Saumeya Suseenthiran

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Colorism & Culture

It's a warm July day at the beach, and the sun's blistering heat is warming the sand. Diya, around five years old, with curly black hair and deep brown skin, is playing by the shore. In one moment, she's building a sandcastle with a moat. In the next, she's running towards the ocean as fast as her little legs can carry her to find little shells to decorate the sides of her castle. She's about finished when her mom calls out, lying down under her umbrella, wearing a monstrously large sun hat. Diya makes her way over, and her mom says, "You need more sunscreen, you're already dark." She feels the weight of her mother's hand plaster white paste all over her face and neck. She is wearing a long sleeve black rash guard, so her mom doesn't need to cover the arms. However, her swim shorts only reach mid-thigh, so her mom covers her legs.

Diya can't help but think what that comment meant. The sunscreen wasn't flattering or comfortable, and it kept getting in her eyes and stinging, "Why was this much of it necessary? Was being dark that bad?" she thought, and when she turned to go back to her sandcastle, it had already been washed away by the tide.

Underlying Diya's discomfort is the discrimination people of darker skin face, making them feel inferior to their lighter counterparts. In *Same Family Different Values: Confronting Colorism in America's Diverse Families,* Lori Tharps writes, "This privileging of light skin over dark is at the root of an ill known as colorism...The curious thing is that the word "colorism"

doesn't even exist. Not officially. It autocorrects on my computer screen. It does not appear in the dictionary. So how does one begin to unpack a societal ill that doesn't even have a name? It's like trying to wrap your hands around a ghost."(pg. 7-8) The way to wrap hands around this ghost is by examining how colorism impacts cultures differently based on history and how society continues to perpetuate discrimination.

The cultures of South Asia, India, and Sri Lanka, for instance, set the precedent that if you are darker, you are uglier and value less than someone lighter. This colorism dates back to when caste systems were formed in India that the British exploited when they colonized the country. Tharps writes, "Long before white Europeans arrived in India, a social hierarchy of castes was already in place, and that caste system seemed to relegate the darker hued Indians to the lowest level." (pg. 99-101) According to Radhika Prameswaran, a professor at Indiana University's media school in Bloomington, and a specialist in race, ethnicity and caste in South Asia, "The assumption about the correlation between caste and color is so ingrained in the people of India... There is a perception that light-skinned means upper caste and that upper caste means you're better so a lower caste person with light skin could pass for upper caste and get those benefits."(qtd. in Tharp pg. 101) Tharps continues by introducing the British as players in India's current colorist society. "When the British arrived and colonized India... they naturally gravitated to those Indians with lighter skin and European features, assuming their lighter skin meant they were closer to their own kind of people." She states that the British used the preexisting caste system by transforming it into a government-sanctioned method of discrimination against their subjects and "projecting their own racist and colorist thinking onto the Indian population." The British played into the idea that lighter-skinned Indians were superior in intelligence and gave

them more opportunity as a result: "..light-skinned Indians were tapped for positions in the government and leadership roles in industry and education, darker skin Indians were left with menial jobs and tasked with serving their new masters." She goes on to assert that "the British took a giant step in institutionalizing colorism, leaving a lasting legacy of disregard and discrimination against those with darker skin." (pg. 101) This legacy exists today and carries weight not only in India but in its neighboring island, Sri Lanka, too. The difference, however, is that Sri Lanka, being a very tiny island with a significantly less amount of people, has less of a variety in skin tone. But distinctions are still made because skin pigmentation will always maintain variety anywhere in the world. Colorist legacies in both countries impact individuals and how they feel about themselves, two of which are Janya Sundar, an Indian-American, and Shanthini Suseenthiran, born and raised in Sri Lanka.

Colorism has modern avenues in India and Sri Lanka, which most often appear through the media in the forms of magazines, movies and television as well with skin-lightening products marketed for darker individuals. In these countries their distinct cultures continue to set the precedent that if you are darker, you are uglier and inferior to someone lighter, exemplified through the media and these products. Both Janya and Shanthini expressed how women of darker skin tones were never present on their screens and on the covers of magazines growing up, affecting how they perceived themselves. Skin lightening creams and lotions became widespread and targeted these women. One brand called "Fair and Lovely" claims their purpose is "to (provide) hope. Hope to millions of women around the world, especially in Asia, who desired fairer and even-toned skin, for how it made them feel about themselves, and for how it made the world see them" ("FAIR & LOVELY FOUNDATION"). Janya discussed skin lightening and her

feelings on products such as these. "Honestly, when I think of those, the first thing I think of is, it's annoying that they don't work because if they did work, I would use them 100% without a doubt. But they don't work and, that's probably the first thing that comes to my head. And I don't really fault them for coming up with this line because it's a big need. Being dark-skinned is a bad thing because, systematically, we've been told it's a bad thing, right? These people are just trying to meet a target audience of people that don't like their skin tone, and like, I don't really fault them for that. I fault them more for not doing it correctly." (Sundar) This viewpoint is one that is harmful and really unfortunate. Sadly, these companies have people willing to invest in their immoral and colorist message. This large group of people has been told their skin color "is a bad thing," and their products reinforce this idea that it needs to be altered. Janya doesn't want the products to disappear; she wants the products to function. This is the first problem: she feels the need to change who she is to conform to society's expectations of what is beautiful, and that isn't her fault, it's society's for making people of dark skin feel inferior for decades. The media also had a significant role in stimulating colorism in India and Sri Lanka as the movies made in India travelled to the screens of Sri Lankan homes. Shanthini recalls watching movies at home and feeling angered by the fact that the stars of the show were always of lighter skin. "They only cast fair people, and if they couldn't find Indian Tamils who were fair, they would go to the North of India and bring them to the South for filming. They would dub their voices because the actors didn't speak actual Tamil. They were wanted just for their skin and how they looked and that bothered me. Dark actors would never be the heroine; they may be sub-characters, not the main character." (Suseenthiran) Moviemakers in India were so determined to have people of lighter skin star in their films that they would bring in actors and actresses that didn't even speak the

language of the film solely because of their skin tone. This was insulting to the communities that spoke that language and frustrating for darker viewers. Media is powerful and only furthers colorism when light skinned models, actresses and actors have control over the industry leaving darker readers and viewers feeling as though they aren't beautiful enough to make it in these industries or that they aren't beautiful at all.

The way colorism has taken shape in India has left darker women in a position where the only thing they could do was compare their beauty to lighter women because society and even their own family members were doing it too. Janya talked about growing up in a household where her mom and sister were lighter, while she and her dad were darker and how comparisons were often made. "My mom would always say, 'Oh (your sister) has my light skin tone, and you got your dad's dark skin tone. There was always, 'Oh, you would be so much prettier if you had my skin tone, it's so unfortunate that you got your dad's skin tone.' That was how my family talked about skin tone for my entire life. My grandparents also constantly said, 'you, unfortunately, got your dad's darkness'" (Sundar). Janya shared a story about her grandmother and how she approached the subject of Janya's skin-tone throughout her childhood. When she was 8 years old, she and her family visited India, where her great-grandmother told her and her sister that she had some gifts for them. She gave them two seashells decorated with henna swirls and written on the front were Janya and her sister Krithi's names. When Janya peered over at Kirthi's and compared it to her, she noticed something off about the shells. "She mixed it up because she thought I was a lighter one, and Krithi was the darker one. She gave it to us mismatched, and she was like, 'Oh, yours is a lighter one. Right? This is a darker one. Now you guys have a little piece of each other with you wherever you go.' And I thought that was

interesting because that's how she decided to make it ours: based on our skin tone. That was so important to her; it was a part of our identities" (Sundar). Then when Janya's grandmother came to visit her in California and stayed with her family for a few months, her mom and grandmother would make little comments about potential ways to lighten Janya's skin. Janya was much younger back then, and at the time, she said, "I would always be like, "No, no, no, like, I like my skin tone. And this is dumb," when they tried to lighten her skin, but last year when her grandmother visited again, she felt differently. "I remember, like, one of the first things I asked her was, "Do you have something to make my skin lighter?" And I remember her laughing at me like, "it doesn't work that way, you have to be younger." As I grew older, I would think like I was so annoying I should have just let them do that because it would have worked." (Sundar) This belief was reinforced throughout her life by her mom and her grandmother, making it near impossible for Janya to feel anything other than inferior based on her skin tone. Janya was raised on the belief that it was a misfortune. She was raised to believe that she was unlucky and there was nothing she could do to change it. She wasn't taught to love her skin; she was informed that it was a burden placed upon her and that her sister and her mother didn't have that burden; that made Janya lesser in beauty. She knows that it doesn't affect her intelligence and decrease her worth, but it does hinder her ability to love herself, every part of herself. Comparisons made by the people who raised her were not to be malicious but were considered normality as they grew up hearing and uttering those comments. Her grandparents and mother were merely reiterating remarks they had heard around them in their past for the reason that skin tone has placed an immense value on individuals for decades in India.

This value was placed in Sri Lanka as well, just to a lesser degree, because there was less variation in skin colour. Shanthini recalled knowing that skin tone was discussed as most of her friends were lighter than her, but the way she was raised framed a different mindset than the one Janya currently has. Everyone in Shanthini's family was of the same skin tone, which made Janya's childhood distinctly different from hers. Still, her mother also made it a point to raise Shanthini in a way that ingrained the notion that her skin-tone didn't determine her value, and it wasn't a misfortune inflicted upon her. "My mother always taught me it's not about the beauty outside, it's about how you are inside. She would always remind me that it does not matter how pretty you are, or how fair you are, so that was always in mind."(Suseenthiran) However, while her mother held these beliefs and reinforced them in her home, they weren't shared by the community. Shanthini recalled a memory from her childhood in which her neighbors had remarked about her darkness to her mom when she was younger. Shanthini Suseenthiran grew up in Jaffna, Sri Lanka where arranged marriages were prevalent. In Sri Lanka, there was a slight variety in skin tone but not to the extent of India. Shanthini had two neighbors who were lighter than her. One day,she was biking home from school when she saw her mom on her lawn talking to her neighbors in a group. They didn't see her as she put her bike away and sat on the pavement, eavesdropping on their conversation. One neighbor had asked her mom how Shanthini was going to find a husband being so dark. "They said, 'Oh, she has darker skin. I don't know how you're going to find my husband for her'. My mother said, 'I'm not worried about that right now. She has a lot of time to go.'" When she was older and started the process of her own arranged marriage, it did become an issue. "I don't know if somebody else looked at my picture and rejected me because of those things, but I'm sure it happened at some point."(Suseenthiran)

Shanthini's mom, however, declined anyone who inquired about skin tone when looking for a bride for their son. Because of the environment she grew up in, where most people around her were dark, she felt more comfortable in her own skin. The few times where her skin tone was brought up negatively, her mother stood up for her and made it a point to raise her to know her worth is separate from the amount of melanin in her skin.

While parents like Shanthini's mother are taking a progressive stance against colorism, there is still much work to do before this societal ill is destroyed. The way the media presents dark-skinned individuals needs to change, becoming more inclusive of darkness and dismantling the markets that encourage women to lighten their skin. When discussing the issue and where improvements can be made, both Janya and Shanthini agreed that the media they received as children did not present enough darker individuals. They both felt that seeing people who looked more like them could have helped them bolster self-confidence, but they differed on its impact. Shanthini's skin tone never bothered her because she was raised in a certain way by her mom in a community where most people were dark. Still, Janya grew up in a household of half light-skinned and half dark-skinned people, her best friends are caucasian, and she didn't have many Indian friends growing up that looked like her. This is why it's harder for her to accept herself to this day. If she had been told she was beautiful from her childhood like Shanthini was, maybe her viewpoint would have been different. We need to support the self-image of darker children from placed like South Asia where the discrimination is strong and extremely prevalent, raising them to know that their beauty does not stem from their skin tone. Skin-lightening products need to be banned to further this message. The media in India needs to promote the image that dark brown is beautiful too, to show impressionable dark-skinned children that the

heroines they see in films are beautiful just like them. Progress made in the states needs to be made in Bollywood. But everywhere an issue that both Janya and Shanthini agree needs to be addressed is the affordability and frequency of makeup for all shades. The makeup industry needs to endorse all shades of foundations in drug stores, so all shades of women can access them. Drugstore brands need to manufacture all shades of foundations so people of dark-skin do not have to buy from expensive specialty brands to find a foundation that matches. They shouldn't be forced into an idea society created: that they're ugly or lesser than anyone lighter than them, and that they are anything less than beautiful.

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