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Caste and Colourism:
Constructions of beauty among women in the historically Indian area of Chatsworth, Durban

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Abstract

This research study has set out to uncover the silences surrounding caste and colourism, and the influence of this on constructions of beauty standards among women in the Chatsworth Indian community. My fieldwork consisted of participant observations and interviews over the course of four weeks at a beauty parlour in Chatsworth, with a predominantly Indian women clientele. There were six participants in this study who consisted of the owner of the beauty parlour, Sandhya, the nail technicians, Mahati and Nidhi, the threaders, Yukti and Kalyani, and the hairdresser, Lavana. Throughout the chapters within this study, I argue that despite the language of caste rarely spoken, it exists as a reconfigured caste system determined by culture and colour, significantly influencing women's perceptions of beauty. Moreover, certain standards of beauty that favour lighter skin tones as a result of systemic prejudice, influence women to partake in beauty treatments that feed into this ideal. Lastly, women's choices in certain treatments are severely influenced by their desire to please a man, impress a mother-in-law, flaunt social status to family through a lighter skin tone, and fit an ideal standard of beauty. In theorising beauty, I draw on feminist and postcolonial perspectives, contextualising beauty within historical, socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political dimensions. I use Hauntology as a framework in unmasking the recursive force of caste which consumes women's everyday lives, dictating marriage criterion, popularity, status, affluence, and beauty standards.

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To the most amazing cohort and newfound friends, where would I be without you.

Dedication

Mum, you are the embodiment of my heart. You have shown me how to appreciate my beautifully dark skin. Thank you for believing in my wildest dreams, nurturing my passions, and pushing me to be the best version of myself. All that I am I owe to you.

Gran, I miss you more each day. Thank you for embracing every bit of my essence and loving me unconditionally. You are woven into the fabric of my being.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My Grandmother has always been my muse, my teacher, my home. Enlightening me on matters of the world, she would place most significance on our Tamil heritage, instilling a deep appreciation for my cultural roots which binds us as a family. Familiarising myself with the various deities, I was most fascinated by and fearful of Kali, the Divine Mother. She is depicted as a formidable figure, with black or blue skin; rarely spoken of due to her reputation of being the goddess of darkness, destruction, and death. However, Kali can be interpreted from a different viewpoint, an embodiment of "absolute freedom of the Divine from human constrictions and norms" (Kuzminsky 2019, 37). She embodies the force of nature and defies the stereotypical feminine ideal of submissiveness and obedience (Kuzminsky 2019, 46). Rooted in the richness of my Tamil heritage, this research tackles the constructions of caste and colourism in relation to beauty standards among women in the Chatsworth Indian community. The story of Kali stands in stark contrast to experiences of idealised beauty standards I encountered growing up in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal. Unlike Kali, women, young and old, were socialised to work towards "fair" or light skin. I wanted to learn more about how colour and caste shaped women's ideas about ideal beauty in the Indian community.

In this introductory chapter, I begin with a section entitled "My Culture, My History, My Story" which offers context for why I chose this research topic. In the second section I outline the significance of my research question, namely how constructions of beauty are influenced by colourism and extended to caste, among women in the historically Indian area of Chatsworth. In the third section, I introduce my research participants in my field site, Sandhya's Hair, Beauty, and Nail Salon. I offer a discussion of methodology. In the fourth section I offer a chapter overview of the research report.

My Culture, My History, My Story

My first understandings of the caste system were shaped by the profound love story of my Grandparents, embodying the unification of two contrasting South Indian communities to which they belonged. My Grandfather, a mix of Tamil and Telegu heritage, was placed at a marginalised position within the South African Indian community, as Telegu was associated with a lower caste status. My Grandmother, of Tamil heritage, was considered higher within this system. Tamil and Telegu are Dravidian languages whereas Hindi is an Indo-Aryan language (Soundararajan 2022, 189). However, all hold distinct ethic, cultural, and religious communities. While each fall under the religion of Hinduism, the rituals and practices differ among them, following different prayers, and worshipping various Hindu deities (Hansen 2012, 231-236).

My Grandparents marriage was considered taboo according to my Grandmother's family, given the implications of caste and colourism that this marriage might bring. They defied the societal standards of arranged marriage, sharing a deep-seated love that transcended the boundaries of caste. While finalising my research topic, I thought deeply about whether the

caste system remains a prominent social hierarchy within the Durban Indian community, continuing to influence marriage criteria, colour consciousness, and perceptions of beauty and attractiveness within its hierarchy.

From an early age I found myself bound by the weight of societal pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty standards and norms, beginning with straightening my naturally curly hair to fit in. Overjoyed at the ability to finally indulge in beauty treatments, I began regularly visiting beauty parlours as soon as I reached 18 years of age. This form of self-care was considered a customary symbol of womanhood, filled with newfound acceptance and inclusivity. However, my growing confidence and sense of self was clouded by the looming injustice of colourism that haunted me for years prior.

I was either 'pretty for a dark skinned girl' or I 'would be pretty if I were lighter skinned'. My dark skin appeared to hinder my attractiveness and desirability to Indian men of all shades. It made me wonder how and why this is the most prominent determining factor. It was often insinuated by my peers that I looked dirty due to my dark skin, and that with enough scrubbing, I would be able to shed my layers of darkness, achieving a "cleaner" appearance. My friends and classmates recommended skin lighteners as a 'cure' for what they perceived as the ugliness of my skin tone. The pressure to conform to a particular standard of beauty and the prejudice that I refused, sparked a resilience within me. In understanding the associations of dark skin with dirtiness and ugliness, and light skin with cleanliness and beauty, it is important to understand the systemic injustices that constructed these correlations, which will be explored in the following chapter, serving as the foundation for this study.

In wanting to fit in and feel a sense of belonging, women, such as myself, begin to fear ugliness and strive for what is perceived as most desirable or beautiful. To be a part of the popular, successful, and sought-after group, we tend to stray from those considered the opposite, who are different or unconforming. We begin to dissociate ourselves with their characteristics, moving further towards what is perceived as ideal among the desired group. In observing this at my school, I gathered the most effective way to do this was through changing one's aesthetics. I am interested in the conditions that influence women to make these decisions, how historical factors play a leading role, and how worthiness is determined by appearances.

Therefore, my decision to delve into this research topic is rooted in my personal understanding of the anguish, raw sensitivities, and enduring emotional wounds of this significant injustice. I aim to bring awareness to the necessity of dismantling this form of discrimination within the South African Indian community, which remains persistent and largely unchallenged, with ignorance towards and normalizations of colourism enduring. Caste has played an exceptionally large role in influencing colourism and perceptions of beauty within the Chatsworth Indian community. As my research study explores, caste has become a reconfigured hierarchy, dictating those of Hindi background associated with lighter skin being at the top, and those of Tamil background associated with darker skin pushed to

the bottom. As this hierarchy has changed greatly through the course of history, compared to its origins in India and to my Grandparents experience, it has taken a new shape yet holds its prejudicial and unjust meaning.

My Grandmother came from a wealthier family than my Grandfather, she was welcomed greatly within her in-law's home, as they often said, "a princess has arrived". While my Grandmother was darker skinned than my Grandfather, this did not matter as her wealth overpowered any prejudice towards her, similar to her sisters. As my Grandmother navigated the space of beauty, through her family and friends she learnt of a home remedy to achieve a "brightened" appearance, by grinding turmeric sticks and water to form a paste that was applied to the face for a few minutes. Moreover, she observed skin lightening creams such as "Ponds Vanishing Cream" and "Snow White Vanishing Cream" being purchased by those wealthier and who could afford it. Thus, using these creams and achieving a lighter skin tone became a sign of status. As with my Grandmother's and my own experience, harmful ingrained beauty standards have severely influenced how women perceived themselves, their beauty, and their desirability. Thus, leading to the inclination of women using beauty treatments that give the perception of a lighter skin tone.

The scholarly intricacies of beauty standards

In theorising beauty, I draw on feminist and postcolonial perspectives, contextualising beauty within historical, socio-political, and socio-cultural dimensions. In this analysis, I argue how beauty standards are shaped by power dynamics and cultural norms, the reasoning behind it, and the impacts it has on women within the Chatsworth Indian community. By observing beauty through these lenses, my research study seeks to uncover the manner in which caste and colourism intersect with broader societal structures and ideologies, exposing the social hierarchy that persists within this community.

The term 'pigmentocracy' emerged in 1944, by a Chilean anthropologist named Alejandro Lipschitz, using it to refer to the "colour-based hierarchies" within Latin America (Telles, Flores, and Urrea-Giraldo 2015). Glenn (2009, 40), describes the term in a broader manner, viewing it as a classification based on "phenotype and cultural characteristics". The concept of 'colourism' emerged from the term 'pigmentocracy' in 1982, originating form Alice Walker, a Pulitzer Prize winner for her novel The Colour Purple. Walker describes this concept as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color." (Norwood 2015, 586). Caste is defined as a Hindu hierarchical system in India, which associated its ranks with social standing, economic status, and ritual purity (Bayly 2008). Bayly (2008, 11) recognises that "people of low-caste origin are often significantly poorer, less well educated, more inclined towards unprestigious forms of `folk' religion, and even physically darker-skinned than those claiming superior caste rank". Their dark skin acted as a socially constructed hinderance to wealth, status, and greater occupations involving both pigmentocracy and colourism. In South Africa, the language of caste is rarely used, my research shows that Hindi and Tamil languages, however, act as stand-ins for the language of caste.

Ayyar and Khandare (2013, 86) argue that Indian beauty and femininity are determined by "lighter skin, lighter eyes, a sharp nose, and delicate nostrils." Moreover, the link between beauty and caste can be linked to the standard of Brahmin, the highest ranking within the caste system. Those who do not have these traits are "deemed ugly and made to face discrimination and condemnation." (Ayyar and Khandare 2013, 86)

Hunter (2007) argues that light skin is highly sought after in many parts of the world, predominantly among women, as it is a symbol of status and allows for greater opportunity. Emphasizing the various beauty treatments done to achieve this, Hunter (2007, 248) elaborates on the attempts made to achieve "whiteness" as a beauty standard with both men and women having the option of using "lighter-coloured contacts", straightening "kinky or curly hair", and harmfully using medical and home remedies to bleach their skin. There have been significant studies conducted towards the understanding the various treatments women undergo to gain a lighter skin tone, with the most common being skin lightening treatments (Glenn 2008; Thomas 2020). While recognising these valuable contributions to the field, my research aims to provide a different perspective by exploring the beauty treatments that provide a perceived lighter skin tone without using chemical products on the skin.

Harper and Choma (2018) argue that the internalisation of beauty standards which emphasise the attractiveness of white women, severely effect Black and Indian women to the extent where they begin "self-objectification". During this process, these women compare themselves to the socially admired status of white women as well as taking into consideration the beauty standard within their culture and society. As Hunter (2007, 240) explains, "Embedded in the leftover colonial structure is a strong and enduring value of white aesthetics (e.g. light hair, straight hair, light eyes, narrow noses, and light skin)." With greater media representation falling to women with these characteristics, Eurocentric beauty standards are pushed and perceived as the most desirable (Hunter 2007, 240). Davis (2003, 74) argues that women often undergo cosmetic surgeries as they are seen as "'different' or 'too abnormal' to be endured". This exposes the larger social implications, where women take on a new appearance to avoid exclusion and social suffering, rather gaining a sense of belonging as they fit a certain standard of beauty that is perceived as "ideal" within a society (Anhallen, Suyemoto & Carter 2006, 676).

Glenn (2008) argues that serious health conditions are the result of South Africa's use of harmful skin lightening products. The overpowering need to obtain a lighter skin tone has driven these extreme measures, a decision made in a world that denigrates their features. Thomas (2020) reinforces the role beauty companies play is creating lasting insecurities within women of darker skin, leading to the belief that beauty occurs through the use of their skin lightening products. The harmful effects of beauty standards can be understood and acknowledged through the valorisation of whiteness and lightness explored by Hunter (2007), Harper and Choma (2018), Davis (2003), with the result being the detrimental use of skin lightening products to achieve this as explained by Glenn (2008) and Thomas (2020). This

study observes the desire to reach these ingrained beauty standards through everyday beauty treatments.

Arrival story

I chose to conduct my research in a beauty parlour because, from my experience, it is the ideal location where discussions around aesthetics and discourses of beauty and attractiveness occur. Reflecting on my experiences in Chatsworth, my friends always opted for aunties down the road, who styled hair within their homes. Therefore, I decided to ask a few of my friends who live in Chatsworth, to send pictures of any beauty parlour signs and contact details outside homes and attached to gates. After a few enquiring phone calls, my search came to an end, as the owner of a specific beauty parlour, Sandhya's Hair, Beauty, and Nail Salon, was more than happy to allow me into her space. Chatsworth was an ideal research location due to its rich history rooted in indentured labour, as Chatsworth became a home for many ex-indentured labourers and descendants of indentured labourers (Desai and Vahed 2013). In the 1950s, under the Group Areas Act, Indian people throughout Durban were relocated to Chatsworth, on land that had previously belonged to Indian farmers and gradually transformed into an officially designated Indian residential area in the 1960s and early 1970s[1]. Today, the township of Chatsworth houses over 450 000 people within 64 suburbs, with predominantly Indian and Black residents[2]. Observing the street surrounding the beauty parlour, it was filled with community members walking freely, carrying their grocery bags, and chatting with their neighbours, outside their semi-detached houses. Cars and taxis cluttered the pavements outside the residents' homes, with palm trees planted on the sidewalks and peaking above the gates.

Before stepping into the field, I conjured up an idea of the beauty parlour from my own experiences and my imagination. I believed the beauty parlour I was going to conduct my research in would be a homely environment, situated within the owner's living room, where women would come in their comfiest clothes, safely offloading their weekly adventures and dramas, and gossiping about their in-laws. However, the beauty parlour where I conducted my research was far from this imagination. Sandhya's Hair, Beauty, and Nail Salon is a double story face-brick outbuilding, just in front of the owner's residential home, within the yard. The parlour has a single room on the upper-level and on the lower-level, it has a half, thin wall, slightly dividing the room. There is a board attached to the wall in front of the beauty parlour, consisting of its name, telephone number, and beauty treatments offered. These treatments include hair, nails, threading, and waxing.

From the outside, the parlour is unassuming. It looks simple and small, however, opening the glass door and climbing up to enter at the top level, I encountered a space that resembled a far

[1] South African History Online. 2020. "Chatsworth, Suburb of Durban". Accessed September 11, 2023. https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/chatsworth-suburb-durban

[2] Seeff. 2023."Chatsworth, Kwa-Zulu Natal". Accessed September 11, 2023. https://www.seeff.com/area-profiles/chatsworth/

more professional operation than I had initially anticipated. Upstairs, where most of the treatments occur, I encountered a room filled with pink and grey suede furniture. The spotless area was tiled from the floor to the walls, providing a clinical feel and setting. The elaborate tropical theme wallpaper framing the room and small potted plants which sit above a ledge on a section of the wall give a blissful and relaxing ambiance. The large windows of the salon that face the houses on the opposite side of the road, allow for sunlight to enter and bring the space to life with warmth and brightness. There are no posters or television and radio stations playing, allowing for a calm, peaceful, and airy environment. Within this space, is a table for payments and purchases, two massage beds for threading, a small hair station with a chair and mirror, and four nail stations with comfortable chairs, footrests, and basins.

Upon my arrival, the strong chemical mixture of acetone and hair dye overwhelmed my nose. The owner, Sandhya, was at the back of the beauty parlour, chatting heartily with a client about the colour highlights she would like for her shoulder-length dark brown hair. I heard the clickity-clack of Sandhya's high heels against the sterile tiles as she walked towards me, welcoming me with a beaming smile and warm hug. She is average height, with straight, thick, dark brown to black hair, reaching the middle of her back. Sandhya often tied her hair into a messy bun while assisting clients, wearing minimal makeup, and choosing to wear high heels despite her spending most of her working hours on her feet. She kept a neutral yet hyperfeminine appearance, offering an air of clinical professionalism. Murnen and Byrne (1991, 480) define being hyperfeminine as "exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role." I would characterise Sandhya as fitting into this definition. Beauty, which requires exertion, as evident by going to a beauty parlour, is presented as effortless among almost all my participants, who choose natural makeup looks. Sandhya took pride in the aesthetic elements of herself as well as her beauty parlour. "Thank you for choosing me and my beauty parlour, I'd love to hear more about your research". Sandhya emanated confidence in every sentence and every stride. She spoke in a self-assured, optimistic manner.

Sandhya began working in beauty in 2008, starting within her home and expanding to her outbuilding over the years. She only opens the beauty parlour when clients book appointments, averaging from five to ten clients per day, occasionally allowing walk-ins if she is home. Her clientele is predominantly Indian women of all age groups, and the treatments she offers at the beauty parlour include threading and waxing, painting, and applying acrylic to nails, and styling, colouring, and cutting hair. Her business employs one hairdresser, two threaders, and two nail technicians, yet when I arrived, I did not see any of the other employees. Sandhya appeared to be handling the day by herself. She left the caramel dye on her client's hair and led me to the porch attached to the front of her home, with woven chairs.

As we sat on the porch, I complimented Sandhya on the beauty of her establishment. She introduced herself and her beauty parlour with pride as we began to discuss the details of my research. She told me she had never had a conversation pertaining to colourism before. In her mind, colourism was the same as racism. As we spoke, I came to realise that she was unfamiliar with the term caste. This came as a surprise to me as I had experience both

colourist and casteist language in spaces such as hers. Her eagerness to learn about these concepts made me feel at ease, yet I was surprised that she had never experienced these obstacles in her life. My task then was to offer a short explanation of caste and colourism: Drawing on Bayly (2008, 11), I explained caste as a Hindu hierarchical system originating in India where those at the lowest level were viewed as poorer, less educated, and often darker skinned; and those at the highest level being seen as the exact opposite. My explanation of colourism stemmed from Alice Walker (Norwood 2015, 586), describing it as discrimination or preference based on the shade of a person's skin tone within a particular racial group. I emphasised that I am specifically focusing on that of darker skinned Indian women. Upon my explanation, Sandhya exclaimed with a frown, "But beauty is within, colour shouldn't matter!". My initial reaction to my participants not using the language of caste and colour within the parlour was that of fear and frustration, that I was searching for something that did not exist. However, little did I know that I would have to read in-between the lines of conversations, listen out for euphemisms, and observe treatment choices closely, to uncover these subtle expressions.

As Sandhya gave me a short tour of her home, a multigenerational household, her mother-in-law heard our voices and rushed into the lounge with an affectionate "Namaste, my darling". I met her son who is being home-schooled due to Sandhya's belief that it has become a far too dangerous environment for her child to grow up in, that he would "fall into the wrong crowd", expressing her concern for the decreasing Indian population within the schools of Chatsworth. Before we knew it, it was time for Sandhya to rinse the dye out of her client's hair. I sat in the furthest chair in the parlour and observed her as she worked. Her client seemed slightly uncomfortable with my presence, we exchanged simple greetings, and her quick "hi" and weary glance gave this away. To fill the awkward silence, I explained my research and my role at the beauty parlour, however, I realized that an academic description was not the best method to go with. After all, I am a stranger, overhearing her conversations, observing her treatments, planting myself in a space she is so familiar with; I should have eased into it a bit more, introduced myself as a person before a researcher. I left the beauty parlour soon after Sandhya concluded her client's treatment, with my first taste of fieldwork and a feeling of wonder as to whether the weeks ahead will be filled with rich insight, that will validate the direction of my research.

Research methods

My research study is qualitative in nature, conducted through participant observation, interviews, and autoethnography, as my main methods of enquiry. My fieldwork at Sandhya's Hair, Beauty, and Nail Salon occurred over a period of four weeks, visiting the parlour three to five times each week. While there I observed how business is conducted, paying attention to the treatments that clients chose to do and carefully listened to conversations among clients and staff, and their intentions behind their choices. I was able to gain deeper insight into the subtleties and undertones of why certain choices were made towards treatments and listen in on what was discussed whilst getting these treatments done. I also observed products being sold within the beauty parlour, who tended to buy these products, and their justifications for

it. In trying to blend into the environment as much as possible, I partook in appropriate duties at the beauty parlour, such as sweeping up hair, tidying stations, serving beverages to clients, and engaging in general conversation with them. Through partaking in these activities, I was able to make my participants and their clients feel a bit more comfortable around me.

My semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants which provided me with insight into their lives, perspectives, and experiences. I was able to ask in-depth and open-ended questions, receiving answers as well as observing silences or pauses that occurred whilst my participants shared their stories with me. Using inductive coding, an exploratory and data-driven approach, I was able to pick up on recurrent themes and patterns that emerged (Thomas 2006, 2). Interestingly, I uncovered an extensive use of euphemisms and roundabout answers to questions about caste and colourism. I went into the field with a preconceived idea that caste and colourism would be spoken of out in the open. However, after the first week of observations and interviews, I realised that its presence is expressed in a different manner. Contrary to my assumptions and expectations, I observed how my participants and their clients' used euphemisms and indirect references to caste and colourism to make sense of their lives, soften their experiences, and justify their consciousness towards beauty standards. They appeared unaware of the undertones looming in their conversations, often brushing it off as surface issues rather than deeper struggles. Hughes (2006, 151) describes euphemisms as "deliberately indirect, conventionally imprecise, or socially "comfortable" ways of referring to taboo, embarrassing, or unpleasant topics". Therefore, the social repercussions associated with the negativity of taboos are avoided through the use of euphemisms. I found that the parlour allowed for people to speak about sensitive and sometimes painful experiences in a way that felt less threatening and divisive.

I employed autoethnography throughout my research study. Being a dark skinned, middle class, Indian woman from Durban, I was familiar with the way women engaged in beauty parlours. My pigment and class shaped how I was read and how I engaged with others. As most of my participants identified themselves as lighter skinned, originating from struggling socioeconomic backgrounds, they did not feel I would understand where they were coming from in our conversations and interviews. They often went into detail about their financial struggles, spelling out their situations, almost as if they did not think I was comprehending the severity of it. However, when the topic of colourism arose, they did not refer to it by that term. As an ethnographer, I had to pay attention to emic understandings and not impose my own assumptions of how and why people spoke about aesthetics and its relationship to caste and colour. I paid attention to how the women would often brush off colourism as something less significant, limiting their answers just enough to answer the questions. Moreover, they provided vague explanations of what they believed was beautiful or why women choose to beautify themselves, often inadvertently mentioning the term "fair". The clients at the parlour who conversed with me were rather open, asking if I've ever done threading or waxing, what colours I get my nails painted, or if I've ever dyed my hair and used coloured contacts. They felt comfortable enough around me to have their usual conversations with their beauticians, occasionally including me by saying "you know what I'm talking about" or "you get what I mean". My pigmentation and class shaped how I imagined the field, due to my personal

experiences at beauty parlours, I imagined darker skinned clients as more conscious of what treatments they indulged in. In drawing from my own positionality and that of my participants and their clients, I added in my thoughts alongside my observations, to self-reflect on these contending perspectives and experiences, and allow for an integrative analysis.

Participants

All my participants were Indian women from Chatsworth, in their thirties, who were deeply invested in beauty and aesthetics. Working in the beauty industry has a low barrier to access for many women from marginalised backgrounds. Most of my participants' skills in beauty by were self-taught, as they slowly practiced from a young age, with the help of their mothers. This allowed them to bring home a small income and provide for their families.

Yukti (32 years old) is a threader at the parlour and her work entails threading upper-lips, eyebrows, and full faces. It took some time over the first three weeks for us to build a rapport. I watched how she interacted with her clients, maintaining a professional manner, and keeping her chit-chat to a minimum due to the up-close nature of her treatments. As the weeks passed, she expressed her difficulty trusting others and allowing people into her bubble. She revealed the donations she makes to the less fortunate, with the little income that she has leftover each month. The more I got to know her, I came to learn of her difficult circumstances. She has struggled financially throughout her life, working hard to give back to her parents and contribute to her home, alongside her husband. Yukti chose to work in the field of beauty as she needed an immediate job to support her family, she was able to secure a position within a parlour, learning the skills of threading as she went along. Yukti is aware of her skin tone, and how it affects other people's perceptions of her. Expressing that due to her Hindi background, people associate her with wealth and lighter skin, however she acknowledges that this economic stereotype in her case is untrue. Yukti's narrative is a clear example of the reinforced hierarchy within Chatsworth and the economic stigma, where Hindi people are perceived to be at the top, having light skinned, with the most affluence and status.

Kalyani (37 years old) displayed warmth and care towards me, from our first encounter, which I soon learnt was a product of her loving home environment. We bonded rather quickly, from the very beginning she outright asked if I am a "Tamil girl", claiming to have known from the moment she saw me based on my features and "warm" skin tone, revealing that she is also of Tamil heritage. Kalyani's life is consumed by her work, as a threader at the parlour. She started learning about beauty from an early age, as her mother focused quite a bit on caring for her skin. She is Tamil, however, is often mistaken for Hindi, as she is light skinned. She is aware of her significantly lighter complexion compared to her family. Kalyani acknowledges how her mother treated her better than her siblings due to their difference in shades of skin. She was greatly favoured, receiving the most attention, the more expensive brands of skin care products, and the pride her parents felt when bringing her along to visit their family and friends when she was younger. Kalyani believes her husband sees more than

her skin tone as his compliments were not focused on her appearance. Listening to her speak, she was tired of being seen as a commodity in her childhood and was familiar with how skin colour influenced her level of desirability and attractiveness. Therefore, she felt it necessary to make her point known, that her marriage was different, that her skin tone did not determine her level of worth.

Mahati (33 years old), the nail technician, and I enjoyed each other's company. Having to grow up quickly and begin working at a young age to support her family, Mahati finds joy in the moments when she can feel young again, chat about silly things, and forget her worries momentarily. She enjoys conversing with her clients', finding commonalities with every one of them, despite their age gaps. Mahati received many compliments growing up, from boys interested in her to envious girls asking what products she uses on her face to achieve her lighter skin tone. She had an easier schooling experience due to this and understands that her appearances enabled her a higher social status and friend base. To further fit in with the popular girls, she began painting her nails like them and this is where her interest in beauty stemmed from. Her parents could not afford to pay for her studies; therefore, she learnt along the way. She married young, to a Hindi man her mother set her up with. This pleased her grandmother, as she advised Mahati to find someone within the Hindi culture. Mahati provides insight into how arranged marriages work, how beauty is viewed as a form of capital which allows for marriage prospects. Furthermore, it creates an escape from poverty and a means for a financially stable future.

Spending time in the beauty parlour with Nidhi (35 years old), the nail technician, was rather calming, her gentle demeaner created a soothing experience for her clients. She is soft-spoken and chats quietly with her clients, working silently on their nails at times. She is grateful for her parent's hard work, in providing for their family. Nidhi began working at an early age to help at home, her first job was in her aunt's corner shop. She wanted something more for herself after high school, and began doing nails as a hobby, which turned into her career. Nidhi was favoured at school among the boys and envied by the girls. She expressed her certainty that her light skinned was the enabler. While she enjoyed the attention, she often felt that she mostly had friends due to her appearances. Nidhi met her husband in her late twenties, she felt that this was later in life as her mother feared she was getting to an age where she would no longer be seen as youthful and desirable. These two words are seen being used interchangeably, expressing the anachronistic expectation maintaining its presence in Nidhi's marriage eligibility. Moreover, while Nidhi's husband believed her to be beautiful due to her light skin, he also worried that she would have an air about herself. Nidhi shares insight into the complexity of having light skin, while she is seen as beautiful, she is also believed to have an elitist mindset.

Lavana (37 years old), the hairdresser, and I spent quite a bit of time chatting and heartily laughing, as most of her clients do around her. Everyone appeared open and content, sharing their daily dramas and weekly events with her. Lavana was brought up by her grandmother, visiting her parents on weekends. Her parents were always working, sacrificing their time with her to ensure she lived a happy and comfortable life. She has passed these values onto

her children, who she works hard to provide a better life for. Lavana's passion for beauty stemmed from her high school days, taking pride in her long hair, styling it from a young age, and enjoying the compliments she received towards it. While she preferred keeping to herself, she often observed the injustices that occurred at her school, a social hierarchy where lighter skinned girls held the most popularity and status, with darker skinned girls being excluded and shunned. Without realising it, Lavana was describing the reconfigured hierarchy of caste within Chatsworth.

Chapter Outline

In chapter two entitled Durga: The Mother of the Hindu Universe, I focus on the history of the hierarchy within the Chatsworth Indian community. In it I argue that despite the language of caste not being commonly used, there exists a reconfigured caste system predominantly based on culture and colour, which has significant influence on perceptions of beauty today. This chapter details my participants upbringing in Chatsworth, their understandings of this social hierarchy, and the influence it has had on their lives.

In the third chapter entitled Kali: The Dark Mother, I explore the various beauty treatments that women choose at the beauty parlour, including threading and waxing, nail polish and acrylic, hair highlights and styles, and coloured contact lens. By paying close attention to these treatments, I show the process through which women achieve the perception of lighter skin as skin lightning has fallen out of fashion. I argue that the new skin lightening treatments operate to reach a certain standard of beauty that has been ingrained through systemic prejudice.

In the fourth chapter entitled Shakti: The Divine Feminine Power, I analyse participants spoken desires regarding treatments and perceptions of ideal femininity. I argue that women's treatment choices are severely influenced by their desire to please a man, impress a mother-in-law, flaunt social status to family through a lighter skin tone, or fit an ideal beauty standard. In this chapter I show how performance of femininity is deeply tied to meeting these desires.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss how these insights amount to a configuration of caste and colourism in Chatsworth which is maintained through elaborate discourses about beauty regimes. It is the contention of this research report that aesthetics can help us learn how caste operates in a context where the language is erased yet its effects linger.

Chapter 2 – Durga: The Mother of the Hindu Universe

Durga
The warrior Goddess,
Both a destructive force and nurturing mother.

Durga is the "protective mother of the universe"[3]. She is a warrior goddess, in her yearning for peace and prosperity, she uses her vengeance to combat evil and harmful forces[4]. I have drawn on Durga as I tackle the injustices of colourism, casteism, and racism. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the hierarchy within the Chatsworth community, based on caste, colour, and race, arguing its influence on perceptions of beauty today. Beginning with an understanding of the prominent scholars and literature associated with this hierarchy, I explore the first-hand accounts and understandings of these concepts and experiences, concluding this chapter with a brief of the overall findings. This chapter aims to supply a unique perspective to the social hierarchy within Chatsworth, observing it through the aspect of beauty and the effects it has on this study's participants.

A scholarly approach to the caste, colour, and racial hierarchy injustices

The South African Indian community has been deeply explored by prominent scholars such as Fatima Meer (1969), Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai (1984), and Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed (2010; 2013; 2015), with each of these leading authors providing valuable insight into the livelihoods, identity, history, and culture of this community. Acknowledging this exceptional insight into this area, my research aims to add a different perspective, introducing beauty into the equation. While various scholars such as Hunter (2007), Glenn (2008), and Phoenix (2014), have tackled the question of beauty in relation to caste, colour, and race across the Indian diaspora, it is rarely seen within the South African Indian context.

Chatsworth served as a home for many ex-indentured labourers and descendants of indentured labourers (Desai and Vahed 2013). As indentured labourers journeyed to South Africa, their caste system was challenged by the symbolic loss of caste, known as crossing of the Kala Pani. This social taboo that emerges from Hinduism, is understood to be an offense of crossing the sea known as "Samudrolanghana" (Wahab 2022). Desai and Vahed (2010, 56) explain this as a figurative construction which "was held to lead to the 'dispersal of tradition, family, class, and caste classifications, and to the general loss of a "purified" Hindu essence'". Soundararajan (2022, 111) stresses how the mingling of different varnas (caste levels) was deeply stigmatised, where select Hindu texts deemed it a threat to the foundations of "family and caste values".

[3] Goddess Garden, "The Hindu Goddess Durga", November 22, 2018, https://thegoddessgarden.com/the-hindu-goddess-durga/
[4] Goddess Garden, "The Hindu Goddess Durga".

Indentured labourers suffered exploitation and discrimination upon their voyage, with the most common being those of darker skin tones; with lighter skinned Indian people having an advantageous edge due to their skin tone resembling Europocentric beauty standards (Desai and Vahed 2010). This ideal capitalized on the pre-colonial forms of colourism in India, under the caste system, as colonial racism coalesced with local forms of discrimination. This journey appeared to reform the caste system within South Africa, specifically Chatsworth, taking on a new identity where hierarchical societal structures resurfaced under the weight of indentured labour and apartheid. With many parallels to the caste system, this form of social hierarchy differs as it focuses on Hindi and Tamil backgrounds among South African Indians.

Hunter (2007, 238), emphasises the colonial influence on colourism and hierarchy with dark skin representing "savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority." White skin was viewed as the ideal, and those with a similar aesthetic were rewarded with privileges. Hunter (2007, 239) reflects on this as "the bleaching syndrome", meaning the internalisation of what is perceived to be an optimal aesthetic of whiteness which includes light skin, light eyes, and light hair. Moreover, tensions associated with race and colour were at its height during the apartheid regime, with racial classifications constructing a social hierarchy within South Africa, skin tone was not accurate in determining this as those of lighter skin fell into the category of white at the very top. Light skin thus become a symbol of freedom, with skin lightening products booming during this period (Anjali 2023, 161).

This hierarchy lives on in Chatsworth today, with roots stemming from the caste system in India as expressed by Bayly (2008) and Ayyar and Khandare (2013), who emphasise the characteristics associated with dark and lighter skin, including the beauty standards that emerged from it. This is observed alongside the influence of colonialism and apartheid, emphasised by Hunter (2007) and Anjali (2023), that has reconfigured this hierarchy, shaping it into what can be observed today.

From birth to death, Chatsworth is my home

As Desai and Vahed (2013, 5) describe it, today "Chatsworth is a living, breathing landscape of people", characterized by its diverse population, despite the apartheid government's attempt to impose a single racial identity on the residents by grouping them as 'Indian'. Varied languages, social strata, ethnic background, and religious beliefs among the residents defy the notion of a homogenous 'Indian' group. My first experience in Chatsworth was a visitation to my friend's house, in my first year of undergrad. While I did not visit all that often, Chatsworth left a long-lasting impression on me. I could feel the strong sense of community with neighbours often visiting each other's homes, and a hot plate of food always prepared for the welcoming of any expected and unexpected guests. As all my participants had grown up in Chatsworth, with similar yet unique experiences, I was able to draw on their interviews and gather a detailed account of each upbringing.

Sandhya grew up in a fearful Chatsworth, remembering it is as an unsafe area ridden with drugs and what she called "bad behaviour", an environment she would not tolerate for her own children. Sandhya chose to home-school her youngest son, as she did not believe him equipped enough to handle the harsh outside world, being exposed to a "barracks way" of living. While I've only heard this word through my Grandparents, I was able to gather that it has negative connotations, associated with a lower standard of living. Crime and antisocial behaviour are results of the marginalisation of Indian, Black, and Coloured townships by the apartheid state (Swartz et al 2012). Sandhya's fears about the education of her child and exposure to barracks life is apt, given that townships were not designed for the cultivating of secure families, but rather racially segregated labour reserves for white owned industries.

Yukti, Kalyani, and Mahati appear to have undertaken life with a passivity, staying on track, and focusing on the "bigger things" in life rather than getting caught up in the "smaller matters". Through our conversations, I was able to decipher that this meant maintaining a poised appearance, not voicing their opinions too loud, not over familiarising themselves with men, and not doing things that could derail their prospects of getting married. This can be read as a stereotypical femininity that they have taken on and idealised. Their social conditions, being their unfavourable quality of living, education, and income have been internalised and possess what they need to protect themselves from, by maintaining their composure and utmost femininity, they feel as though they surpass their circumstances.

Lavana and Nidhi openly expressed their struggles growing up, mainly elaborating on their socioeconomic status'. From a young age, they were aware of the hard work their parents endured to provide a better life for them. Yukti, Mahati, and Nidhi took on part-time jobs while finishing high school to support their families, slowly learning skills, and progressing into positions at beauty parlours to earn a higher salary. While my participants experienced much hardship in their lives, they were extremely grateful for the life they had, thankful for the sacrifices their parents made in bettering who they are, and ultimately happy with their decision to go into the field of beauty. As Sandhya expressed in a mocking tone, Chatsworth was her home "from birth to death", as much as she wished she could move to a wealthier area, she was restricted by her socioeconomic and familial obligations.

The Pegging Act and Ghetto Act of 1946, implemented the forceful diminishment of slums due to the unsanitary living conditions, laying the foundation for the Group Areas Act of 1950. Under this legislation, Chatsworth became a dominating residential area for Indian South Africans, with the land seized from 600 Indian farmers. Indian people from areas such as Cato Manor, Clairwood, and the magazine Barracks were forcibly relocated, with Chatsworth officially opening in 1964, serving as the buffer zone between White residence and Black townships[5]. The homes within Chatsworth were often far too small for the Indian

[5] South African History Online. "Chatsworth, Suburb of Durban." Last modified 18 November, 2020. https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/chatsworth-suburb-durban#:~:text=Chatsworth%20comprises%20an%20area%20that,under%20the%20Group%20Areas%20legislation.

nuclear families that occupied it, with an average of seven to nine family members living together (Hansen 2012, 66). Indian people held municipal positions with extremely low wages, barely able to pay for their entire family's needs, which heightened during their relocation to Chatsworth (Desai 2002, 21). As seen among my participants, their need to work from an early age is rooted in the historically unfavourable socioeconomic standards of living for Indian families.

I feel trapped by my culture and skin tone

In the early 1960s, the initial residents of Chatsworth hailed from diverse backgrounds, with majority practicing Hinduism, while smaller communities followed Islam and Christianity (Desai and Vahed 2013, 1). This specifically pertains to my research as I have observed a Hindu division within the Indian community; four out of six of my participants mentioned a hierarchy based on cultural backgrounds, between people identified as Hindi and Tamil in Chatsworth. Despite Hindi and Tamil people sharing the religion of Hinduism, Hindi people are seen as fairer, wealthier, and of higher status; and Tamil people seen as darker, poorer, and of lower status. People ascertain other's ranking within this hierarchy by their surnames.

Speaking about her interactions with Hindi speaking people, Lavana informed me that, "Majority of Maharaj's and Singh's are wealthy, they drive nice cars and live in big houses, they use it as their advantage. Also, if you say their surname incorrectly or pronounce it differently, they will correct you. They will tell you exactly how to say it. They regard themselves as quite high." The surname, 'Maharaj' descended from North India, found among Hindi speaking South African Indians, it is claimed to have descended from the "Brahmin varna" (Kuper 1960, 27). The highest level of the caste system in India.
Yukti felt trapped by her Hindi culture and light skin, her family struggled financially, and worked hard for the little they received. However, comments on their expected wealth and status always seemed to loom, causing a frustration within Yukti. She did not want to be stereotyped as superficial or "a spender" when her life was quite the opposite.

Being a Hindi woman herself, Sandhya was aware of her light-skin privilege. Speaking about the treatment she receives over darker skinned woman, she tells me, "When you are fairer, people think you are more beautiful, they treat you better. I don't like it; I think people can be fair and have no features. I am not just beautiful because I am fair." Sandhya feels the need to justify her beauty, not only through her skin tone, but through her features. Judging by the treatments women are getting done at the parlour, these features include light-coloured eyes, a perceived lighter skin tone, and various lighter shades of hair highlights. Therefore, it can be understood as a euphemism for Eurocentric and arguably Brahman centric beauty standards. Moreover, this is an indicator to the implications for darker skinned women, who are not perceived as holding the same standard of beauty due to their skin tone and opposing features, subject to unfair treatment.

Kalyani is a Tamil woman, often mistaken for Hindi due to her light skin. She expressed the dynamics within her home as she is the lightest skinned among her sisters, she received more

attentive care from her mother, always ensuring she used the best creams for her skin. This created an unequal and envious dynamic within her home. Moreover, when going out as a family, Kalyani always received compliments of her beauty, to her sisters' dismay. Yet when it came to finding a partner, she happily shared, "My husband was the first man I dated, I asked him why he would ask me on a date because it was all new to me. He said that it is not because of the colour of my skin, it is because I am very beautiful and have a good personality. My husband was the first person to compliment me like that." Kalyani's first experience with her husband raises a more complex rendering than a colour-blind narrative. Colour blindness in itself is one of the fundamental ways in which consciousness of colourist hierarchies are being erased (Goldberg 2008). Moreover, if her husband truly felt that skin colour was not a priority, he would not feel the need to deny it as a factor. Therefore, the eerie undertones of colourism are present in his compliments.

Unpacking these instances with Lavana, Yukti, Sandhya, and Kalyani, it appears to be a common phenomenon for Hindi women to be stereotyped a certain way. From the information gathered within these interviews, it can be understood that people of Hindi background are viewed as more financially stable, deserving of a higher status and standard of treatment, and often acknowledged for their perceived beauty. Conversely, women from Tamil backgrounds are treated entire differently, their dark skin is associated with the polar opposite of the stereotypes about Hindi women. In a place like Chatsworth, these social dramas play out to create a social context of hyper awareness of colourism, especially because of the denial of its existence.

My looks are both a blessing and a curse

Lavana, Kalyani, and Nidhi shared different experiences of colour consciousness in their school lives, where the social hierarchy affected their experiences with teachers, friends, and burgeoning love interests.

As the niece of an established teacher within her school, Lavana chose to remain out of the limelight, simply observing the cliques and clashes that formed in her high school. She expressed the leading conundrum of colour among Indian girls, where segregation was formed based on it. "If you were fairer than me, then you would have more friends, be more popular in school. It didn't make sense to me at that age, we were coming from the same culture and background, but because you are fairer, you are automatically being told you are more beautiful and above me." Moreover, this segregation extended to interactions with boys, where the lighter skinned girls were seen as the "main attraction", and darker skinned girls were excluded. Listening to Lavana's story, I thought about the experiences of rejection and exclusion dark skinned young women had at school. The lesson was not only for the dark skinned women, but for light skinned women: being socially accepted was associated with colour.

Kalyani witnessed acts of colourism during her time at school, where dark skinned girls were excluded and called names, mostly by the popular girls who were lighter skinned. Kalyani did

not partake in this, rather trying to divert the girls away through humour, who generally interfered as a form of asserting dominance over the others. She observed these colourist acts as harmless teasing; however, it is quite the opposite. It is textbook bullying and as Kalyani described it as playful belies, she lacked sensitivity towards the complex effects this kind of experience of early rejection had on the girls being teased. Moreover, it taught the girls who were bullying the others, that their behaviour was acceptable and amusing, allowing them to repeat their harmful actions in the future. Acknowledging her lighter skin, Nidhi understood where she was on the social ladder at school, she was used to the attention she received from boys and the jealousy felt by girls. She felt a power she did not want and attention she did not enjoy, as she expressed "My looks are both a blessing and curse".

Despite Lavana and Kalyani experiencing opposite ends of the social hierarchy within their schools, they were equally affected by this phenomenon, both experiencing an exclusion or inclusion that was out of their hands, based on an uncontrollable element being their skin tones. While Lavana shared the perspective of a young girl being dismissed and discriminated against due to her darker skin tone, Kalyani shared the experience of only being considered valuable due to her looks. She sheds light on the dehumanising side to being put on a pedestal due to having a lighter skin tone. The idealised yet unrealistic standard of beauty hinders women through the prioritisation of physical appearance above other attributes of their character and efforts. Women who conform to these ideals feel the need to be perceived as attractive and receive external validation. Under the guise of acceptance, women inadvertently become tokens, with their value lying in their physical attributes (Wolf 1990).

He loves my heart, not my skin colour

From a teenager, I was always advised to find someone of my culture, a Tamil boy. I often heard stories from my friends or girls at school who were older than me, providing me with guidance to always go for a boy who was darker than me as he would appreciate and value me more. This phenomenon can further be observed among my participants.

At the salon where Yukti previously worked, was a woman who regularly came in for her treatments, each time asking a bit more about her. On a day filled with more compliments than usual from this client, Yukti was asked if she would meet with her son, as she felt she was the perfect fit for him. They fell in love, and married soon after, with the warm welcoming into her new family. While Yukti did not consider colour when marrying her husband, she always felt slightly uncomfortable visiting her in-laws, they would constantly admire her lighter skin, almost as though it was a commodity. Yukti knew from the very beginning that her husband loved her for her heart, rarely complimenting her skin tone or beauty, rather her intelligence and kindness.

Moreover, Mahati shared how her husband was first introduced to her. Mahati's mother and her mother-in-law had planned a lunch where her and her future husband could meet. While Mahati was blindsided by this arrangement the mothers had made, she fell in love quickly and got married at 19 years of age. She expressed how the darker skinned women in her

husband's family would treat her, constantly complimenting her beauty and asking what creams she uses on her face as they desired her appearances. She was considered the favourite daughter-in-law, with her brother-in-law's wife, who was slightly darker than Mahati, often being forgotten and side-lined. Mahati made a point to mention that this made her uncomfortable as she was aware of what was going on, however, remained silent not to upset her relationship with her in-laws.

Nidhi met her husband at the age of 29, this pleased her mother immensely as she feared Nidhi's age was hindering her possibility for marriage. Her mother had saved her money over the years in preparation for her wedding, hosting an extravagant event to celebrate her daughter and son-in-law. Her mother exposes the anachronistic expectation of a woman marrying at a young age, with her assertion that Nidhi married later in life. Historically, women were expected to marry young, due to their naivety and lesser education which makes them easier to control (Field and Ambrus 2008). Nidhi and her husband attended the same church for years; however, her husband did not approach her for most of this time as he felt intimidated and feared rejection. Nidhi noted a comment her husband made when he gained the courage to talk to her, focusing on how beautiful and light skinned she was, he said he felt concerned that she may have an attitude about her. As Nidhi got to know her in-laws more, she understood why her husband said this. Her in-laws often made comments to her husband about how her fair skin would lead her to eventually "behave like a white woman, like this and like that." From my personal experience and understanding, this is an insinuation of someone conducting themselves as though they are better than others, above them, almost superior to them. Nidhi's story reveals the dual tension of familial pressure for marriage and the implicit pressure to ignore negative experiences of being idealised for her light skin. There is a double bind in this situation for women like Nidhi, while lighter skinned women are associated with being beautiful, they are also associated with having a snobbish persona.

As Yukti, Mahati, and Nidhi have expressed, marriage is a family affair with hierarchy embedded in it. It is apparent that light skin is highly valued among in-laws, with daughters-in-law being valued accordingly, serving as form of commodity. Moreover, not only is light skin deemed an advantage, but gives off the impression that a woman feels she is superior due to it, an unfair stereotype in certain families.

The blind presence of caste

While insight into my participants lives, experiences, and perspectives have reinforced the caste system as an active component in their every day, they remain unaware of this phenomenon. Upon asking my participants what their understanding of the caste is, all claimed never to have heard of it before, after a brief explanation on my side, Lavana, Mahati and Kalyani expressed a different understanding. Upon hearing the word "hierarchy", they immediately began explaining an occurrence I am familiar with, the concept that Hindi people are viewed as being at the top, believing themselves to be superior to Tamil people, who are viewed at the bottom. Hindi and Tamil were the two cultures that most commonly resurfaced in our interviews and conversations, holding prominence and stories behind them.

An important concept that I find most attuned to this phenomenon is Hauntology, the persistence and reoccurrence of historical events, cultural practices, or ideologies that continuously take form in contemporary societies (Good, Chiovenda, and Rahimi 2022). When applying this to my research, I perceive it as the persistence of the caste system's ideologies in the present-day Chatsworth Indian community. Caste appears as a recursive force that repeats itself even as it is not named, despite my participants never hearing of the term, they were practicing it through the unspoken social hierarchy dictated by culture and colour. From my participants experience, it has evidently consumed their everyday lives, dictating marriage criterion, popularity, status, affluence, and beauty standards. Goldberg (2008, 1714) calls attention to the fact that dismantling the terms of racial recognition without dismantling the accompanying racist social structures is a futile endeavour. This is paralleled through my findings, where the casteist social structure remains intact, while its language is discarded.

Anti-blackness holds a heavy space within casteism. The caste system in India dictates Dalits, the 'untouchables', as people at the lowest level within the social hierarchy most often associated with darker skin. Dalits performed jobs such as cleaning sewers and disposing of dead animals which were considered dirty. Yenge (2019, 5) exposes how they were deemed "despicable, polluted, unworthy of life". Individuals within this caste were often deprived of certain freedoms due to the fear of 'polluting' the higher castes and their contrasting 'purity' (Douglas 1966). The concepts of purity and pollution are concerned with more than physical cleanliness, rather deeply embedded in cultural and symbolic structures, creating socially constructed boundaries to confine and control social order. Caste-based perceptions of darker skinned people coincide with that of blackness, believing both to be a "symbol of inferiority and indicator of a particular racialized subjectivity" (Jayawardene 2016, 338). Moreover, classism has shaped anti-black racism. Through the inequality of socioeconomic factors within a society, it has given rise to a class hierarchy, with those poverty stricken at the bottom, while the wealthier structure the hierarchy to maintain their superior status (Kleven 2009).

Observing this within the South African context, poverty is a product of the apartheid regime. The implementation of discriminatory policies and unequal access to education, resources, and employment for Black people has formed a racial dimension to poverty, as they bear the brunt of this injustice (Klasen 1997). The apartheid regime gave way to a heightened desire for skin lightening products, emphasising this era of racial classification and segregation, reinforcing the notion that whiteness is associated with power and privilege (Thomas 2020, 98). Skin lightening became a tool for social mobility, allowing individuals to access opportunities and advantages denied to them based on their natural skin tone (Thomas 2020, 103). The ability to pass as white held significant freedom, elevating status and transcending oppressive conditions. The apartheid regime's emphasis on racial purity and segregation created a society where skin colour became a critical determiner of one's status, and skin lightening products became a way of transcending these boundaries. However, this only

served to reinforce the underlying racist structures, creating an ongoing cycle of oppression that continues to this day.

The apartheid regime's racial hierarchy eerily mirrors the caste system's social stratification, as both placed significant emphasis on skin tones as the determiner of one's social standing. The shade of one's skin tone was a crucial factor in ranking people within both systems. The fixation on skin colour determined the value and worth of individuals. The caste system and apartheid regime both relied on skin tone to enforce social boundaries and maintain power dynamics. Lighter skinned individuals held power and privilege, while darker skinned individuals faced systemic oppression and injustice. The emphasis on skin tones in both systems has led to the internalisation of colourism, with the recurring prejudicial actions and attitudes based on skin tone.

The racial undertones looming in Chatsworth

Despite the advent of democracy in 1994, devastating racial inequality and socioeconomic disparities persisted, heightening during the July 2021 unrest, especially in areas such as Chatsworth. This period of protests, violence and looting was the result of ex-president, Jacob Zuma being imprisoned, seen by some as a martyr for the poor and marginalized. During this period of unrest, predominantly Indian and White businesses were targeted, as an act of frustration and economic empowerment by predominantly Black communities. Indian people capitalized on the looting as an excuse for violently attacking and murdering Black people[6].

In understanding the reason behind these violent attacks, it is important to recall the 1949 Riots in central Durban. While a fight began between a Black news-seller and Indian shopkeeper, it quickly escalated, with other Black venders and Indian shopkeepers joining in and bystanders choosing their sides based on race. The racialised violence continued as night approached, with White police being unable to control the chaos, and began instigating further violence. The racial tensions were capitalized on by authorities to feed into their oppressive agendas. As the riots ended, Black newspapers highlighted the racism Black people faced at the hands of the upper-class Indian people. Moreover, Black people felt discontentment towards the Indian people who were higher up in the apartheid racial hierarchy, with greater advantages. These social divisions served as an effort to maintain and magnify the racial tensions, demobilising their solidarity against the apartheid regime[7].

The racialised protests and riots of 1985 followed the murder of a Black woman by the apartheid government, strikes and boycotts broke out by the youth occupying the area, spreading widely through Black townships within Kwa-Zulu Natal. This was shortly followed by two Indian homes being burned in Inanda, with further Indian shops and homes being

[6] Davis, Nicolson, and Bheki Simelane, "July unrest: What really happened in Phoenix?" *Daily Maverick*, August 8, 2021, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-08-08-july-unrest-what-really-happened-in-phoenix/
[7] Youlendree Appasamy, "You came here on a fucking boat," *Africa is a Country*, 2020-2021, https://africasacountry.com/2021/11/you-came-here-on-a-fucking-boat

destroyed in the next week. Indian people were displaced from their homes and sought safety in Phoenix, haunted by their experiences and understandings of the 1949 riots. The violence in Inanda is contextualised by the political turbulence of the apartheid regime, taking an anti-Indian approach fuelled by the Inkatha-aligned fighters, funded by the government, in their efforts to expand their influence in Inanda. However, this violence held multiple causes and was met with resistance by the youth[8]. The devastating events of 1949 and 1985 have shaped how the July 2021 unrest materialised, with a deep-seated history of racial tensions in South Africa looming in the background and constantly playing on people's minds.

The 1949 riots prompted the re-evaluation of priorities and alliances among African and Indian people. Their efforts were redirected towards dismantling the systemic injustice of their shared oppression. Thus, the 1950s saw the alliance of the Indian Congresses and African National Congress, organising and materialising anti-apartheid activism (Desai and Vahed 2021, 20). The Defiance Campaign of 1952 served as a non-violent form of resistance mobilised by the union of various organisations spanning across all racial groups. This act of civil disobedience catalysed a unity between these diverse movement leaders, giving rise to the Congress Alliance and ultimately, the 1955 Freedom Charter which declared "South Africa belongs to those who live in it" (Desai and Vahed 2021, 21).

The 1960s saw the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement, which sought to unite African, Indian, and Coloured people under a shared 'Black' identity. This term referred to those who actively fought against their shared oppression, striving to emancipate themselves and others under the same identity. Black Consciousness aimed to dismantle the hierarchy that separated racial groups and instead promote a unified front against the apartheid regime. While some Indian people were hesitant to adopt this new identity, others joined the movement, recognising the need for solidarity across racial lines (Desai and Vahed 2021, 32-37).

The Indian community underwent significant socioeconomic shifts in the 1970's Durban. As many settled into their new surroundings in Chatsworth, they worked to reestablish their cultural identities and community structures. When buses were banned between Durban and Chatsworth in 1972, working class residents protested the inconvenient and expensive rail system (Desai and Vahed 2021, 57). The collective action highlighted the importance of accessible transportation for the community. The appeal to the court accompanied by ongoing unrest was successful, allowing for buses to continue in operation (Desai and Vahed 2021, 59).

The 1980 student protests marked a pivotal moment in the fight against apartheid, sparked by the stark disparities in Black and White education (Desai and Vahed 2021, 73). As the movement intensified, students became embroiled in the community struggle. The Indian community rallied in support, advocating for a unified, democratic system. A new generation of student leaders emerged, galvanised by their experiences and imprisonment, playing a vital

[8] Appasamy, "You came here on a fucking boat".

role in the broader political landscape, shaping their understanding of the struggle against apartheid (Desai and Vahed 2021, 74-77).

A hierarchy of racial injustice learned through my interviews has proven racial tensions present in Chatsworth today, taking on various shapes and forms. From the insights of my participants, I was able to gather the racial undertones that emerged. From the concerns of sending children to a predominantly Black school, to the association of White being of utmost beauty, to the behaviour correlated with each race, Sandhya, Lavana, and Kalyani have expressed it. While analysing my findings, a theme emerged in terms of racial association, with Black people perceived as those who have made Chatsworth unsafe, who have predominantly occupied the schools and taken over areas as "their own territory"; while white people are perceived as of a higher status, better than others, and in a league of their own.

Race is widely understood to be a social construct. Race is the belief that people are classified into separate biological groups based on "skin colour and other skin-deep properties" (Machery and Faucher 2005, 1208). However, the differentiation of subspecies based on genetics and morphology cannot be correlated with humans. The genetic variability within our racial groups is greater than between them and the phenotypic characteristics associated with each race are overlapping. Therefore, the idea of various biological groupings based on skin-deep attributes being the makeup of race is disproven (Machery and Faucher 2005, 1209).

Conclusion

This chapter served as an analysis of caste, colour, and race within Chatsworth. While the literature has argued towards the formation of a hierarchy based on these elements within the community, the perceived beauty of light skin among women has rarely been included in this analysis. This chapter has argued that the role of skin tone within the hierarchy of Chatsworth, is symptomatic of an underlying social order. Casteism serves as another way of reading class structure under a racist colonial order. Moreover, as the Hindu caste system was irreparably changed by colonialism, the apartheid regime shaped caste in South Africa with skin tone serving as a veneer for a deeper systemic set of issues.

Chapter 3 – Kali: The Dark Mother

Kali:
The dark mother
She who is black,
She who defies the ideals of beauty,
She who is the divine feminine[9].

Kali maintains the image of a divine feminine because of her "blackness" or darkness". In the case of Kali, blackness acts as a defiance against beauty norms I observed upheld within Sandhya's Hair, Beauty, and Nail Salon. I was curious how the notions of darkness and lightness play out in the space by observing the types of treatments used to achieve this beauty ideal. This chapter navigates what kinds of treatments women choose at the beauty parlour and how it alters their aesthetic, arguing that women intentionally choose treatments which provide a perceived lighter skin tone. Observing how they were carried out at the beauty parlour, whether it be through hair dye, contact lens, nail polish, or hair removal, each serves it purpose of reaching this ideal. This chapter begins with an outline of scholars who have written on aesthetic alterations that are undergone to reach a certain archetype, transitioning into the treatments offered at the beauty parlour and how women use them to achieve the look of a lighter skin tone, and ending with an overall understanding of the importance each treatment holds.

A lesson on beauty secrets

While conducting my fieldwork, one of my most interesting finds was the subtle ways in which colourism took form, from venting about everyday life to choosing certain treatments, the clients of the beauty parlour were my most valuable informants. Since I had never done fieldwork before, just interviews for Honours, I was quite surprised by the information I was able to gather, witnessing it for myself. I had to read between the lines, ask in indirect ways, and observe closely, to witness and understand the forms colourism took. It evidently strongly influenced many women's decisions on their beauty treatments and self-esteem altogether. It was almost as though colour consciousness is ingrained, I was taken aback by the realizations of how colourism is a norm in so many women's lives, despite their difference in age, skin tone, and familial life, they shared this aspect. The treatments I observed at the beauty parlour were incredibly insightful, the surprising ways in which they can give the illusion and enhancement of a desired skin tone. The clients at the beauty parlour were predominantly Indian women, with various shades of skin tone. What many of these women had in common were their intentions for their treatments, whether it was waxing or changing the colour of their hair, eyes, and nails, they all wanted to fit the ingrained standard of beauty that favoured a lighter skin tone as the superior quality.

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[9] Kavitha Chinnaiyan, "Embracing the Divine Feminine, Darkness and All," *Embodied Philosophy*, April 22, 2021, https://www.embodiedphilosophy.com/embracing-the-divine-feminine-darkness-and-all/

A ghostly presence lurks at the edges of our awareness, carrying the weight of history and shared experiences. It disrupts the present, imposing the patterns and structures of the past, serving as a haunting reminder of the ways in which historical injustices continuously shape our lives (Rahimi 2021, 20). The desire for treatments that give a perceived lighter skin tone exposes the hauntology of intersecting oppressive systems, the caste system and apartheid regime. This interconnection has created a harmful dynamic where their ghostly legacy continues to shape the lives of Indian women, fuelling their pursuits of perpetuated beauty, social mobility, privilege, and acceptance.

Lavana, the hairdresser at the beauty parlour, was rather familiar with the treatments her clients generally came in for, simply mixing their usual desired colour and applying it with no questions asked. On certain occasions, Lavana would hesitate, suggesting a deeper brown to her clients with much dismissal. While Lavana believed a darker and more natural hair dye and highlights suited her clients best, they often contested her on this, believing it either "washes out" their skin tone, or draws attention to their dark skin. Colours of copper, light brown, and caramel were most common in the recurring highlight touch-ups. Discussing the treatment choices with Lavana allowed me to gain a deeper insight into why these colours are most common. Many of her clients had been loyal for years, coming to her every other month, during their initial treatments they revealed their reasons for choosing this, not to be repeated in the future. As Lavana explained, some clients would justify their choices in a roundabout way, claiming the colour does not match their personality or suit their style, that the lighter colours were in, and they wanted to join their family and friends in this trend. However, Lavana knew this could not be the leading reason to drastically change such a prominent feature. Relying on her experience and personal knowledge, Lavana believed her clients were rather insecure of their skin tones, judging by their conversations pertaining to peer influence, side comments, and social perceptions of what is deemed beautiful, they attempted to use coloured highlights as a shield against these societal judgements.

Moreover, there is a common phenomenon of clients at the beauty parlour purchasing and using coloured contacts which do not enhance vision, rather being used for aesthetic purposes, with hazel as the most popular colour. Lavana explained that those who purchase these generally ask for similar coloured highlights to match, piecing together that this ensemble accentuates the look they are aiming for. From their eye and hair colour choices, these women are not trying to look white by imitating blue eyes and blonde hair, rather they are trying to look like light skinned Indian women. From overhearing many conversations, I understood that these contacts were often used for special occasions, where they would be seen by close friends and family such as weddings, in an attempt to "look their best". Interestingly, the women who made these types of statements, often compared "looking their best" to looking like Bollywood actresses. The names Deepika Padukone, Priyanka Chopra, Alia Bhatt, Aishwarya Rai and Kareena Kapoor were mostly mentioned in this comparison, with clients drawing on their "fair" skin as markers of beauty that they desired. The term "fair" was often used at the beauty parlour to describe an ideal standard of beauty Indian women were aiming for. Drawing on my experience, being an Indian woman from Durban, I am familiar with this word. While it is used to describe light skin, it acts as a subtext further

used to refer to beautiful. Hunter (2007, 243) reinforces this and emphasizes the universality of this term by stating, “In English and in Spanish, the term ‘fair’ and ‘la guera’ mean both ‘light’ and ‘pretty’.” Moreover, Thomas (2020, 28) explores feminine beauty as associated with “shininess, brightness, lightness, and ritual whiteness” among Sesotho and Setswana speakers.

One of my most unexpected findings occurred towards the very end of my fieldwork, an elderly woman who had initially come in for a chin wax and to get her roots tinted black, whispered something to Sandhya, before collecting a pre-ordered product and slipping it into her bag. Upon asking her for further details, Sandhya explained that it was a skin lightening cream which the elderly woman purchases each month and always hides away before leaving to go unsuspected. I was lost as I had not seen any skin lighteners in the parlour, which I would later find out in the second interview with Sandhya, that if the clients ask for skin lighteners, then she would order them. However, she did not promote or sell them out in the open, she also mentioned that it was usually the older women who asked for skin lighteners, never the younger ones. Moreover, my participants felt women purchase these as they want to look “youthful”, “their best”, “pretty” and “dolled up”. Attaining lighter skin seemed to only have positive connotations, with the insinuation that women will elevate their appearance through skin lighteners.

Coincidentally, a dermatologist came in to have her hair done a few days after this incident, she was quite interested in my research, she asked many questions on my topic and explained that she often treats women with skin conditions and burns caused by the use of skin lighteners. She spoke openly about the various types, she mentioned that skin lightening creams are mostly used by older women, whilst younger women prefer the IV drips and injections, generally wealthier women as well. She also mentioned that her patients are very aware of her lighter skin, with women often complimenting it and asking what products they can use to attain this which she finds extremely uncomfortable. She was not afraid to speak on this topic despite others being around and even mentioned that she has spoken out publicly against skin lighteners. Hunter (2007, 248) reinforces that skin lightening creams are used to “‘lighten’, ‘brighten’, or ‘whiten’ the skin”, these terms and euphemisms are used interchangeably to describe the desired lighter skin tone.

Yukti and Kalyani were the most popular at the beauty parlour, with multiple clients each day. Women of all ages attended, with the most popular treatments including a full-face thread or wax, and an eyebrow tint. While Yukti and Kalyani’s clients did not chat as much due to the facial movement restriction of their treatments, they did comment on their looks afterwards; with the most prominent word being “brighter”. In my experience, this is a further example of a euphemism used in the Durban Indian community, to subtly and more acceptably refer to “lighter”. Moreover, with the insight and expertise of Yukti and Kalyani, I was informed that a darker tint was mostly used for their clients, a method aimed towards the illusion of a lighter skin tone against the darker shade of their eyebrows. Medical anthropology utilizes euphemisms as means of discussing delicate issues such as death, dying or serious illness, especially those that have a stigma attached to them (Herbert 2016). Dark

skin has historically deep roots in discriminatory beliefs, being stigmatised as unattractive, undesirable, dirty, and inferior. This is furthered by the social and culturally constructed beauty standards that favour lighter skin tones. Similarly to the euphemisms used in medical anthropology, those associated with darker skin are utilised as a means of softening harsher underlying meanings.

Euphemisms often reveal the sensitivities within cultures and are important in maintaining social order as they soften taboo topics (Foster 1966, 53). Skin colour appears to be an uncomfortable subject within the beauty parlour as it is cushioned by common euphemisms among my participants and their clients. The use of "warm tone" instead of saying "dark skin", is similar to the terms "fair" and "bright" which are used to replace "light skin". The concept of a "warm tone" versus "dark skin" carry entirely different emphasis. The former can be read as a compliment, as I observed and experienced, they are often accompanied by the terms "golden" and "honey". Whereas the latter is associated with insults, historically being characterized as "backward, ugly, and low status." (Hunter 2007, 245). The use of this euphemism conceals the derogatory connotations with a more flattering and positive substitute. The tendency for my participants and their clients to use euphemisms to soften and disguise these sensitive subjects of skin colour, reveal the underlying systemic prejudice and biases among them. The deep-seated beauty standards, media representation, and cultural inequalities, severely influence this choice of language.

Nidhi and Mahati, were vocal of their opinions towards the colours their clients chose for their nails, expressing it openly in the many conversations we shared. While Nidhi felt these colours were chosen with consideration towards the client's skin tone, Mahati felt it was based on their personalities and ages. From observing young women doing various shades and colours of nail polish, to older women opting for more neutral tones, I understand where Mahati was coming from. However, Nidhi made an interesting point, although age and personality do play a role in the client's decisions, lighter skinned women usually choose darker, bolder colours; while darker skinned women choose nudes, neutral, and light pink tones. An unexpected incident occurred during my time at the beauty parlour, where a woman had recently done her toenails, a few days prior, however, could not stand the white colour she chose, claiming it "too bold" and that it made her feet look "darker than usual". She insisted on a redo and a light pink colour instead. However, none of this was spoken out loud, rather whispered to Nidhi, who I later casually asked why.

It was rare to hear colourist words spoken outright at the beauty parlour, with most incidents occurring in an underlying way as expressed above. However, in a single incident, I witnessed two women who were getting their nails done, chatting about a woman in a derogatory manner, as a means of degraded her, they called her names such as "blackie". Emphasizing how dark she is as a form of an insult, they further claimed she looks "so bad and black" whilst laughing about it. This was the sole conversation I observed of this sort. However, had a lasting impact on me as it exposed the disturbing narrative of antiblackness where "black" has connotations to ugliness and inferiority. The absence of black people

within the beauty parlour further underscores these interactions as driven by those who hold deeply ingrained societal biases.

Conclusion

This chapter argues the ways in which beauty treatments at the parlour are used to give the perception of a lighter skin tone among the predominantly Indian women client base, as the product of harmful beauty standards that have been ingrained through systemic prejudice. Through the choice of copper, light brown, and caramel highlights, hazel-coloured contact lens, facial threading, nude and light pink nail polish, and acrylic choices, these ideal beauty standards were able to be achieved. Moreover, while it was rare to hear outright colourist comments, euphemisms for the word “light” were used, with the most common being “fair” and “bright”; as well as the term “warm tone” to describe “dark skin”. Referring back to Kali, she is depicted as “black” and “dark”, however, defies the ingrained standards of beauty, giving an emancipated meaning to her shade of skin tone. The ways in which darkness and lightness are spoken of in the beauty parlour, shows the taboo and discomfort women feel about openly speaking of skin colour and the consciousness they have towards the meaning behind it.

Chapter 4 – Shakti: The Divine Feminine Power

Manifesting the divine feminine power,
Three Shakti's of consciousness are called upon:
Jnana Shakti, Kriya Shakti, and Iccha Shakti
Knowledge, action, and desire[10].

Goddess Shakti is the manifestation of the powerful energy within the universe. By connecting to her spiritual significance, the energy of the three Shakti's to feminism, it is the power and agency of women to assertively pursue their desire, seek knowledge and understanding, and take meaningful action. Through the feminist embrace of these aspects, women are able to empower themselves to challenge patriarchal norms. This chapter serves as an exploration of why women at the beauty parlour chose certain treatments that alter their aesthetics and for whom, arguing that women feed their desire to please a man, impress a mother-in-law, flaunt their worthiness to their family members, or fit an ideal, through beauty treatments that give the perception of a lighter skin tone. Overhearing conversations and justifications for treatments, served insightful in gaining a deeper understanding of this. Beginning with an overview of the scholars who have delved into the various aspects of desirability, this chapter moves onto the observational findings that expose the driving factors for women choosing certain beauty treatments, ending off with an overall analysis of these conclusions. This chapter aims to provide a greater understanding of the complexities within a woman's mind when it comes to beauty, the rationale behind her treatment choices, and the weight it holds when reflecting on herself.

The scholarly intricacies of desirability

Several scholars have analysed the complexities of desirability, employing various perspectives within the space of beauty and skin colour. While recognising this existing body of work as crucial, it is important to acknowledge that an anthropological perspective goes often unexplored, my research is able to contribute to this gap in the literature.

Hunter (2007) details the advantage of having light skin as a woman, as it becomes a commodity in allowing for the eligibility of greater marriage potential and possibilities. Moreover, Hunter (2002) argues that beauty, in the form of light skin, can be understood from a social capital viewpoint. Skin colour becomes valuable for people with no other forms of capital. Indian women experience the effects of systemic racism and patriarchy. They also experience casteist oppression. Colour then becomes valuable in a context where one cannot "buy" themselves out of this structure. It can be argued that even wealthy Indian women

[10] "The Three Shaktis (Power)". *Wisdom by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar*, July 2016, https://wisdom.srisriravishankar.org/dynamics-of-three-shaktis/#:~:text=Consciousness%20expresses%20the%20three%20shaktis,not%2C%20life%20is%20in%20doldrums.

cannot buy out of it either entirely, but they certainly have class power to mitigate the effects of colour on their lives. Performing idealised beauty allows particular women, who fit into the criteria, an advantageous future in education, marriage and earnings. Particularly observing a set of Hunter's (2002; 2007) findings that have proven women of lighter skin tone were considered to have a high status, and in accordance with 'marital homogamy', they are more likely to marry into more economic capital due to their perceived beauty. This is defined as hypergamy.

Glenn (2008, 282) argues that the skin colour is a form of "symbolic capital". While men are considered most desirable when holding capital associated with wealth and education, women are deemed most desirable when they are "physically attractive", using their looks as their form of capital. In raising their social status, women use various cosmetics and beauty treatments to "change the appearance of one's skin tone to make it look lighter." (Glenn 2008, 282). Nagar (2018) provides insight into the marital criteria in India, where women of lighter skin are compared with what is perceived as the most desirable qualities, a manifestation of attractiveness, fertility, and health; with the contrasting characteristics associated with women of darker skin. Popular television shows such as 'Indian Matchmaker' show that even when a woman has a high social status due to her education and personal wealth, she is still not deemed as desirable if she is not "fair"[11].

Abid et al (2021) explore the concept of beauty as a socially constructed phenomenon, arguing that beauty is subjective, perceived and inferred by individuals. Beauty standards set by a society are internalised by its inhabitants, specifically women, who strive to achieve these. Beauty standards and norms are dictated by particular cultures and societies that an individual is born into, and through conforming to these norms, a greater social status is gained. Webster et al (1983), describe how perceived beauty and physical attractiveness impact social status, expressing that attractiveness is a product of society, whereas beauty is considered a 'status characteristic', a product of shared cultural beliefs. Moreover, perceived attractive people hold a social advantage, Webster et al (1983, 158) explain those considered attractive to be better at "situations in general, things that count in this world, most tasks, and abstract ability". Beauty thus is not a superficial issue but a structural one. Women's quest for beauty is derided as inconsequential, however, this research shows that beauty has far reaching social, political, and economic implications.

Madan et al (2018) explore the perceptions of beauty which varies across cultures, with beauty standards being shaped by socialisation. The article notably expresses the concept of 'self-construal', where individualistic cultures emphasize personal autonomy and collectivist cultures emphasize group harmony and interdependence. These differences in self-construal influence individuals' inclinations to conform to societal norms. Kaziga et al (2021) conducted a study with fascinating findings on the perceptions of beauty. Most attuned to my research study, is the observation that the young women are unable to act on these hegemonic

[11] Anna Purna Kambhampaty, "Netflix's *Indian Matchmakin* Is Bringing Painful Conversations to the Fore. But Is It More Helpful or Harmful?" *Time*, 24 July, 2020, https://time.com/5868422/indian-matchmaking-criticism/

impositions, especially when it comes from their homes, schools, or social media. They are not conforming because they agree, they are doing so for survival in what would be a hostile environment for those who deviate from these ideals.

Reflecting on these scholarly works and referring to it alongside my research findings, there appear to multiple parallels between them. Hunter (2002; 2007), Glenn (2008), and Itisha (2018) shed light on the reality of what men seek in a suitable partner and the ongoing desire for a woman to meet this, my research strongly coincides with this argument. Taking it a step further, through my observations, it is evident that women not only need to meet this criterion but have to maintain the desired appearances for their counterparts, constantly getting beauty treatments done to achieve this. Moreover, these treatments are not only to please her husband, but it extends to impressing her mother-in-law, who has the power to create a happy or fearful communal living environment. Abid et al (2021) and Webster et al (1983) tackle with the concept of beauty as a source of social status and standing. This argument is applied to my research, as I observed a driving factor for beauty treatments being the desire of a woman to flaunt her best appearances to her family, which is perceived as a symbol of status and prosperity. Madan et al (2018) and Kaziga et al (2021) emphasise the effects on socialisation, and the need a woman has, to conform to societal norms. Collective culture influences them further, by often exposing them to harmful beauty standards from a young age. My research argues a similar point, where coming of age in a culturally Indian household is met by pressures from mothers and the desire to fit in. While it is a delicate transition, if young women are not being forced into beauty treatments as they are now 'adults', they feel inclined to as they want to fit in with other young women and finally be perceived as beautiful.

<u>The desire to please a man</u>

The most prominent motivator behind getting certain treatments done at the beauty parlour, was the desire of women to please the men in their lives, whether it be a husband, boyfriend, or date. Despite the beauty parlour being a predominantly women-centred space, men were figuratively occupying it, constantly playing on women's minds, and driving their decisions.

A client of Yukti's, a young woman in university, expressed the pressure she felt to remain most desirable to her boyfriend, explaining that she "wanted to look beautiful again for him" in one of her monthly upper lip and eyebrow threading sessions. Moreover, another woman, appearing in her late twenties, came in for a full face of threading with Kalyani, wanting to "look her very best" as she was tired of being single and felt she was getting old. Believing that threading her face would lead her to a more desirable appearance, she applied her EMLA (eutectic mixture of local anaesthetic) Cream for a numbing effect and began her treatment. Controlling and managing hair on women is a long-standing trope in South Indian culture. Racist and orientalist depictions have led to an overemphasis on hair removal. To fit the sociocultural ideal standard of beauty, women feel the need to remove their body hair, giving them a more positive perceived appearance of attractiveness, desirability, and femininity. Whereas women who do not remove their body hair are seen as the exact opposite, with

terms such as “disgusting” being used towards them (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004). Moreover, the removal of body hair to reach physical attractiveness is rooted in Eurocentric patriarchal standards (Basow and Braman 1998). In the parlour, women weren’t only concerned about beauty but also staving off ugliness. The idea of ugliness being connected to dark skin and body hair demonstrates a very particular narrative about aspirations and desire. It made me think a great deal about how men and mothers-in-law shape how women understand themselves to be beautiful or ugly.

A slightly older woman came in to the beauty parlour, to remove the acrylic on her fingernails and get a new set done by Mahati, choosing a rather similar light pink to the one she had removed. From overhearing her conversation, she stays at home while her husband works, doing both cooking and cleaning. In wanting to remain desirable and youthful for her husband, she chooses to do her nails, threading, and hair frequently. This was her first time at Sandhya’s Hair, Beauty, and Nail Salon, as her usual spot had no available appointments for the day. As she gets extremely busy with her household duties, she uses her spare time to “pamper herself”, she feels as though she needs to “keep on the ball” as her husband “works hard all day for her”. What should be a relaxing grooming time for her is articulated through her husband’s desires. Her work at home is not enough, she needs to be beautiful. His work is deemed important, whereas domestic work is not. These gender roles inflect how women choose to groom and why. Historically, women who became housewives from a young age were associated with the utmost femininity. Women were primarily expected to do housework and to maintain an attractive and desirable appearance for their husbands and possible suitors. Moreover, it was reinforced that upkeeping these standards would ensure the keeping of a man (Friedan 1974). Men in these narratives are represented as immature and fickle, able to fall in and out of love based on aesthetics alone. Yet despite men’s supposed immaturity, their perspectives loom large in the minds of women at the salon.

A middle-aged woman, with light brown highlights came to the beauty parlour to have Lavana dye her grey hairs and touch up her highlights. She was quite flustered, having to leave work midday to accommodate her hair appointment. She appeared comfortable chatting with Lavana as she elaborated on her exhaustion after a busy week in the office, she mentioned her husband’s complaints about her “lack of self-care” and how she is “letting herself go” after many years of marriage. She seemed frustrated by this but felt it would be easier to get the beauty treatment done as she was tired of her husband’s nagging.

Unpacking the reality of these choices, it appears that the women put themselves last in their decisions pertaining to beauty, seemingly feeding into the image their counterparts want for them. The women, sacrificing the desire they hold for themselves, pursue a desire that would please their men. While these beauty treatments are often used to give the perceived appearance of a lighter skin tone as expressed in the previous chapter, it can be understood that in these instances, women believe they are most desirable to men when they appear light skinned. Men desire light skin as it is a form of social capital for them to have a coveted wife. It is about how other men will perceive them. This homo-social status ranking is just one of the ways in which the patriarchy hurts men.

The desire to impress a mother-in-law

Within Indian homes in Chatsworth, it is quite common for a mother-in-law to live with her son and daughter-in-law, which may cause tensions and rifts in the household dynamic. While this is not always the case, it was observed in the instances below, where mothers-in-law take on a more dominating role within the couple's relationship.

A newlywed woman attended the beauty parlour for a full face of threading from Kalyani, shyly expressing the insecurity she felt towards her looks as she was constantly picked on by her mother-in-law if she did not get this treatment done. She felt an instilled fear of wanting to impress her mother-in-law who claimed she looked "beautiful and brighter" afterwards. Moreover, a woman attending a baby shower for her husband's relative, came in for a hair treatment with Lavana, wanting to look her best in front of her in-laws. She chatted with Lavana about how poorly her mother-in-law treats her, and how she feels the need to always be one step ahead of her in terms of her appearances, to avoid being picked on. Upon mentioning my research study to her, she elaborated that her mother-in-law never truly liked her as she was a bit darker than her husband. She continues to pick on her decades later, as she feels she is still not beautiful enough for her son.

I was able to gain a different perspective on the situation, as an elderly woman came to the beauty parlour to dye her grey hairs and wax her chin. She appeared to be a regular, chatting comfortably with Kalyani and Lavana, while also mentioning that her daughter-in-law dropped her off. She spoke offishly about her, commenting on her lack of cooking, cleaning, and her busy job. Drawing the most attention to her looks, the elderly woman commented on how rarely her daughter-in-law comes in for treatments, exclaiming that she "doesn't take pride in her appearance". Putting down a career woman was notable. Her financial security gave her the freedoms this client never experienced in her own life. Rather than channelling that resentment towards the patriarchy and racist systems that prevented her from having the same independence, she derided her daughter-in-law as a way of gaining a social favour from relative strangers.

The desire to impress a mother-in-law appears to extend further than pleasing a man. While pleasing a man seems to satisfy a skin-deep desire, it is more complicated in the above instances. The mothers-in-law use harsh words against their daughters-in-law, who instinctively want to impress them. While trying to include themselves in their husband's world, they would ultimately need to make their mothers-in-law happy, thus creating a pleasant environment to live in. A daughter-in-law is also a reflection of her new family, representing her mother-in-law's son; considering the experiences above, when she is perceived as most estimable, she has the appearance of lighter skin. Moreover, if a woman does not have control of her own life and destiny, she may use her sons to gain proximate patriarchal privileges (Sivakumar & Manimekalai 2021). In becoming a mother-in-law, she may employ her power through her sons to control her daughters-in-law, dictating the social aspects of their lives.

The desire to flaunt fairness within the family

The beauty parlour served as a safe space for women to openly share their thoughts and frustrations, with many expressing bitterness towards their women family members, having the urge or desire to outdo them at gatherings and functions. Flaunting their most manicured appearances was a symbol of status, a means of expressing their prosperity. The appearance of power, however, is not the same as power. Thinking about how women acquire power against one another in reference to men demonstrates the hold patriarchy has over women's lives. Even without men in the beauty parlour, they loom large.

A middle-aged woman, who had come in for a wash, cut, highlights, and set with Lavana, was excited for her upcoming family event. She was extremely specific of the colour she wanted for her highlights, ensuring it was the perfect mixture to create a caramelly effect for her hair. She emphasised how many salons were unable to create the shade she desired, which she saw on a Bollywood actress, Deepika Padukone, and desperately wanted the look for herself. She further purchased two pairs of hazel-coloured contacts from Sandhya, making a point that she needed to show her family how she was thriving through her looks. She was attending a Nelengu for her niece on the Friday as well as her wedding on the Saturday, who had also asked for a pair of contact lens. Weddings as rituals offer the opportunity to play out several idealised social gender roles in the Indian community. The fact that a bride and a guest both need to be perceived as beautiful has deeper connotations than eliciting envy. Envy here operates as a means of demonstrating worth, as women use their appearances to show their success and social standing.

An elderly woman came in to have her grey hairs dyed black, she was chatty and spoke about how she wanted to look her "very best" for her sister who was visiting. Despite her exhausting week, and her deteriorating health, she still wanted to "impress" her sister. Attractiveness and beauty are perceived as a sign of health (Rhode 2010, 7). Therefore, the elderly woman may not have wanted to worry her sister, by appearing in good health.

The elderly lady had brought her daughter along, who was rather quiet and appeared displeased as she sat silently on her phone until her threading appointment. She had a full-face of threading done and when asked if she was excited to see her aunt, by Kalyani, she mentioned how judgemental she can be, and how she constantly draws attention to her appearance. She did not enjoy her visits and felt self-conscious around her, she elaborated that she feels almost intimidated, she threads her face to appear "fairer and brighter", as her mother's side of the family are lighter skinned.

Another woman came in to for a wash and set, she was one of Lavana's regulars and had an ash-blonde sleek bob. Overhearing her conversation, she was relieved that it was Friday as she had the weekend off. However, it was her cousin's birthday party and she needed to cook a few meals for him, as well as "beautify" herself for her extended family who would be there.

Women feel the desire to prove they are of a certain status and live a prosperous life, specifically making this point among their family members. Historically, dark skin has been associated with manual labour which is harsh on the body and shows low economic status (Hunter 2007, 239). Therefore, there is a direct correlation with light skin and class status. Similarly, women who can do their nails are perceived as women who do not do harsh, domestic labour as it would ruin their nails, implying being pampered. Thus, women work hard to maintain the image of a leisurely life. By attending beauty parlours and undergoing treatments, they are able to materialise this. The connection between status, beauty and light skin continues as an ongoing cycle, with women of all ages feeding into this social norm.

The symbolic value of beauty standards becomes a ghostly presence that lingers in our consciousness, influencing our desires and sense of self-worth (Rahimi 2021, 27). This is a manifestation of the cultural and historical factors that have shaped our understanding of beauty, through the injustices oppression and patriarchy that continue to haunt us. It is a presence that serves as a constant reminder of the unattainable beauty ideals that women strive for, and the inadequacies felt if it is not achieved. It pushes us seeks validation, acceptance, and the often-contradictory expectations placed upon us.

The desire and duty of a newfound woman

The Ritu Kala Samskara is a coming-of-age ceremony in the Hindu culture, it is a rite of passage where a young girl becomes a young woman, marking the beginning of her menstruation[12]. When it was my turn for this ceremony, I was blessed by the women in my family, I was able to wear a saree for the first time, and the rituals I underwent were to purify and protect my newfound self. I was also aware of the consequences from the very start, I was a woman – I had to act like one. This entailed carrying myself in a certain manner that demanded respect, interacting in a more conservative way with boys, and considering beauty treatments I now had the right to. This marked the end of my childhood and the beginning of my adulthood. I began visiting a beauty parlour for facial threading once this transition occurred, using various numbing creams to avoid the pain, keeping in mind what I desired most – fitting in with other young women, being seen as beautiful, and having a new level of maturity.

Observing this at the beauty parlour, a timid young girl, now considered a young woman, unwillingly following closely behind her mother. She appeared rather reluctant of the treatment she was going to have. Her mother was doing a full face of threading with Kalyani, while she waited patiently to do her eyebrows and upper lip with Yukti. The young woman, watching intently as Yukti prepared the string, once the treatment began, she found it quite painful as seen by her flinches and watering eyes. She wanted to stop midway, however, her mother insisted Yukti continue as she was considered a woman now and needed to show a

[12] Ghulani, Srishti. "Ritushuddhi Practice: Is Menstruation Just A Biological Construct?" *YKA Where Young India Writes*, November 8, 2021, https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2021/11/ritushuddhi-practice-menstruation-rituals-south-india/

consciousness towards her appearance. The idea that beauty is pain is perpetuated in the often painful procedures women undertake.

In a similar experience, a young woman prepared herself for eyebrow and upper lip threading with Kalyani, as her mother sat near her for support. She looked nervous, fidgeting, and unable to sit still, in Kalyani's attempt to ease her anxiety, she asked her if it was her first time. The young woman explained that she began these treatments a few months ago, however, she despised them. She continued as all her friends seemed to be doing it and getting quite a bit of attention for this, she did not want to feel left out and look "hairy and ugly", she just wanted to fit it. This desire for belonging is not the same as conforming or fitting in, yet it has been modelled for the young girl in this way. She feels that by conforming and prioritising this social acceptance to the beauty treatments her friends are doing; she will receive a sense of belonging within the group as opposed to being excluded or ostracised. Her mother plays a key role in teaching her daughter that belonging is conforming, by supporting her through these treatments.

The desire and duty of a newfound woman is rooted in her need to be seen in a new and different light, which is facilitated by her actions and choices. This is the stage where young women's perceptions of beauty are formed, most often beginning beauty treatments as their rite of passage. Mothers play a critical role in this transition, pushing their daughters' take an interest in their looks, alongside the desire to feel beautiful and conform to their new standards of beauty, young women strive to achieve this appearance. Without realising it yet, many young women may possibly be going down a rabbit hole, where their perceptions of beauty will strongly be influenced by their shade of skin tone.

Conclusion

This chapter served as an exploration of desirability in the realm of beauty and its persistent connection to light skin. While the literature analysed has indicated social and cultural standards of beauty strongly influence women, it further implies the desire women have, to be perceived in this manner. My research findings coincide with this argument to form my own, drawing on my observations of clients reasonings behind their beauty treatment choices at the beauty parlour. This chapter argues that desirability and light skin go hand in hand. Women at the beauty parlour are aware of the appearance of light skin their beauty treatments provide them with, choosing to do so as it feeds into the desire to please a man, impress a mother-in-law, flaunt fairness among women family members, and transition from a young girl to a young woman.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This journey of constructing my research study has been filled with self-discovery and growth. During my fieldwork, I was able to gain valuable insight into myself as a researcher, my research methods and materialisation, and the importance of the research I am engaging with. I found the beginning of my fieldwork at Sandhya's Hair, Beauty, and Nail Salon rather difficult as it was my first time in the field. I was not sure of what to expect, how I would come across to my participants and their clients, and if I would be able to gather enough information to compile a research study.

During this period, I needed to be conscious of my cultural self-awareness, in understanding how my preconceptions and biases shaped how I interacted with those of various cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Coming from a Tamil background, I was aware of its stigmas and associations with darker skin and lower status. While conducting interviews and overhearing conversations about the hierarchy in Chatsworth and learnt of the extent of the cultural divisions, I was taken aback and constantly needed to contain my judgement. Moreover, as a darker skinned woman observing the beauty treatments other women were getting done to reach a perceived lighter skin tone, I found myself constantly having to bite my tongue, blend into the environment, and allow the day to run its course as naturally as possible. At the end of each day, I would jot down my findings alongside my own thoughts. As this was first post-graduate experience in the field of Anthropology, I slowly learnt how to bring myself into conversation with my participants, my findings, and the literature.

The ethical considerations I took when conducting my fieldwork, was gaining informed consent from my participants, having complete transparency, and upholding their anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy. I gave the beauty parlour and my participants pseudonyms and conducted multiple interviews with them where I was able to gain a rounded understanding of their perspectives and beliefs. Through observing the beauty treatments done at the parlour, I overheard the conversations between my participants and their clients. In doing so, I understood how beauty preferences towards lighter skin were not spoken out aloud, rather expressed through their treatment choices.

It was important for me to prioritise my self-care, despite wanting to uncover as much information as I could for my research study, I needed to pace myself. During the first few days at the parlour, I would hastily try to remember the stories and instances I had overheard over the course of the day. It became difficult as things I had forgotten would come to mind in the latter moments. As the beauty parlour generally only opened when clients booked appointments, I was able to go for a few hours a day, relieving me from the stress of cramming in what I could remember, as I had more time to think and write clearly.

Going into the field, I expected colourism and casteism to be out in the open, exposed by expressive conversations and bold statements. However, I quickly learnt that it took the form of undertones, queues, and euphemisms. I had to read deeply into the interactions between my participants and their clients, listen intently for the subtle hints towards why they are

choosing certain treatments, and how they justify these actions. Reflecting on my findings from the first week of fieldwork, I understood where I went wrong, I needed to do more than just listen for the answers I wanted to hear, it lay in the details I considered insignificant such as women's daily activities.

Furthermore, through building a strong rapport with my participants, I was able to gain a better understanding of their perspectives as well as their clients who were often regulars at the parlour and trustworthy friends. Over the four-week period during which I conducted research at the parlour, I learnt how to adapt to the environment and become more flexible. While I am introverted in nature, I opened myself up to my participants, in creating a trusted bond. Likewise, it took some time for them to familiarise themselves with me, the more time we spent together, the more we were able to find commonalities and navigate the space in which they now shared with me.

While I stuck to the smaller jobs of tidying up and serving beverages, I was able to overhear the conversations happening around me. Some clients shared snippets into their lives, families, complaints, and gossip, others spared the details, simply asking for their "usual". In casually bringing up these various instances with my participants, I was able to understand the stories behind their treatment choices, which often held eerie undertones of colourism and casteism.

Writing this research study required a critical reflection of my own assumptions and interpretations. Through deeply analysing the interviews, observations, and valuable information gathered to construct my argument, I was able to uncover the underlying power dynamics and inherent biases. In establishing the sociocultural and socioeconomic injustice of colourism and casteism in relation to beauty, I laid the foundation in which this study is rooted. Each have played a devastating role in shaping the hierarchy within the Chatsworth Indian community which dictates a particular cultural background is superior to that of another on the basis on skin tones and surnames.

Historically, a darker skin tone has been associated with a lower class and caste, viewed as unattractive, dirty, and undesirable. Whereas a lighter skin tone has been categorised as having a higher caste and social status; associated with attractiveness, purity, and desirability. These stigmas and stereotypes are applied to the Hindu divisions within the Chatsworth Indian community, it is assumed that a lighter skin tone means a person comes from a Hindi background, whereas a darker skin tone is associated with a person from a Tamil background. This phenomenon can be observed as early as in the schooling days for my participants. Their skin tone, something out of their control, dictated where they stood on the social ladder. Moreover, this social hierarchy appeared deeply embedded within my participants marriages, where a lighter skin tone meant a higher valued daughter-in-law. Drawing on the concept of Hauntology, the presence of caste looms unaware within Chatsworth, however, maintains its persisting presence within my participants and their clients' lives. It is a recursive force, repeating itself through unspoken social hierarchies dictated by culture and colour. The racial inequalities within Chatsworth have led to antiblackness, as caste-based perceptions of darker

skinned people coincide with that of blackness. The socioeconomic inequalities give rise to a class hierarchy, where superiority is held by those of wealthier status. These socially constructed boundaries confine and control the social order within Chatsworth.

Within the beauty parlour, ingrained beauty standards were exposed through the types of treatments women chose which gave a perceived lighter skin tone. Through the use of hair dye, nail polish, contact lens, and hair removal, each aided this cultural norm. Women's choices were severely influenced by peer pressure, social perceptions, and side comments on what is deemed beautiful. Their treatments serve as a shield against societal judgements. Euphemisms were frequently used when describing skin tones, with lighter skin being replaced by the terms "fair" and "bright" and darker tones referred to as "warm". This served as a more socially acceptable way of approaching the culturally sensitive topic of colour as a means of maintaining social order, and the consciousness women had in understanding the deep-seated associations with each skin tone.

The reasoning behind women choosing various beauty treatments that alter their appearances, can be traced to the driving factors which constantly play on their minds while at the parlour, weighing heavily on their reflections of themselves. Women feel the desire to please the men in their lives, conforming to the cultural standard of beauty that dictates a feminine ideal. The treatments done to achieve this result in a lighter appearance, which men hold as a form of social capital. Mothers-in-law often live with their sons and daughters-in-law, asserting control in their home lives. Women feel the need to impress them through their appearances, conforming to their beauty ideals in order to avoid conflict and create a pleasant and peaceful home environment. As women feel the desire to prove their higher status and prosperous life among their family members, they do treatments that give a perceived lighter skin tone, as light skin is strongly associated with class. Through pampering themselves and maintaining a leisurely life, they are denying the historically negative association with dark skin. As young women become aware of their perceptions of beauty, they strive to achieve the ideal standards, often guided by their mothers. They begin treatments as a rite of passage, unaware of the implications it will have on how they perceive themselves based on their skin tones.

The significance of this research lies in the complexities of caste and colourism, and how it influences standards of beauty and women's perceptions of attractiveness in the Chatsworth Indian community. In voicing the silences surrounding this topic, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural divisions and social hierarchy present within this community. The observation of beauty treatments and their undertones expose the manner in which ingrained societal prejudice and biases influence women's choices. This study is women-centred, narrating their experiences and perspectives, highlighting their agency and challenges. Moreover, it provides a platform for marginalised voices to be heard, where enduring historical injustices and systemic inequalities are deeply embedded, shaping perspectives of beauty and social hierarchies. To further the research in this area, it is important to gain a deeper analysis of constructed beauty standards and how they are presented and perceived to women through media representation and cultural norms; how women are able to reclaim their identities and reject systemically ingrained beauty standards;

how generational standards of beauty persist and shape women's perceptions of beauty ideals and self-worth; and the psychological impact of internalising societal beauty standards based on caste and colourism and its contribution to self-esteem, body image, and identity among women. This research journey has explored the nuanced dynamics of caste, colourism, and beauty standards, underscoring the need for further exploration of its intricacies and interconnectedness.

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