



UNDOMESTIC GODDESS

Serving up Life, Without the Sugar Coating

BEYOND THE PALE

Is it finally time to lighten up
about skin tone?

My hips are too big for my body. I'm told they're good for child bearing, which would be great – if I wanted kids. I'm not exactly fond of my hair either – it's kind of like the follicle equivalent of an anorexic on diet pills; weak, limp and severely lacking in confidence. Then there's my nose, which according to www.anaface.com (and my last boyfriend) is a bit wide for my face.

Do these things affect me on a deeply cellular level? No, but ask me if I'd change them and I'd probably say yes. Unfortunately, there's no way to do so short of having my hip bones shaved (yes, it can be done), spending thousands on Cheryl Cole style hair extensions and getting a nose job (no thank you). But what if there was a simpler solution? What if there was some sort of cream I could rub into my hips every night and voila, five months down the line I'd look like Nicole Scherzinger? (Ok, so I'm reaching but you get the gist.) Would I fork out for that magic lotion? Damn right I would.

Now imagine it wasn't my hips I hated, but my skin colour. What if I thought my brown skin was unattractive, and craved a whiter complexion? Suddenly my neuroses become far more ominous and my personal hang-up becomes a symbol of the far-reaching consequences of British colonialism. Suddenly it's about identity and culture and *shame*.

An Asian woman could dye her hair lighter and the worst she would get is a blonde joke or two; admit to using skin lightening products and she'd spark a deep indignation among her peers. On a very simple level, the first change seems more acceptable because it is temporary, lasting several months at most, while the second has more permanence. But the reasons behind the unease don't end there. As we all know, there is a historical belief within the Asian community that 'fair equals lovely' and 'dark equals ugly'.

This debate around skin lightening isn't just academic; it affects real women every day. Take my younger sister who nursed a complex

about her darker tone for years after a neighbour commented: 'Your sisters are so fair, how come you're so dark?' or one of my friends whose sister-in-law asked why she used bronzer on her wedding day when she's 'already dark to begin with'.

There are several theories that attempt to explain the reasoning behind this ideal. Some say fair skin is thought to be more desirable because of its association with higher social castes in the Subcontinent. Some say it's a colonial hangover whereby wealthy westerners are seen as superior and something to aspire to. Others say that dark skin is associated with the poor who undertake manual labour outside in the sun – hence the

"Of course dark doesn't equal less attractive," she said, "but it's a woman's individual choice – if she wants lighter skin, why shouldn't she strive for it? We're okay with curlers and straighteners and fake lashes and even breast implants, but not this – it's time we got over it."

I shook my head vehemently. "But those are based purely on beauty ideals. Lightening is linked to something more ominous; not only a historical belief that fairer is prettier, but also an advertising industry that perpetuates this garbage."

"You don't give me enough credit," she said simply. "My mother-in-law might want a fair daughter-in-law, fine, but I want to be fair

"Can skin lightening ever be like changing your hair colour or will it always signify a sort of cultural treason?"

fairer you are, the richer you must be. The truth is most likely tangled somewhere in between.

Some defend skin lightening by likening it to westerners' quest for the perfect tan. *If Americans and Europeans can so openly and enthusiastically darken their skin, what's so wrong with Asians and Africans doing the inverse?* they ask indignantly. In the past, I have dismissed this as an oversimplification. You see, I've always rallied against anyone or anything that implied fairer skin was prettier. Take my Twitter exchange with Rodial Skincare in June this year. I asked them why they were marketing a 'skin bleach serum' that 'lightens skin tone'. They, like most other suppliers in this multi-million pound industry, simply claimed that the product isn't intended to whiten skin but 'brighten' it. I guess they never checked the meaning of the word 'bleach'.

It was later when discussing the exchange with a friend that I started to question my view.

separate from what she thinks, separate from what my parents think, separate from what everyone thinks just like you want smaller hips or bigger hair. It's not anything deeper than that."

I tried to digest her argument. Could the quest for light skin really be divided cleanly into purely a beauty ideal and one that's shaped by something more ominous? Can it ever be like changing your hair colour or will it always signify a sort of cultural treason?

I think it would be naïve to say the personal quest for light skin isn't informed by public opinion, but I also think there is a touch of hypocrisy amid the outrage. *Why* can't a woman lighten her skin if she does so safely? Yes, it's changing a fundamental aspect of her body, but so would using a magic lotion to change her hips or her hair – and no-one would complain as loudly or as stridently about that.

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