect of its society .

The first section of the essay will be dedicated to the exploration of cultural perceptions regarding skin colour, as essentially it is through this rhetoric and discourse that the need for fairer skin stems from. The section will look into the connotations skin colours hold, complexion in regards to marriage, its effects on success in professional settings and the relationship between skin colour and caste. The middle two sections will look at skin lightening in terms of media and advertisements, investigating how fairness is seen and sold as a necessity, opposed to simply a product of aesthetic value. The final section will take a more scientific approach into skin lightening practises by looking at the implications and health risks of the chemicals used in such products and practises. Due to a gap in academic study regarding skin lightening in Pakistan research has been used from other scenarios and been applied to this study in order to explore the topics discussed.

**Cultural Views and Ideas Associated with Skin Tone**

There are few aspects of Pakistani society which dismiss the idea of fair skin as that which brings with it success and acceptance, instead this notion is passed on from generation to generation. Skin lightening is considered to be more than just an aspect of aesthetics, in it is a rooted age old notions of fairer skin as the acceptable norm that is still hugely relevant in twenty first century Pakistan. The semantics of skin colour in a South Asian concept carries with it ideas of cultural perceptions, behavioural qualities, moral values, alongside notions of

ideal womanhood (Philips, 2004). From a long-established British perspective the 'English rose' is often viewed to represent the epitome of femininity and traditionally the colour white itself represents an emblem for purity. This idea is signified in Pakistani culture today where fairness is seen to be associated with perfection, virtue and chastity, however, this is problematic in a nation where many people do not fit into the spectrum of fair skin. Within ancient societies "fairness of skin was considered as a yardstick for purity and innocence" (Shankar and Subish, 2007). This idea still continues today in the mindset of Pakistan today as females with fair complexions are seen as superior to those who have a dark complexion. One source claims that "the entire social fabric of Pakistani society seems to be woven around a woman's chastity" (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1988) and in this society nothing screams purity more than fairness.

A fair complexion is viewed as a necessary factor in the marriage market and "women are constantly told across Asia that if they get darker no man will want to marry them" (Hundal, 2010). This message is continually reiterated through the media and through casual discourse in everyday life; those who do not have a fair complexion are advised to seek treatment in order to 'cure' themselves. Furthermore, matrimonial adverts in Indian newspapers reveal a demand for women with fair skin (Almeida, 2005, p.384), and Pakistan is no different as those whom do not adhere to the fare skin palette are believed to be at a disadvantage in the marriage market. In a culture where "marriage is a central aspect of societal functioning" (Vaid, 2009) the problematic beliefs regarding dark complexions become a strong anxiety for young females who believe their skin colour will hinder their chances of marriage. A young Pakistani woman told one news reporter that "a woman's marital prospects are not really good enough if she's not fair and that is why I get whitening treatments in salons" (BBC, 2014). First-hand accounts such as this prove how influential ideas regarding skin tone are, resulting in people to take active steps in order to reach the high expectations of a society which places fairness at the height of both beauty and success.

Campaigner, Rabia Hadi, summarises how "in Pakistan women are conditioned to believe that they will be more accepted in society if they are fair" and unfortunately this is a real scenario for many of the country's women whom from a young age are socialised into believing that fair skin brings with it many advantages that are not available to those with darker skin. A study carried out on a South Asian matrimonial site found that females who had 'very fair' and 'fair' skin easily found matches, whereas dark skinned women were "falling through the matrimonial cracks" and surprisingly "there was not one case of a dark-skinned man marrying a 'very dark'- skinned woman" (Jha and Adelman, 2009, p.76). Thus the discrimination of skin colour falls pre-eminently on women, with those of a dark complexion not being included in the success stories of the site. Double standards regarding gender and skin complexion which could be seen in the findings of this study are ones that mirror Pakistani perceptions on skin colour in everyday life. Although men may also feel the need the to have fairer skin, ultimately the social pressure of this is placed heavily on women.

Within *Shades of Difference*, Glenn outlines that many "women recognize the reality that light skin constitutes valuable symbolic capital in the marriage market" (2008, p.189). Symbolic capital refers to the assets available to an individual on the foundations of respect and prestige. For Bourdieu (1991) symbolic capital includes the owning of a good reputation, thus is similar to that of status (Giddens and Griffiths, p.322). This status in the form of a fair complexion perpetuates the gendered idea of a woman's worth lying in her appearance and it is considered that the best compliments that can be paid to females "is the recognition of their whiteness" (Jafar and Masi de Casanova, 2013, p.119).

A change in gender roles and the emergence of women in professional settings has changed the focus of skin fairness and the shift has moved from fair skin as a necessity for

marriage proposals to now being associated with accomplishment in the workplace. A fair complexion thus becomes “a necessary prerequisite for success in both the professional and the personal sphere” (Shankar and Subhish, 2007). Many advertisements for skin lightening products now display this image, with narratives portraying professional women whose light complexions bring with them success in academia and the workplace. Thus the media and advertising industry are constantly conversant with changing cultural views and capitalise on these.

Cultural views regarding fair skin are not merely limited to the marriage, success and aesthetics, but also carry with them notions of class status. Within Pakistan, fair skin is considered to be an indicator of both “aristocratic lineage and class allegiance” (Shankar and Subhish, 2007). Those belonging to a lower caste are associated with conducting manual labour and field work in scorching heat, thus perceived to have a darker complexion opposed to the wealthy that are viewed to lead a life of leisure and comfort. Gazdar argues that caste based marginalisation is both prominent and common in Pakistan, however society chooses to silence any discussion or debate around it (2007). Although many Pakistani's views have shifted regarding the importance of caste, there are still some who continue to carry age old views regarding caste systems and this allows caste based discrimination to still be common amongst many Pakistani citizens. These caste based perceptions interlink with discrimination around skin colour and together the two form to create a strong sense of prejudice based on both aesthetics and caste.

### **Fair Skin in the Media**

Within contemporary British women's magazines it is common to view images of thin white models, who are seen to portray the epitome of womanliness, in order to sell products and represent the feminine ideal (Redmond, 2003). Interestingly enough this concept is also popular within the Pakistani media who use fair skinned models and popular figures on the covers of magazines, billboards and commercials. Almost every cover page found on the official Facebook page of Pakistani women's magazine *SHE* had used the figure of women who had fair complexions (see appendix 1). Within the magazine there were images of darker complexioned models, however, they rarely made it to the magazine covers, thus supporting “the notion that ‘whiteness’ is the object of desire” (Goon and Craven, 2003) and essentially this is what sells and what the public are accustomed to seeing.

Drama serials are another popular mode within contemporary Pakistan. They are seen as family affairs, usually watched together in the evenings and discussed amongst the public due to their wide viewership. These serials have become a vital component in Pakistani culture but what is problematic about them is that although they challenge issues such as traditional gender roles and age old cultural views regarding certain topics, they choose to place the issue of fair skin as superior to its counterparts to one side. Instead of using their influence for a social purpose and eradicating the myths and stereotypes of skin colour the drama industry further reinforces these views by casting actors who are fairer than the average population of Pakistan. These dramas are meant to be reflective of Pakistani lifestyles and the characters portrayed are envisioned to represent the everyday Pakistani, yet instead they represent the vision of a fair complexioned society with only the minor and villainous characters being those with darker skin.

From a group of eleven popular Pakistani dramas (Nisar, 2015) not one contained a protagonist who was of the complexion of most of Pakistan's population. In western culture, the media and television is associated to play a huge role in the concept of our own self-image and Pakistan's media is no different, portraying fair skin as the epitome of beauty. Thus programmes which are meant to represent the Pakistani culture portray an image which is not of the general population, but instead of an ideal that society envisions.

This issue is not individual to only Pakistan, but neighbouring India also has an entire media industry which reflects this image of fairness as the norm. Similarly to that of Pakistan, India also has an obsession with fair skin and the majority of well renowned actors and actresses chosen for movies have fair complexions and Caucasian features (Beeman and Narayan, 2011). However, the size and well established nature of the Bollywood industry allows it to propagate an ideology of fair skin being the norm and a sign of superiority at a much larger scale, opposed to that of Pakistan which has an industry that is less renowned with a smaller audience. Bollywood's huge influence and mass viewership in Pakistan means the Pakistani audience is accustomed to images of fair skinned actresses, models, singers and other popular television personalities and reproduce these ideals within their own industry.

The racial notion of darker skin as inferior does not merely stop at movies and dramas but is continued within other aspects of the media. *Gora rang* (fair skin) are commonly used words in Pakistani music videos, with pop songs claiming '*goray rang ka zamana kabhi hoga na purana*' (the age of fair skin will never get old). The blatant messages given through these discourses further perpetuate an already existent cultural view that a woman's worth is defined by her beauty, which of course in this context is bound with having a fair complexion.

Within India Women of Worth (WOW), a non-governmental organisation, have challenged the portrayal of fair skin as the primary indicator of beauty and self worth by promoting the 'Dark is Beautiful' awareness campaign, a movement which aims to celebrate the diversity of skin colour and draw attention to the unfair effects of biases around skin colour within its society (2014). Although there is great progress to be made before discrimination around skin tone is completely eradicated, the campaign has seen great popularity and media attention thus caused people to question the prejudices around skin tone. It is required that campaigns such as this are also made in Pakistan as a way of attempting to overcome the biases that come with skin tone and the messages the media gives regarding these.

### **Skin Whitening and the Advertising Industry**

Although Pakistan's media, regardless of its public influence, has not seen huge revenues, its advertising industry has seen rapid growth over the past decade and this is expected to continue at a significant pace over the coming years (Alam, 2012). Thus, lightening products which are advertised during commercial breaks on television, viewed in almost every fashion and beauty magazine, and plastered on billboards in the cities all have a large influence on their target audience. The public are sold products which do not merely have a cosmetic purpose but promise to bring with them success: this success coming in the form of self-confidence, career prospects, societal acceptance and potential suitors, and thus "the Pakistani commercial is a microcosm of dreams, desires and escapism" (Mirza, 2012). Furthermore, whitening lotions and creams which ensure to fade skin colour are not merely products which are desired but are depicted as a necessity, propagated by cultural views and promoted through clever advertising strategies.

Jyotsna Vaid (2009) states that "the ideology that fair is beautiful continues to exert a pernicious effect on the self-esteem of women who have been repeatedly reminded that if they are not the former, they cannot be the latter" (Vaid, 2009, p. 165) and this mind set is further promoted by the Pakistani advertising industry. Advertisements for skin lightening creams do not just sell a product, they sell an ideal. The ideal being that fair skin brings along with it a sense of accomplishment, and essentially, this is what sells as the companies merely mirror the myths and mind sets of Pakistani society within their advertisements. Mirza (2012) outlines how "to look at a commercial in Pakistan, is to look at a mini-movie, with inventive narratives, exquisite costumes and scenery, high production values and, finally, a roster of film stars and musicians". This glamorized form of advertising is both alluring and effective with a storyline that comes with each product on the market. Many of these skin lightening adverts have a similar narrative of saddened young females whom upon

beginning to use fairness products gain confidence and happiness. One such example of this is the commercial for Zubaida Aapa Whitening Soap (2014) with the catchphrase '*ab gora hogा Pakistan*' (now Pakistani will be white). The narrative begins with numerous dejected young girls looking disappointedly into mirrors, with the entire setting in a melancholy state, it is then that prominent Pakistani chef Zubaida Tariq, a popular household name, appears affectionately touching one of the girls faces claiming "*bachay tho khush hi achay lagthay hai*" (children only look good when happy) and introduces her whitening soap to the saddened onlookers. The advert ends with the same females looking happier, and fairer, cheering on Zubaida Aapa as she walks past signing autographs and concludes with the group statement '*ab gora hogा Pakistan*'. The adverts ending with a sense of achievement portrays how, in this society, a fair complexion is the primary goal of females and is now attainable through a soap which brings promises of fair skin. Another advert for a whitening skin lotion (2015) propagates "gender biased stereotypes of women in society" (Gupta, 2005, p.110) by displaying a female whom upon using a whitening product gains the approval of her husband, and thus fulfilling simplistic gender stereotypes of women as merely objects of desire for men, and indeed a fair complexion is depicted as the ultimate form of desirability in this context (Shankar et al., 2006).

Furthermore, an advert for a skin whitening goat milk soap (2011) claims to remove darkness and bring forth fairness, implying that everybody is white inside and ends with the notion that this product has the ability to bring out your inner beauty, which in this case is a fair complexion. It is implied here that inner beauty can only be displayed by fair skin and follows age old notions of the idea that dark complexions are somewhat 'dirty' and should be washed away. It follows the traditional generic, yet simplistic, idea of white as good and dark as bad. These ideas were commonly held during the period of the British Raj, where the fair skinned colonizer was viewed as both virtuous and civilised opposed to the natives; the late nineteenth century poetry of Rudyard Kipling enforces this notion who when depicting an Indian water carrier claims "an for all 'is dirty 'ide 'e was white, clear white, inside" (2004, p.648). Such perceptions may have been common during the colonial rule of India, and acceptable in poetry in 1892, however to see these ideas still being circulated in modern day Pakistan would imply that these notions continue to exist within the countries psyche and are the results of long implanted attitudes rather than the after effects of colonial rule.

Images and ideas portrayed through advertisements are problematic as they perpetuate a form of racism, yet the wider public are oblivious to this, as the concept of fair is beautiful has become so widespread that it is considered a norm in Pakistani society to use fairness creams on a regular basis. However, the adverts simply continue with ideas that already exist in Pakistani society as culture is a vital aspect in the messages given by skin whitening advertisements (Saeed et al, 2014, p.5638). Many claim that manufacturers and advertisers have exploited the underlying anxiety for fair skin and portrayed their products to give a fair complexion which is a "necessary prerequisite for success" (Shankar et al., 2006). However, although the industry does portray images that are offensive, it would be naive to place the entire blame upon advertisements as prior to the use of skin lightening creams, many people created homemade combinations using household products such as turmeric powder in order to attain a fair complexion. Thus, the advertising industry simply caters to the needs of a market and the images that it portrays are ones that already exist within the social fabric of Pakistan.

### **The Science of Skin Lightening: Chemicals in Fairness Products**

In order to understand the damages caused to health by skin lightening treatments, we must firstly be aware of the chemicals used in such products. However, to know of the exact products is not always possible as the licensing of skin fairness produce is not always rigid as highlighted by Dr Ayan Panja (2013) during a news segment discussing skin whitening in Asia.

However, having considered this, some of the chemicals that are known to be used within skin lightening products bring with them long lasting damage to skin alongside other health implications. Hydroquinone, an organic compound used in many skin lightening products has been found to cause dermatitis and thus been made illegal in Europe, the United States and Japan (Emsley, 2004, p.87). The chemical lightens the skin by “compromising the body's manufacture of melanin”, however, many scientists believe “the chemical is a carcinogen or cancer agent” (Hall, 2010, p.160). This chemical still circulates in the products used in South Asia as no effort has been made to stop the licensing of it in many countries, regardless of its endangering effects. Furthermore, according to the World Health Organisation (2011) skin lightening products commonly contain mercury, a toxic element which is rapidly absorbed through the skin and often leads to mercury poisoning. This chemical is seen as a vital element in skin lightening products as “mercury salts inhibit the formation of melanin, resulting in a lighter skin tone” (World Health Organisation, 2011). However, this does not come without its implications as mercury is a proven toxic chemical element with the main adverse effects of its use within skin lightening products being that of kidney damage, skin cancer, and skin discolouration alongside other medical problems (Anekwe, 2014). Skin whitening products promote regular use, usually on a daily basis, however it has been found that continued use of these products containing mercury damages the connective tissues by thickening collagen fibres, which thus results in altered appearance of the skin (Shome, 2012). As a result of its endangering effects, the World Health Organisation has banned the distribution of soaps and creams containing mercury in the European Union and many African nations, yet its use is still widespread in many parts of South Asia (2011).

Skin lightening products do not stop at creams and lotions, but are also produced in the form of injections and tablets. Glutathione skin whitening injections are available in most cosmetic surgeries in Pakistan and come with the promise of fairer skin and blemish removal (Skin Life Clinic, 2013). Cosmetic surgeries advertising these treatments make use of persuasive rhetoric in order to sell their services. One practise claims their procedures make “dreams come true” and that upon taking treatment, patients will no longer have to feel embarrassed due to their dark skin; these negative messages play on the notion of dark complexions as something which one ought to be ashamed of and needs to be overcome in order to reach a state of acceptable beauty (Royal Cosmetic Surgery, 2014).

As a result of constant negative depiction regarding dark complexions, the need for fairer skin overpowers the damages certain treatments bring. Skin whitening products cannot be effective without containing skin bleaching chemicals such as mercury salts, steroids and hydroquinone alongside other harmful substances (Islam et al, 2006). Glutathione injections do not come without side effects and patients can suffer from, bruising, infections, scarring and bleeding alongside other health risks. Furthermore, there is little evidence to prove the efficiency of these injections and there is little established knowledge on their overall effect (Gavura, 2015).

Furthermore, irrespective of the numerous products and procedures on the market, the industry does fail to deliver its promise of fairness. It is important to note that glutathione “injections only suppress melatonin production” and when treatments are stopped “the skin will eventually revert back to its normal tone” (Sibtain, 2012), hence they do not provide the long term results that the advertisements and manufacturers suggest. Furthermore, many over the counter products are sold at low prices, indicating that they may be of low quality and ineffective. Within one study, most participants discovered that the creams, lotions and soaps did not perform as advertisers suggested in commercials. As a result whitening products do not always live up to the claims made by manufacturers and consumers are often left disappointed due to the false advertising and ineffective nature of the products (Kamran, 2010). Nevertheless, what is interesting in this case is that although consumers are dissatisfied by some of the products they still continue to use them, or buy others, in the hope for fairer skin. Consumers cause long term damage to their skin and health by using

products containing dangerous chemicals which are ultimately ineffective in their purpose. However, the continuous use of skin lightening products means either way the industry profits from the anxieties and low self-esteem of those who aspire to an ideal of fair skin.

The desire for fair skin leads many Pakistanis to use toxic chemicals without a second thought. Health experts from the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences found that the pressing need for fair skin has caused women to suffer from burns, as a result of noxious acid peels and also caused them to suffer from many life-threatening side effects due to the use of steroid creams (Zakaria, 2012). However, regardless of their damaging effects to health, the popularity of these skin lightening products is ever growing; the need for fairer skin has thus overpowered any health implications that may arise as a result of using chemicals that have endangering elements.

### **Conclusion**

This essay displays that racism does not always come in the form of violence or abuse, and instead, can be a mentality ingrained into the mind-set of a nation, which proves to be an equally powerful tool in discrimination and perpetuating racist views. Within Pakistan the notions held around dark skin as inferior are ever prevalent and propagate a form of racism which is different to that which is generically seen, as this racism is directed towards each other. Racism in the case of Pakistan adapts concepts of aesthetics and notions of race to interlink and uses these both to cause further prejudices. However, this does not end here as prejudice around skin colour is interwoven with matters of identity and constant negative portrayals of dark skin result in low self-confidence and self-worth for many of those who do not reach this ideal. Thus racism in this setting works by undermining groups of people and individuals due to their skin tone, to such an extent that the victims themselves begin to hold these ideas, resulting in a race based identity crisis where one feels as though they do not belong within their own skin and views their complexion as limiting them from certain advantages.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how or when these racist ideologies of fair skin as superior stemmed from, however it has continued for generations resulting in racist views that are generally left unquestioned by the society they are circulated in. Many authors suggest that these views are a result of colonial rule and white supremacy; to place the blame entirely on this would be naïve as although Pakistan's colonial influence cannot be ignored, it also cannot hold the entire blame for the ideologies that the nation still holds today.

In conclusion, it would appear that racism is, to a certain extent, rooted deep in Pakistani culture. In order to overcome processes of racialization that are constantly active within the fabric of this society it is vital that more research, studies and academic thought go into this area. Policies and regulations should be made regarding the distribution of skin whitening products and procedures that are commonly used and carried out, as well as educating people of the implications that they carry. The mass media should challenge these age old racist notions rather than propagate them and most importantly ones complexion should not be something which causes them anxiety or to have low self-esteem. Views should begin to change so that people do not consider their skin colour as something to be ashamed of or altered, but instead acknowledge that this forms their identity and sense of self so should be embraced and accepted. It is only when all this is considered that Pakistan can overcome its obsession with fair skin and be able to eradicate the racism it generates.

## Appendix 1

(Cover pages of SHE magazines, the earliest found from an October 2010 edition and the most recent from the May 2015 edition)

Images were taken from the official Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/pages/SHE-Magazine-Official/181956858487477?sk=timeline&ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pages/SHE-Magazine-Official/181956858487477?sk=timeline&ref=page_internal)



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