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Anxiety and Hypocrisy: An Analysis of the Skin Lightening Industry in India and the United States' Criticism of the Skin Lightening Practice

Accused of internal racism, India's growing skin lightening industry is a heated, multifaceted topic discussed in both Eastern and Western cultures and contexts. Obviously, the industry is not solely rooted in an internal racism problem in India. A combination of internalized racism, the caste system, the influence of Indian media/Bollywood, the American media, colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, and capitalism are all contributing factors to the success and controversy surrounding the skin lightening industry. Since it is such a complex issue with a multitude of influences, this paper addresses several concrete aspects of this industry. I believe unpacking this intersectional issue will clarify race related anxieties in both India, the United States, and beyond. I want to explore this topic by analysis of two differing scholarly articles, both of which discuss anxiety as the driving factor of skin lightening industry's influence in both India and the United States. Skin lightening creams make Indians anxious, as a white complexion is consistently paired with success and desirability. The business gives the United States anxiety, as its success disrupts America's precedence in global capitalism.

To begin with the first aforementioned instance of anxiety, Shehzad Nadeem's "Fair and Anxious: On Mimicry and Skin-Lightening in India" opens with a summary of the industry:

...in India, skin-lightening creams—with troubling colonial overtones—are a big business, an over \$200 million industry, according to one estimate, which is growing at 10-15% annually and comprises the largest segment in the country's skin cream market (Timmons qtd. in Nadeem 224). The bulk of consumers are reportedly between 18 and 35, though recent survey research suggests the age profile of users is getting younger (Singh qtd. in Nadeem 224). As Emami, maker of the product called *Fair & Handsome*, explains: "A fair complexion has always been associated with success and popularity. Men and women alike desire fairness, it is believed to be the key to a successful life." (Nadeem 224)

There is colonial tension palpable in the Emami company's statement that whiteness has "always" been associated with self-actualization. The business is selling whiteness as a tool to forge happiness; whiteness itself is not, and never has been, inherently indicative of any superior traits. Nadeem asserts:

...'fairness' is a key modality through which exclusion operates in globalizing India. As a benchmark for beauty, its exclusionary power is most vividly felt in advertising, modeling, film, and television (Shevde qtd in. Nadeem 225). The fairness fetish, moreover, pervades the job and marital markets and is deeply entwined with gender, class, and caste discrimination. In reality and in advertising fantasy, then, skin color functions as a form of symbolic capital that shapes life chances (Glenn and Twine qtd. in Nadeem 225). (225) Intersecting factors work to make fairness a

coveted asset, social constructions and constraints build whiteness on the premise of a better life. This is not all a lie—consequently, those with lighter skin are treated better in the workplace, are more likely to be chosen for marriage arrangements, etc.

Nadeem goes on to elaborate on the construction of skin lightening cream advertisements, in which typically a dark skinned individual attains the previously unattainable by whitening the skin (a relationship, job, wealth, etc.) or views lighter skinned individuals possessing all positive traits while he or she remains unhappy as long as they do not use a skin lightening treatment (225). These advertisements often include relevant pop culture, Bollywood figures.

These advertisements are often gendered, notes Nadeem. Summarizing a commercial in which opens with a father telling his dark skinned daughter he wished he'd had a son so their family would not be in poverty, the commercial closes as follows: "After a four-stage lightening process, the young woman's face is luminous. She walks confidently down a bright, airy corridor in a smart pink shalwar kameez to her job interview...Her beauty dazzles the interviewers...She is hired and her family's problems disappear...Fair families are happy families" (Nadeem 227). Nadeem then analyzes the messages of such an advertisement:

The implications of the commercial are quite clear: women earn less than men, and non-fair women earn far less...India has one of the highest rates of female infanticide and foeticide in the world. The wish the father makes about having a son rather than a daughter is thus not an idle wish. Possessing relatively dark skin, the commercial implies, reduces one's chance of netting a high-earning husband.

Studies of Indian matrimonial advertisements and websites reveal that skin tone is one of the most noted characteristics in describing women to potential male suitors (Vaid qtd in Nadeem 227). (227)

Whiteness has no natural advantages—lighter skinned individuals are not intrinsically more intelligent, more attractive, more successful, more hard working, more human than darker skinned individuals. Fairness and its connotations are social manufacturing, not perpetuated only by Indian media, but by Western standards of beauty. Across much of the world, European features, light skin being a main characteristic, are held in angelic standings, a construction forged through the violence and imperialistic history of white colonizers, such as Britain, the country that colonized much of India. Eager to validate colonization that imposed upon and attempted to erase aspects of another culture, the British praise of lightness and “white like me, the powerful group” mentality is retained in India today, as evident by the success of the skin lightening industry.

Nadeem describes the idealism of a whiter identity as an anxious fascination with the other: “The British Empire approached India with both trepidation and arrogance...Orientalist knowledge and the imperative to justify their own rule, moreover, inclined the British to champion lighter skinned groups as intelligent and marital and attractive, while dark-skinned peoples were portrayed as effeminate and dimwitted” (226). Colonizers utilized a combination of racism and sexism to make sure their features were more appealing. This was born out of fear of losing control, as well as a means to retain control. Present day consequences of this fear apply especially to India women, made constantly to feel undesirable and incapable in order for businesses such as skin lightening companies to keep making money.

This anxiety, born of an obsession and hatred of the other (229), is more complicated than individuals seeking success and happiness. Capitalism, another system strongly imposed by British colonizers, profits off of the anxieties of the public. Sexism and classism retain their power when certain demographics are made to feel inferior. As Nadeem puts it, “The desire for lightness is not...a mere instance of people being duped into self-loathing. It is better understood as an irrationality born of wider irrationalities: the profanely ordered stratification of class; the divinely ordained hierarchies of caste; the racially coded contours of the global system” (228). Indian women suffer from this acute anxiety, as patriarchal norms of marriage combine with capitalism’s message that marital bliss can be attained more easily through complexion altering products.

In an interview with *The Guardian* magazine, Nandita Das, advocate for the “Dark is Beautiful” campaign, says, “History doesn’t explain everything” (Prolongeau). “Dark is Beautiful” is sponsored by a non-governmental organization called Women of Worth. The movement’s slogan is a direct shot at Emami’s *Fair & Lovely* marketing, declaring, “Stay Unfair. Stay Beautiful” (Nannar). In her interview, Das continues, “We are more than just the result of tradition. We are now part of the globalized world and it’s the consumer society which keeps such racism alive. The market is just waiting to seize on our hidden urges and sustain them” (Prolongeau). Das recognizes the complexity of the skin lightening issue, citing education as a potential solution. Das believes that reframing race and color in Indian society must be done alongside efforts to empower women and eradicate internalized misogyny (Prolongeau). A large part of the problem is that many Indian women are brought up to market themselves as marriageable prizes, and skin lightening creams are directly advertised towards this vulnerability.

When it comes to doing their business, both American and Indian companies are guilty of prioritizing moneymaking over self-acceptance or social equity. However, aforesaid, India is accused of internal racism; skin-lightening creams and their success are heavily criticized by Western culture as an Eastern, contained problem. In the article “Threatening Consumption: Managing U.S. Imperial Anxieties in Representations of Skin Lightening in India” author S. Shrestha writes, “Orientalism [Edward Said’s theory based on imperial othering] works through a comparative dynamic where Western progress is certified in contrast to a supposedly stagnant Eastern opposite. This orientalist framework is apparent in dominant discourse about skin lightening as wholly antithetical to American values and sensibilities” (Shrestha 105). The term anxiety is also found in the title of this article on the skin lightening phenomena in India. This author is also referring to anxiety in regards to fear and loathing of the other, but this time turning it towards the West in order to point out the United States’ hypocrisies and contributions to the idealization of fairness. Shrestha argues:

On the one hand, US mainstream media representations of skin lightening call into question Indian claims to progress and shared values by disavowing the practices and disassociating the United States from the social conditions (racism, colorism, ethnic and caste-based hierarchies) that popularize them. On the other hand, the growth of the skin-lightening industry indicates ebbing US power particularly in terms of consumerism. The global cosmetics industry’s rapid and widespread inclusion of skin-whitening products indicate their interest in catering to the tastes of Indian and other emerging consumers, trumping the traditional dominance of US and Western European markets. Within the context of growing wealth disparity and

economic discontent in the United States, assertions of American exceptionalism in terms of dubious claims to racial equality and harmony become all the more ideologically resonant. (107).

In other words, threatened by India's growing ability to provide for its own consumers, thus reducing its dependence on the United States, the United States is quick to attack the skin lightening industry for its social implications. The United States can try to further itself from its own racism and colorism (that exists pervasive in American media, modeling, beauty, and many other industries as well) by pointing an anxious finger towards the economically burgeoning India. While some Western criticism may be validated due to the problematic messages of skin lightening Nadeem addresses, it is important to place the United States rightly in its anxieties and privileges while doing so. Much criticism India receives from the United States regarding skin-lightening attempts to define the U.S. (incorrectly) as a post-racial society worthy of criticizing a less progressive, racialized society (108). Shrestha explicates this hypocrisy further by claiming that skin-lightening treatments are sold in the United States, under different marketing strategies: "The fact that skin-lightening products are marketed in terms of anti-aging and/or spot removal in the United States is continually credited in Western mainstream media accounts as evidence of their 'non-racist' nature in opposition to overly racist Indian context" (113). What these "progressive Western" arguments fail to address is that there still exists a large gap in makeup/cosmetic options for darker skinned women of color, as well as less opportunities to participate in the beauty industry. Women of color, particularly dark-skinned women of color, are extremely less likely to see themselves represented, their features romanticized just as European features are, in media.

Indian-Canadian blogger Arti Patel writes of her childhood, “I quickly figured out my so-called ‘dark’ brown skin was darker than most Indian girls and as a result, I became fascinated with fair skin...My pre-teen views on beauty were simple: beauty meant fair skin” (Patel). Patel praises efforts such as Nandita Das’, but notes that the problem isn’t just an Indian problem, but a problem for those of Indian descent, of darker skin, living anywhere. She writes, “Sure, we’re not bombarded with Fair & Lovely ads (even though you’ll see them sitting on shelves of most South Asian grocery chains), but if you don’t hear it subliminally from your peers or your parents at home, you’re constantly seeing magazine after magazine covered in the same face” (Patel). Patel notes for her, the struggle is personal, and while she knows structural changes must occur in the media, the persistent struggle with self-esteem begins and continues within the home and in interpersonal relationships.

Should this issue be addressed during our class’s trip to India, I would want to know what different women in different parts India think of skin lightening creams in general, why women chose to purchase or chose not to purchase skin lightening products, and how advertisements depicting women make them feel about themselves and beauty culture in India. I’d also like to know more about the Women of Worth NGO and the work they do.

The skin lightening industry is a result of history, personal attitudes, media, and many other factors. While it may help to bolster the economy in India, the social implications, particularly aimed at women, do nothing but further patriarchal control over the self-esteem of Indian women and fuel potentially harmful marriage expectations. However, while critiquing racism in India, it is vital that the United States acknowledge its own problems surrounding race and the glorification of European features, how its massive

influence on other countries spreads. Fear and anxiety reinforce the harmful implications of “fairness” as ideal—capitalism aims to exploit the insecurities of its participants, and colonization takes a lot of responsibility for introducing this vicious cycle of consumption post-colonialization.

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