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## The Causes, Contributors, and Consequences of Colorism Among Various Cultures

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**The Causes, Contributors, and Consequences of Colorism Among Various Cultures**

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## Introduction

As the timeline of the world progresses onward, it appears that the human race battles more and more “-isms,” or ideologies, associated with discriminatory practices. For example, racism, sexism, and classism are some of the most common problematic “-isms” that the world faces today (Kurunmäki, 2018). Discrimination is defined as the prejudice or unfair treatment against an individual or group based on social attributes such as race, gender, and social status. Two practices of discrimination that can easily get confused with one another are racism and colorism. Although both are intertwined with each other, they have distinct definitions, causes, and consequences. According to The National Community for Conference and Justice (NCCJ), racism is defined as encompassing the individual, cultural, and institutional beliefs that systematically oppresses people of a particular race or ethnicity. Colorism, on the other hand, is a product of racism that discriminates against people of darker skin and gives privilege to those that are lighter skinned in any society or culture. Like modern racism, the origins of colorism are rooted within the history of slavery. Slavery itself was a practice of racism but within it, colorism existed. For instance, slave owners would assign domestic tasks to lighter skinned slaves and more arduous work to darker skinned slaves (“Colorism”). Over time, colorism evolved into all parts of society, especially the labor market and the media. Within African American history in particular, the “paper-bag test” was used to determine whether a black person would be hired for a job or accepted into certain clubs or fraternities. The premise of this test was that if a black person’s skin matched the color of a paper-bag or was lighter, they would be accepted. Those that were darker would be rejected (“Colorism”). This phenomenon still exists today in professional spaces, although no one may say it outright. Media also heavily perpetuates colorism. In the Hollywood film industry alone, dark skinned lead actors and actresses are still

underrepresented. Whenever there is inclusion and diversity within a cast, it largely consists of lighter skinned or mixed people of color. Because of how colorism is steadfastly present across many different facets of society, its consequences are severe. Darker skinned individuals suffer abuse that extends beyond lost opportunities, such as being labeled with slurs and being seen as less than human. Simultaneously, lighter skinned individuals are afforded certain privileges, such as gaining those opportunities and representation not given to darker skinned people. To fully understand these consequences, the history of how colorism arose must be discussed more in-depth. This thesis will start with some background information about colorism, specifically its origins. Following this, the thesis will analyze the causes, contributors, and consequences of colorism among various cultures.

## **Background**

Because colorism is a product of racism, its origins can be traced back in history to the beginnings of racism. Both racism and colorism have roots in early colonialism by the Europeans. Colonialism began with the Crusades in 1095 when Christians were persuaded by the Pope to defend themselves against Muslims. During this period, the European rulers felt extremely threatened by their foreign enemies and with the message of the Catholic Church urging them to partake in the killing and pillaging of Muslims, the Church, the kings, and the people became unified in their mission to return Europe to its former glory and power. The Crusades reinforced the European's feeling of superiority over other races and because they used religion to justify their actions, they felt they were doing right by God (Bulhan, 2015). These claims of racial and religious supremacy were continued to be utilized to justify the colonization of the Americas in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the genocide of Native Americans. With further conquest

into the continent of Africa, the Atlantic Slave Trade began, and the land, resources, and African people were exploited by Europeans. Racism fueled both the Atlantic Slave Trade and the colonization of Africa. Black people were considered to be associated with evil and seen as less than human. For example, colonists used religious text to justify their hatred toward black people. Christian colonists would cite Cain's exile and intentionally misinterpret the curse bestowed on anyone that harmed him, as a curse only placed on his black descendants (Anekwe, 2014). Over the centuries, colonization expanded beyond the Americas and Africa to include Asian and Latin countries. In all these places and more across the globe, Europeans unremittingly used racism and their self-claimed superiority to enable their crimes.

After the colonization of the Americas and Africa, colorism evolved from racism primarily through the practice of slavery. Slavery was done systemically, designed to create division not only between black and white people, but between darker skinned black people and lighter skinned black people. Willis Lynch, a British slaveowner from the West Indies, wrote that the most effective way to segregate black people was to "use the dark skin slaves vs. the light skin slaves and the light skin slaves vs. the dark skin slaves." Following Lynch's teachings, slaveowners in America separated light skinned slaves from dark skinned slaves. The slaves that were assigned domestic work were often the biracial children of the slaveowners and slaves, so they were of mixed race and light skinned. Contrarily, slaves that were dark skinned were confined to work in the fields and were abused and tortured relentlessly. This systemic practice of slavery helped to bring about colorism within the African American community (Anekwe, 2014). Subsequently, colorism became an effective strategy in colonizing and dividing people in other continents and countries across the world as well.

## South Asian Culture

In South Asian culture, colorism has been a prominent issue for a long time and shows little signs of disappearing anytime soon. South Asia consists of countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Although British colonialism is often tied to modern day colorism in South Asia, the early origins of colorism are not fully known. Most scholars agree however, that the Indian caste system existed long before colonialism and played some role in stratification based on the color of one's skin (Modi, 2016). The Aryans established the caste system when they migrated to northern India around 1500 BC. They disregarded local customs, conquering villages and pushing Indians into the south or mountains and jungles. Shortly after their settlement, the Aryans organized their new society into categories based on a variety of factors such as religious devotion, occupational status, and skin color. At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins; this class consisted of priests, the wealthy, and those with fair skin. Next were the middle castes such as the Kshatriyas, or warriors, followed by the Vaishyas, or merchants. Manual laborers, the poor, and the very dark skinned were classified as Sudras (Modi, 2016). Today, discriminating by castes in India is illegal; however, it is still practiced in rural areas and violence still occurs at times due to caste tensions.

When the British ruled India from 1858 to 1957, they continued the caste system but instead of stratifying people on a multitude of cultural factors, they categorized primarily by skin color and occupation, with Europeans at the very top of the hierarchy. To efficiently rule India, the British used this system to determine who could work alongside them in the government in high positions and other white-collar jobs (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2019). Additionally, the Calico Act of 1721, which banned the export of cotton from India into Britain, left the economy crippled and the Bengal weavers unemployed. This created further divisions in the class system

of India and made it difficult for those at the bottom of the social ladder to climb up because they did not have access to any educational or financial resources (Regmi, 2020). In this way, the British colonization of India reinforced colorism within the culture of India and adjacent South Asian countries.

In contemporary South Asian society, media is one of the primary agents that perpetuates colorism. The film industry of India, Bollywood, is the main perpetrator. Since its beginnings in the 1930s, Bollywood has continued to uphold colorist ideals that were implemented during the British occupation of India. It is very common in Bollywood movies to find that the villains are typically of a lower caste and dark skinned, while the heroes and protagonists are in an upper caste and fair skinned (Regmi, 2020). Additionally, Bollywood is notorious for casting light skinned actors and actresses, with more pressure being put on the women to be light skinned. For example, some of the most famous and most recycled names in Bollywood films are Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Katrina Kaif, and Kareena Kapoor – all light skinned Indians. Because Bollywood does not play an active role in diminishing colorism but instead contributes to it, the film industry sets unrealistic beauty standards for their South Asian audiences.

There is a range of diversity in the skin tones of South Asians, but Bollywood depicts the most beautiful as those with fair skin and Eurocentric features. The South Asian cosmetic industry takes advantage of this and capitalizes off of colorism and further contributes to it. In television commercials and newspapers, skin lightening products such as Fair and Lovely are heavily advertised. Bollywood actors and actresses are shown in commercials advertising bleaching creams and becoming more attractive after using it (Vijaya, 2019). In this way, the film industry and the cosmetic industry work hand-in-hand to perpetuate colorism in India and other South Asian societies.

Women bear the brunt of the consequences of colorism more than men in South Asian cultures. One such consequence is the marriageability of South Asian women being linked to the color of their skin. In countries like India and Bangladesh, a woman is not seen as desirable if she is dark skinned, and her value as a bride decreases. To compensate for dark skin, women are expected to have higher education, a high-status occupation, or come from a wealthy family if they are to be considered a worthy bride (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2019). The caste system is therefore preserved through these arrangements and the discrimination against dark skinned individuals is continuously passed down through generations. Meanwhile, light skinned women are seen as the standard of beauty and have no problem finding suitors; in many cases, being light skinned triumphs one's occupation or social status. Men on the other hand, do not face the discrimination that women do in marriageability because their worth is based on their wealth, jobs, and caste.

The persistence of poverty in South Asian society can be attributed partly to colorism as well. Although the caste system has been abolished, its ideology still lingers in South Asian societies. Having dark skin equates to being unable to take care of oneself properly; it is associated with dirtiness and the lack of education. Therefore, those with darker skin are affiliated with lower socioeconomic status and find it hard to achieve upward social mobility. Systemic discrimination against dark skinned South Asians exists in education and the labor field because educators and employers prefer light skinned people while holding biases against dark skinned people (Thelwell, 2020). Moreover, class status and skin tone are interlinked just as they were during British rule. As a result, dark skinned South Asians are unable to free themselves from the shackles of poverty and colorism to this day.



## Western Culture

As explained earlier in the introduction, colorism within Western culture originated from colonization of the Americas and the system of slavery that followed. Once slavery was abolished however, the practice of colorism did not vanish because it had seeped into the communities of black Americans. Intra-racial discrimination has been a term used to describe the racism within communities based on characteristics such as skin tone or even hair texture. Black Americans knew that to be born with lighter skin meant that a person had more advantages in society than a darker skinned person. Such knowledge came from observing the practice of colorism during slavery (Turner, 1995). After emancipation, black Americans perpetuated colorism by starting social clubs in which admittance was based on skin color. If an individual's skin was light enough for the veins to be visible on their underarm, they were accepted. To maintain the privileges obtained during slavery, light skinned African Americans went so far as creating separate communities, such as the Sugar Hills neighborhoods of New York and East Hyde Park in Chicago (Ware, 2013). Another example of colorism within black communities is in the sector of education. Before *Brown vs. Board of Education*, black teachers in segregated schools would favor lighter skinned students. The lighter skinned students were chosen as leaders for clubs and plays and had better social connections. Additionally, colorism divided African Americans in a critical time of fighting for equality. Marcus Garvey, the leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Organization, accused W.E.B. DuBois and the NAACP of being colorist. The NAACP, or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, inadvertently perpetuated colorism in their *Crisis* magazines by only featuring lighter skinned African American women that were well-educated and well-dressed. They wanted to eliminate the image of darker skinned women doing menial tasks such as partaking in war production, but

in doing so, they gave no representation for darker skinned women at all (Ware, 2013).

Moreover, these early practices of intra-racial discrimination in segregated black life preserved the system of colorism implemented by colonizers and slaveowners. In these ways, black Americans have kept the cycle of colorism going through generations, making it harder to break and unlearn.

Colorism in Western culture has been primarily fueled by the film industry in the past and continues to be. The colorist ideals implemented by the white majority reached people in every corner of America and Europe through media that utilized colorism to further racial stereotypes. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was common to find Hollywood movies where white actors and actresses did blackface, which is the practice of using makeup to appear as a black person, to depict black people as uncivilized and uncouth. Films such as *The Song of Freedom* for instance, cemented the idea to a mainstream audience that black people, especially those with darker skin, were inferior. In the rare occasion that a dark skinned black person was cast in a role for a Hollywood film, they would play the comical side-kick character or other caricatures of black people. For example, Lincoln Perry, one of the first African American actors, was famously known for his role as Stepin Fetchit, “an incomprehensible, laughing, dancing, fool” (Farrow, 2019). Over the decades, Hollywood has stopped using blackface and making movies that are so blatantly racist. However, the practice of colorism persists in the film industry today in more subtle ways.

The film industry of Western culture continued to produce movies showing the inferiority of dark skinned people even much later into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Movies like *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Indiana Jones* (1981) show dark skinned people being conquered by white people, in addition to showing dark skinned people as primitive and less sophisticated (Singathi, 2020). In fictional and

adventurous movies like these, the colorist stereotypes get buried underneath the heroic and fun plotlines, but children that consume such media form preconceived notions without really knowing it and carry these notions into their adulthood. Although Hollywood has improved in having more diversity in their casting, colorism prevents darker skinned actors and actresses from getting roles that are instead given to lighter skinned people. Dark skinned women struggle more in this aspect than men. For example, Zoe Saldana, an Afro-Latina woman, played the role of Nina Simone in the 2016 film *Nina*. This role could have been given to a dark skinned woman but was given to a lighter skinned black woman who gets famous roles quite easily. To alter her appearance to match that of Nina's, Zoe used dark makeup and a prosthetic nose (Singathi, 2020). Zoe and the film faced severe backlash, but this is just one of many examples of how Hollywood remains colorist to this day and does not do much to change it.

One of the most significant consequences of colorism in Western culture is experiencing discrimination within the field of employment. Extensive research has been done on white people being given jobs and opportunities over black people, but other research shows the same disparity exists between light skinned black people and dark skinned black people as well. According to the 1990 study done by Hughes and Hertel, light skinned black people were found to have higher education, higher incomes, and a higher status occupation than dark skinned black people in America. In particular, dark skinned black women struggle greatly with attaining jobs due to their gender as well. Since dark skin has been deemed unattractive and associated with lesser intelligence throughout history and media, darker skinned black women deal with the additional stress of being looked at as unworthy candidates. Studies show that black women of lighter complexion earn more than black women of darker complexion even when their resumes are the same (Hughes & Hertel, 1990). Additionally, dark skinned black men are at a

disadvantage when looking for jobs due to society presenting them as dangerous and violent people. Because of colorism, dark skinned black people in Western culture are immediately faced with preconceived biases before having the opportunity to present themselves, which results in many lost opportunities and high rates of unemployment.

A more life-threatening consequence of colorism is inequality within the justice system. Several studies confirm that between white and black people, black people are more likely to be incarcerated than white people for the same crimes. For example, a study found that in 2005, black people made up 12.8% of the population, but almost half of prison inmates were black people and 42% were on death row (Tonry and Melewski, 2008). However, recent studies have found that there is a relationship between skin complexion and sentencing as well. Eberhardt's et al. (2006) research found that the more black a person appeared to be, with darker skin and Afrocentric features, the more likely they were to be sentenced to death. Within the justice system, stereotypes that those with darker skin are more dangerous prevail and greatly influence sentencing decisions. To absolve the justice system of colorism, racism must be dealt with as well since they are interwoven. Such a task proves to be enormously challenging because racism and colorism are deeply embedded within the structures of Western culture.

### **East Asian Culture**

Colorism is viewed by many as a simple dichotomy between dark skin and light skin. When one thinks of colorism, they might not immediately think of it being a significant problem in East Asian countries where people are racialized as "yellow" people. The media of Western culture contributes to this, with East Asians often depicted and described as "pale" and "doll-like." However, a range of skin colors exist in East Asia and colorism is indeed prevalent. Many

East Asian countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand were able to avoid European colonization, yet the idea that lighter skin is superior exists in these cultures. Studies have found that the preference for light skin predates colonization in some East Asian countries and has existed throughout their history (Yeung, 2016). For instance, women that were deemed attractive were described as having skin like “snow” or “ice” in ancient Chinese literature. A famous Chinese proverb asserts that “a white complexion can hide several flaws” (Zhang, 2012). In the history of East Asian countries like China and Japan, the complexion of a person’s skin was indicative of their class (Yeung, 2016). Those in the upper class or elite never had to work outside in the sun, while farmers and manual laborers toiled in the fields and developed darker complexions.

On the contrary, East Asian countries that were colonized by Europeans can attribute the origin of colorism in their cultures to both historical preferences for light skin and racist ideologies from white people. In countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines, skin color is not only indicative of beauty and class but of race as well (Jones, 2013). Just as slaveowners implemented the idea that white skin equates to intelligence and purity in the Americas, colonizers in these East Asian countries reinforced their own superiority and made those of dark skinned complexion believe they were less worthy.

Colorism in East Asia has been heavily perpetuated and preserved through politics. During the 1980s, after the Maoist regime, China encouraged the use of skin lightening products by women as an “indication of the flourishing development of socialist production” (Honig & Hershatter, 1998). High level authorities such as Tan Fuyun, the former chairperson for the Shanghai Women’s Federation, has publicly praised the cosmetic industry and acknowledged that she and her emissaries were met with more respect when beautified with lighter makeup

(Honig & Hershatter, 1998). In a communist country like China where many aspects of people's lives are controlled significantly by the government, these colorist ideals take root and continue for generations without challenge.

The cosmetic industry contributes to colorism in East Asian culture just as much as it does in South Asian culture. A 2007 survey found that 46% of Chinese, 46% of Taiwanese, 29% of Koreans, and 24% of Japanese had used skin lightening products in 2006 alone (Glenn, 2008). Clever marketing techniques are utilized to perpetuate colorism in products such as foundation and sunscreen. For instance, advertisers insist that their products not only lighten the skin, but they can have an overall and permanent effect on one's skin tone with habitual use. Additionally, whitening salons are common and can be found in the urban cities of China. These salons utilize technology that claim to whiten the entire body (Schwartz, 2011). Along with the availability of skin lightening products, East Asian advertisements display Asians that have very pale skin and Eurocentric features as the epitome of beauty. In such advertisements, traditional proverbs are used to justify the appeal for lighter skin by manipulating consumers into believing that skin lightening is an ancient and normal practice (Yeung, 2016). By commodifying beauty through lighter skin so drastically, the cosmetic industries of East Asian societies have contributed to the continued existence of colorism.

Intra-racial discrimination is one of the many consequences of colorism in East Asian culture. Because skin color is tied to socioeconomic status, the complexion of a person's skin can serve as a marker of their national origin. In a 2007 study conducted by Rondilla and Spickard, a Chinese-Cambodian woman shared that "we've experienced a lot of racial discrimination by our pure Chinese relatives who look down on us for being part Cambodian and for being darker and poorer." Another part of their study included a survey where participants had to rate the beauty

of three Asian women based on their skin complexion – one was dark, one was medium, and one was light. They noted that the responders assumed that the woman with dark skin was an immigrant of Filipino or Cambodian descent (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that such preconceived notions further the discrepancy in income, education, and status between honorary “white” Asians such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, and those that are darker and considered part of the collective black such as Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Cambodians (Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Due to the desirability of light skin emphasized in East Asian culture, the beauty and marriage criteria for darker skinned women are scrutinized more severely just as they are in South Asian culture. A study of Chinese college students showed that a woman’s outward appearance is essential in securing employment opportunities or marriage proposals (Zhang, 2012). Having darker skin is detrimental, especially when pursuing careers in industries like modeling and fashion. Additionally, the access to skin lightening products implies one’s wealth and agency. In East Asian cultures, a dark skinned person who does not have access to products to alter their skin color to achieve upward socioeconomic status is considered poor and limited in their agency. Furthermore, the effects of colorism in East Asian culture are prominent as ever and will take a considerable amount of work to get rid of.

### **Latino Culture**

For centuries, Americans with Latin or Spanish roots have struggled with identifying themselves or have been forced to use labels that erase their diverse backgrounds and group them all into one category. Cristina Mora, an associate professor of Sociology at the University of Berkley, has found that people dislike labeling themselves solely as *Hispanic* because it alludes

to colonialism and *Latino/a* is too vague for some because it is not inclusive of African or indigenous roots (Steinmetz, 2018). To remedy this, many identify as *Afro-Latino/a*. According to historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., the country of Brazil received 5 million Africans from the slave trade and is the second blackest nation in the world today. Mexico and Peru received 500,000 Africans and this is how the Afro-Latino community began (Nelson, 2019). Therefore, the skin color of someone from the Latino community can range from light to tan to black, depending on their background. In addition to struggling with labeling their own identities and being acknowledged by the world as such, people of Latino culture battle colorism as well.

Colorism within Latino culture originated with the conquest and colonization of Mexico and Latin America by the Spanish. The Spanish brought along ideas of white superiority and imposed them on the natives through a strict caste system. Stratification by skin color was significant as it allowed them to hold political, societal, and economic power at the expense of indigenous and African groups (Alvarez, 2019). A person's title, level of education, and access to resources were all determined by their place in the caste system. Additionally, the Spanish used terms like *mestizo* and *salta atras* to describe the ancestry of a person. *Mestizo* is used to describe someone of white and indigenous ancestry, while *salta atras* is used to describe someone of African and Spanish ancestry. Unlike *mestizo*, the term *salta atras* is used in a derogatory fashion and literally means to "jump backwards," implying the inferiority of those mixed with black (Alvarez, 2019).

The issue of colorism is intertwined with the issue of racial identity in Latino culture and is sustained through ideologies such as *Mestizaje*, or the mixing of races. Chaves-Dueñas et. al (2014) concluded that *Mestizaje* has contributed to a color-blind phenomenon in Latino culture. This idea is based on the belief that everyone in the Latino community has African, indigenous,



and European roots so there are no racial divisions and that everyone can stand under one umbrella. Such an ideology is harmful because it completely disregards the colorism dark skinned Latinos experience due to their black heritage. Politics have played a role in furthering *Mestizaje* ideology and erasure of unique ethnic backgrounds. For example, the second president of Mexico, Vicente Guerrero, decided that race would not be a part of Mexico's national census. His belief was that eliminating race as a demographic category would get rid of social inequality; however, the result was the opposite (Chaves-Dueñas et. al, 2014). Afro-Latino people and those of indigenous descent were unable to identify as they chose and were subjected to colorism at the same time. Meanwhile, lighter skinned Latinos are unable to acknowledge the privileges they are afforded because everyone is under one pan-ethnic label.

Family and the language they use play a significant role in perpetuating colorism in Latino culture. In a study conducted by Alvarez in 2019, one interviewer commented on how as soon as babies are born, family make comments on the skin complexion. If the child is dark, they grow up hearing jokes constantly made about their skin tone and deal with other microaggressions, such as being reminded that they must not be in the sun too long or they will become even darker. Another interviewer mentioned how conversations about racial identity are never held within families. She grew up in a Mexican family, but no one ever educated her on her indigenous roots until she was old enough to learn on her own. Additionally, she commented on how Mexico is divided into regions based on indigenous backgrounds; the northern Mexicans are considered superior while the southern are considered inferior due to their indigenous roots. The language used casually by family to comment on someone's skin also contributes to the cycle of colorism through generations. Phrases like "*mejorar la raza*" meaning better the race, and "*pelo malo*" meaning bad hair, used specifically against Afro-Latino/as, preserve racial

stereotypes and become difficult to unlearn because they are so commonly utilized (Alvarez, 2019).

The effects of colorism in Latino culture can be seen prominently in the statistics regarding the education and income between light skinned and dark skinned Latinos. In a 2007 study by Crespo-Flores, it was found that the math and reading scores of indigenous people were significantly lower compared to the rest of the population in Mexico. Similarly, the data for Brazil show the trend that lighter skinned people have significantly higher incomes compared to darker skinned people. Additionally, Afro-Latinos and indigenous people comprise less and less of the class population as the level of education increases. For example, in the “university complete” category, black and brown people make up only 1.1% of the total population (Crespo-Flores, 2007). With lesser resources and access to education, dark skinned Latinos are at a great disadvantage and find themselves struggling to find jobs and achieve upward socioeconomic status. Moreover, colorism in Latino culture has become so enmeshed with the problem of racial identity that it has permeated every facet of their culture and society and become almost impossible to ameliorate.

### **Caribbean Culture**

Colorism in Caribbean culture originated in the same way as it did in Western culture, with ties to both colonialism and slavery. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Spain was the first to colonize the Caribbean with the specific goal of controlling each region’s economy. During the process of colonization, “civilizations were destroyed, genocide on the widest scale occurred, riches gleaned from the natural resources of expropriated societies were taken from those countries to enrich Europe, enormous numbers of Africans were forcibly taken from their homeland to be

enslaved in the region, cutting them off from their ancestral homes and way of life, racism of its most reprehensible form was developed” (Burton, 2009). Through colonization, racism became prominent in Caribbean countries like Jamaica and Guyana and as a result, stratifying people on the color of their skin became normalized.

It was not until the British took control of Jamaica and other territories that colorism became widespread and so interwoven in Caribbean culture. Through three centuries of British rule, Jamaica became heavily involved in trade and plantation agriculture. With the establishment of the plantation system, slavery became prevalent in Jamaica. Slaves could be found in every aspect of the country’s economy, such as working in the fields or working as domestic servants (Embassy of Jamaica, 2007). By the time slavery was abolished in Jamaica in 1834, over 311,000 slaves made up the population compared to 16,700 white people. The system of slavery created a population of mixed people, or “mulattoes,” since slaveowners had consensual or nonconsensual relations with their slaves. Slaveowners referred to the mixed group as colored people because of their mixed European and African ancestry (Satchell, 1999). Colored people formed their own class on the social ladder, where they were neither completely accepted by the dark skinned slaves or the white slaveowners. However, colored Jamaicans had better opportunities due to their lighter complexion, such as being able to attend British universities or in rare cases, even inherit wealth from their fathers. More commonly, colored Jamaicans held better jobs than the dark skinned slaves such as working as skilled artisans, teachers, and journalists (Mohammed, 2000). Moreover, colorism developed during the early colonization and slavery of Caribbean countries and infiltrated not only their economies and politics, but the culture as well.

The primary reason why colorism remains largely unchallenged in Caribbean culture is due to the structural inequalities that still exist. Although slavery was abolished in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in Jamaica, the presence of white people did not diminish. Even though the majority of today's population in Jamaica is made up of people with African roots, the economy is still controlled by the minority of white people, Asians, and Indians (Charles, 2003). Therefore, the European ideals of white supremacy that Spanish and British colonizers brought over still persist in Caribbean culture. Those authorities at the top do not acknowledge the disparities in class, education, and income due to colorism because they never experienced such discrimination. To address a problem as complex as colorism and the effects it has, a higher understanding of culture and media knowledge is needed. Unfortunately, dark skinned Jamaicans are unable to climb up the social ladder and obtain the resources or power to challenge the colorist ideologies that affect them.

Socializing agents like media and school are also heavily responsible for the preservation of colorism in Caribbean culture. Music is one facet of media that has praised light skinned women in Jamaica in the past and still continues to do so. To be more specific, the genre of Reggae disseminates popular cultural values and social practices. For example, the musician Buju Banton expressed his love for light skinned women in his popular 1992 song *Love mi Browning*. He faced backlash and made another song *Love Black Women* to include dark skinned women; however, this shows how deeply ingrained colorism is within the Caribbean culture and would remain overt if not for public outcry (Robinson, 2011). Songs perpetuating colorism have been made as recently as of 2009, such as Reggae artist Lisa Hype's single *Proud a mi Bleaching*. The song became a hit among Jamaican women who indulge excessively in skin bleaching and do not feel there is anything wrong with it (Robinson, 2011). Additionally,

Caribbean children grow up being instilled with colorist ideals in places like school. A common game played in Jamaican elementary schools is *Brown girl in the ring*. Only girls of light brown skin are invited to join the circle and dance around. Although the game is played in innocence, the exclusion of dark skinned girls reinforces the superiority of those with lighter skin (Robinson, 2011). Through practices like these, colorism continues to subsist in Caribbean culture.

The most dangerous and biggest consequence of colorism in Caribbean culture is the practice of skin bleaching. A self-esteem crisis develops in dark skinned Jamaicans as they observe that beauty contests revolve around white standards and having lighter skin. Dark skinned Jamaicans can conclude that in their culture one is deemed more attractive and worthy as a human being if their complexion is lighter. Skin lightening products have been utilized since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the number of Jamaicans partaking in it only increases over time (Charles, 2010). In his 2003 and 2006 studies, Charles found that those that bleached their skin had higher self-esteem compared to non-bleachers. Those that bleach their skin feel assured that they are more attractive and possess more aesthetic capital. Just as in South Asian and East Asian society, there is easy access to skin lightening products in the Caribbean due to globalization. Although the health department of Jamaica has intervened and attempted to restrain the practice of bleaching through campaigns such as *Don't Kill the Skin* (2007), the easy access to products and the widespread belief that having dark skin is inherently wrong prevents the termination of the phenomenon of both skin bleaching and colorism (Browne-Glaude 2007).

## Conclusion

After analyzing the causes, contributors, and consequences of colorism among various cultures, many similarities and differences can be observed. The origin of colorism in every culture can be traced back to European colonialism and slavery at some points in their history. Although some countries in East Asia were never colonized by Europeans, the neighboring countries that were colonized influenced the spread of colorism within them. Colonialism and slavery worked together to produce colorism from racism, a form of discrimination that has pervaded every facet of every culture. In South Asian and East Asian cultures, colorism may have pre-dated colonization since their ancient histories show the preference for lighter skin such as in the Indian caste system and Chinese literature. Mass media plays a significant role in perpetuating colorism in every culture, whether it's through the film industries like Bollywood and Hollywood, or through music like in the Caribbean. Popular culture is known to underrepresent dark skinned people while giving the spotlight to light skinned people. Additionally, the cosmetic industry works with mass media to capitalize off of colorism and promote skin lightening and bleaching products, which can be found worldwide. Politics have also fueled colorism, either by furthering colorist ideology or refusing to acknowledge it. Because of all these contributors, the consequences of colorism are severe. Most commonly, the result of colorism is the dehumanization of dark skinned people, who are left at the bottom of the social ladder and suffer from lack of education and jobs. On top of being hated by others, dark skinned people in all cultures develop self-hatred and try to meet unrealistic beauty standards primarily through bleaching. Furthermore, colorism is a complex issue that has rooted itself deeply into the foundations and structures of every culture worldwide. Breaking the cycle of colorism will require recognizing its existence and acknowledging it on a much greater scale.

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