RESEARCH REPORT
Fair (?) & Lovely: Ideas of beauty among young migrant women in Chennai, India

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Abstract

This paper explores beauty ideals prevalent among young women in Chennai, India. It is part of a larger project that contributes to the emerging scholarship around women's experiences in the rapidly changing landscape of urban India, with a focus on young female rural to urban migrants living in the city of Chennai (their destination). Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of women living in hostel accommodation conducted in 2015 and 2016, I consider the talk, observations, and beauty practices of the research participants. In particular, I explore the ways in which 'lighter' skin colour is privileged as more desirable and how participants both reproduce and contest this construction. The discussion here delves into the obsessive aspiration for lighter skin, its gendered dimensions, and its reflection in online spaces.

Keywords

Colourism, Fair & Lovely, racism, feminist ethnography, South Asia studies, gendered migration, gender studies, skin lightening, beauty

Introduction

During a dinner conversation on a winter evening in Christchurch shortly after I returned from my fieldwork in India, a Chinese colleague said, 'As a child I thought Indians were White people until I met them in real life. Why is everyone in Bollywood so pale?' As a child growing up in rural India, I had the same question. Why do only light-skinned people 'make it big' in our movies? This pattern, I now observe, applies to film industries beyond India, as highlighted by the #OscarsSoWhite controversy of 2016. Even so, it is difficult not to get overwhelmed by India's 'fairness fetish' as Nadeem (2014, p.2) aptly put it. This fairness fetish dominates the realms of popular culture, media, and matrimonial advertisements percolating to the average person's everyday life. The residents of the hostel where I conducted my nine-month ethnographic study were no exceptions to this. We found ourselves deeply embedded in this social construction that put people at war with their own skin and image every day. The most important marker of beauty that emerges from the analysis of my fieldwork data is that of 'achieving' a lighter skin tone. Everyone – regardless of the shade of their skin – aspired for greater 'fairness.'

The project

In recent decades in India, specifically after economic liberalisation in the 1990s, the number of single young women involved in internal migration, particularly from rural areas to cities, has increased markedly. However, this migration received very little academic attention as women

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were often seen as accompanying men rather than as solo actors/agents (Thapan, 2006). My PhD project was set in this context, recognizing the need to understand the gender-specific dimensions of migratory experiences within academic literature. More recently, feminist scholars (Afsar, 2011; Thapan, 2006) have highlighted this gap and tried to address it. They suggest that gender is in fact one of the most important factors determining the experience of migration (Afsar, 2011). As part of my PhD project, I conducted an ethnographic study of young, single internal migrant women in the city of Chennai, India. I chose Chennai not only because it is the largest city in south India but also because of my relative familiarity with the city, having conducted my masters project there. I spent my childhood mostly in rural Kerala, India. Moving to the closest city, Kochi, for my undergraduate studies was a turning point in my life. Later, I spent a considerable amount of time in Chennai doing my masters project and studies. Effectively, therefore, this project falls within the methodological strategy developed and used by social anthropologists such as M.N. Srinivas, Andre Beteille, Veena Das, and others who focused on studying their own society rather than the 'exotic other' (Das, 1995). Das (1995) identifies the need for contemporaneity in anthropological studies and a distance from anthropology's tendency to focus on the remnants of the 'traditional' that can be found in today's world. It is within this postcolonial, contemporary, 'non exotic' framework that I locate my study.

Discussion of literature

The obsession around fair skin in India is intertwined with caste, class, gender, and colonisation (Hussein, 2010; Nadeem, 2014; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2008; Runkle, 2004), which makes the debates around its origin complex. Some literature points to the caste system as the root cause for this colour bias in the sub-continent (Shevde, 2008); however, this has been challenged by postcolonial scholars who identify the significance of race and colonial discourse on colourism as we see it today. Nadeem (2014), for instance, highlighted how the internal differences of the subcontinent, such as religion and caste, were highly ambiguous until the advent of foreign invasions. The diverse and ambiguous divisions began to be defined and solidified with the various powers that ruled over significant parts of India – from the Muslim dynasties of medieval times through to the Mughals, followed by the Dutch, the Portuguese, the French, and, most significantly, the British. Hussein (2010) emphasised this foreign influence, rejecting the usage of the term 'colourism' in favour of 'intra-group racism.' This, she argues, is to specifically acknowledge the significance of the colonial concept of race on the present-day discrimination in the sub-continent. Calling it 'colourism' might discount the impact the construction of race has on the phenomenon. However, there is a possibility that the term 'intra-group racism' might be misunderstood as being part of a discourse on racial differences within Indian or south Asian communities, which is not the focus of this discussion. While the influence of colonisation and postcolonial reassertion of the West through technological and neo-liberal processes exerts significant influence on techno-savvy millennials of urban India (this point is expanded in the following paragraph), discussions of internal racial differences do not occur prominently.[1] My fieldwork observations also found no explicit or implicit references to the concept of race. Therefore, while I would like to absorb and include the significant argument focusing on the racist-colonial project raised by Hussein (2010) to the discourse on skin-colour preference, I prefer not to use the term 'intra-group racism' in this discussion. Instead, I believe the ambit of the term colourism can be expanded to include the effects of the racial discourses. 'Colourism', I believe, is also a less clunky word and possesses the flexibility to be broadened in scope.

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Picton (2013) went a step further, terming the phenomenon 'caucasianisation' and 'internationalisation' of beauty standards in India. This view can also be found in earlier works by scholars such as Runkle (2004) and Oza (2006) who investigated beauty standards promoted by 'Femina', a popular women's magazine that runs the 'Miss India' contest. Oza (2006) quoted organisers of the pageant, who mentioned that they were no longer looking for a 'Miss India.' Rather, among the contestants, they looked for a 'Miss World' – an 'international' beauty: Someone who could represent India and be accepted on the world stage as a beauty queen. These studies, notably, were undertaken after the remarkable success of the Miss India contest on the world stage in the 1990s and early 2000s, with straight victories at the Miss World and Miss Universe competitions. Runkle's (2004) ethnographic study of the grooming process for Miss India also revealed how the contestants had to undergo elaborate dermatological treatments to make their skin lighter. Thapan (2006) related this dominance of Western standards in the fashion and beauty industry to the idea of 'recolonisation.' She argued that though globalisation resulted in a rapid increase in information flows, connectivity, and interactions throughout the world, this did not imply greater parity between peoples. Rather, it resulted in furthering of the dominance enjoyed by the imperial West in the postcolonial world. This occurred as a result of what Thapan termed the 'postcolonial habitus', applying the Bourdieusian concept of habitus to her analysis. Postcolonial habitus, Thapan explained, is the accumulated social, economic, and cultural capitals of the West over the past few centuries of colonisation. This dominance in the economic and cultural spheres is strengthened through the newer channels of interaction that globalisation provides. In my field site, Chennai, the internationalisation or 'caucasianisation' of beauty standards seemed more applicable to the economically well-off sections and was connected with 'becoming urban.' However, this process seemed to be resisted in many ways. For instance, a majority of the hostel residents followed ethnic fashion and beauty trends rather than Western ones. Even among the more 'Westernised' section, ethnic fashion and beauty were appreciated and popular. There were a multitude of ways of 'becoming urban' among my participants. In other words, there are multiple ways to be 'the new Indian woman.'[2] Therefore, I argue that, while the concept of caucasianisation is relevant, it does not provide a singular explanation for the contemporary beauty ideals.

Another important aspect surrounding the preference for light skin is the construction of purity and pollution. The dichotomous construction of 'purity and pollution' is at the core of racial and caste hierarchies. Picton (2013) demonstrated this through his study of advertisements during colonial times. The soap brand 'Pears', for instance, in a popular campaign, depicted a White child washing a Black child using the product, turning him White in the process and muddying the water that was used to wash him. This advertisement symbolised a perspective that identified the concept of 'purity' with the White race, and the 'White man's burden' of 'cleansing' the 'impure' dark-skinned peoples of the world. Light skin or whiteness, according to this narrative, stood for purity and goodness. This related to purity of both 'character' and culture and physical purity. Blackness represented the polar opposite – portrayed as impure, both in the physical sense and in the sense of (lack of) culture. These discourses still seem to impact those in the West, as Sherman and Clore's (2009) psychological analysis of perceptions of colour indicated. Fanon (1952) noted that colonisation and ensuing violence – both physical and structural – resulted in a situation where subject populations felt inferior in their own skin. He termed this strategy of the colonial powers as the 'epidermal schema' (Fanon, 1952, as cited in Nadeem, 2014), which results in non-White peoples being in a state of war against their own skin, competing to gain acceptance in a Western-dominated world.

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The concept of pollution in the context of caste is most evident in the practice of untouchability. The so-called upper castes are generally associated with lighter skin, whereas the Dalits or so-called lower castes are generally associated with darker skin. Occupational division and hierarchy (Varnashrama Dharma) among castes also follows this oppositional construct of pollution and purity. An explicit example of this is the case of manual scavengers – communities belonging to Dalit sub-castes that are expected to manually collect and dispose of human excrement from 'upper caste' homes. It should be added here that the Indian constitution and parliamentary law have outlawed these activities through the institution of fundamental rights and through passing specific legislations targeting caste violence and systemic and structural biases. However, the efficacy of these measures is up for debate. The weight of caste is still apparent in the subcontinent.

Nadeem (2014) argued that the desire to become lighter is not merely a preference; rather it is connected to the longing to become a privileged 'other.' The desirability of the 'other' is dependent on the existing power structures of the society, again, connected with caste, class, and privilege. In other words, becoming lighter appears to be a legitimate way to access privilege and acceptance. Advertisements for skin-lightening products in the mainstream media, especially television, leverage this common aspiration to sell their products. Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) identified the three key themes that dominate the advertisements. The first and perhaps most crucial theme is that of *transformation*. Through the advertisements, companies promise a transformation from the dull existence of a dark person to the life full of confidence, opportunities, and success of the newly 'lightened' person. The second area of focus is *scientific authority*. All the products used some sort of science to sell their formula. While a lot of it was based on Western science, Parameswaran and Cardoza also recognised the increased interest in Ayurvedic[3] and natural formulae. The third aspect is around *heterosexual romance*. The advertisements often emphasised the possibility of securing a good marriage/relationship through transformation of skin colour. While advertisements re-produce and re-entrench ideals around beauty, they cannot be considered the sole culprits in the creation of colourism. The origins of these phenomena are from within history and society – a reflection of the culture of the bearers of power and privilege – be it imperialists or so-called upper castes who hold disproportionate access to social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capitals, dominating and dictating most realms of 'desirability.' In the following sections, I discuss my methodology and findings that have been informed and shaped through these scholarly discussions.

Methodology

I locate my work within the framework of postcolonial feminist thought. For this paper, as my introductory discussion indicates, I particularly draw on south Asian postcolonial scholarship as well as work of critical race theorists. Here, I reflect upon my observations and interviews from a ten-month ethnographic study conducted among migrant women in Chennai, the biggest city in southern India. It was carried out in two stages, roughly one year apart – from January to June in 2015 and from March to July in 2016. During this period I stayed at a women's hostel, a form of accommodation very popular among rural to urban migrant women in Chennai. Over one hundred women were living in the hostel on both occasions, and participants for my study were recruited from the same hostel in which I was living by direct word of mouth. By spending a lot of my time in common areas of the hostel, namely the mess hall, laundry area, terrace, and portico, I was able to gain acquaintance with residents and recruit participants. The hostel management were happy to allow me to stay and carry out the research. It should also be noted that this hostel was the cheapest among the various hostels I considered in the area

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for my study, the monthly rent being less than 100 New Zealand dollars, which included power and food. The more expensive hostels usually had facilities such as air-conditioning.

My first stage included 25 participants, whom I tried to catch up with during my second trip. All participants were aged between 18 and 30 years. They had moved to Chennai from smaller towns or rural areas on their own for either work or higher studies. The women in the hostel were highly educated, the minimum level of education being high school graduate. All working women I interviewed had received university education. This is consistent with the high female education levels achieved in south Indian states (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2013). Obviously, education is an important factor for mobility – both social and geographic. A significant number of the students and working women were in the field of information technology (IT), software engineering, and other service sector jobs, reflecting the nature of the city's economy and available opportunities for young women. The hostel residents were from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, to be expected in a large city such as Chennai with limited accommodation options in the central city. The number of Christians in the hostel was disproportionate, as the hostel was run by Christian management. However, there were a significant number of Hindus and one Muslim woman among the participants. The caste distribution of the residents of the hostel was also quite diverse, but caste divisions were not outwardly visible. No one mentioned or seemed to worry about caste, except in the context of discussing marriage. The real division in the hostel, from my observation, was along class lines, which became visible through outwardly visible aspects such as fashion, lifestyle, English fluency, and so on.

I conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with my participants at a time and place convenient to them, usually in the common spaces of the hostel or in their shared rooms. The interviews were recorded, except in a few cases where participants opted not to be recorded. Interviews were conducted in English or Tamil, as per the respondents' comfort and ranged in length from 30 minutes to slightly over an hour. Another significant source of data was participant observation. Casual conversations and dinner table interactions all contributed to enriching my data. The next section provides a glimpse into my data and findings around ideas of beauty gathered from my fieldwork.

Figure 1: Cosmetics arranged in a hostel room. Note the fairness products among them. Source: Author's fieldwork photographs, 2016

Who is the fairest of them all?

The very day I arrived at the hostel, I noticed the cosmetics carefully arranged in the rooms I visited. Skin-lightening products were undoubtedly the most common cosmetics used by hostel residents. Walking around the hostel after dinner, one could observe at least a few of the women relaxing or working – engrossed in their smartphones or laptops or doing university work – with face packs applied. For instance, one of my participants, Nasreen, would apply a turmeric-based face pack every night to deal with her acne marks and lighten her skin. I found myself doing the same after the first couple of weeks, joining in that time of camaraderie. I bought an Ayurveda-based brand 'Banjara's Papaya and

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Multanimitti face pack sachets' and would apply these a few times a week together with my new friends in the hostel. When I left the hostel after my first field trip, I gave the remaining sachets to Ragini who, when I returned the following year, remembered me fondly for it.

On a warm February morning, Ragini, Priyachelvi, Aiswarya, and Paaru were sitting by the kitchen door. They were all young women in their early twenties, hailing from the same remote village in southern Tamil Nadu. Paaru had a tube of Fair & Lovely with her and they were discussing using it when I walked towards them:

> *Josephine*: Why do you use Fair & Lovely, Paaru? You are already lovely and beautiful.
>
> *Paaru*: I have been using this continuously for long. Now how will I stop? Do you think I am beautiful?
>
> *Josephine*: Yes you are. You don't have to become "fair" for that. Dark is beautiful.
>
> *Paaru*: Dark is beautiful?
>
> *Josephine*: Yes.

After this, I recited the lines of a famous Tamil movie song that translates literally to 'Black is the colour I love.'[4] Everyone laughed.

> *Ragini*: But that is for men … not for us!

The others nodded in agreement.

This conversation highlights the gendered nature of colourism. Like the many forms of discrimination, colourism is also gendered, affecting men and women to varying degrees. The gendered nature of colourism has been identified by critical race theorists from the United States. Falconer and Neville (2000), for instance, discussed the gendered nature of beauty standards, or rather the beauty double standards. In an analysis of magazines published in the United States featuring Black models, Keenan (1996) indicated that, of the Black models featured, female models were much lighter than male models. As part of my research for this paper, I investigated the official posters of the 12 Tamil films released in the month of June, 2016. Not surprisingly, Keenan's (1996) findings were repeated here. Nine of the 12 movie posters featured female lead characters who had lighter skin tones than the male leads. Of the three films that did not follow the trend, two were female-centric films with no male actors on the posters and one featured an all-male cast.

Figure 2: Poster of Tamil movie Oru naal Kuthu. *Source: IMDB, 2016.*

The gendered nature of colourism is not limited to movies – it wields significant influence on the daily lives of women, as Parameswaran (2015) noted. She cited the works of Black feminists such as Hill (2002) and Hunter (2002) who highlight a similar pattern in the United States. Dark women evidently face a greater degree of discrimination, both in the public spheres of work and employment and in the private spheres of relationships, marriage, and family, as demonstrated in Satya's case. Satya was in her mid-twenties and had moved to Chennai from rural Tamil Nadu, where she had been raised and educated. She had completed a masters degree in English literature and had procured a fixed-term job teaching undergraduate students

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at a prestigious college nearby. It was upon getting this job that she moved to Chennai. She had mentioned how she found it difficult to cope with the standards and pressures of the city and her urbanised students who valued 'fancy' English accents. However, she opened up to me about her failed marriage only on the day before I left the hostel.

> *Satya*: Are you leaving tomorrow?
>
> *Josephine*: Yes.
>
> *Satya*: So you are going back to New Zealand?
>
> *Josephine*: Yes.
>
> *Satya*: And you will not come back to stay here?
>
> *Josephine*: No.
>
> *Satya*: In that case, I want to share my experience with you.

Satya began by saying that she had not previously opened up about her past to me as she felt extremely vulnerable and wanted to ensure that no one else in the hostel came to know about it. She then shared some of the darkest experiences of her life, including that she had previously been in a marriage – a failed one. Satya's story revealed much more than the existing taboo surrounding divorced women. She was mistreated by her ex-husband for being 'too dark' and 'too thin.' Her ex-husband sometimes called her a trans-woman as she was not 'womanly enough.' He was not interested in having sex with her: 'I suspect he was gay or impotent. At one point, he had told his family that I was a trans-woman and I had to prove to them otherwise by revealing to his mother when I got my period.'

Satya had a relatively darker skin tone than most women in the hostel. She mentioned how her father had to pay a hefty sum as dowry because of her skin colour. However, her rather traumatic past did not seem to break her spirit or sense of self-worth. Rather, it enabled her to pursue her interests as a teacher, vis-à-vis being an abused wife, reluctantly, yet dutifully confined to the domestic sphere.

Voices of resistance

Like Satya, Prabha was also critical of the overarching system that favoured lighter skin tones. Prabha, a social worker employed at a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the area of children's well-being, was one of the few women who spoke clearly against the colourism so evident in the everyday lives of these women. She described to me an incident that occurred at her workplace:

> *Prabha*: Day before yesterday in my office there was a child and I was asking her which among us do you like the most. We are like … eight or nine or ten of us in the office. One person in my office has very light skin. She has good features with a round face and all. Almost instantaneously the little girl said that she liked that woman – the woman with the light skin. The second thing she said is that she resembled a doll. So for her, being fair and being pretty is what beauty means. [*sic*]
>
> *Josephine*: So for her, being fair is equal to being beautiful?
>
> *Prabha*: Yeah. Fair and lean … that is what is inculcated from a very young age. Boys, from childhood, talk to fair girls. They don't talk to girls who are dark or girls who are not pleasing. So when they grow, that becomes a stable factor.

Prabha's account of the incident revealed an acceptance that being 'fair' meant being outwardly beautiful. Prabha says 'for her, being fair and being pretty is what beauty means.' Here, she suggests that, while being fair is 'pretty', beauty should not be considered as mere outward prettiness. She further described how beauty should be seen in one's character and qualities such as kindness and empathy. Within these narratives is an inherent acceptance that not

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everyone is 'physically beautiful.' She seems to suggest that the physical beauty (that light skin would provide) should be disregarded in favour of the other aspects of one's person. So, while there is an inherent acceptance of fairness as physically pleasing, Prabha suggests there should be less emphasis on physical appearance. She also highlights the gendered aspect of this emphasis – how the burden of 'looking desirable' falls disproportionately on the shoulders of females. However, Prabha does not challenge or critique the unique position light skin holds in the ambit of physical beauty.

Colourism in the age of the internet

At the time I first met her, Samantha was doing an undergraduate degree at a college nearby. She had over 1500 followers on Facebook alone, and her photos would usually get around 400 'likes.' 'Add me on Facebook!' she said, a few days after we met. Her profile had plenty of photographs, predominantly selfies. All the photographs were heavily edited or 'filtered.' Samantha was very light skinned in comparison with most of the hostel residents. Yet, she used lightening filters in every photo before they got uploaded. Within the hostel, especially among the students living there, popularity on social media platforms such as Facebook was a mark of success. During my second field trip, I noticed more of my participants taking part in social media, like their urban peers in college and at work. I was surprised at the level of acceptance the usage of filters and editing had come to receive. It did not matter how much one edited a picture as long as it got plenty of 'likes' and appreciation. It appeared as though the virtual avatar of a person was becoming more and more important, sometimes overshadowing the offline self – thus creating an enhanced identity and acceptance both online and offline. The camera angle, striking the right pose, choosing the right filters – all were part of the daily life of the hostel residents.

Mahadevi was among those who would visit Rosie's room for photographs to be taken. Rosie owned an iPhone with a filter app for her camera. One afternoon, Mahadevi wanted to send a picture to her boyfriend, and I joined them. Rosie clicked a number of snaps and they sat together to choose the best filter. She clicked a few for me as well. After the photo session, she opened Instagram on her phone and showed me an image of one of our hostel-mates. She looked considerably lighter than her actual self in the photo. 'I took this picture and edited it for her. If it wasn't for those edits, she wouldn't have got so many 'likes'!' she said, giggling. The aspiration for lighter skin had thus spilled over to virtual spaces, where it was clearly easier to attain. Filters, after all, were cheaper and more effective than the plethora of fairness products available in the market.

All events – major or minor – from going to the mall, beach or parties to university and workplace events were photographed and shared on social media such as Facebook and Instagram by an increasing number of hostel residents. Even moments inside the hostel were sometimes shared. Along with lightening filters, camera angles were also chosen with care, clicking multiple times to get the most 'flattering' image of the face and body. In this process, they attempted to hide what they considered undesirable, for instance, 'fat.' In the following section, I discuss the other desirable features or beauty ideals besides the preference for lighter skin.

Other beauty ideals

While the aspiration for lighter skin seemed to be ever-present in the hostel environment, some other beauty markers also became evident in the course of my stay there. Prominent among them were straight and silky hair and a 'feminine' body, as briefly mentioned in the section about

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Satya. During my second field trip, I noticed an increase in the number of hair straighteners being used secretly in the hostel rooms (electronic devices other than phones and laptops were not allowed, to limit power consumption). This can be related to the 'caucasianisation' or internationalisation of beauty ideals in India, especially after economic liberalisation and globalisation, as discussed by scholars such as Thapan (2004), Runkle, (2004), Oza (2006), Picton (2013), and so on. However, the obsession for a size zero body as seen in the West was absent. The residents seemed to dislike the idea of a size zero body, having a clear preference for fuller bodies. At the same time, being overweight was not seen as desirable, as is evident from the following account.

Rosie had gained some weight since my previous field visit. Rosie was very close with Indrani and confided a lot of personal information to her. Rosie was still at university and Indrani, who moved to Chennai for higher studies, had graduated and had been working for two years in the city. One day at dinner time in the hostel mess hall, Rosie complained about how she had been gaining weight despite her intake remaining more or less constant. Indrani had a very interesting theory around this. Knowing Rosie's curiosity and desire for sex and her habit of watching porn, Indrani declared that it was her sex drive that caused her weight gain.

> *Indrani*: Women who have a lot of desire for sex gain weight easy.

Everyone laughed, and Rosie looked visibly embarrassed.

> *Rosie*: But I don't … you are the one that has a boyfriend. I have no one!
>
> *Indrani*: But I don't have an obsessive desire and curiosity for sex like you.

Indrani was confident while saying this (as she always appeared). She had a thin frame herself, which served as a testimony to her 'theory.' While the theory itself might not have been the most acceptable, especially for Rosie, it highlights a few interesting themes. First, the undesirability of a 'fat' body and, second, how the undesirable fat body resulted from a deviant or unacceptable behaviour, in this case, unmarried women expressing their sexual desire. Here, it is interesting to note how an acceptable or desirable appearance is linked with superior morality, similar to the 'purity and pollution' construct discussed earlier in this article. The body is not just a symbol of superficial merit (or the lack of it) but also, deeper than that, it seemed to represent morality. This also relates to the feminist discussions on 'deviant bodies' (for example, see Evans, 2006) and female fat bodies (see Murray, 2008; Saguy, 2012). Evans (2006), for instance, critiqued the positivist claim of the separation of the body and mind – of looking at bodies as merely a container of the mind. Evans highlights feminist arguments that critically look at how everyday experiences and perceptions of morality, especially within patriarchy, are embodied and shaped around bodies, and more so for female bodies.

Rosie later spoke of Indrani's weight-gain theory in a dismissive manner. She did not seem to bother much about the theory itself or her weight gain. What had affected her was the breach of trust and the possible judgements on her character other people would have made following this. However, by the next time I met her, she had formed her position on it. 'Either I can be myself and learn to ignore judgements, or try to change my person and still possibly be judged. I chose the former', she said. Rosie's voice here joins the strengthening chorus of the voices of resistance.

Conclusion

Colourism affected migrant women both at the source region and at the destination (Chennai), although to varying degrees. The fashion and beauty culture of Chennai is very vibrant and dynamic. However, the preference for light skin tones seemed to remain constant, if not

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strengthened, over time. Whereas, in the smaller towns and villages, beauty standards became important around the central theme of marriage and finding a good alliance that would assure security in life, the importance of appearance seemed much greater in Chennai – at the workplace or college, for interviews, and even during the more casual occasions of spending time with friends in public spaces such as the beaches, malls, and so on in the city. Moreover, living in the hostel exposed the residents to a host of cosmetic products and grooming regimens through friends and peers. The shared nature of the hostel space is also crucial here; the hostel offered no single-occupancy rooms. The most common type of room was a 'four-sharing' room. The sharing of intimate spaces meant sharing of routines and ideas. The fact that roommates knew almost every aspect of each other's lives had both advantages and pressures. The pressure of grooming and beauty regimens was one of them.

The working women in the hostel gained access to a greater variety of cosmetic products upon migration thanks to their economic independence and expendable income, and the higher demand for and availability of beauty products in the big city. For students, it meant earmarking amounts from their pocket money; therefore, access to expensive skin-lightening products and other cosmetics was highly dependent on class.

Possessing a lighter skin tone evidently came with a lot of advantages. The most popular women in the hostel were relatively paler, yet they themselves could be seen using skin-lightening products and filters. There clearly was greater visibility, acceptance, and opportunity attached to having lighter skin. The growing dominance of internet and online media created another realm wherein rather unattainable goals such as lighter skin could be achieved much more easily – through filters and editing. This discussion also highlights how the aspiration for lighter skin is not merely a cosmetic 'choice', as tanning is in the West, but rather a necessity attached to advantages such as greater access to opportunity and privilege. The hostel was effectively a site where these beauty ideals were reproduced and, in rare cases, challenged.

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Notes

1 However, recently, a politician of the Bharatiya Janata Party in a television debate surrounding racist attacks against Nigerian youth near Delhi suggested that Indians could not be considered racist because of the inclusion of southern India in the nation. This remark stirred a very unusual debate on race in India, with some activists in south India pointing out how British colonisers considered all Indians as Black, with references to Indians as 'niggers' common in British accounts. See 'We accept South Indians' (2017) for the exact statement made by the politician.

2 The new Indian woman, contrasted with the Western construct of 'the third-world woman', is a concept theorised and discussed by postcolonial feminist scholars from the sub-continent to signify the diverse and changing ideals of femininity in a globalised India. See Daya (2009), Fernandes (2000), Lau (2006), Oza (2006), and Thapan (2004).

3 Related to Ayurveda, a system of medicine that has its historic origins in the Indian subcontinent.

4 This song was part of the movie *Vettrikodi kattu*, released in the year 2000, and became very popular. See this link to a YouTube video of the song with subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fi7tRkqN-7c

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