

The Snow White Men of India

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The New Delhi I left behind six years ago to study creative writing in America was one I understood. I may not have agreed with it always, particularly when it came to how unsafe it was for its female population or the lack of reliable public transit options or the ensuing frustrations from trying to maintain friendships in that far-flung city of fifteen million residents. Still, it was a New Delhi I found comfortable; the way I suppose comfort is inherent in all hometowns. I was conversant with its roads; I had memorized the bus routes, I knew what neighborhoods to avoid at all times, and which hole-in-the-wall establishments to frequent for the best silver jewelry or the most succulent biryani and brain masala. My strongest pop-culture memories comprised the handful of malls where my friends and I hung out to watch movies, the almost non-existent presence of reality shows on Indian TV, and the availability of only one brand of skin fairness cream—its distinct, lavender colored tube available for purchase at the local bhैया-ji's shop.

Last summer, however, when I revisited India after a gap of three long years, I found the landscape vastly different. New Delhi's international airport was no longer choked in dust and obstructed by construction equipment. Instead, it was sparkingly clean and tidy. The paperwork was quick and painless, and hailing a taxi without having to haggle over distance or cost, ridiculously easy.

On the drive to my parents' home, I heard about the new and excellent public transit systems, which had not only shrunk vast distances but also, made the city a lot safer. There were shiny roads snaking around dazzling new buildings, and more malls than I could count, thanks in part to the Commonwealth Games, held in 2010. Although these glass and chrome constructions took away some of New Delhi's old world magnificence, I still felt a surge of pride. That now, a first-time traveler's initial impression of my beloved hometown would be more than just favorable.

Over the next two months, I lost myself in my mother's cooking, vegetated on the same red leather beanbag I have had in my room since grad school, read up all my favorite books from childhood and visited friends and family. My eyes and ears happily devoured hours of non-English TV programming, and that's when I began to notice other changes, brought about by India's rising economic presence in the world along with the enormous purchasing power of its middle class. Normal, regular people I had gone to school with were now posting giddy updates on Facebook about impulsive shopping trips where they had parted with 30,000 rupees (approximately \$550) in less than twenty minutes. The country seemed rife with an alarming number of do-gooders, mostly with political backgrounds, each armed with an array of causes (both pseudo and genuine), and the number of reality TV shows was proportionate to the number of Indians in the world.

But what surprised me the most was how skin care had almost uniquely come to mean fairness creams. There were some specifically targeted for women's

soft skin, and others that promised salvation to men. There were those for young girls and others for the not-so-young. The tell-tale pots and tubes were everywhere: on giant hoardings flanking busy streets, inside expensive make up and skin care stores; in full-length newspaper and magazine inserts and on TV screens. They were modeled by celebrities as well as regular-next-door-neighbor-type folks. The visuals were remarkably similar, their pitch written as if by the same team of copywriters: you dabbed on the fairness cream, and within days, you blossomed into a new person because whiteness imparts confidence. It allows you to look straight into the camera or into other people's eyes that you may have hitherto avoided. It strengthens you to stride to interviews with aplomb, land your dream job, become a rock star, and get the date you have been eyeing since forever.

It was all very ironic given the daily realities I confront in my current hometown—Moscow, Idaho, possibly one of the whitest towns in America. I teach at the university here and in these last six years, Moscow has been mostly kind and accepting of my foreign, non-white status. There have been a few instances though where my color has seemingly suggested that I must not understand English very well so questions have been shouted at me because not knowing a particular language is the same as being hard of hearing. I am also reminded of all those times when my brownness has prompted well-meaning folks to stop me on sidewalks, intercept me at cafes, or slide next to me on bus stops to ask, with beatific smiles and concerned expressions, “Have you heard the name of our lord, Jesus Christ?” I have politely assured them I have and that he was a most wonderful man, and they have let me leave it there.

In Moscow, I have also witnessed the other kind of fascination for the color Brown. It never ceases to amuse me when I overhear, for the umpteenth time, excited, envious students comparing each other's tans, especially after their spring/summer vacations. I have seen them grab each other's hands to compare shades. I have heard them gush about new tanning products and pick and defend their favorites ferociously. I have also come across incentives. For example, at the gym I frequent, tanning services are provided to members as part of their benefits at no extra cost. But I have also seen accidents—perfectly normal white students have turned orange within a week, sometimes to only recover by the end of that particular semester. All this of course, is just the ground reality of what I see being peddled as the idealized form of beauty on American TV and cinema, where brown equals sunshine, fitness, athleticism, and beauty.

Just the exact opposite of the message I got in India.

This stark contrast reminded me of an incident from my own past as a college student. It was 1997, the year India celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of independence. Also, the year *Border*, a jingoistic film bashing on Pakistan became India's biggest commercial blockbuster, Bill Clinton got elected to his second term, and J. K. Rowling delivered the very first *Harry Potter*. That same year, I joined St. Stephen's College, one of India's best known repositories of the Oxbridge culture that it has acquired as an indirect result of colonization. Given its hallowed history (Gandhi had at one time been a regular visitor) and nationally-ranked status, my Stephanian friends and I were convinced at age eighteen that life from this point onwards was going to be an endless Ferris wheel

ride of one successful venture after another. After all, we were in the most meritocratic and egalitarian institution ever imaginable, and we had fought hard, studied hard, and interviewed hard in order to get here.

But one afternoon, I was rudely reminded of the real world, layered with faults and discriminations that awaited us outside the majestic gates of St. Stephen's. I was with a friend, I will call her Sita, a girl the same age as me and the exact shade of brown. We were hanging out inside the college café, when Sita asked me, "Are you conscious of how dark you are?"

I was stunned, not because up to that point, I had been unaware of most Indians' preference for white skin but because I had been so supremely confident that once you became a Stephanian, no one challenged your place in the world over something as trivial as color or religion. I thought the walls of St. Stephen's hid our flaws, whether real or imagined, and sheathed us in a cloak of indestructibility. I didn't say anything in response to her question, simply because I just didn't know how to.

Oblivious to my reaction, Sita said, "My parents are going to start looking for a suitable bridegroom as soon as I graduate."

"What do you mean, 'suitable'?" I asked tentatively.

"Just the usual. A boy from Kerala, same church, denomination, language, etc."

I was outraged. "What's the point of studying at Stephen's if you are going to let your parents choose your groom and worse, he has to be the exact checklist of their virtues?"

Sita was silent for a minute. Then she shrugged and said, "Look, I agree with you. But I also know I will obey them. My mother is already stressed. She says finding me a groom will be hard given how dark I am."

I no longer remember the rest of our conversation. Maybe we argued over the relationship between people's suitability vis-a-vis their skin color. Or maybe we moved on to another topic. But the incident made me aware, for the first time in my life, that even though I might not be directly perpetuating prejudices, they have a way of being seamlessly integrated into our subconscious and within our larger world.

It's been more than a decade since that conversation with Sita. We are friends on Facebook, where in the manner of most virtual friendships, we never speak to each other. I see pictures of her husband, who has the same skin tone as her. And yet, at the time of their wedding, no questions were raised about his suitability or lack thereof given his color, but hers was a matter of almost national concern.

And it's also not just her. There are at least two other friends—one an editor in a leading publishing house and the other a biologist—they belong to two different religions and regions of India, they speak different mother tongues, and they are both more academically qualified than their husbands, and yet, they have endured the same hurtful jabs about their complexion from their parents or in-laws.

It is no secret that like in many other parts of Asia and Africa, fair skin equals attractiveness in India. It denotes power and superiority, problematic notions in a country like ours given our class-based, caste-based history as well as

colonization. Being fair-skinned is still subconsciously associated with the upper class, whether Brahmins or Englishmen, who could hold on to the milky-whiteness of their color as opposed to everyone else who did backbreaking work outdoors. The mindset is so damagingly deep-rooted that pick up any matrimonial ad, whether in the print media or online, and the demand for a “fair” wife is as timeless and relentless as the Indian sun.

Last June, however, when I was in India, watching the endless barrage of fairness cream advertisements, the feminist in me, derived a small frisson of pleasure from the fact that these products were no longer solely targeted towards women. The first men’s fairness cream was launched in India in 2005, twenty-seven years *after* the ones targeted towards women. But still, I was happy to note that even the most regular, or accomplished brown man could no longer be complacent. Instead, he now faced the same pressure to snow-whiten himself as his female counterpart, whether to become more suitable for the marriage market, for the professional world, or for his overall individual growth. And just for this, this barely leveled playing field, that required men to be as “fair” as the women, I allowed myself a smug sense of bittersweet victory, comparable to how I feel every time I witness the search for that perfect shade of brown in my little white corner of America.