

My Fair Lady

Can Indians condemn westerners for skin color prejudice when there is so much of it within the Indian population as they view each other?

“Oh, hello dear! I haven’t seen you in years! Look how you’ve grown! And become so fair!”

She saw me last month at another Indian party. And at age 21, I definitely had not grown...or lost any of the pigment in my dark coffee colored skin. Of course, it was clear that she knew this – she was wearing the look of pity on her face reminiscent of the vast majority of Indian woman who have made it their job to try to teach me to be more attractive.

I cocked an eyebrow at my Mom’s “old friend” and smirked, “Hello! I hope you’ve been well! Actually, I finally seem to have gotten a bit darker! I got some sun over the summer, you see.” The smile froze on her face and her own eyebrows furrowed so far together that I was reminded of Burt and his great unibrow from Sesame Street.

“Oh, *beta*, you must learn to stay out of the sun! I always wear long sleeves during the summer – it’s a great way to keep your skin *saaf* so you can avoid getting too dark!” exclaimed Burt Lady. *Saaf* literally means ‘clean’ in Hindi, so naturally, I bristled. Since when did dark skin indicate uncleanliness? Obviously she didn’t notice and grinned proudly.

I laughed to hide my ire. “I take plenty of showers, so I think I’m good with the *saaf* factor!”

She looked like she was going to say more, and I had been stuck in enough of these conversations to know she could go on for hours if allowed, so I “heard my mom calling” and walked away.

Just a typical encounter at a typical Indian party.

When Nina Davuluri was crowned Miss America as the first winner of Indian origin, there was uproar on both sides of the globe. Miss Davuluri has a classic beauty about her: slender body, big doe eyes and sharp facial features, not to mention gorgeous voluminous hair. It is not hard to believe that she could participate in and win a beauty pageant if you take into account everything about her except for one thing – her skin tone. She has the typical Indian skin tone that lies somewhere between a Middle Eastern olive and North African brown.

One tweeter called the color a “beautiful, exotic chocolate”. Others thought...let’s just say they would prefer their chocolate with a lot of milk. Comments were thrown around saying that the American born Miss Davuluri was not American enough to be Miss America and that she was more like Miss Al-Qaida. There were comments like, “Darn, I wish Miss Kansas would have won. Real American woman!” and “Miss America? You mean Miss 7-11.”

These American comments were not only ignorant and hurtful to the pageant winner herself, but they also incensed Indians and a few Indian Americans who were outraged at the blatant attack on their race. How could these westerners be so racist? Miss America won fair and square! Who are these horrible people saying such bad things about us Indians!

The comments go on and on about the injustice in several online Indian newspapers. The best part? Right next to an article is an advertisement for Fair & Lovely, Unilever Hindustan’s premier fairness product and India’s highest rated fairness cream. The advertisement features a Bollywood superstar with one half of her face darkened and one half lightened, with the second half showing her face after the effects of the cream. The darkened half of her face features downcast eyes, freckles, and a heavy frown. The lightened half shows a bright smile and flawless skin that also happens to be several shades lighter than the actress’ actual skin color.

To find out more about the product and how it is advertised, I called Unilever Hindustan’s headquarters and asked the spokeswoman a couple of questions.

I started out politely and made myself sound like a potential customer. “Good morning, my name is Swati and I was wondering if I might be able to ask you a couple of questions about Fair & Lovely.”

“Of course, ma’am, my name is Neha and I would be happy to help you.” Her thick Indian accent was tinged with practiced British and I knew I was speaking with a trained saleswoman.

“So first, I was wondering if you could tell me about the safety of use of the product.”

“Yes, ma’am. Fair & Lovely is one of our premier products here at Unilever Hindustan. It is the 11th most trusted brand in India and we have never had any reports of skin irritation or reaction of any kind. Fair & Lovely is a very safe cream,” she finished reassuringly.

Fair & Lovely, a cream of chemicals made to alter the pigment in skin by direct application, is one of the most trusted brands in India – the country with the second largest population in the world.

My reaction: *Oh Dear*. Slightly disturbed, I continued.

“How exactly does it work?” I was actually extremely curious to see how she would handle this one.

“Fair & Lovely brand is committed to deliver safe and effective skin lightening benefits to its consumers and through years of research it has proven to deliver this to our consumers. Over the years we have always striven to improve our formulation and deliver the best possible benefits. Fair & Lovely Advanced multivitamin is our best ever formula which has been designed and proven through advanced efficacy studies as well as consumer use tests to deliver unbeatable efficacy on various measures of skin lightening thus giving an expert fairness solution.”

That sounded to me like it was read off of a script. It didn’t really answer my question and made no sense. A multivitamin that lightens skin? Multivitamins nourish your body and do not have any direct correlation with skin tone.

“Do you have a lot of International customers?”

“Yes, absolutely Ma’am. We have large branches of Fair & Lovely in many parts of the Middle East, Thailand, Indonesia, and many other countries. We also export the cream in high quantities to the United States and Britain. It is very popular overseas.”

Of course it is. I have seen it stocked on shelves of many international grocery stores all over the country. Even people here in the United States love it, going by the packages heaped into shopping carts.

“Are the majority of your customers overseas of South Asian descent?”

“This is not something we have recorded, Ma’am, but in my time here at Hindustan Unilever, I have only encountered South Asian customers.” At this point, her tone had started to question the relevance of our conversation, so I wrapped up.

“Last question, Neha. Could you tell me a bit about your brand ambassadors?”

“Oh yes, Ma’am. We have some of the best Indian actors and actresses promoting Fair & Lovely who in fact use the product on their own on a daily basis! We even have cricket players and other athletes on board!” Neha sounded excited.

I smiled, thanked her, and ended the call.

Neha was nice enough, but the conversation left me with a bitter feeling. It is common for girls to look up to female celebrities. To have their favorite actress or singer tell them that they are not good enough the way they are in different advertisements and commercials would be devastating.

Advertisements for Fair & Lovely are the most interesting and highly offensive of them all and the most famous Indian actors and actresses have starred in them. Actors and actresses from Bollywood (the Indian Hollywood) seen as Gods among Indians and whatever they say is more often than not gobbled up as fact.

The typical Fair & Lovely commercial depicts a young Indian woman who misses out on all the happiness in her life (a career, friends, men) because of her dark skin. Then she somehow is introduced to Fair & Lovely and her life changes. People notice her and her career simply skyrockets, making her a model or actress.

My favorite is about a young woman whose father is upset about not having a son and blames the family's poverty on not having another able bodied man in the house. Angry and determined to prove her father wrong, the young woman decides to get a job as an air hostess, but is promptly rejected at the interview when the interviewer tells her that they are looking for someone with a little more aesthetic appeal. Saddened, the girl goes home and sees Fair & Lovely on the shelf of a grocery store as she passes. Intrigued, she tries the cream and voila! She becomes light skinned and simply glows. With a smirk on her face, she goes back to the interviewer who apologizes profusely for rejecting a face as beautiful as hers and begs her to take the job. The ad ends with a smile on the girl's face as she is admired by her family.

What a load of crap.

The entire concept of beauty depending on lightness of skin began with the reign of the Mughal Empire in India during the early 16th century. Royalty from the Middle East came to the country looking for land and riches and ended up ruling the people of the Indian subcontinent. To the average Indian, these people looked regal, powerful, and beautiful. To become beautiful like the Mughal Kings and Queens, the average poor Indian could not even dream of the expensive clothes and jewelry that the

Mughals dawned, but perhaps they could match the skin tones with home remedies. This desire to be fair in order to look beautiful only intensified when the British Raj began. The British were even paler than the Mughals – and the desire to match their looks strengthened and never really went away.

In 2007, pressure from organizations like Dark is Beautiful compelled Fair & Lovely to decrease its number of advertisements significantly due to resultant negative influences that caused young men and women to lose their confidence and become self-conscious of their looks.

The decrease in the number of these ads did not do much to hurt the brand in general, however. Fair & Lovely is everywhere, from every stall on the streets of India to Indian grocery stores in the United States to my mom's dresser drawer. In an ethnicity where culture gives so much importance to fairness and goes as far as condemning those without fair skin, do people even have the right to be upset about some of the racist comments that Nina Davuluri has had to endure? Can they make self-righteous comments against Americans, who are considered to be the most accepting and have the largest melting pot of cultures?

When they teach their own moldable children that they need to alter their skin tones to be more beautiful? Absolutely not.

As a young Indian American, I was like clay.

Children are usually like nitrogen gas. When placed in a container, they grow and change and expand to fit the environment that they are in. As a child, I was more like molding clay. I could be influenced, but not completely or immediately convinced. I asked way too many questions and insisted on having every bit of information and every point of view before I finally and often slowly made an opinion as opposed to the average child who quickly believed and embodied everything they were told.

This was often very irritating for adults trying to deal with me – especially the priest at the local Hindu temple. Religion is based on faith, not fact or science. As one can imagine, I was awfully reluctant to pray to an idol made of stone without understanding why and how the rock had anything to do with God. So, of course, I asked. The priest answered. I refuted many of his claims with what little I knew about science at the age of eleven. The priest massaged his temples and asked if we could continue the discussion at another time.

The only other topic that I was able to get others so riled up with was that of skin color and fairness. The desire for fairness is just about as deeply rooted in Indian culture as religion. One description of the Goddess of beauty in a religious text states that her beauty stems from the beautiful skin, white as the flesh of a coconut. This was the text I came across after being dragged to the temple by my mom one day after school. I had grown up listening to Indian women going on and on about how they needed to become more beautiful by lightening their skin, and had eventually tuned them out. Here was a religious text claiming that this was important to a God too, though. Any devout and easily convinced, dark skinned Hindu child would probably be devastated by the passage and begin obsessing over lightening their skin. I was not devout or easily convinced, though, so I just became more skeptical about the religion and culture. Such situations pulled me further and further away from Indian culture and cultural Hinduism and gave me more of a sarcastic and removed perspective on cultural issues like fairness.

That isn't to say that the perpetual Indian desire to be pale never affected me. It is so embedded into Indian mentality that this would be impossible. Although British control over India ended in 1947, their prolonged presence in the country as upper class and superior citizens made "lower class" Indians yearn to be like their beautiful counterparts – and the biggest physical discrepancy between the two was the color of skin.

This mentality has opened doors for products like Fair & Lovely, sold in a pretty, slender, pink tube standing no higher than seven inches to open to such a high demand, that prices have dropped to as low as 10 Rupees (around 20 cents). Fairness products are an integral part of many Indians' daily beauty techniques and even my own mom wasn't spared from being sucked in. Although she rarely uses them anymore after decades in the United States, she keeps her vanity drawer stock with fairness creams and bleaches including Fair & Lovely and loudly proclaims that I must rub lemon juice onto my skin to remove the tan that unavoidably sets in after a long Summer day in the park or the beach during a vacation. Although my own mother's worries stop here, one of my best friends' mom goes as far as to worry that perpetually that no good Indian mother will accept such a dark girl as a daughter in law. It is an epidemic of dissatisfaction that has set into a mentality.

I find myself and my sister lucky that we have withdrawn from the culture enough to sift through its negatives, but many first generation Indian Americans have not been successful here. Tina is one vivid example.

The extent to which the desire for fair skin has engrained itself within South Asian culture is most visible when looking at the way children and teenagers talk about it. I teach Bollywood-style dance to kids during the summer and this past summer was no different. The girls performed at the local Indian Festival and had worked hard over the past few weeks to be performance-ready. The most difficult and elaborate part of choreographing and performing this dance was the costumes. The girls were just so picky.

One girl, Tina, rejected every costume because it made her skin look too dark. Tina is darker than the average Indian and comes from a very traditional, Indian family where girls can be and have been rejected by a family for marriage solely for having skin that is “too dark”. So naturally, Tina has grown up believing that the most important key to her beauty is losing some of its pigment. From Fair & Lovely to home remedies like gram flour with lemon juice, Tina tries them all. I would go as far as saying that she is obsessed.

Tina is also a 16 year old girl with all the normal insecurities of a 16 year old girl, so she really ended up drawing the stick with the shortest end when it comes to self-esteem. The girls were one talking about their biggest regrets in their short lives in their typical teenage-angst way and I was privy to the details first hand. Tina’s biggest regret was that she was too ‘dusky’. In proper society, if someone has dark skin, they are called dusky to avoid using offensive terms like ‘dark’. Tina’s favorite word is ‘dusky’ and she uses it rather liberally.

While the girls were getting ready for their performance, Tina commented continuously on the lighting in the green room making her look even duskier than usual and how the girl next to her, Sakshi, was so fair and beautiful. Sakshi really is gorgeous. She has amazing features and is a fantastically graceful dancer. She is also paler than a hermit, and Tina could not stop commenting on it. I watched for several minutes, willing Tina to stop berating herself. Eventually I stepped in and told Tina she was just as pretty as Sakshi and that they needed to have one more dress rehearsal before the performance in hopes of distracting them from their side by side reflections in the huge mirror. Tina’s scoff made it clear that she did not believe me.

When a cultural obsession seeps into the children and teenagers of a society, it is clear that the issue has gone to the next level. How far does it need to go before anyone does anything about it?

I have been asked about my skin tone and why it is the way it is on many occasions, most often during my trips to India. My grandfather's cousin came to visit once and asked to see me and my sister. My sister is a bit lighter than me, so she was spared the cruel words, but he asked my mom why I looked like an uneducated villager and why she kept me in the sun so much that my skin has burnt black. I was nine at the time and had just finished an intense season of swim team. It was a normal summer tan.

When a society tells women like Nina Davuluri or girls like Tina or even young women like me that we are not good enough because of the color of our skin, that same society loses respect and stature in my eyes, and most importantly, loses the right for the pot to call the kettle black (pun intended). One tweeter made the perfect comment to bring forth the backwards nature of skin tone prejudice: "What's interesting is Miss America Nina Davaluri would never win pageants in South Asia because she is too dark to be considered beautiful." A "dark" woman just became Miss America while the vast majority of Miss India qualifiers are either naturally as light skinned as a Caucasian person or are using products like Fair & Lovely and other chemical alternatives to lighten their skin. Many Americans did have a negative reaction to Nina Davaluri's crowning, which was certainly sad and regressive. The number was a very small minority, however. What is worse is that the vast majority of Indians believe the fairness is a necessity for beauty see this opinion confirmed every day through the media and celebrities.

It is a very unscrupulous for people to discriminate against a group of individuals, but it is downright horrible for individuals in a group to discriminate against each other. The result is a deeply rooted prejudice against something as mundane as skin tone, children looking up to such discriminators in the form of celebrities, and unnecessarily lowered self-confidence.