

## 7. BEAUTY AND SKIN COLOUR

The colour of the skin is no criterion of beauty or any other type of superiority. And yet the fair of colour and the beautiful are words of similar meaning not alone in the white lands of Europe but more so in the sultrier climes of Asia or the Americas. On merit, this distortion of aesthetics is inexplicable.

The dark of colour have not always been treated with neglect, at least not in India. To Sanskrit literature, the dark one, Shyama, is the beautiful one. She need not actually have been dark of colour, but if she was young and beautiful, and the young and the beautiful often tend to be synonymous, she was called Shyama. The perplexed cloud asks as to how he would recognise the damsel to whom the message was to be delivered and Kalidas describes the Shyama of slender waist and of step languorous with the weight of hips, of a lower lip red and full, of eyes that belong to an astonished deer and similar treasure. The male incarnations of god-head, Ram and Krishna, were dark of colour.

The greatest woman of Indian myth was dark. Draupadi also called Krishna has suffered neglect, probably because current male vanity cannot reconcile itself to her five husbands and a platonic affairs or two in addition. Savitri and Seeta, the chaste and also the fair of colour, represent India's womanhood, not entirely without reason, but unreason ensures when other representatives are excluded. Krishna, the dark female, and Krishna the dark male, are however the two peerless flowers of India's myth-making with the utmost beauty and fragrance.

Draupadi is perhaps the one woman of myth or history in the wide world, who was wiser and wittier than all the men of

her time. The question of comparing her with Krishna should never arise, for this woman of ready wit and deep wisdom was his friend, the companion, the heroine and the occasion of his years of duty as Radha was of those of delight, and Krishna and Krishna are the two heroes of *Mahabharat* of equal merit, companions without a shadow of conflict. This Draupadi was dark of skin.

Are not then the fair of skin beautiful? To say that they are not would again be untrue. In fact, one of the finest poems on woman's beauty describes the visible forehead surrounded by the darkness of the hair as the incomplete moon of the 8th day. Such a forehead must necessarily be fair and this exceedingly delicate poem also belongs to Sanskrit literature. Ancient India had probably succeeded in separating beauty from colour of complexion and was ready to discover the beautiful wherever it was located. It had presumably at least during certain periods been able to rid itself of prejudices in favour of the dark or of the fair in appraisals of beauty. Succeeding generations have squandered this great maturity of aesthetic judgment.

From such rites of beauty contests as are revealed to the world, it would appear that the measurements of chest, waist and hip are among the deciding qualities. No dark beauty, however, has so far been elected. A Japanese Miss Universe succeeded in gate-crashing after what must have been nearly half a century of beauty contests. Japanese women must, of course, have been beautiful even before one of them was crowned as the queen of the world, and it is not as though they are more beautiful today than before. The change is not in them but in the eyes of the beauty judges of California. The turn for the dark skins of Africa and Asia may yet to come.

The eyes of the beholder have so patently deceived not only over weeks or decades but also over tens of centuries, for they see what the mind has taught them to. Assam is the fabled land of feminine magic and also of feminine charm. Visiting strangers extol the beauty of its females, most of them because of ceremony and without knowing what they are

talking about. Is it the soft melting beauty of the fair skinned which they praise or the celestial shapes of the dark skinned for which their eyes are beholden? Assam is indeed a land of female beauty, but they could hardly know it who confuse beauty with fair skin. The tea woman, or at least some of them, predominantly of Chattisgarh and Oriya extraction arrest the eye with the shape of their body and the lustre of their visage and hold it captive for ever and these labouring women are dark-skinned. Not many hit upon this truth of beauty residing in dark as well as fair skin ever in their life. Some do, but when their youth has passed. Myth also makes Radha the fair-skinned companion of the youthful Krishna, while Krishna who is dark of skin is his companion in the period of statecraft and middle age. As one grows in years, one begins to prefer the south to the north and also those who are dark of skin.

I am talking from the angle of the male and about female beauty. There is no implication that I hold woman to be a thing of beauty and no more. If that in fact were my perspective, I would never have been able to discern Draupadi's beauty, of which her unexcelled wisdom seems to be a source, or that of Assam's tea women, with whom labour, independence and good looks would be difficult to disentangle. If I were a female, I would probably have looked at the question of male beauty much from the same angle. In the first place, the male has not suffered the same amount of depreciation because of the colour of the skin, and secondly, the female has so far been busy evaluating her own beauty as much as his. Should beauty ever become a mark of man to the extent that it is today of woman, which I very much doubt, the proposition about the colour of the skin would hold just as well if not more.

Meenakshi the fish eyed has her abode in Madura, now the chief city of the river Vygeyi, which at one time nurtured the great Pandyan kingdom. This great goddess who presides all by herself over what must be one of the largest temples of India, is not the only fish eyed one. All women of the Vygeyi

share in her beauty. To judge between the fish eyed and the deer eyed would be at all time difficult, for the Mediterranean eyes speak just a little bit more to the senses, while those of the Vygeyi speak that bit more to the soul. The fish eyes seem to possess a little extra of the quality of sympathy and mercy. These Vygeyi women of the fish eyes are dark-skinned, as are most women of Tamilnad, India's true south.

Tamilnad makes its own films in Tamil language, though Hindustani films are also popular. A most curious fact stands out that, though male heroes of these films are generally Tamils, Andhra and Malayali women are just as generally cast in the role of film heroines. There may be many reasons for this, but I would like to mention one. I had occasion to see Tambaram Lalita, a Tamilian woman, play in a minor role, and I looked intently at her for a possible clue to the behaviour of Tamil films. The thick coat of paint and powder made her face look different from her arm, whose true colour showed through a coating that was not as liberal. Lest one should put it down to the failure of technique, it is only fair to wonder whether all parts of a heroine's body which a film has to show can be effectively covered with such thick coats of paint and powder.

I found Lalita just as beautiful as any other woman cast in the major roles of that film. A dark-skinned Meenakshi of shapely body would of course be peerless. But the dark-skinned Tamilians evidently do not think so and they prefer to see the Malayali and Andhra women of lighter skin in their films. A friend completed my observation and told me that, before the beauty judgments of film audiences could come into play, the dark-skinned beauty would have to pass muster at the hands of the producer or the director. The coat of paint and powder may charm the audience, but the producer would be a little too close for that.

This distortion of aesthetic judgement must be ascribed to political influences. The fair-skinned peoples of Europe have dominated the world for over three centuries. For the most

part, they conquered and ruled, but, in any event, they have possessed power and prosperity, which the coloured peoples have not. If the Negroes of Africa and ruled the world in the manner of the whites of Europe, standards of woman's beauty would undoubtedly have been different. Poets and essayists would have spoken of the soft satin of the Negro skin and its ennobling feel and sight; their aesthetic construction of the beautiful lip or elegant nose would have tended to be on the side of fullness. Politics influence aesthetics; power also looks beautiful, particularly unequalled power.

The worldwide conjunction of fair skin with overwhelming power has received great reinforcement from a specific Indian situation. Those fair of skin or at least less dark have generally belonged to the higher caste. The Hindustani word for cast is 'Varna', which probably means colour. The 'Rigveda' has named white as the Aryan colour. Against the background of bright colours of nature and sky in India, the fully white but unstarched raiment probably makes the beholding eye happy and accentuates the beauty of the wearer. But that has nothing to do with the colour of the skin. Nevertheless, the conjunction of worldwide domination with the speciality of India's caste has given to fair skin its formidable prestige and made it a thing of beauty in itself almost without other accompaniments.

Is the colour of the skin then no part of beauty. When the element of novelty tickles the beholder, all fair skin looks like soothing marble and, I guess, by the same token, all dark skin, ochre or wheat-like, looks like the immaculate trunk of the plantain tree. After the novelty has passed, the blotches of the white will show themselves same as the monotone of the dark. The colour of the skin is certainly no criterion of beauty. If any quality of the skin goes into beauty, that certainly is its texture, a soft, unbroken and even texture, that is some times seen perhaps at its best in China or among the ochre or wheat-like women of Africa, India and similar lands. I have perhaps tilted the balance somewhat in the other direction, and that often

happens when an earlier tilt is being corrected. A soft, unbroken and even texture may be found, though more rarely, among the fairer skin, which may cause madness to rage in the blood just as much as its darker skin.

While it makes no sense to prefer between the dark and the fair, some subjective impressions may be noted. All women are beautiful. Some are more so than the other. Among the more beautiful ones of fair skin are such as ooze frankness and innocence and pleasing beauty like the clear rippling brook or better still the transparent depths of rivers in the hills and the light of the moon. Among the more beautiful ones of dark skin are such as evoke the mystery of life and creation, the quickening that gives to fish its eyes, to the she-elephant its languorous step, to twilight its pregnant repose and all such things where deep calls unto deep.

Beauty and sexuality are allies. Darker women have in fact attracted the sexuality of the dominant male, but only in nights clubs or on the sly. India's system of castes erects further hurdles. Not only are the ways of life and speech and conduct different, but the modes dictate a segregation, at least outward, between the sexes of the higher and the lower castes. The dark skinned women of the lower castes, when genuinely in love, would perhaps neither relish nor be able to practise the ruses of the higher castes. There is, however, no love without sexuality and no beauty without love. The woman who loves and is loved radiates the beauty of the starlit sky, whether she is dark or fair. The darker women have in the recent past been denied such love, at least by those who speak or sing of beauty. Hurdles made out of different ways of life and erected among India's castes or between the dark and the fair in all the world may take time to remove. The greatest hurdle of them all is built upon a sheer error, which attributes beauty to fair skin.

The tyranny of colour is among the great oppressions of the world. All women are oppressed and mankind is the poorer for lack of adequate expression to their talents or gifts. Coloured women, who are more numerous, suffer greater oppression.

They are reared on a diet of anxiety and inferiority. Even as a little child, the dark girl, who may be sister to a fairer girl in the same family, has to accustom herself to neglect and treatment reserved for citizens of the second grade. The female child suffers lack of opportunities for growth in comparison to the male child, and on top of that, the coloured girl experiences an additional portion of shame, at least the burdens of an inferior position. The coloured male is also not wholly free of such burdens.

Soaps and creams and lotions and the latest is injections, as might change the skin to lighter hue, are very much in demand by the coloured youth, both male and female. In land where a minority of whites and a mass of coloured people live together, as in South America, and where the white dominates, the accepted tyranny of colour can be seen in its most accentuated forms. All the world suffers this tyranny of skin's colour, a tyranny made worse because the tyrants do not practise it as much as the slaves, who inflict upon themselves.

Most tyrannies are built upon error and so is this largest and widest tyranny, that of colour. How coloured humanity has come to willing and eager acceptance of standards of beauty laid down by those of fair skin is probably a greater marvel than any. The key to the marvel is the same as in the case of the tyranny of the rich over the poor, the high caste over the low caste, the foreign-tongued over the native-tongued, the select over the mass. Between dark and fair as between rich and poor lie myriad gradations. The dark can be the black of coal or the yellow of pearl with many intermediate wheats and browns and ochres and chocolates, so that the fair who dominate aesthetic judgments are able to win substantial followers in the dark-skinned camp. The distance between dark and fair as between rich and poor is covered by innumerable intermediate points, so that the restoration of a valid aesthetic judgment has become as difficult as that of a proper economic or moral standard. When would the beautiful women of dark skin assert their supremacy or at least their

rights of equality or, perhaps, the revolution in this as in other matters will be paved by the tyrants themselves. An aesthetic revolution in the evaluation of beauty and its relation to the colour of the skin will blow the air of freedom and inner peace over all the world almost as much as any political or economic revolutions.

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