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**SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH IN CANADA: YOUNG WOMEN NEGOTIATING MAINSTREAM  
REPRESENTATIONS OF COLOUR**

by

Nimrit Saini, BA, University of Victoria, 2007

A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University

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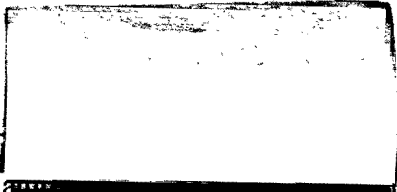
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# **SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH IN CANADA: YOUNG WOMEN NEGOTIATING MAINSTREAM REPRESENTATIONS OF COLOUR**

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**Master of Arts, 2011**

**Immigration and Settlement Studies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

South Asian women in Canada negotiate mainstream representations of skin colour, in a context where light skin is systemically privileged through marketing “whiteness” as a desirable and attainable ideal for beauty and success. A semiotic analysis of two web spaces targeted at young, South Asian woman in the West will be undertaken, to reveal the constructions of colour which favour dominant ideology. However, it can also be seen that such spaces serve as a means to challenge hegemonic constructions and provide a platform for South Asian visibility in the mainstream. In considering colourism within the South Asian context, it is imperative to reflect on systemic power imbalances and colonial history, which have shaped the experiences of South Asian communities.

**Key words: South Asian; Gender; Colourism; Youth; Semiotic Analysis; Media Representations**

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“Look how dark you've become, playing in the sun!” – Mr. Bhamra to daughter Jess,*

*Bend It Like Beckham, Film (2002)*

Mainstream representations of South Asian feminine physique throughout the globe, have long been characterized by skin tone, branding the standard of success, happiness, beauty and sexual attractiveness by light skin. South Asian youth in Canada continue to negotiate multiple facets of identity, whilst consuming mainstream representations of the dominant group, other communities of colour and South Asians that consistently privilege lighter shades of skin tone. By examining the relationship between media representations and the continued discourse of colourism amongst South Asians, one can begin to discern racist ideologies that persist within hegemonic understandings of colour and “race”.

The underlying messages, images, texts and ideologies embedded within the colourist discourse can be examined to reveal the systemic racism that is manifested through intra-group fragmentation and skin tone hierarchies. Hunter (2011) speaks to the deeply entrenched messages regarding colour, stating “hegemonic representations of white skin are thoroughly rooted in multiple social institutions including education, religion, mass media, and popular culture” (3). It is important to consider the normalized and dominant representations of colour consumed by youth that provide information about the identity of self and others. The meanings assigned to skin tone creates differential understandings of what it means to be a light-skinned versus dark skinned South Asian, which will be further considered in the research project. These racist constructions may implicate the identity of forthcoming generations in a way that will



foster systemic, generational oppressions. However, while challenging normative understandings of colour, it is also imperative to recognize the spaces of resistance, and the potential role of media in serving as an agent to challenge dominant constructions.

Seminal to the research project will be Desai & Subramanian's (2000) work on the experiences of South Asian youth within Canada, and their identity negotiation process. Desai & Subramanian's conception of an integrated anti-racism framework will be employed to further the understanding of the manifestation of colourism within South Asian communities. The authors argue that the experiences of South Asian youth in Canada "must be contextualized within the realities of their everyday experiences in Canada where cultural imperialism and White supremacy are exercised through Eurocentric institutions that reinforce a racialized society" (Desai & Subramanian's, 2000, 21). This framework will be expanded, with further reflections on the institution of media as a tool to propagate and maintain said institutions.

### ***Research Project***

This research project will aim to examine the messages regarding colour within mainstream web spaces negotiated by young South Asian women in Canada. Firstly, a literature review on key focus areas will be conducted. Secondly, to address the research questions, the literature review will be followed by a semiotic analysis of representations and underlying messages in two web spaces targeted at South Asian females aged 16-30. Henry & Tator (2009) define "mainstream" as the "political, social, educational, cultural and economic institutions through which power is maintained" (409), a definition that will be used as a foundation of the analysis.

South Asian youth in Canada occupy a unique social space, in which notions of what it means to be “Canadian” or “South Asian” can be challenged due to hybrid and multifaceted identities. Handa (2003) states that “...their presence points to ruptures and contradictions between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’...they often unsettle and resist certain mainstream definitions” (5). As the future of South Asian communities in Canada, this group offers a space in which to reconceptualise notions of colour within the South Asian community and the community at large. Hence, the research project is highly relevant in addressing both the short-term and long-term ramifications of a pertinent issue, as South Asians continue to establish deeper histories in Canada, through existing generations and newcomers that settle throughout the nation.

Web spaces offer a platform from which to tie together the linkages of transnational media consumed by South Asian youth. McGinnis *et. al.* (2007) found that “transnational youth, youth who hold affinity ties and/or affiliations to two or more countries, are increasingly engaged in online culture that not only transcends geographic distances and boundaries, but has also become an integral part of their identities and social realities” (284). Online spaces targeted at South Asian youth living in the global North, are able to cater to the hybrid identities, which are viewed as neither “too Western” nor “too Eastern”.

Notley & Tacchi (2005) have said of youth-centred web spaces that:

The technologies themselves are seen to hold the potential to encourage community building, empowerment, unregulated and egalitarian levels of media access allowing everyone to have a voice, to be enabled to communicate with others and form connections not reliant on physical proximity or mobility. (75)

For example, in interviews conducted by Durham (2004) with South Asian immigrant girls, the study revealed that youth bridge the physical gap between transnational communities, through

using media tools such as internet, film, and television to engage with various South Asian popular culture (i.e. watching Bollywood movies). This consumption offered a way in which to maintain ethnic ties, while concurrently negotiating mainstream culture.

Further corroborating the finding of the use of technologies, particularly web spaces, as socializing agents, Subramanian (2010) found that “young immigrants are using media and technology to engage in popular culture production and consumption, finding community, and engaging in identity exploration” (19). Furthermore, Subramanian (2010) indicates that various forms of online participation (chat rooms, web pages, zines, social networking sites etc.) were well-utilized to connect with one’s ethnic / cultural / religious communities, as “youth consider the Internet a space where they can learn about what it means to be a person of color and a member of a minority population” (21). Given this finding, I will aim to determine *what* representations youth are presented with regarding the colour of oneself and others, and the meanings assigned to skin tones.

Henceforth, web spaces targeted at South Asian youth will be examined as a slice of media consumed, as they provide a unique duality of incorporating multiple sets of values and cultural standards, rather than the either / or mentality of purely Western media or purely ethnic media outlets. This hybrid space provides a platform from which to consider both the production and consumption of representations of colour. As both spaces create their own content (i.e. selection of models, editorials etc.), the magazines are producing an image for an assumed target audience that reflects, what is understood to be “mainstream” norms, desires and conceptions of young South Asian womanhood.

In understanding the role of web spaces, one can begin to question - who and what is constructed as ideals of South Asian beauty and success? What messages are conveyed through

these web spaces regarding skin colour? How is the “desire for whiteness” and desire for light skin marketed in what one reads and sees? In what ways can hegemonic texts / ideals be unsettled and negotiated? Through considering these questions, it is possible to challenge deeply embedded values of whiteness. Furthermore, one can establish and determine spaces for change, with alternative discourses to dominant understandings of colour.

### *Theoretical Considerations*

An anti-racist feminist theoretical framework will be utilized to orient the analysis and discussion of colourist discourses. Particularly, Henry & Tator’s (2009) conception of anti-racism will be applied, as the authors provide a framework applicable to Canadian media systems, racialization and dominant representations. Henry & Tator (2002) argue that race as a social construction functions through correlating physical characteristics (i.e. skin colour) to “intellectual, moral or cultural superiority” (7). The authors argue that “radio, television and the print media...these vehicles of cultural production help shape our sense of ethnicity, class, race and national identity...” (Henry & Tator, 2002, 5).

To further corroborate Henry & Tator’s argument, Desai & Subramanian (2000) provide a conception of an integrated anti-racism framework within the South Asian context. The authors state that:

An integrated anti-racism framework reveals whiteness as normative and exposes how this gets constructed to ensure white power and privilege as well as cultural supremacy. It, therefore, acknowledges the role of social institutions in producing and reproducing racial, gender, and class-based inequalities and marginalization of certain voices in society...” (Desai & Subramanian, 2000, 23).

This “integrated” approach is imperative in addressing the ways in which colourism is normalized and entrenched within dominant power systems.

To better recognize and deconstruct the underlying messages regarding skin tone, colourism as a form of racism, must be framed in reference to a larger ideology. Racist ideology places socially constructed groups into hierarchies based on perceived skin colour. Henry & Tator (2002) describe racist ideology as a philosophy that “organizes, preserves and perpetuates a society’s power structure. It creates and preserves a system of dominance based on race and it is communicated, and reproduced through agencies of socialization and cultural transmission”

\*(21). This can be further understood with reference to Stuart Hall’s (1981) work, which argues that media serves as a means to continuously produce and reproduce ideologies through the dominant lens. Hall (1981) provides a useful theory of culture, as he speaks to the concept of “inferential racism”, a mode of representation and narrative that is entrenched within media systems. This is influential in considering colourism, as colourist ideologies are perpetuated by media, benefiting institutions and systems in power. Additionally, Hall’s (1980) work on semiotics, which will be discussed in further detail within the semiotic analysis, will be used to develop the methodology of the research project.

Lastly, Carty (1999) offers a feminist framework from which to theorize the ‘othered’, racialized body. Carty provides an analysis of the interplay between gender and race, with consideration to colonial and imperial history. This is particularly relevant when considering colourism in the South Asian context, given colonial history in both Canada and throughout South Asia. Secondly, Carty (1999) critiques various feminist scholars, who often speak to the experiences of people of colour without including the perspectives and voices of diverse communities within communities of colour. This is important to consider, as dominant media systems are exclusionary to the voices of people of colour, which allows for the perpetuation of problematic representations of groups. This theoretical approach will be utilized to ground the

research project, as it addresses the way in which representations and discourses continue to be disseminated from the perspectives of dominant groups. Through utilizing these frameworks, one can critically analyze colourist mainstream representations, as consumed by South Asian youth in Canada.

### ***Framing 'Whiteness'***

To consider the “desire for whiteness”, it is imperative to position whiteness in the theoretical context in which it will be applied. “Whiteness” will be utilized to mark particular discussions within the discourse of colourism. Whiteness as a term, a theory and a system can be used in multiple ways. Firstly, it can be seen as the desire to be in proximity to characteristics which are afforded to those with white privilege. Light skin can be viewed as simply the vehicle that places one in a position closer to this privilege. However, it is not the only vehicle, as issues of class, education and other markers of social location are also pivotal in this desire. Secondly, one can speak of the desire to be a physically lighter skinned South Asian. This speaks strongly to the lasting affects of colonization throughout South Asia, continued globalization and Western influence, in addition to intra-cultural biases which privilege the lighter skinned woman (Thompson, 2001). Malik (2007) states of this that “white privilege has benefited the dominant populations at both a physical and psychological level...Examples of this include conceptions of beauty or intelligence that are both tied to whiteness or fair skin and also explicitly exclude brownness or blackness” (13).

Whiteness can be seen as a social construction – one that “provides material and symbolic privilege to whites and those who pass as whites...Whiteness functions as a marker of power and privilege” (Malik, 2007, 13). This is important to note, as whiteness does not

necessarily equate to “Caucasian” in the typical way in which race is categorized. Frankenburg (1993) provides a comprehensive definition that will be used to ground the research project, stating that:

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint’, a place from which white people look at [themselves], at others, and at society. Third, ‘whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1).

Through this definition one can see that whiteness goes beyond a superficial lens of colour, recognizing the specific privilege given to an individual in a particular social location. Desai & Subramanian (2000) further this understanding, stating that whiteness “is description, symbol, experience and ideology” that shapes the “social, cultural, educational, political and economic institutions of society” (29).

Lastly, my research project will make reference to “cosmopolitan whiteness”, as defined by Saraswati (2010), who identifies whiteness beyond racial or ethnic lines. She describes the globalized image of Western affluence and cosmopolitan lifestyle, which is marketed throughout the world as an ideal. This image is then “sold”, privileging those within the dominant group – this dominance does not necessitate a particular race. Cosmopolitanism is marketed in association with a particular set of values and characteristics deemed to be in proximity to whiteness. Hence, Caucasians is not the marker of “cosmopolitan whiteness”, but rather it is seen in association with perceived characteristics of whiteness. Saraswati (2010) states that:

To think about whiteness beyond a racial or ethnic category is not to argue that race and racialization are irrelevant in thinking about whiteness...rather I argue that whiteness is *also* affectively constructed as cosmopolitan and that race and racialization operate in concert with cosmopolitanism...transnational circulations of whiteness from the United States depend on the ways in which whiteness is capable of maintaining its currency globally” (23).

## ***Background***

Colourism is a term used to “describe the system that privileges the lighter skinner over the darker skinned within a community of colour” (Hunter, 2002, 176). Colourism is understood as a distinct process from racism, although its existence would not be possible without the systemic way in which whiteness is privileged (Hunter, 2002, 176). Hence, colourism operates as a process intimately embedded within racism itself. Hunter (2002) elaborates further on this concept, differentiating racism and colourism in its scope. Racism is said to operate “at the level of racial category”, whereas colourism “operates within the system of racism” (Hunter, 2002, 4) creating distinctions amongst individuals within a community of colour. It can be understood that colourism is therefore a particular manifestation of racism – not an entirely separate entity. Additionally, Hunter (2002) argues that recognizing the distinction between the concept of racism and colourism is important, as individuals within a particular community of colour, may have differential experiences of racism based on their skin tone.

Glenn (2008) conceptualizes skin colour in terms of its significance on a person, defining skin colour “as a form of symbolic capital that affects, if not determines, one’s life chances” (282). In terms of the South Asian context specifically, the largest consumers of skin lightening agents in the world, are South Asian women between the ages of 16 to 35 (Glenn, 2008, 287). Use of such products reveals the way in which desiring lightness has not only become commonplace, but is also deeply entrenched within a normalized consumer marketplace. Hence, conceptualizing skin colour as a form of “capital” that can be attained by a particular individual is important to the research questions, particularly in examining images within media.

The legacy of colonialism and imperial ideology has had a significant impact on the way colour is negotiated within South Asian communities. Hussein (2010) describes the discourse



throughout South Asia that has created a “colour divide”, whereby light skin is associated with prosperity, beauty, success and status, whereas dark skin is constructed as the binary opposite. The media has played an important role in the continued perpetuation of these constructions, through representing Western “beauty” as an attainable standard (i.e. marketing of skin lightening products). Hussein (2010) states that “this yearning for lighter skin can be seen as a legacy of colonial inter-group racism transformed into intra-group racism in postcolonial societies of colour...” (418). Malik (2007) corroborates this perspective, arguing that “colorism was largely imposed on people of color by white colonists, but has become internalized within communities as well” (14). Colourism has resulted in distinct social hierarchy, in which whiteness (ideologically and phenotypically) is represented as superior.

In understanding colourism, it is imperative to recognize the limitations and challenges of using the concept of “colourism” versus “racism” itself. The issue in using “colourism” is that the concept can become disconnected from the larger process of institutional and systemic privileging of dominant whiteness and the marginalization of communities of colour. Colourism in the mainstream can be distorted as an issue of a particular community, much the same as issues of forced marriages, domestic violence and criminality have become largely characterized as “South Asian” issues. Such oversimplification is not only racist in itself, but also, does not allow a community of colour to address the issue in a larger context, hence continuing to cement and perpetuate dominant ideology and constructions. Without examining the pre-colonial and post-colonial historical contexts, under which such hierarchies were established, hegemonic discourses cannot be challenged.

Colourism operates as a social process, as notions of colour and race are socially constructed meanings that are assigned through perpetuating specific discourses. In order to

maintain relevancy, systems of power actively engage in continuing to disseminate colourism through various means, including the media. The consumption of media by young people ensures that the colourist discourse will continue to be embedded in the ideologies of forthcoming generations. Hunter (1996) affirms this, stating:

...because skin color stratification is the manifestation of a racialized ideology, it is not self-sustaining and must be reinforced and recreated on a daily basis in order to continue. This is to say that ideologies and the systems created from them do not stand alone, but must be deliberately perpetuated to remain intact...(521).

In considering the nature of dissemination of these marginalizing discourses, one can begin to conceptualize alternatives to create spaces of resistance which counter the hegemonic understandings of race and colour.

## CHAPTER TWO: SOUTH ASIAN IDENTITY & COLOURISM

### *South Asian Identity in Canada*

In order to further consider the constructions of colour in media, it is critical to theorize and deconstruct the South Asian identity. The category “South Asian” is a concept used to amalgamate a diverse group of individuals based on perceived sameness by dominant ideology. As the South Asian diaspora has increased in numbers within Canada, the national census category of “South Asian” has been utilized in order to capture demographic information regarding this group. However, despite the merged identities of members within this group, the experiences, religious ideologies, languages spoken and cultural practices vary extensively among South Asians. The category “South Asian” encompasses a range of individuals identifying with Bangladeshi, Bengali, East Indian, Goan, Gujarati, Hindu, Ismaili, Muslim, Kashmiri, Nepali, Pakistani, Punjabi, Sikh, Sinhalese, Sri Lankan, Telugu, Kannadiga, Malayali and Tamil ancestry among others (Tran & Kaddatz, 2005, 21). To conceptualize the South Asian identity in the presence of such diversity, it is important to recognize that individuals within this category are not necessarily directly connected to a particular geographic region. Due to the patterns of global migration, individuals who are categorized as “South Asian” in the global North may have ancestry in Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, Europe etc. for generations.

Sundar (2008) suggests another conception of “South Asian” as asserted by second-generation youth, which associates the identity with a perceived skin colour. The author states that “...the terms ‘brown’ and ‘South Asian’ were often used interchangeably by youth to indicate a shared historical connection...[Brown-ness] is made significant when others orient to the colour of their skin” (Sundar, 2008, 259). This suggests that the gaze of the “other” not only

determines the category under which the group is amalgamated, but is also instrumental in racializing South Asian youth within the social construction of “brown-ness”. The term was preferred to the use of “South Asian”, as it was inclusive of various religious / ethnic / cultural backgrounds and referenced the “first thing people react to” (Sundar, 2008, 259), that being skin colour. Corroborating this finding, Desai & Subramanian (2000) conducted interviews with South Asian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. Respondents consistently used the term “brown”<sup>1</sup> to identity self and others, rather than “South Asian” or a specific ethno cultural identifier (i.e. Bengali).

“Brown-ness” may also foster a sense of unity among some South Asian youth amidst power imbalances. Desai & Subramanian (2000) found that youth from different South Asian communities would defend each other and provide support to one another in time of need, despite internal struggles amongst differing groups. The authors state of this finding that “diverse immigrant communities feel the need to join forces when threatened by the dominant group, even though under normal circumstances these groups see themselves as being culturally distinctive and not part of a ‘homogeneous’ South Asian community” (50).

Within Canada, South Asians represent 4% of the national population and 24.9% of “visible minority” groups in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). As defined by Statistics Canada, “visible minority” refers to persons “non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Statistics Canada, 2010) making South Asians the second largest visible minority group in Canada. Of this population, 70% of South Asians resided in either metropolitan Toronto or metropolitan Vancouver (Tran & Kaddatz, 2005, 23). Within the city of Toronto alone, there are nearly 50,000 South Asian youth between the ages of 15-24 (Desai & Subramanian, 2000, 39). It is important

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<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note that the term ‘brown’ is not exclusive to South Asian communities, as other communities of colour, may use “brown” colloquially to self-identify (i.e. Latin communities).

to acknowledge that different communities within the category of “South Asian” will navigate differing experiences and oppressions<sup>2</sup>. Due to the variety of linguistic, cultural, historical and geographic backgrounds with which members of the South Asian diaspora identify, they offer diverse perspectives challenging the homogenous “South Asian” identity itself.

### ***Historical Background in Canada***

The history of various South Asian ethnic collectives in Canada is important to consider, as dominant attitudes towards immigration have continued shaping the experiences of this group. With an immigration history that dates back into the early nineteenth hundreds, South Asians experienced government-sanctioned racism, such as the Continuous Journey Act of 1908. The act was implemented to curb South Asian immigration, by stating that no person could enter Canada if a “continuous journey” had not been made from India to Canada, an implausible feat for the time (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000, 150). The ramification of this act can be seen in the landmark case of the rejected boat of passengers from India via Shanghai, arriving to British Columbia in 1914 onboard the *Komagata Maru*. 376 passengers were sent back to India, after enduring two months aboard the ship without being permitted to disembark in Vancouver, sending a clear message that members of Asian communities were not welcome in the nation (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000, 150). Due to the circumstances created by colonization throughout South Asia, in conjunction with poverty, lack of economic opportunity, increasing urbanization

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Tamil-Torontonians experienced a specific form of discrimination during and after the 2009 protests in Toronto. Protesters demonstrated in regards to the civil unrest in Sri Lanka, resulting in the murder of Tamil people. One protest involving a human chain that blockaded the Gardiner Expressway, a high volume Toronto commuter highway, resulted in the creation of a particular public opinion and increasing media coverage that fostered negativity towards the community.

and food shortages, migration to other parts of the world was seen as a potential opportunity for a better life for individuals leaving South Asia (Handa, 2003, 46).

Hostility towards South Asian immigrants remained steady into the 1940's with Prime Minister Mackenzie King publicly stating that "the people of Canada do not wish, as a result of mass immigration, to make a fundamental alteration in the character of our population....any considerable Oriental immigration would give rise to social and economic problems" (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000, 312). King furthered this by stating that he wanted to "protect" Canadians, and not bring them "face to face at once with loss of that homogeneity which ought to characterize the people of this country if we are to be a great nation" (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000, 203). It was made clear to South Asians, regardless of whether they were first, second or third generation Canadian, that they would not be included in the conception of "nationhood", nor was their presence in the country welcome. Handa (2003) speaks to the history of immigration in Canada stating that "...the policy has been based on various criteria of exclusion and cultural difference. A look at South Asian immigration...suggests that moral panics over immigration and representation of the ethnic 'other' as backward, inferior or unsuitable helped to construct whiteness and Canadian nationhood as synonymous" (45).

A reform to Canadian immigration policy in 1967 saw changes that theoretically would reduce the weight of the categories of "race" and "place of origin" in admission into the country. The "points system" was adopted, which is an immigration process that continues to be utilized today. The system favours immigrants presumed to make significant economic contributions to Canada on the basis of existing wealth, education, skills, health and age. Although this provided greater access to South Asian groups for entry into Canada, racist cultural stereotypes of male

criminality and female subjugation perpetuated through dominant discourses, shaped problematic constructions of this group (Mahtani, 2001; Handa, 2003).

A specific example of this narrative would be discourses that presently construct South Asian men as perpetrators of domestic violence, and South Asian women as their victims. Particularly in the Greater Vancouver Area, where increased, disproportionate numbers of domestic violence cases have been seen in the Punjabi community, the media stereotype is being constructed that Punjabis are either perpetrators or victims, based on an inherent cultural problem embedded within beliefs and values of this community. Domestic violence in the South Asian community of Greater Vancouver is a complex issue that needs serious consideration. However, mainstream media constructions further marginalize the community through creating binaries. BC Attorney General Wally Oppal was quoted as referring to domestic violence as “a ‘cancer’ in the province’s Indo-Canadian community” (National Post, 2007 April 27).

The same article, titled “Saving Face as South Asian Women Die” quoted a leader in the violence-against-women sector, stating “Keep in mind that people are still coming to Canada from places such as India where these freedoms may not exist. They arrive with traditional values and suddenly their world opens up to them. And this can threaten their husbands, and their families” (National Post, 2007 April 27). Such discourse reinforces the narrative that South Asians are somehow inherently violent, traditional and backwards, and that on the contrary, the Western world is free of domestic violence and patriarchy. These inaccurate and racist constructions of what it means to be “South Asian” continue to implicate South Asian communities in Canada.

## *Gender and Colourism*

Within colourist discourse, colourism implicates men differently than women due to standards of beauty and the evaluation of bodies, which are more strongly reinforced for women. Hunter (2007) refers to this as the “feminization of color”, where “light skinned women are viewed as extremely feminine...and dark skinned men are often considered more virile, dangerous, sexy and strong...” (312). However, it is imperative to note that any association of dark skin with a particular attribute is a racist conception, regardless of whether it is seen as a negative or not. This ideology is fundamentally racist, noting that the same constructions are used to characterize Black men as “violent rapists or sexually insatiable lovers” (Hunter, 2007, 313).

Although dark-skinned men, regardless of ethnicity, may be implicated differently than dark skinned women, they continue to face marginalization within housing, the labour market, social status and education (Hunter, 2007, 309). Women are predominantly seen as the targets for products that reinforce the privileging of whiteness, with a well-researched body of work on the skin lightening agent popular within various South Asian communities – “Fair & Lovely” (Chandrashekar, 2008; Malik, 2007; Glenn, 2008; Hussein, 2010; Osuri, 2008). However, Unilever has a lesser discussed product “Fair & Handsome”, whose campaigns targeted at South Asian men are much the same. In the context of South Asian youth, the gendered norms that are internalized through consumption of dominant ideologies may further marginalize young women, who experience multi-layered, interwoven oppression due to race, colour and gender.

The workplace provides an example of the gendered implications of colourism. Studies have shown that individuals who fit perceived beauty norms have an advantage within the labour market, through higher salaries, competitive job offers, receiving promotions and being



perceived as more competent (Harrison, 2010). Harrison (2010) argues that “among colorisms basic principles is the belief that Blacks are perceived as being more attractive when they have physical features...that are more Eurocentric than aligned with African ancestry” (69). The author provides an example of beauty queen, singer and actress Vanessa Williams, who was crowned the first Black Miss America, with “straight hair, grey eyes, a pointy nose and thin lips” (Harrison, 2010, 69). The Eurocentric features of Vanessa Williams are constructed as a Black beauty ideal. Hunter (2002) corroborates the claim that colourist ideologies impact women in the workplace, when she argues that dark skinned Black women have lower salaries than their light skinned counterparts with similar credentials. In seeing these differences, the “reward” of whiteness is disseminated through the media, which may implicate the ways in which South Asian youth perceive their own colour and the colour of others in different racialized communities.

Another issue of gender and colourism that is particularly relevant to the South Asian context, is the way in which colourism becomes constructed as a “cultural” practice of perceived “backwards” and “patriarchal” communities. This oversimplified and racist discourse continues to be reinforced through media defining South Asian young women “in need of rescue from traditional, overbearing, unyielding cultural practices or families” (Handa, 2003, 32). It is important to recognize that violence against women, objectification of women and arbitrary beauty standards exist across communities, including within the dominant culture. Desai and Subramanian (2000) address this, stating that:

Gender oppression of South Asian women in Canada [is seen] as simply being located in South Asian culture...These authors fail to identify the specific ways in which gender inequities and oppression among South Asian families in Canada are uniquely created and maintained by historical factors such as racism, classism and cultural imperialism...(16).

Dominant ideology maintains that South Asian communities practice colourism as a “cultural practice”, inherent within the caste system of particular South Asian communities. Although colourism is evident within specific systems in a community, the issue of colourism can be looked at within a broader context, as only very specific groups within the category of South Asian, can even be argued to be implicated by a particular practice. Additionally, such discourse tends to capture a historical snapshot, assuming that a particular community is somehow unchanging or “frozen” within a frame of history. Additionally, as Glenn (2008) points out, “...colonial-era and postcolonial Indian writings on the issue may themselves have been influenced by European notions of caste, culture, and race...” (289). This is not to negate the colourist discourse that exists within the caste system and colourist beauty standards amongst South Asians predating colonialism, but to recognize that the history of colourism is grounded in colonial and imperial practices that continue to oppress specific communities.

One can argue that internalizing representations that privilege whiteness can impact self-esteem, self-confidence and negotiation of one’s ethnic identity. Glenn (2008) states that the “relations between skin colour and judgments about attractiveness affect women most acutely, since women’s worth is judged heavily on the basis of appearance” (282). Within the South Asian context, young women contend with colourism when seeking a marital partner. Although men also experience colourism, Glenn (2008) argues that males are able to “compensate” for dark-skin with education, family status or income level more so than their female counterparts.

Runkle (2004) researched the Miss India pageant competition, in order to examine the creation of an “ideal” Indian femininity that is globally broadcasted and congruent with existing power structures. Runkle (2004) notes that “every single one of the young women was taking some sort of medication to alter their skin, particularly in colour” (149). Fair skin was deemed to

take participants further in the international competition. Her research demonstrated the economical benefits of whiteness for Indian women, stating that "...economic changes are necessarily social changes...participating in the pageant allowed young women a form of social mobility that they otherwise would not have had, although this mobility came at the price of modifying their bodies (Runkle, 2004, 157). Leeds (1994) addresses the way in which a group comes to accept these practices, as colourism entrenches itself into the "cultural fabric", normalizing what she calls "pigmentocracy". This is further corroborated by Henry & Tator (2002), when they state that "...the discursive and institutional forms of bias and discrimination remain unacknowledged and invisible...they are so much a part of the everyday normative culture...that racist ideologies and rhetorical practices seem natural to those immersed in this environment" (226).

### ***Conceptualizing Colourism in South Asian Communities***

For South Asian youth in Canada, the legacy of imperialism is not only intertwined with the history of colonization within the subcontinent of India, but additionally with the colonial history of Canada. South Asians in Canada continue to see narrow conceptions of colour that have been reconstructed within both the country of origin and Canada itself. Dominant discourses conflate colourism with being a "cultural" issue of various communities of colour, without examining the historical contexts under which such hierarchies were established. In Canada, youth are exposed to conceptions of colour from within South Asian diaspora communities, South Asian communities abroad and also through observing notions of colour within other communities of colour (i.e. Latin communities, African communities). Henceforth, the consistent

messaging of privileging lightness is reinforced through the overarching power relations that are represented within media and popular culture.

Colourism has a complex history within the context of South Asian communities. There are deeply rooted prejudices structured within both pre-colonial and post-colonial histories. These histories operate together, to sustain a system that continues to marginalize darker skinned South Asians. Although each particular South Asian community may have its own distinct evolution of skin tone hierarchies, communities across the South Asian diaspora are impacted by colourism. For example, the Hindu caste system or *varna* is argued to reinforce skin colour hierarchies, with association of lighter skinned Brahmins as a higher caste, and darker skinned individuals as members of lower castes (Jha, 2009; Chandrashekar, 2008). It has also been argued that Aryan migration to India fortified a cultural colour divide, with North Indian-Aryans possessing lighter skin, and South Indian Dravidians, possessing darker skin (Glenn, 2008). However, as acutely pointed out by Glenn (2008), this distinction is difficult to make as “...the wide range of skin color from North to South and the variation in skin tone within castes make it hard to correlate light skin with high caste” (289). Another theory argues that skin colour hierarchies were strengthened due to association of labour with social status. In other words, those who worked outdoors in manual labour-oriented work would be exposed to greater sun, whereas, those who had alternative employment opportunities indoors in less labourious work, would possess lighter skin due to lack of sun exposure (Glenn, 2008). Hence, those with lighter skin were associated with class and economic privilege.

Hussein (2010) furthers the understanding of the historical construction of colourism within the South Asian context, through examining the role of academia and ideology. Christoph

Meiners, a renowned academic in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century placed:

...strong emphasis on animalism of the 'ugly races' which put them on a lower position than the 'beautiful' white race. To him the noblest race were the Celts (Caucasians)...below were the people of the Middle East and Asia, with limited intelligence, lack of adaptability and insensitivity..." (406).

This ideology was widely accepted, establishing whiteness as morally, intellectually and physically superior. Hunter (2002) furthers an understanding of the establishment of colour hierarchies, stating that "Light skin is associated with Europeans and is assigned a higher status than darker skin, which is associated with Africans or indigenous people, and is assigned a lower status. These colonial value systems are forced on the colonized and often internalized by them..." (176). Although many theories and histories can be linked to colourism within the South Asian context, it can be understood that a combination of social process both pre-colonial and post-colonial, operate together to produce and reproduce colourism.

## CHAPTER 3: MEDIA & COLOURISM

### *Marketing Whiteness*

Within Western mainstream media representations, the South Asian identity is constructed as a source of oppression, through portraying primarily patriarchal relationships with one's culture, religion, and gender. South Asian characters are highly underrepresented, and when represented portray hyper-stereotyped roles. As media reinforces these stereotypes, the way in which South Asian youth perceive their ethnic identity may result in internalizing whiteness and making efforts to attain the privileges of whiteness. This includes negotiating colour in order to achieve perceived beauty, success and power that are attributed to light skin. This is corroborated by Desai and Subramanian (2000), who argue that South Asian youth in Canada use media as a "socializing agent" in order to negotiate their identity.

Members of communities of colour that are shown in positions of status, power or beauty, overwhelmingly feature light-skinned individuals. Such imagery fosters a desire to achieve similar success, through attaining whiteness (i.e. use of skin lightening products). Hunter (2007) states that "television, film, Internet, and print ads all feature white women with blond hair as not only the cultural ideal, but the cultural imperative. White and light-skinned people are rewarded accordingly..." (248). Hence, one has to consider how colourism is internalized by South Asian youth, who are bombarded with messages regarding the "reward" of whiteness.

In a study conducted by Sahay & Piran (1997), South Asian Canadian students were found to "desire lighter skin than they possessed" and "the desire to be lighter skinned was greater the more the participant differed from the cultural White ideal" (161). This desire can be said to be strongly linked with an active ideological process, which conflates various facets of

perceived success with skin colour. Jah (2009) examines the role of skin colour in Indian mate selection websites, finding a clear bias for lighter skin. Particularly for females, Jah (2009) concludes that “whiteness and a fair-skinned complexion became a form of social capital for females in attracting males” (70). The incentive to attain whiteness is demonstrated through such studies, which reveal the lived experiences of negotiating one’s colour.

Cultural stereotypes are reinforced and reaffirmed through media. Durham (2004) argues that media “offer[s] social discourses that play a key role in identity construction” (141). The media is used as a resource to understand different ways in which to identify, including concepts of ethnicity, sexuality, beauty, gender etc. The representations are used as a tool by youth to make sense of oneself and others (Durham, 2004). The author argues that the images presented of South Asians reinforce difference from the mainstream values through creating hierarchies (Durham, 2004, 144). An “othering” takes place, which emphasizes ideas of Orientalism<sup>3</sup> in the construction of a racialized female body. Oppressive ideologies continue to conceptualize ideas of colour that have resulted in a “white-washing”, where repeated privileging of whiteness has cemented dominant values and norms as the fabric of moral, physical, intellectual and cultural superiority.

South Asian youth navigate consumption of a diversity of media sources. Colourism is fostered within Western media through problematic images of various communities of colour. Both South Asian media (i.e. Bollywood films, ethnic magazines, Asian Television Network etc.) and mainstream media send a consistent message of the benefits of whiteness. For example,

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<sup>3</sup> As defined by Edward Said, Orientalism is “a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient” (Said, 2007, 45). It is argued that the Orient is constructed from a Western bias and perspective. This “academic tradition” (Said, 2007, 45) creates dichotomies, which places Western philosophies and knowledge as superior.

one of India's most famous entertainment icons, Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai, is one of few South Asian entertainers that have established a presence in North America, serving as a transnational symbol of South Asian beauty. Rai possesses highly Anglo features, with green eyes, light skin and a tall stature. She has been taglined "the most beautiful woman in the world", by various Western media outlets. Rai is also a spokesperson for L'Oreal India and Fair & Lovely, two leading skin whitening product brands within South Asia.

Osuri (2008) analyzes the image construction of Rai in both South Asia and North America observing that "comments that describe Aishwarya Rai as a Greek goddess or the fact that she cannot be placed as Indian appear to make her a more attractive Indian celebrity. Moreover, it is precisely the approximation to whiteness that appears to intrigue and seduce media and fans..." (117). Colourism, as perpetuated through Bollywood is further described by Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) when it is stated that "a majority of the Indian female actors in Bollywood are light skinned women and the few dark-skinned women actors who have overcome the restrictive norms of skin color wear thick make-up to conceal their dark facial skin. (21). Similar to images within mainstream North American entertainment, Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) argue that Bollywood perpetuates colour binaries where light skin is associated with divinity, intelligence, beauty and desirability, whereas dark-skin is associated with demons, deviance, ugliness and repulsion.

Both mainstream media and South Asian media outlets propagate similar messaging regarding skin tone, which possess deeply embedded notions about beauty. Regardless of whether the representations are of African communities, Latin communities, South Asian communities or any other community of colour – light skin is privileged and the "reward" for whiteness remains an established standard to be desired. The globalization of colourism creates a



transnational, homogenized norm, where “whiteness is believed to represent civility, intelligence, and beauty, and in contrast, Blackness/Brownness is seen as representing primitive-ness, ignorance, and ugliness” (Hunter, 187, 2002).

The colourist discourse does not only present itself within the media, but has tangible implications on South Asian youth. Skin lightening products have gained a significant customer base within communities of colour, utilizing advertising and marketing that sells whiteness as an attainable commodity. Although the products are found in limited mainstream retailers within Canada, some South Asian stores, the global marketplace on the internet and ethnic media sources consumed by South Asian youth in the Western world, make readily available both the products and ideology. Glenn (2008) states that “India and Indian diasporic communities around the world constitute the largest market for skin lighteners” (289). The messages to consume these products is not only an Eastern phenomenon, as the fundamental ideology that promotes colourism through the use of these products is the continuous exposure to white ideals of beauty from Western dominant discourse. Hussein (2010) elaborates on this stating that:

Transnational mass media promote a global homogenised body image that is being telecast all around the world. Caucasian models in many Asian and African advertisements of beauty products support the desire of non-white women to be of lighter skin, at the same time sending the message that this is possible through the use of different products (405).

Advertisements for such products are deeply entrenched within South Asian popular culture, infiltrating magazines, film, television etc. For example, two of Bollywood’s most popular celebrities coined the ‘king’ and ‘queen’ of Bollywood, Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai are both spokespeople for Fair & Lovely products, the most popular skin lightening brand throughout South Asia (Osuri, 2008). Rai has promoted the product ‘L’Oreal White Perfect’, which promises users that it is a “breakthrough in whitening by reducing melanin production and

gently exfoliating dark, dead cells, so that the skin darkening process is regulated” (Osuri, 2008, 114). Such advertisements suggest that attaining whiteness can be done so through manipulating biology, in order to reap the benefits of white privilege.

In examining particular marketing messaging, one can argue that rather than challenging white privilege, campaigns actively use colourism to market the potential for success and happiness. This commercialized endorsement of skin colour hierarchies has fostered the embedding of colourism within normalized values and beliefs. Rai has received criticism from South Asian feminist groups across the globe for her endorsement of such products, given her power and influence. However, as acutely pointed out by Glenn (2008), “focusing only on individual consciousness and motives distracts attention from the very powerful economic forces that help to create the yearning for lightness and that offer to fulfill the yearning...” (298). Hunter (2011) corroborates this, highlighting the “greater force” and the importance of acknowledging systems of oppression that create the conditions of individual action. She states that “the lifestyle that is communicated through these ads sells whiteness, modernity, sophistication, beauty, power, and wealth” (Hunter, 2011, 143).

## CHAPTER 4: MEDIA CONSUMPTION

### *Media as a Socializing Agent*

The media can be used as a tool to understand social norms and identities by adolescents, and even more so by immigrant youth. Although adolescents in general may turn to media for a reflection of norms, Orozco & Todorova (2003) argue that is particularly true for those youth that become immersed into a new set of social norms and identities due to migration. Media is used in order to negotiate changes in attitudes, beliefs and culturally normative behaviour. Therefore, the research project will seek to explore the representations consumed by youth within a specific form of media. This exploration is important in order to consider what messages regarding femininity and colour are being normalized for South Asian communities. These representations directly serve to marginalize groups of South Asian woman who do not fall within these perceived “ideals”.

In examining the role of media as a socializing agent for South Asian youth, a socializing agent can be defined as the factors by which one begins to understand one’s environment, self and others. Examples of socializing agents can include family members, peers, community members, religious institutions, teachers and mass media, among others. These factors do not exist in silos to determine youth identity or behavior, but rather offer various sets of values and beliefs that can be negotiated by an individual. Arnett (1995) describes a socializing agent as a socializer that furthers one’s integration of “attitudes, beliefs, and values, in order to preserve social order” (526). Media is specifically utilized as a socializing agent primarily to understand gender roles, ethnicity, sexuality and frame values and beliefs (Arnett, 1995; Padilla-Walker, 2006).

Identity is defined as “an individual’s self concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his [or her] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Phinney, 1990, 501). For racialized youth, the process by which to construct one’s identity will utilize accessible and dominant representations of what it means to be a part of a specific social group, within their current context (i.e. what does it mean to be labeled a “South Asian female” in Canada? What does it mean to be labeled a “Black male” in Canada?). Orozco & Todorova (2003) state that:

For immigrant adolescents, social worlds are also fundamental to the process of identity formation. Their development requires the usual challenges of adolescence complicated by a process of racial and ethnic identification...These new identities, crafted in the process of immigrants’ uprooting and resettlement, are fluid and multilayered...” (22).

Immigrant youth and second generation youth are negotiating facets of identity for which they receive conflicting information based on their changing social worlds. For example, the adoption of or labelling of one as “South Asian” may become a new, imposed identity that has to be understood in the context of maintaining one’s ethnic identity (i.e. a Pakistani South Asian or Sri Lankan South Asian). Ethnicity is socially constructed and is subject to modifications, rather than being a fixed or natural concept (Durham, 2004, 142). Ethnicity and culture are both constantly reconstructed, dynamic and change in relation to the environment. Handa (2003) describes ethnicity as “constructed and imagined, political and strategic concepts” (6). This is foundational in understanding the significance of the research project, as regarding the media as a socializing agent provides the link to the potential impact of representations on South Asian identities.

Understanding the flexible nature of these social categories is imperative to assessing the ways in which one identifies with an ethnic collective, as it demonstrates how one can be either

included or excluded from a specific identity based on the socio-political location of an individual at any given time. This is important to bear in mind when considering the possible implications of dominant media representations. Hence, it can be understood that negotiation of ethnic identity is then not only a personal process, but a political process that can serve to maintain dominant interests. Hall (1996) furthers this understanding, arguing that "...identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices" (4). This acknowledges the potential way in which media, as a site of discourse, may implicate the way in which a South Asian youth may negotiate facets of the identity of themselves and others.

In considering media as a socializing agent, one can examine the normalized behaviour and characteristics that become associated with a particular group. Desai & Subramanian (2000), conducted a research project with South Asian youth immigrants in Toronto. Their objective was to learn about youth settlement issues. One of their findings in interviews was that "media in general, and television in particular, came through as a powerful socializing agent. Some participants felt that watching programs on television had helped them learn how to speak, how to act, and basically behave like a typical teenager" (53). One participant interviewed stated that "I basically see what the culture and the ways are - the behaviour – on the TV and when I saw all these things...I was, you know, able to adjust quite easily" (Desai & Subramanian, 2000, 53).

Given the dominant representations regarding South Asian communities (i.e. selling the "desire for whiteness", light skin as "beauty", incidents of domestic violence etc.), one must consider the ways in which youth negotiate their own South Asian identity. One can begin to question if consuming these messages results in desiring whiteness / privilege of whiteness, and/or "living up" to the representations that become expected of South Asians by dominant

discourse. Mahatani (2001) states that "...negative depictions of minorities teach minorities in Canada that they are threatening, deviant, and irrelevant to nation-building. These portrayals are damaging to the psyche because they can effectively serve to instil inferiority complexes among minorities" (101). Henceforth, as a socializer, the media serves to maintain the status quo, through disseminating consistent messaging regarding various communities of colour. This is clearly problematic, as it reinforces marginalization of youth within the South Asian community.

In negotiating identity and learning social norms, immigrant youth in particular may feel marginalized due to losing a sense of social understanding. Orozco & Todorova (2003) state that "Immigrants must learn new cultural expectations ...They also lose the social roles that provided them with culturally scripted notions of how they fit into the world. Without a sense of competence, control, and belonging, many immigrants feel marginalized" (20). Although the authors refer specifically to the immigrant-youth experience, it can be argued that the "1.5 generation"<sup>4</sup> and second generation South Asian youth, may have similar experiences.

For example, Patel (2007) examines how South Asian women and their gender roles are socially constructed within mainstream American communities. The American case demonstrates how the "culturally scripted notion" of their gender role becomes characterized by the mainstream construction of ethnic stereotypes. This is described when it is stated that:

Notions of Asian-American womanhood are constructed in diametric opposition to White womanhood...Asian-American women are construed as weak, passive, exotic, and submissive. White women are construed as normal, confident, self-possessed, and assertive...South Asian American women are left either to comply with an objectified stereotypical version of South Asian womanhood or constantly to prove that they are 'not like the others' and risk being perceived as 'acting White' (Patel, 2007, 54).

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<sup>4</sup> The term "1.5 generation" is used to describe those individuals who immigrate to Canada as children, rather than being born in Canada (second generation) or migrating as young adults or adults (first generation). This distinction is made, as the experiences of 1.5 generation youth may be distinct from the other two generations.

This dichotomy can position one in a marginalized position, with mainstream representations being in direct opposition to or in conflict with self-understood gender role identity. For youth in particular, discrimination of this nature can result in rejecting association with Western society and becoming more closely tied with one's ethnic community, or on the contrary, reject involvement in one's ethnic community in order to be most closely associated with the dominant culture (Berry *et. al.*, 2006, 326). Neither allows for a balanced approach of integration, where one can be involved in both ethnic and mainstream cultures, simultaneously synthesising multiple identities (Berry *et. al.*, 2006).

However, it is important to note that the "South Asian community is one of the most unified when it comes to the value they attach to family interaction, the maintenance of social networks within their cultural group, and the preservation of ethnic customs, traditions and heritage languages" (Tran & Kaddatz, 2005, 20). A Statistics Canada study reports that 88% of first-generation South Asians and 75% of second-generation South Asians maintain communication with family members from the country of origin (Tran & Kaddatz, 2005, 21), demonstrating strong global connections and transnational activity. Hence, the socializing agents and information utilized to understand self and others cannot be limited to dominant Western norms, as South Asian youth negotiate a diversity of social norms, sources of media, ideologies and representations. In terms of the research project, it is imperative to bear this mind, as no one source of media can be implicated in generating colourism ideology, as in addition to individual attitudes, youth process a myriad of values, norms and belief systems.

## *Youth Agency*

In analysing the consumption of media representations by young South Asian females, it is imperative not to place youth within a victimhood position. This positioning places all power within dominant systems, failing to recognize that youth themselves are active agents in processing and interpreting the content they consume. Mahtani (2001) states that “traditional image of audiences as indiscriminate sponges of media was effectively resisted...researchers suggested that consumers of mass media actively interpret, perceive and determine the meanings of media representations...” (114). Influence of mainstream media systems cannot be obscured, however, it is important to recognize individual choice, community action and acts of resistance to these messages. In reality, youth can challenge and redefine mainstream constructions. Without recognition of their agency, one eradicates the possibility to conceptualize a change in ideology and power imbalances.

Ralston (1999) addresses the importance of emphasizing the agency of South Asian youth in “creating, challenging and contesting lived experience, power relations, and identity construction” (5). In interviews conducted with immigrant South Asian women in Canada, Ralston (1999) found that the way in which ethnicity, gender, sexuality and social norms are understood and performed was an active and conscious decision of each person to navigate their individual experience. Arnett (1995) further addresses this agency stating that, “adolescents do not come to media as blank slates, but as members of a family, community, and culture who have socialized them from birth and from whom they have learned ideals and principles that are likely to influence their media choices and how they interpret the media they consume” (527). Further research indicates that youth in fact, actively choose media sources and integrate information that fits within their personal preference (Arnett, 1995; Durham 2004).



The “refusal to be victimized” as an active, conscious and deliberate choice, demonstrates a site of resistance to dominant representations for marginalized groups. Durham (2004) argues that “viewers who are socially marginalized are better able to read media oppositionally than mainstream audiences” (156). In a research study, South Asian immigrant youth effectively recognized and challenged the politics of the media text and images that they were consuming (Durham, 2004). Considering this finding, one can argue that although mainstream media representations can serve to normalize dominant interests, it can also be used as a site to imagine new ways of conceptualizing gender, sexuality and ethnicity through questioning and resisting the images. Representations in this case, serve to foster a nuanced approach to the formation and negotiation of norms, which places the power of interpretation and internalization in the eye of the viewer.

In terms of the research project, it is important to consider that although colourism exists within media representations, the *impact* of these images on youth themselves cannot be addressed within the scope of this project. The existence of colourism within media does not necessitate that youth then further perpetuate the mainstream colourist dialogue. Henceforth, the focus within the project will be to make the media itself the “object” of research, as each person who consumes the media will interpret the information perceived in different ways. The impact of representations can thus be concluded to be a future area of research consideration, as this specific project provides only an opportunity to reflect on the *potential* impact of media.

## CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

### *Guiding Questions*

The research project will aim at addressing four key questions in analysing colourism:

- 1) Who and what is constructed as ideals of feminine South Asian beauty and success?
- 2) What messages are conveyed regarding skin colour?
- 3) How is the “desire for whiteness” and the desire for light skin marketed in what one reads and sees?
- 4) In what ways can hegemonic texts / ideals be unsettled and negotiated?

In considering these key guiding questions, I will analyze the ways in which said “desire for whiteness” is contested, affirmed or negotiated, particularly as it pertains to colourism. The research questions will be addressed through conducting a semiotic analysis of representations and underlying meanings in images (visual) and texts (written) of two selected web spaces.

### *Semiotic Analysis*

A semiotic analysis will be used as a conceptual framework from which to develop a study of the selected web spaces. Features of the semiotic methodology and general principles will be utilized, with other aspects of the methodology not being employed due to the limitations of the scope of this project. As defined by Bignell (2002), “semiotics or semiology is a way of analysing meanings by looking at the signs (like words, for instance, but also pictures, symbols etc.) which communicate meanings” (2). Hall (1997) describes this methodology, stating that “the underlying argument behind the semiotic approach is that, since all cultural objects convey

meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs..." (36).

Hence, all such "objects" that are analyzed must be understood to have a negotiated meaning, rather than possessing a universal "truth".

This approach places the consumer of media at the centre, recognizing the relationship that exists between production, transmission and interpretation. Additionally, the approach does not simplify South Asian youth as passive consumers of media, or "victims" of an oppressive ideology. Rather it acknowledges the *interpretation* and negotiation that exists when one decodes an image or text. Chandler (2002) elaborates, stating that, "meaning is not 'transmitted' to us - we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware" (11). The research methodology will be grounded in Hall's (1997) argument that "meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems" (28). These representational systems, as understood by Hall, must consider the standpoint of the reader (i.e. intersection relationship between race, gender, class, ability, age etc.), henceforth, recognizing the importance of privilege and dominant power systems in the process of 'meaning'. Hall (1980) argues that language itself and the meaning that one derives, operates from a dominant system of power. The role of the consumer as being an active agent in negotiating and interpreting a mass media based on one's perspective and biases, is foundational to Hall's (1980) work on semiotics.

In analysing "signs", one can consider the denotation and connotation of content. Denotation refers to the basic agreed upon social meaning (i.e. she is wearing a blazer). The connotation would refer to the meaning that is signified by the object (i.e. she is a business woman). Hall (1997) provides an example of this stating that "Clothes, for example, may have a simple physical function – to cover the body...but clothes also double up as signs...an evening

dress may signify 'elegance' ..." (37). Hence, any image, text or object can be seen as "functioning as signifiers in the producing of meaning" (Hall, 1997, 37). Specifically in reference to media, Bignell (2002) corroborates Hall, stating that "...when we consider advertising, news, and TV or film texts, it becomes clear that linguistic, visual, and other kinds of sign are used not simply to denote something, but also to trigger a range of connotations attached to the sign" (16).

The semiotic approach allows one to reveal the way in which meaning is created within a particular system. The media can then be seen as a tool to produce, reproduce and disseminate ideas of particular cultural significance (i.e. race, gender, power), bringing into question the role of social location, for example, in negotiating the meaning of a particular image (Hall, 1981). This is highly significant in looking at the "desire for whiteness", for example, as it emphasizes the importance of considering privilege and hegemony, as a deeper, underlying factor in colourism.

Semiotics will be utilized to address the research questions, as it offers a multifocal approach that incorporates a diversity of disciplines (i.e. media studies, cultural studies, sociology, women studies etc.). This methodology offers a means to examine the production of meaning, power structures and dominant ideologies within content that is signified or coded within an embedded image or text. The nuances of the message are not necessarily blatantly apparent. This approach also allows one to challenge what is sometimes assumed to be natural within a given cultural ideology, through recognizing that everything is a representation that is interpreted by the consumer. In other words, content is not understood or negotiated in an identical manner by individuals. The same magazine image, for example, could be interpreted as being oppressive by one person, yet empowering by another person.

To summarize, the wide application of semiotic analysis allows one to examine systems that privilege certain individuals, through recognising the intersections of gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, status, age etc. Lastly, the subjective nature of the semiotic approach allows one to claim ownership of the interpretation and experience as a consumer of a text or image. In determining the underlying messages in images regarding feminine beauty and skin colour, this approach recognizes the individual experience in viewing and decoding media content.

### ***Limitations***

The research project has limitations in its methodology and scope that should be considered when reviewing the analysis. Firstly, two mainstream South Asian web spaces are being examined, which is not representative of the diverse range of web media specifically targeted at South Asian woman (i.e. feminist e-zines, blogs etc.). Additionally, the web spaces being examined are primarily beauty, fashion and entertainment spaces, which have a very specific objective and underlying framework. This is to be noted, as it is important to recognize the many spaces of resistances within the South Asian community, particularly online, where transnational networks are able to collaborate in addressing issues affecting their communities. Secondly, the process of selecting the web spaces and the content to analyze was a process of research self-selection. Henceforth, subjectivity exists in which content was selected.

Additionally, in conducting this analysis, assumptions were made about the use of the web space. Although one is able to establish the target audience of the web space, it is not possible within the scope of this project to determine if that target audience is in fact the consumer. Lastly, in speaking of colourism one begins to consider representations of “dark” and “light” skin. However, one must ask, to whom is one comparing? What is the scale to determine

dark versus light? Given the diversity of shades of skin colour amongst South Asian groups, the “light” versus “dark” skin determinants will be based on subjective judgement and indicators of exclusion (i.e. given the diversity of skin colour, a lack of dark skinned South Asian representations could be considered an indicator of colourism, through the form of exclusion).

The semiotic analysis approach itself, offers some limitations and further considerations. Firstly, Bignell (2002) addresses the “ambiguity of the sign”, recognizing that each individual will interpret signs differently – one cannot claim a universal “truth” within an image or text. Subjectivity in interpretation can be seen as a limitation. However, it can also be understood that objectivity does not exist anywhere in research, as outlined within feminist standpoint theories. As argued by Harding (1992), all individuals and institutions come to research from a specific “standpoint” or location, which will be grounded in a specific type of knowledge production. Acknowledging one’s framework and biases as a researcher, is a strength of feminist methodologies as “standpoint methodologies have been perceived as one way that research projects can turn disadvantaged social positions into powerful intellectual and political resources” (Harding, 2005, 2013).

Given systemic power imbalances, the voices of those most marginalized are often excluded within this production process. Harding (1992) argues that the use of a “strong objectivity”, which voices the perspectives of marginalized groups through employing “strategies to detect social assumptions” (580) providing opportunity for greater objectivity. Furthermore, through offering “voice” to marginalized perspective and shifting notions of researcher / “subject” power structures, feminist methodologies “challenges the actuality, possibility, and even the desirability of research presuming to occupy, or speak from, a culturally neutral position” (Harding, 2005, 2012). In this way, although subjectivity can be seen to have

limitations, is it important to recognize the potential strength that a feminist methodology has in developing more inclusive research.

Lastly, the findings of the research project should not be generalized beyond the context of the content being analysed, as the semiotic analysis of the selected content is intended to serve only as a starting point to consider the way in which colourism is presented. Hence, it can be understood that the objective of the research project is not to provide a broad spanning analysis. Rather the objectives can be said to be met if the four guiding questions are addressed within the analysis of the selected images. In addressing the guiding questions, I will reveal the contradictions, complexities and ambivalences existing within media systems, which reflect the social realities of young South Asian women in Canada as they continue to negotiate discourses of colourism.

### ***Process of Selection***

In order to select web pages appropriate for the analysis, various South Asian web spaces were explored. These were found through word of mouth, personal knowledge, links on other relevant web pages, South Asian blogs and Google searches. ANOKHI and SAPNA were both chosen, as they are two of the most popular spaces for young Western South Asian woman, as determined through my personal exploration of various online spaces that continuously referred to SAPNA and ANOKHI. Both magazines have interactivity on their website (i.e. a blog), and function as a print magazine and web space. The purpose was not to contrast or compare the spaces, as both are fairly similar. Rather, two spaces were selected versus one, to increase the sources of analysis and diversify the content. Additionally, using two unaffiliated web spaces demonstrates the consistent message regarding skin colour across different spaces. Both

magazines have similar target audiences of young South Asian women in the West who are “brand-savvy”, “affluent” and “modern” – key words used in both spaces in describing their readership (SAPNA Magazine, 2011a; ANOKHI Magazine, 2011a).

In this process of selection it is important to recognize that alternative spaces do exist, which serve as forums for South Asians. For example, SAMAR (South Asians for Action and Reflection) focus on activist movements and social processes within South Asian diaspora in the United States. However, such spaces do not have the same consumer base, as they do not target South Asian young women specifically as do SAPNA and ANOKHI. Hence, mainstream fashion /lifestyle/entertainment magazines were chosen due to their popularity, relevance in target audience and applicability to representations of beauty ideals. Additionally, both spaces create their own text and images (i.e. photo shoots, feature articles) rather than simply “recycling” content from other magazines, advertisements and/or sources. Hence, the ownership of the images can be placed with SAPNA and ANOKHI. Other smaller web spaces do not have the capacity to create their own content. Hence they utilize images and texts from other sources, which would create a significant limitation if utilized for analysis within this research project.

The content selected was collected from the period of March 2011 to June 2011. A collection of texts and images was developed that was relevant to the research project. At the end of the collection period the images and texts were clustered into six main focus areas, which represented the most frequently seen colourism trends on the websites. These six main theme areas are covered within the research project – with one full analysis section on each theme. A single image or a small number of images were chosen to represent each key area. These images are meant to characterize the types of images that could be found within that particular focus



area. Other similar images within a focus area would garner similar analysis. The image is meant to provide a visual representation of the written analysis conducted.

### ***SAPNA Magazine Overview***

SAPNA Magazine ([www.sapnamagazine.com](http://www.sapnamagazine.com)) is targeted at the young, Western South Asian female diaspora. The majority of the content is focused on beauty, fashion, relationships and other issues assumed to be relevant to the target readership. SAPNA Magazine was chosen for analysis, as it not only has a physical presence in print form, but also has a vibrant online presence. The website is frequently updated, and offers interactivity with the consumer, including a blog where readers can connect through posting comments and feedback on a topic of discussion. Lastly, SAPNA Magazine is connected with other forms of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, offering a quick and easy way to share the images and text of the magazine with others. This speaks to the ease in which representations are disseminated amongst youth.

The magazine states that its mission is to “be a platform for the South Asian American woman’s cultural identity: a place where South Asians can discuss their issues, relate to their interests, and find avenues to achieve their dreams” (SAPNA Magazine, 2011a). As an objective of the magazine SAPNA seeks to become “a platform for community building, being a trusted girlfriend in self-improvement advise, and empowering women to achieve their personal dreams and grow their social consciousnesses” (SAPNA Magazine, 2011a). Although it is not explicitly stated within the text of the magazine, based on the content, style and issues addressed within the magazine (i.e. repeated focus on relationships / dating), the target audience can be assumed to be within the frame of the research project – ages 16-30.

SAPNA Magazine is smaller in distribution and scope of the two chosen magazines. SAPNA has a print version for purchase of a special issue. However, its primary means of distribution is its online space. SAPNA Magazine is also unique, in that the staff operate as an online community throughout Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom to create the editorial. There is no one physical “head office” of SAPNA Magazine. This is important to consider, as it reflects the fact that editorial staff in this magazine have complete control of their publication in terms of what and who they choose to feature. In this sense, they are very much involved directly in knowledge production. SAPNA encourages product and service advertisements, pitching to potential advertisers that “our readers, the women of the South Asian Diaspora, are affluent and brand-conscious” (SAPNA Magazine, 2011b).

### ***ANOKHI Magazine Overview***

ANOKHI Magazine ([www.anokhimagazine.com](http://www.anokhimagazine.com)) is self-described as being “North America’s longest running South Asian Fashion, Lifestyle & Entertainment magazine for affluent, brand-savvy and fashionable 18 – 44 year old South Asian women” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011a). It has print circulation in major urban cities, throughout Canada, United States and the United Kingdom. Like SAPNA Magazine, ANOKHI was chosen for analysis, as it combines a hybrid of media forms – a print magazine, in addition to an online space. This web space also allows user to share comments, as well as interact via Facebook and Twitter. A unique feature to ANOKHI is its growing presence as an online community. Founder / CEO Raj Girm, features a website “Open Chest”, which allows consumers to follow her everyday updates of the latest happenings in South Asian “lifestyle and entertainment”, via written and video blogs, as well as interactivity with others in the readership.

ANOKHI markets itself as the “perfect blend of East and West” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011a) stating that the magazine “appreciates and feeds the needs of contemporary South Asian women. It is a publication that truly understands, reflects and promotes the merger between rich Eastern philosophies and progressive Western ideologies” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011a). The magazine describes its primary objective as being a publication that serves as a voice for South Asian lifestyle, entertainment and culture within the Western world. This web space was chosen, due to its established online and print presence, as well as its target population which matches that of the research project.

Of the two magazines being examined, ANOKHI is the larger, more “mainstream” publication. ANOKHI prints an issue every two months and is available to customers for in-store purchase. In Canada in particular, ANOKHI can be found in many mainstream newsstands in popular retailers such as Chapters Indigo, Shoppers Drug Mart and Wal-Mart among others. It is also available for order online through their web space, or one is also able to subscribe to their “virtual magazine”. ANOKHI is self-publishing with their head office located out of Mississauga, Ontario. Their six issues in 2010 sold 25,000 units in Canada alone, corroborating their claim that they are a leader in North American South Asian publications (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011b).

ANOKHI has created a comprehensive media toolkit to promote advertising spaces in both their online and print publications. ANOKHI informs potential advertisers that “South Asian consumers are well educated, integrated, affluent and brand conscious. They have healthy spending habits and are willing to try new products” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011b). Through creating a very specific image of what it means to be a South Asian in North America, ANOKHI garners a certain type of advertiser to correspond with this image of affluence and cosmopolitan

lifestyle. For example, a running banner on their web space from whisky brand, Johnnie Walker, states of their “Gold Label” product, “discover luxury” corresponding with the general aim of the magazine to associate with affluence. Hence, ANOKHI can be seen to be constructing a specific representation of “South Asian-ness” to its readership and to potential advertisers throughout North America.

### *Avoiding the Dichotomy*

In considering the representations within SAPNA and ANOKHI magazines, it is imperative to position the analysis as a critique of the normative discourses that are constructed regarding colour. However, through revealing these underlying messages in images and texts, it is not meant to undermine the efforts of these magazines to create spaces for young South Asian woman. It is important to note that as a researcher, I recognize the constraints that both spaces face working within a systemically oppressive system – particularly in the realm of mainstream media, which neither favours South Asians nor woman. Within Western mainstream media representations, the South Asian identity is constructed as a source of oppression. South Asian women are constructed as docile, passive and uneducated victims of patriarchy (Handa, 2003). Incidents of domestic violence, forced marriages and youth crime are sensationalized and over represented as “South Asian” issues (Handa, 2003; Desai, S., & Subramanian, 2000). In such a reality, both magazines seek to create an alternative space for young woman within South Asian communities that reflects their culture and experiences in nuanced ways.

The entertainment business dictates that both SAPNA and ANOKHI market themselves alongside a mainstream market – they are a business, with vested interest in profit. Although there is a level of accountability and ownership over the content that both magazines can take

into further consideration, the critique is meant to recognize the embedded ways in which messages of colourism are disseminated. Rather than being fixated in creating the dichotomy of “oppressive magazine” versus “empowering magazine”, it is imperative to consider the *normalization* of the subtexts being considered. As stated by Henry & Tator (2002):

The discursive and institutionally structured forms of bias and discrimination remain unacknowledged and invisible. Media representations are discursive formations. Furthermore, they are so much a part of the everyday normative culture – including the material fabric of media institutions – that racist ideologies and rhetorical practices seem natural to those immersed in this environment (226).

With this in mind, in conducting an analysis, it is important to consider the ways in which colourism are embedded within normative construction of an idea South Asian feminine body, rather than to focus in on the individual actions of a particular editor, writer or photographer within a specific media space.

## CHAPTER 6: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

### *Analysis: Celebrity Circulation of Modernity and Trends*



Fig 1: Karen David feature in ANOKHI <sup>5</sup>



Fig 2: Karen David ad for Vasanti Cosmetics<sup>6</sup>

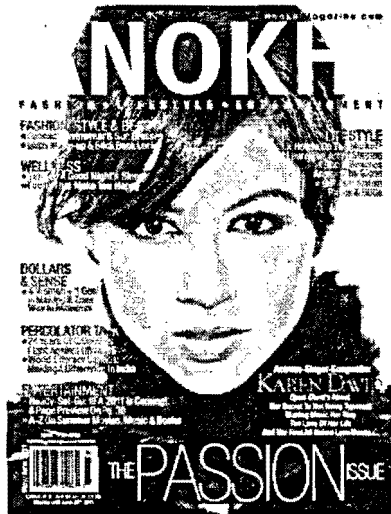


Fig 3: (Left) ANOKHI cover featuring Karen David<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Kitshoff, I. (c. 2011). "photo viiii." [online image]. OPEN CHEST Interview with Actress, Singer, Songwriter Karen David, *ANOKHI Magazine*. Retrieved online April 28, 2011 from <http://www.openchest.com/oc-in-print/actress-singer-songwriter-karen-david/>

<sup>6</sup> Karen David's MySpace Blog (Oct 27, 2009). "Karen David's New Shot for Vasanti." [online image on blog post]. Retrieved online April 28, 2011 from <http://www.myspace.com/karendavid/blog/516068903>

<sup>7</sup> ANOKHI Magazine. (c. 2011). "First Published in The Passion Issue, May 2011." [online image]. OPEN CHEST Interview with Actress, Singer, Songwriter Karen David. Retrieved online from April 28, 2011 from <http://www.openchest.com/oc-in-print/actress-singer-songwriter-karen-david/>



Fig 4: Karen David photographed in person<sup>8</sup>



Fig 5: Karen David photographed in person<sup>9</sup>

ANOKHI features a cover story on Karen David (Figures 1 and 3), an Indian native British entertainer. While the magazine can be commended on increasing the profile of a South Asian figure within the mainstream context, the portrayal of her colour in both ANOKHI and the Vasanti Cosmetic ad in which she is featured, are highly problematic when compared to her authentic skin tone. Karen David provides a representation of femininity that can speak to the target audience of the magazine, as David is a transnational embodiment of South Asian-ness – an Indian born woman, raised in and living in the UK. She has also demonstrated an ability to gain success in the Western entertainment sector, a challenging industry with few South Asian women represented. Hence, David is a South Asian figure that exhibits the realm of possibilities

<sup>8</sup>Barraza, A. & Wenn.com (c. 2009). "Karen David Los Angeles Premiere Of 'Couples Retreat'." [online image]. *ICelebZ.com*. Retrieved online from [http://www.icelebZ.com/celebs/karen\\_shenaz\\_david/photo1.html](http://www.icelebZ.com/celebs/karen_shenaz_david/photo1.html)

<sup>9</sup>Deme, D. & Wenn.com (c. 2010). "EA British Academy Children's Awards 2010." [online image]. *ICelebZ.com*. Retrieved online May 5, 2011 from [http://www.icelebZ.com/celebs/karen\\_david/photo2.html](http://www.icelebZ.com/celebs/karen_david/photo2.html)

for young women, not only in attaining a magazine cover, but also through her professional achievements and accomplishments.

David's images focus on her face, with the photographs being lightened to the point where the nose begins to blend into cheeks, a completely unnatural feature for any racial body. As a part of the May 2011 "Passion" issue, the whitened image becomes associated with excitement, lust and David as an object of desire, as boldly indicated below the photograph. The airbrushing to create an unnaturally light skin colour on David can be argued to market the "desire for whiteness". The image itself, in conjunction with the success that David operate together to reinforce this desire.

Saraswati (2010) argues that such images can be conceptualized as the marketing of a "cosmopolitan whiteness", rather than marketing actual Caucasian-ness. Saraswati (2010) sees whiteness not purely defined in terms of colour, but rather in terms of a certain privilege and affluence stating of the concept that "cosmopolitan whiteness, I refer to whiteness when represented to embody the 'affective' and virtual quality of cosmopolitanism: transnational mobility" (17). Rather than viewing this image as emulating a simple Caucasian whiteness, it can be seen that through whitening the skin of a cultural icon, one is equating whiteness as "something that is good and desirable" (Saraswati, 2010, 19), and additionally something that allows for global mobility and freedom. In this way, whiteness can be seen as functioning as a system of privilege that represents access to success, beauty, affluence and cosmopolitan life. Such an image does not necessarily represent a desire to be a Caucasian person, but rather the privilege that whiteness affords – the vehicle of transmission to that privilege is light skin.

ANOKHI markets itself as being "different" and "unique", a literal translation of the word "anokhi". This branding describes itself as "the merger between rich Eastern philosophies



and progressive Western ideologies” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011a). By constructing Western ideologies as progressive, Eastern philosophies are by direct comparison implied to be backwards or traditional. Hence, the ANOKHI readership is placed in a position that is privileged over other South Asians, who are not achieving such proximity to Western ideology. As whiteness is closely associated with Western ideology, one can see the connection between lightening an image of a celebrity to produce a certain conception of a contemporary South Asian woman. The magazine furthers this understanding stating that “we know our readers are proud of their cultural heritage and comfortable with their cultural duality” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011b), hence affirming that through desiring whiteness, one is not relinquishing one’s South Asian identity – but rather asserting it.

For example, consumption of mainstream “modernity” is equated with South Asian-ness, as seen in the marketing of ANOKHI. The magazine asserts that “ANOKHI...inspires today’s women by providing them with the best in fashion & beauty...plus the latest in popular culture and entertainment - from Bollywood to Hollywood - and anything else a modern South Asian female desires to know” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011b). The assumption being made here is that to consume Western products or culture (i.e. Hollywood), is to be “modern” and South Asian at the same time. Throughout their web space, Western product advertisements are marketed as ‘desirable’, such as clothing by European fashion house Christian Dior. When Western designer James Mischka used what is argued by ANOKHI to be “South Asian style”, the magazine supports the notion of commodifying South Asian clothing asserting that “this trend has become a viral phenomenon in the Western world” (Elliot, 2011 May). Hence consumption of the Western products becomes not only trendy and modern, but also very much aligned with being South Asian.

This is somewhat ironic, as Hollywood superstars such as Elizabeth Hurley or Elizabeth Taylor are seen as “fashionably forward” when they sport an Indian-style turban. However, the realities of South Asians Sikhs in the Western world who wear turbans is one that is marked with racism, racial profiling, associations with terrorisms and being considered overly-traditional. The Sikh female turban is somewhat seen in even rarer form among Sikh woman in the West, however, for those that are visibly marked by this religious adornment, it can be argued that they are seen as anything but modern and fashionable. On the contrary, they may face discrimination, barriers to economic and social access and challenges in integration. Marie Claire Magazine featured an online article about the “urban turban” trend, stating that “a turban is the ultimate high-drama accessory” (Glyde, 2007 May). Such commodification of South Asian cultures is problematic as it obscures the social realities of South Asians who are marginalized by the mainstream due to these very same supposed ‘trends’.

## *Analysis: High Fashion*



**Fig 6: Model Neha Metha – SAPNA Photo<sup>10</sup>**



**Fig 7: Model Kiran Lynn – SAPNA Photo<sup>11</sup>**

SAPNA Magazine functions in the role of image producer, as they create their own textual and image content through recruiting and hiring self-selected models, photographers, writers and editors. Unlike many other web spaces that “borrow” content from other spaces (i.e. advertisements, articles etc.), SAPNA is in the unique position to construct their own vision of the world of a South Asian young woman. As seen above, Neha Metha and Kiran Lynn, two

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Veloz, T. (c. 2011). “Couture Bun.”. [online image]. Making Lux in the Club: High Fashion for Your Friday Night, *SAPNA Magazine*. Retrieved online June 18, 2011 from <http://sapnamagazine.com/2010/making-lux-in-the-club-high-fashion-for-your-friday-night/>

<sup>11</sup> Veloz, T. (c. 2011). “Red Hair-ing.”. [online image]. Making Lux in the Club: Saturday Night Fever, *SAPNA Magazine*. Retrieved online June 18, 2011 from <http://sapnamagazine.com/2010/making-lux-in-the-club-saturday-girls-night/>

South Asian models, are featured in a fashion photo shoot – a look that is described by SAPNA as going “from commercial to high fashion” (SAPNA Magazine, 2011c). It is interesting to note the proximity to European fashion magazines that these images represent – not only in style of clothing and poses, but also in the models themselves. Although both models are South Asian, it is difficult to place them as such due to their digitally lightened skinned, modified hair colour and lightened eyes. Although the selection of primarily light skinned models is one issue, an equally disconcerting issue is the *modification* and *manipulation* of skin colour on a female body, as done so in these representations. The image of “high fashion” is closely associated with Eurocentric ideas of beauty. Saraswati (2010) addresses this stating that, “the audience feels good looking at beautiful pictures...they will have an orientation toward these beautiful women as being good. In all of these ads, the models have white skin color, even if they are not considered Caucasian women themselves” (29). Through this process, white skin colour becomes associated as ‘beautiful’ and such becomes a desired standard of South Asian beauty.

Perhaps this is best described by Handa (2002) when she states that, “Brown girls in saris are immigrant and ethnic, not mainstream and fashionable” (161). Although SAPNA does feature editorials with ethnic fashions, the images overwhelmingly feature Europeanized representations of South Asian women. These images, once again, reveal the marketing of whiteness as an ideal – whiteness as a position of privilege, but also as a skin colour. Saraswati (2010) states that:

Access to whiteness, in its cosmopolitan sense...relies on one’s ability to embody the affective identities constructed as ‘cosmopolitan white’. Whiteness here is not simply coded as embodying specific biological features...but also as involving feelings of cosmopolitanness. At the heart of these ads lie powerful cultural narratives of how happiness is achieved by consuming specific products (29).

In this case the product being marketed is “high fashion”, which is equated with status and affluence. Hence, white skin colour can be seen as representing status mobility within these particular images. This can be further understood through Parameswaran & Cardoza’s (2009) work who argue that “non white woman perceive light skin color to be an asset that can be mobilized to move up the social and economic ladder” (227).

In interviews conducted by Purkayastha (2005) with young South Asian women growing up in the West, the interviewees recognized the challenges of negotiating identities as female, where one’s “South Asian-ness” is seen as undesirable. In the experience of interviewees, within the majority culture, darker complexion and “ethnic” features were not desirable to males from the dominant culture<sup>12</sup>. Hence, changes were made to fit the “white” beauty ideal, which was seen as the norm – including changes to one’s hair, dress etc. Such narratives reveal the lived experiences of South Asian girls, where messages regarding one’s skin colour and ethnicity are consistent – not only in the dominant community, but also through messages conveyed within South Asian media and within other communities of colour. The message throughout indicates the value and desirability of light skin.

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<sup>12</sup> These interviews were conducted in a geographic context where there were few individuals from communities of colour. Hence, the interviewee referred to the desirability of South Asians to males from the dominant, Caucasian community.

## Analysis: "Sexy & Successful"

Fig 8: (Below) Nomination for ANOKHI's "Sexy & Successful" Awards<sup>13</sup>



Do you know someone who you feel is *Sexy & Successful* and fits our criteria below? If your answer is YES, we want to know about them. Simply fill out the form below and hit 'SUBMIT' —it's that easy!



Fig 10: (Top Left) Raj Girn & Actress Lisa Raye<sup>14</sup>



Fig 9: ANOKHI Founder Raj Girn Poses for a photo shoot<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> ANOKHI Magazine. (2011). "Sexy and Successful Nominations". [online image]. Retrieved online June 05, 2011 from <http://www.anokhimagazine.com/sexyandsuccessful>

<sup>14</sup> ANOKHI Magazine. (c. 2011). "With Actress Lisa Raye". [online image]. Gallery – With Celebrities, *Open Chest with Raj Girn*. Retrieved online May 18, 2011 from <http://www.openchest.com/photos/with-celebrities/>

<sup>15</sup> ANOKHI Magazine. (c.2011). "The Magazine". [online image]. The Profile, *Open Chest with Raj Girn*. Retrieved online May 18, 2011 from <http://www.openchest.com/profile/>

As ANOKHI magazine delivers its campaign to recognize the “Sexy & Successful” within the South Asian diaspora, it offers clear criteria of which South Asians can be considered within this distinction. Individuals must “Work in the Fashion, Entertainment, Media, Professional, Business, Entrepreneurial, IT, Not-for-Profit industries” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011d). On the surface this may appear to be a venue of inclusion – as it is. South Asians are largely ignored within mainstream discourses and recognitions, particularly in the Western world. Recognizing South Asian achievements is commendable, as it offers voice and a platform for exposure.

However, it is important to consider *who* is constructed as both “sexy” and “successful”, as many South Asians are excluded from this conception. Affluence is highly associated with these constructions, based on the criteria for nomination. This representation once again privileges whiteness – both in skin colour through using beauty as a signifier (implied in the word “sexy”) and through rewarding the “cosmopolitan whiteness” – those who fit within the structure of Western privilege. This critique is not meant to diminish the valuable intent of the award or to devalue the contributions of many South Asian leaders, but rather to acknowledge the consequences of constructing success in a particular way. Chandler (2002) states of this, “deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal *whose* realities are privileged and whose are suppressed” (11).

SAPNA Magazine (2011a) relates to their demographic, stating on their website:

Relationships, that big report, friends, hitting the gym, and those new shoes you’ve had your eyes on...life is a constant juggling act. But who does it better than the South Asian American woman? We’ve got it together. Our dynamic world is held together by family, community, and our dedication to culture. In this hectic world, we center ourselves in our roots.

SAPNA similarly, constructs a specific type of South Asian woman that is reminiscent of a brown-faced *Sex in the City*<sup>16</sup> character. Such constructions, including that implied in the “Sexy & Successful” campaign, conjure up images of the South Asian business woman on Wall Street, who has been transformed from “tradition” to “modernity”, while still enjoying her share of Bollywood movies. Parameswaran & Cardoza (2009) refer to “commodity feminism”, where a supposed “feminist” approach of liberation and women’s freedom is utilized to commercially brand and market. They state that “These ‘feel good’ stories of women’s transformation into autonomous, empowered and mobile subjects construct a form of commodity feminism, a consumer discourse that raids feminist values, goals and meanings in order to articulate a depoliticized and branded image” (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009, 245).

While acknowledging their consumer base and target audience, it can also be noted that “social status, membership of particular social groups...are all signified by the products which we choose to consume” (Bignell, 2002, 36), in this case such magazines. However, the question of exclusion is one that is imperative, particularly in a social reality where there are limited spaces for South Asian diaspora woman. As a researcher I ask - whose experience do these constructions reflect – if anyone’s? Who does this image exclude? Which South Asian women are further marginalized if they cannot stand up to this supposed “perfect” balance of tradition and modernity? What does this construction reveal about the “reward of whiteness” and Westernization? Is the South Asian full-time mother who raises her children on a humble

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<sup>16</sup> *Sex in the City* was an American television show, chronicling the lives of four New York-based professional women. The characters exhibited hyper-cosmopolitan characteristics of life in an urban capital for a career woman. The show was well known for its celebration of high fashion / lifestyle and focus on relationships and sexuality.



household income in suburban Ontario not successful? Is she not permitted to enjoy the music, movies and arts of her community? Where is her place and her experiences valued in this space?

Images of Raj Girn, the Founder and CEO of ANOKHI Magazine, adorn the spaces of *Open Chest*, her interactive online forum. Her online profile describes her experience as a South Asian woman from humble beginnings to her rise as a female South Asian North American voice, throughout Canada, the US and UK. ANOKHI is the longest running and one of the first South Asian publications of its type. Undoubtedly, Girn can be considered a role model in her leaps in marketing, communications and gaining South Asians' mainstream visibility. In an industry where South Asians in the West are often left competing for stereotypical roles as "cab drivers and convenience store clerks...and with the right look can play terrorists as well" (Popkin, 2007), Girn's ANOKHI empire offers a space in the mainstream for South Asians to receive publicity, connect with fans and distribute their work.

However, the choice of the magazine to digitally lighten Girn's skin tone throughout her photo shoot pictures serves to divulge the question – who and what is constructed as ideals of female South Asian beauty and success? Do Girn's achievements not stand out to speak for themselves or must her skin colour be altered to fit this notion of "sexy" and "successful"? Can her natural skin colour – darker than what is portrayed – not stand by her achievements to represent success and perceived beauty? As argued by Bignell (2002) there are "particular mythic meanings which reinforce a dominant ideology" (13). Girn's "success" and achievements economically and as a media mogul are obvious – however a "mythic meaning" in skin colour is constructed, equating light skin and whiteness with success and beauty, which serves to perpetuate, disseminate and continue to reproduce the dominant ideology.

Within this construction of the “sexy and successful” is the idealized cosmopolitan South Asian woman who is created as being synonymous to the “ANOKHI woman”. This ideal is of a woman of particular socio-economic class, social status, cultural cosmopolitanism and consumerist. The magazine states of their idealized readership “*ANOKHI* women are many things! She’s integrated! She’s vocationally diversified as a professional career woman and/or homemaker! She’s single! She’s married! She’s intelligent and educated! She’s fashionable and brand savvy. She has solid disposable income. She’s a sophisticated and cosmopolitan woman, who’s proud of her cultural duality!” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011b). They further this construction, by adding youthfulness as a characteristic, informing readers that “The median age for South Asians is 30, 8% lower than the Canadian average of 38” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011b).

One potential positive element to this construction is that ANOKHI redefines conventional stereotypes of South Asians that are disseminated throughout mainstream discourses. This disrupts notions of creating dichotomies of labelling the magazines “right” or “wrong”, as they occupy an ambivalent and complicated space, where both empowerment and marginalization occur. However within this construction of the cosmopolitan South Asian woman, the reality of the experience of many South Asians becomes obscured. In asserting that the ANOKHI woman has a “solid disposable income” and is “integrated”, takes away from the reality of the systemic barriers faced through the process of immigration and settlement. Additionally, it is important to recognize that education does not necessarily equate to financial security, particularly in the case of those that are foreign-born, whose credentials and experiences abroad may not be recognised. To generalize that “South Asian consumers...have

healthy spending habits” (ANOKHI Magazine, 2011b) is to exclude marginalized South Asians and ignore the barriers they face in access within the West.

For example, in the City of Toronto, Statistics Canada has reported that 34.6% of South Asians families live below the Low-Income-Cut-Off, reflecting on the poverty that many South Asian community members are facing (South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario, 2011).

Additionally, South Asians who have come to Canada under the refugee application category, face even further challenges due to access wait times, and oftentimes, lack of financial resources upon arrival. Both ANOKHI and SAPNA do not seem to problematize socioeconomic differences and dynamics of power *within* South Asian communities, which further perpetuates the marginalization of particular South Asians. In considering this, it is important to recognize this experience, rather than to mask and dismiss the realities of many South Asians. Although not their target audience, I believe that such web spaces and media outlets could be utilized as a platform to address the needs of South Asian communities in the West and foster a space for dialogue, while continuing to maintain relevant to the interests of their readership.



**Fig 11: Actress Rani Mukherjee in SAPNA<sup>17</sup>**



**Fig 12: Modeling bridal make-up in SAPNA<sup>18</sup>**



**Fig 13 & 14: Caucasian model Carmen Johnson models South Asian bridal fashions in SAPNA<sup>19</sup>**

<sup>17</sup> SAPNA Magazine. (2009). "She's Got Rani Mukherjee Eyes: Bridal Make Up for Darker Skin tones". [online image]. Retrieved online June 02, 11 from <http://sapnamagazine.com/2009/shes-got-rani-mukherjee-eyes-bridal-make-up-for-darker-skintones/>

<sup>18</sup> SAPNA Magazine. (c. 2011). "Purple Shadow 1". [online image]. Purple Shadow to Make Brown Eyes Pop. Retrieved online June 02, 2011 from <http://sapnamagazine.com/2011/purple-shadow-to-make-brown-eyes-pop/>

<sup>19</sup> Mahmud, I. (c. 2011). "Desi Bridal Fashion Lookbook". [online image]. Retrieved online June 02, 2011 from <http://sapnamagazine.com/2009/desi-bridal-fashion-lookbook/>

The notion of marriage and the ideal South Asian bride are communicated through the representations found in both ANOKHI and SAPNA magazine. Heterosexual marriage within South Asian communities, particularly for females is emphasized as an indicator of life success<sup>20</sup>. Talbani & Hasanali (2002) state that “from early childhood, children are encouraged to socialize and are expected to marry within the religiosocial group, especially girls, in whom the idea of marriage is inculcated as an important goal in their lives” (618). Such expectations can be constricting and fail to acknowledge the limited parameters of choice that can marginalize some South Asians. The extent of these parameters can greatly vary depending on personal circumstance, socio economic status, education and other factors. Hence, it is imperative not to generalize this as the overarching South Asian female experience.

It is important to acknowledge that within the context of the target readership, the parameters of choice may be greater, with emphasis on attaining education or other goals that define perceived life success. However, even among this supposed affluent and “modern” class that ANOKHI constructs as an ideal readership, the importance and significance of marriage continues to be emphasized and defines what is constructed as an ideal South Asian female. The repeated highlighting of marriage throughout both web spaces serves to reiterate the expectation of getting married. It should also be noted that this expectation of marriage is true of the dominant culture as well, with stereotypes such as that of the “spinster” for woman whose choices to do not include marriage. As in ANOKHI, mainstream magazines from the dominant culture also tailor to the heterosexual conceptions and ideals of marriage.

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<sup>20</sup> This narrative also excludes the experiences of LGBTIQ South Asian communities. Hence, it not only marginalizes heterosexual woman whose choices do not include marriage, but also fails to acknowledge the unions and partnerships within LGBTIQ South Asian communities. As LGBTIQ communities of colour often face distinct experiences of marginalization, a failure to recognize the existence of the community is problematic.

Jha & Adelman (2009) further these limitations arguing that for young South Asian women “where marriage is critical for lifelong security and economic stability, discriminatory practices may disenfranchise a significant segment of the female population” (78). Among these discriminatory practices is the preference for light skinned females over dark skinned females. Hussein (2010) corroborates this, stating that “skin colour is considered critical in defining women’s beauty, her desirability or “saleability” in the marriage market” (411). Jha & Adelman (2009) conducted a study that similarly found that, light skinned females on South Asian matrimonial sites were significantly preferred over darker skinned females. They also found that “working women earning an income became desirable in the marriage market” (70), however despite income potential, skin colour continues to play a significant role in desirability. Glenn (2008) corroborates this finding, stating that South Asian men are socially positioned to be able to “compensate” for dark-skin with education, family status, or economic position when seeking a partner, whereas young women are more so evaluated on perceived beauty standards in finding a marital partner.

In considering all this, the bridal models featured within the spaces of these magazines are overwhelmingly light skinned, either by natural skin tone, make up application or digital altering of skin tone. The narrative of the “perfect” South Asian bride is created – with the eyes down, no smile and a docility that feeds into the stereotype of a South Asian woman as submissive, passive and obedient (Handa, 2002). Ironically, this image that is consistently perpetuated is one that is in stark contrast to the cosmopolitan, “on-the-go”, 21<sup>st</sup> century woman that the magazine strives to construct. The myth that is created through these images is that heterosexual marriage is vital in the lives of South Asian woman and a defining term of “success”. Additionally, fair skin is associated with the ideal bride, once again correlating beauty

with skin colour. Purkayastha (2005) notes on the beauty ideal "For females the pressure to attain standards of beauty inflict a feeling or need either to be like whites or to project an exoticized, sultry image...the norms of beauty are most often based on whatever is typical of whites: light skin, greater height, certain body types...etc." (33).

In SAPNA magazine in particular, it is interesting to note that of the six main sections one can visit, four of those sections are related to beauty or fashion – with one whole section being devoted to "shaddi" or marriage. The emphasis on the importance of this particular social construction is problematic in what is defined as a "success" for a South Asian woman and also the messages regarding skin colour and the South Asian bride. In other words being a South Asian female, the narrative is created that one must marry and that beauty of a bride is defined in terms of skin colour.

The narrative perpetuated within these web spaces is one that is consistent with that of the dominant culture – where marriage / finding a heterosexual partner and "beauty" of the bride are highly emphasized. One only has to look at the success of wedding-centered shows that largely feature mainstream marriages, such as TLC's "Say Yes to the Dress", or Slice Network's "Rich Bride, Poor Bride", which have created reality shows to chronicle the process. However, one can argue that mainstream representations of South Asian matrimonial are constructed differently than the dominant union. Oftentimes there are overrepresentations of being forced, arranged or a form of obligatory patriarchal cultural practice (Handa, 2002). Where marriages of the dominant group may be seen in the light of love and choice, South Asian marriages are often

not constructed in the same regard<sup>21</sup>. Hence, it is important to deconstruct the type of bride that is constructed within these web pages.

In an ironic contradiction, SAPNA features an article about actress Rani Mukherjee (top left), who is said to be a “dark skinned woman”, which is arguable in itself. The article states “...the majority of India’s women come closer to Freida Pinto’s complexion than Aishwariya Rai’s. We can’t change the system, today, but what we can do is share one fantastic desi bridal look for medium to dark skinned women” (Khan, 2011 October). Firstly, it is interesting to note the submission that “we can’t change the system”, when in fact the magazine is in the position of knowledge production, reproduction and dissemination. The magazine could serve as a space to show the diversity of woman represented within the South Asian colour spectrum, hence participating in “changing the system”. Rather, they are attempting to market a type of “cure” for what is perceived as being a beauty impairment. This blatant disregard for the agency of editorial staff in challenging hegemonic constructions of colour is problematic.

Furthermore, one can argue that by asserting that the system cannot be changed, consumers of this web space are receiving the message to surrender to colourism and work within the oppressive system through modifying one’s skin colour. In this case the products that are being sold to the reader (make-up products for medium to dark skinned South Asians) carry a narrative, offering relief and hope to the undesirable South Asian woman through consumption of a product. Hussein (2010) states of marketing whiteness, “...the promise

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<sup>21</sup> For example, mainstream representations of South Asian unions, are in association with cultural confines on women. For example, films such as *Bend It Like Beckham* or *Mississippi Masala*, are created within a mainstream cinematic construction. They can be commended for discussing important cultural issues and offering characters for South Asian youth to relate to. However, they also portray South Asian parents as traditional, racist and patriarchal. Other examples would include the film *Water*, which tells the trajectory and tragedy of a child-widow in India. Although these films provide a snapshot of an experience, there also needs to be recognition that there are few spaces showcasing South Asian unions in a positive regard, within mainstream representations.



of their product in the ads reaffirms the cultural discourse of South Asia that associates fair skin with marriage prospect, career progress and confidence in oneself“ (418).

In the bottom two images, it is interesting to note the use of Carmen Johnson, a Caucasian model, who is showcasing the latest in South Asian fashions. Perhaps the most prominent feature of this particular image is the accompanying tagline, which states “You too can have a ‘white wedding’. The traditional red or blue bridal outfit is being passed up for white fusion looks!” (SAPNA Magazine, 2009 October). The Caucasian model is clearly meant to be interplay with the notion of a South Asian person being able to have a “white wedding”, which is constructed in this dialogue as something to be desired by South Asians. It implies that a South Asian would desire a “white wedding”, which is something that one cannot ordinarily obtain, due to one’s race. The notion of “passing up” one’s traditional wedding garb for a “white” look, is marketed as a desirable and attainable marker of modernity. To have a hybrid identity, is equated to becoming closer to “whiteness”, fostering an aspiration to relinquish one’s cultural practice for a proposed “modern” look that is the “latest trend in Desi bridal fashion” (SAPNA Magazine, 2009 October).

With such few mainstream spaces where South Asian females are represented within the entertainment sector, the choice of a Caucasian model to feature bridal fashion by a South Asian magazine should be considered. Given that SAPNA is a South Asian publication, featuring this image can be argued to be purposeful in its’ intent, particularly with the accompanying tag line. Firstly, it can be noted that despite being “white”, the skin of the model is digitally altered to be further lightened. Secondly, by showcasing clothing worn by brides in this manner, it appears that the model is displaying an ethnic costume, rather than something that has cultural significance. The clothing, when outside of its cultural context, becomes ornamental and

“exotic”. Featuring this image as a “trend” in bridal fashion, is to commodify the culture itself, where in the subcontinent of South Asia (and throughout South Asian diasporas), women continue to wear ethnic clothing, and do not experience the same gaze of “trending”. The reality of South Asian woman, particularly in the West, would be that in many spaces wearing of one’s ethnic clothing would result in further marginalization within the public sphere. Bignell (2002) argues that “texts and media position their audiences in particular ways and audiences understand and enjoy the media in different and diverse ways” (3). Although one could contend that the “race” of the model is irrelevant, as the purpose is to showcase a fashion – I would argue that the choice is deliberate to foster the “yearning for lightness”, an economic decision to produce a certain consumer where “skin lightening has been incorporated into transnational flows of capital, goods, people, and culture” (Glenn, 2008, 282).

### *Analysis: Bollywood...or Hollywood?*



**Fig 15: SAPNA Magazine – Image of Bollywood Actress Aishwarya Rai; Original picture featured in Elle India magazine<sup>22</sup>**

<sup>22</sup> SAPNA Magazine. (2010). “Aishwarya loses her clothes, poses for Elle Magazine”. [online image]. Aishwarya Rai Bachchan poses for Elle India wearing Ayesha Depala. *Original Photograph Elle India Dec 2010*. Retrieved online May 19, 2011 from <http://sapnamagazine.com/2010/aishwarya-loses-her-clothes-poses-for-elle-magazine/>



Fig 16: ANOKHI Magazine features actress Saira Mohan



Fig 18: (Above Right) Pooja Kumar photographed in person<sup>23</sup>

Fig 17: (Left) Bollywood actress Pooja Kumar in ANOKHI Magazine<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Stámas, M. & Wenn.com. (n.d.). "Pooja Kumar". *ICelebz*. Retrieved online May 29, 2011 from [http://www.icelebz.com/celebs3/pooja\\_kumar/images/photo1.jpg](http://www.icelebz.com/celebs3/pooja_kumar/images/photo1.jpg)

<sup>24</sup> Lions, V. (c. 2009). "Open Chest: Pooja Kumar". [online image]. *ANOKHI Magazine*. Retrieved online May 29, 2011 from <http://www.anokhimagazine.com/story/2010/01/07/raj-girns-open-chest-interview-pooja-kumar>

Bollywood provides a prime example of the impact of globalization on creating a “global feminine body” that privileges the light-skinned woman, who closely matches the ideal of Western standards in physical appearance, behaviours and characteristics. The name itself - “Bollywood” is a direct derivative from the American film industry’s “Hollywood”. Although Bollywood is not representative of South Asia as a whole, but rather the Indian film industry, Bollywood has transcended many linguistic and cultural boundaries in its reach, with consumers from South Asian diasporas across the world – particularly in Asia, North America and Europe. Secondly, within the mainstream, Bollywood is closely associated to the idea of “South Asian”, regardless of the fact that these films are primarily in the Hindi language, only one of the multitude of languages spoken by the South Asian diaspora. SAPNA Magazine’s Bengali columnist Maher Hoque addresses this, stating that “The Indian Subcontinent is too diverse a land in and of itself to be effectively promulgated by one message... I don’t speak a lick of Hindi but there are Bollywood songs that I know by heart. I have no idea what I’m singing” (Hoque, 2005 September). Hence, analysis of the representations within Bollywood, are relevant in considering the constructions of colour within the South Asian community at large.

Kassam (2007) conducted a study on young South Asian Canadians, aged 19-29, to determine the role that Bollywood cinema had in the construction and negotiation of identity. Kassam (2007) argues that “popular Indian films have been acknowledged for their ability to educate diasporic South Asian youth about their culture, traditions and values” (1). Additionally, the interviews reveal that Bollywood provides an avenue to negotiate hybrid identities, and “fill a cultural vacuum during times when other symbols of South Asian culture might not have been readily available or visible” (2). Given this significant finding, it can be argued that Bollywood may have an influence on young South Asian women in the Canadian context.

Bollywood, and by extension Bollywood actors / actresses, are seen as cultural icons, given the widespread popularity and distribution of films. Bollywood has been influential in terms of fashion, beauty and lifestyle, showcasing the latest in trends. Increasingly, Bollywood has become transfixed with propagating Westernized trends, products and cultural norms (Runkle, 2003). Glenn (2008) argues that the “main avatars of feminine allure are Bollywood actresses” within the context of transnational symbols of South Asian beauty. Runkle (2003) has researched Bollywood from its early beginnings, into its present day standing and argues that Bollywood has become fixated with the Euro-American lifestyle. She states that:

We can envision Hindi films as multiply centered, as part of a world in which Swiss meadows can stand in for Indian ones without contradiction. Even films with plots set in India often have dance sequences filmed in international locations, most often in Europe, to provide an international flavour...” (56).

Osuri (2008) corroborates these findings, suggesting that transnational constructions of Indian beauty norms have become highly Eurocentric, criticizing “the discourse of a cosmopolitan Indian femininity in the circulation of Aishwarya Rai as an official and unofficial Indian ambassador” (109), and challenging this highly narrow conception of a South Asian woman.

ANOKHI and SAPNA both feature updates and images from Bollywood superstars. The problem here is multifaceted – not only Pooja Kumar’s and Aishwarya Rai’s obvious digital skin lightening, but also in *who* can become a Bollywood superstar. For example, light skinned woman such as Aishwarya Rai and Saira Mohan who are physically closer in proximity to whiteness in both features and personal characteristics, in large part fair better in the industry. Mohan is biracial possessing both South Asian and Caucasian ancestry, placing her in reality closer to the white beauty ideal. In the case of Rai, features that are already highly European are

further Anglicized in this image (i.e. skin colour, eye colour) to the point where she is not even light skinned, but literally an unnaturally bright white.

The magazine images of the female Bollywood actresses are manipulated to be so far in proximity to “South Asian-ness” in terms of physical characteristics<sup>25</sup>, that all three cannot be placed as Indian without knowing their ancestry. These images not only demonstrate the favouritism to light skin, but also send a greater message of success and beauty associated with the Western life. Hunter (2011) addresses this stating, that “the mass marketing of these images of white beauty and a ‘white lifestyle’ build on the long standing European colonial ideologies that valorize white beauty, European culture, and white aesthetics” (143). This ideology is further cemented by using cultural icons to further disseminate this message.

### *Analysis: Challenging Normative Constructions*

Although both spaces can be understood to be disseminating problematic constructions of skin colour and the myth of an ideal South Asian woman, ANOKHI and SAPNA offer sites for acknowledging gender politics, racism and addressing pertinent issues within South Asian communities. Although the acknowledgements often lack depth in offering an understanding of the complexity of issues, they are nevertheless creating a platform for questioning normalized understandings and behaviours in an approachable way. Further discussion of the ways in which the web spaces operate to challenge normatives will be explored in greater length throughout this chapter.

The existence of the spaces in their very nature challenge normative constructions of what it means to be a South Asian woman through the means of alternative representation. As a

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<sup>25</sup> For example, actresses are frequently featured with grey, blue or green eyes. Although such eye colour can naturally exist among South Asians, this feature is predominantly seen on individuals of European decent.

young South Asian growing up in the West, within a community of limited South Asians, I rarely saw representations that remotely reflected my ethnic community within elements of entertainment and popular culture that I was drawn to as a teen. When representations of South Asian woman did occur, it was generally in stereotyped roles that did not reflect my experience as a young, second generation South Asian in Canada. Nor did they offer positive alternatives to, what I perceived at the time to be dichotomized cultural values that I was negotiating. In my experience, the only option that mainstream media offered me was to polarize my home life as “East” – being traditional, and my life in the larger community as “West” – being somehow modern and free. Although I cannot confirm for this to be true, I speculate that had alternative representations existed, I would likely have negotiated facets of my identity in a different way as a young person.

ANOKHI and SAPNA feature South Asian woman – as leaders, as educated professionals, as musicians, as entertainers, as figures of beauty. Although problematic in their constructions, they nevertheless offer a place for South Asian females to see a reflection of their community within popular culture. In a way, it can be argued these magazines mirror the position of their target consumers – in constant redefinition, with contradictions amidst themselves. Rather than simply criticize the magazines, as a researcher, it is imperative to also acknowledge the work that such spaces have done, as to not diminish the positive contributions that such magazines have made to the experiences of negotiating identity for young South Asian women.

## Recent articles

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[ DATING + RELATIONSHIPS ]

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### When Black Men Date South Asian Women

June 03, 2011 "He was disappointed." The words blinked to me on the screen, and released a strong cocktail of emotions – a combination of irritation, irony and even apathy. [\[More\]](#)

The June 2011 feature article in SAPNA Magazine features an editorial titled “When Black Men Date South Asian Woman”. Within the article, the magazine speaks to the South Asian audience, stating that “we need to begin to respect the personal unions in our community” (SAPNA Magazine, 2011d), addressing some of the challenges South Asian woman face when pursuing partners outside of their respective ethnic collective. This article is an example of the web space being used as a tool to challenge normative constructions. Within South Asian communities the vast majority of marital partnerships have been amongst partners with the same ethnic background, and doing so otherwise largely continues to be regarded as a cultural taboo (Jethwani, 2001). Hence, mainstream representations of South Asian partnerships have been within the same ethnic group, constructing a specific collective identity in regards to partnering norms. This article not only provides a visual image of a partnership rarely acknowledged within

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<sup>26</sup> SAPNA Magazine. (c. 2011). “When Black Men Date South Asian Women”. [online image]. Retrieved online June 5, 2011 from <http://sapnamagazine.com/2011/when-black-men-date-south-asian-women/>



South Asian communities, but also provides a series of arguments and texts to support said partnership.

However, it should be noted that the magazine does fail to acknowledge the role of skin colour in this taboo South Asian union. The article simply states that “Most South Asian parents wish or demand for their progeny to mate with the identical cultural background...this attitude is often escalated when it comes to unions between Black Men and South Asian Women” (SAPNA Magazine, 2011d). A deeper analysis as to why this may be the case is missing, losing an opportunity to deconstruct notions of race and colour that are prominently circulated in various communities.

### *Analysis: Challenging Colourism*

Despite perpetuating colourism, both ANOKHI and SAPNA also feature articles or comments to challenge colourism within the web space. For example, SAPNA presents an article titled “The Color Complex: Is the Fixation Really Fair?”. Columnist Anushay Hossain, asserts that “Our culture attaches a certain prestige to whiteness, as though it possesses a magical power to swing open doors for you and instantly make life better” (Hossain, 2010 March), acknowledging the arbitrary notion of placing value on skin tone. This specific article recognizes the history of colourism within the South Asian context, stating that “While the French ruled by using language as an extensive tool of colonialism, imparting the attitude that if you spoke French, you were French, the British created racial boundaries by instilling the attitude that you will always be inferior because you are not white” (Hossain, 2010 March). Revealing these insights into the roots of colourism, recognizes that colourism is not merely a ‘cultural issue’, as often framed by the mainstream, to the readership.

The author further challenges the normalized constructions of skin colour asking the reader, “How can we hold the people of a region which is home to thousands of diverse dialects, religions and cultures hostage to one concept of beauty? And that of a skin color which is not even natural to us?...is it just a case of what we have been fed through mainstream media...?” (Hossain, 2010 March). By *directly* addressing the audience, these questions serve to foster a dialogue to question one’s own understanding and beliefs about colour as a reader. Furthermore, ironically, Hossain (2011) points out an integral accomplice in disseminating colourism – mainstream media, a system which SAPNA Magazine can be argued to be perpetuating through their own content. Although ambivalence is by no means a perfect stance<sup>27</sup>, it is noteworthy to acknowledge this specific article, which addresses colourism in some depth and useful insight to the SAPNA reader.

ANOKHI features a similar article, titled “Fair Game”, which discusses skin lightening agent usage in the South Asian community. Addressing the marketing schemes of these products, author Mishal Cazmi (2010) states that, “The carefully marketed rhetoric seems to suggest that darker women suffer from a condition and that skin-whitening products offer a cure” (Cazmi, 2010). By unpacking the popular narrative used to market these products, ANOKHI places into question the validity of not only the marketing campaign, but the product itself. As with the SAPNA article, this editorial acknowledges the history of colourism – particularly in India, recognizing the role of colonialism and also the complexity of “social organization and ideas

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<sup>27</sup> It can also be argued that through lacking fixed binaries, both magazines are able to appeal to a wider audience. Hence, when the magazine does challenge mainstream constructions, perhaps they have the potential to engage a broader demographic that may not otherwise challenge normative beliefs.

about light skin entrenched within the country” (Cazmi, 2010), which include issues of caste and class that have been attributed to compounding the colour issue.

This article is noteworthy in challenging normative constructions, through bringing voice to very active South Asian feminist movements. Mainstream discourses construct South Asian woman as a docile, uneducated and obedient body, which is a stereotype overturned through the activism that is able to bring transformations within the political sphere (Ghandi, 2002). Often, this South Asian, feminist activist voice is not given mainstream exposure. Cazmi, brings to the forefront the contributions of some of these voices, addressing the work of the All India Democratic Women’s Congress and Women of Worth, who worked to challenge colourism within India, through various campaigns. This is significant as Ghandi (2002) states that, “diasporic Indians possess an important agency in building alliances, mobilizing resources and translating advocacy strategies across borders” (361). Through offering a platform to gain exposure and demonstrate that activism is in fact vibrant in South Asian communities, others may be piqued to consider contributing to the work of transnational activist networks.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

### *Reflecting on Colourism*

In looking at messages that are conveyed regarding skin colour, the most striking element on both web spaces is the contradictions that are apparent within the text and images. Whilst both sites feature articles that challenge and contest the privileging of light skin within the South Asian community, the representations are overwhelmingly of lighter skinned South Asians. Furthermore, it is not the image of a light skinned model itself, but rather that images have been digitally tampered to create a lighter skin on what is in reality, a darker skinned body. This is further amplified by the over-emphasizing of typically Caucasian features on South Asian models (i.e. use of blue eye contacts). However, the images are not just a matter of skin colour – the individuals portrayed of South Asian women emulate Western, White standards of beauty, and associating whiteness with success. This speaks to overarching role of racism, in privileging not only light skin and Caucasian facial features, but also whiteness itself.

The multiple mentions on both sites reaffirm the reality that the issue of colourism is a lived experience of many young South Asian women. Aujla (2000) addresses this in her writings on second generation South Asians, stating that “the desire to be white or possess typically western features is, unfortunately, quite common. The impact of this is compounded for multigenerational South Asian Canadian women who have been socialized into the Western beauty ideal” (4). Although the magazines attempt to address the issue on a surface level, the same pages continue to perpetuate the very colourist message they are critiquing. One could equate this to mainstream Western magazines, that often feature articles about self-esteem and

“throwing away the diet pills”, while exclusively featuring unnaturally thin ideals of women from cover to cover. Hunter (2002) speaks to the beauty standards for women, stating that:

Light skin tone is interpreted as beauty, and beauty operates as social capital for women. Women who possess this form of capital (beauty) are able to convert it into economic capital, educational capital, or...prestige related to things such as social status, reputation, and social networks. All of these forms of prestige can be converted into economic or educational capital (177).

Therefore, considering the ideals of female South Asian beauty and success that are constructed is imperative to acknowledge the very real consequences of these constrictive and normative images on the lives of women.

An analysis of web spaces, targeted at young, South Asian female diasporas in the West, reveals that colourism persists within mainstreams representations of colour. Light skin is associated with the attributes of beauty and success, where dark skin is concealed, misrepresented or underrepresented. Mainstream constructs market a “desire for whiteness”, that not only favours light skin, but also associates the globalized Western, cosmopolitan body, as a desirable and attainable ideal. Modernity and affluence are characterized in the context of whiteness, fostering an ideology that continues to sustain white privilege. However, an analysis of the target web spaces demonstrates the complexity of such discourse, as these very same spaces are also used to challenge oppressive normalized values, beliefs and ideology.

The limitations and scope of the study, allowed for a narrow slice of perspective into the constructions of colour. The impact of such images can only be hypothetically considered, keeping in mind the role of media as a socializing agent. Henceforth, as a future consideration or possible research focus area, the experiences of youth themselves in negotiating said images would provide a holistic and broader understanding of the role that the colourism play within the

lives of young, South Asian woman. This approach would shift the research “object” from being the media, as done in this research project, and rather focus on the experiences of the consumer.

### *Reconceptualizing Colourism – Thinking Forward*

In analysing colourism within the South Asian context, it is evident that colourism continues to be deeply entrenched within normalized ideals of South Asian beauty. However, when the issue of skin colour is further deconstructed, it can be understood that colourism is not simply a cultural issue of any community of colour where colourism persists. Through pointing out both the blatant and subtle ways in which colourism operates within the lives of South Asian women, it is imperative to see colourism within the broader processes of racism, from which it continues to be propagated and flourished. In conducting the semiotic analysis, it has been my intent to remove the cloak of “culture” that reduces hegemony and systemic power systems to merely practices of a traditional or patriarchal community.

Handa (2002) speaks to the challenges that scholars and activists from communities of colour face in responding to research on their communities, as one can begin to feel protective of the way in which a group is conceived and/or constructed. She addresses this conflicting position of wanting to speak to the issues within one’s community, but not wanting to further stigmatize a group, stating that “at public forums, we steered away from discussing the ways in which women’s lives were regulated, yet privately we anguished, obsessed, and even joked over the ways in which our lives as women were restricted” (Handa, 2002, 11). Handa further explores this problematic location questioning if “in a context of racism, where hanging out your “dirty laundry” is even more dangerous because it opens you and your community to more stereotypes or reinforces stereotypes, is it possible to expose all truths?” (Handa, 2002, 16). As a researcher

it has been my aim to remove the cultural stigma of colourism away from a particular community – despite its relevance and prevalence within that community. Rather, it is necessary to explore how processes of colour hierarchies are able to be produced, maintained and disseminated, as to serve the existing systems of privilege. Osuri (2008) further speaks to this stating that “the success of multinational skin-whitening industries in India, can appear as evidence of India’s ‘backwardness’ in its self-loathing regarding dark skin...This fissure speaks of an ongoing struggle within postcolonial contexts...” (121).

A shallow understanding of colourism only serves to reinforce the dichotomization of “East” versus “West” values, through perpetuating the existence of the dichotomy through the forthcoming South Asian generations in Canada. The oversimplification of colourism takes away from the ability to assess why and how systemic barriers, history, colonization and racism serve as important factors in the continuation of various inequities among South Asian ethnic collectives. Often the “East” identity is associated with being backwards or lacking progression, with the “West” values being an ideal to achieve in order for females to assert agency and equality. Not only does this ethnocentric approach minimize the experience of young South Asian woman, overlooking the importance of inequities within the West as a factor, but it also misconstrues Eastern philosophies to perpetuate Eurocentric power systems. Experiences of inequality and oppression as a result of colourism are lived experience and cannot be ignored, as young South Asian woman continue to negotiate hybrid and complex identities. With this said, one must ask – where are spaces of resistance that challenge oppressive constructions of colour? How can media systems be used as an ally to challenge these constructions?

In considering the marginalization of South Asians within mainstream media systems, it is imperative to examine colourism from a lens which acknowledges the complex histories of

South Asian people not only in Canada, but also throughout the world, where colonization and exclusion have played important roles in the normalization of certain beliefs. With this notion in mind, one can remove the stigma and problematic construction of colourism being a product of a patriarchal, traditional or otherwise backwards cultures. It is only through such a nuanced approach that one can begin to conceptualize alternative discourses to challenge whiteness and shift system power imbalances that continue to marginalize not only South Asians, but other communities of colour throughout the globe.



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