

Colored Darkness

Category: New Voices

written by Nikita Mittal | March 30, 2022



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across my legs...

“You know how empowering it was for me to walk out into the ocean without my shirt on?” asked my twenty-four-year-old cousin Neil after we’d returned from a day of swimming and sunning at the beach.

For me, it had been a rare and welcome break from my coursework in medical school, where I had just started my fourth year.

It was the first time I had worn a bikini in public after years of veiling myself in shirts and wetsuits. Growing up as an Indian American, I’d always felt self-conscious about my skin color. Now I sat in front of our hotel-room mirror, rubbing my face and stomach with bleaching cream to erase my newly acquired tan.

I lifted my head to look at Neil. His eyes seemed different—brighter and free of the shadow of oppression that I’d often seen in them.

“You don’t hate that you tanned?” I asked.

“No. It’s about time I *did* tan,” he responded, admiring his dark brown back, which at one time had been badly scarred by the chemical products he’d used to lighten it.

His words resonated with me in a deep, unexpected way. Gazing at my own skin, I slowly glided my fingers across my legs noticing the border where their tanned dark sepia met the untanned golden brown. In that moment, I saw my body divided into separate nations by the sun.

Silencing a host of long-accustomed negative thoughts about my skin color, I let my fingers drift down my legs in a fragile, tentative attempt at admiring their sun-kissed hue.

But the attempt was short lived.

The loud voices of patients probing me about my ethnicity gradually crept back into my mind: *"Where are you from?... What language do you speak?... How did you make it to America?"* Worse were their wordless facial expressions—their seeming reactions of distaste during the physical exam as my brown hands touched their white skin, combined with their apparent relief when my white male supervising physician walked into the room.

These interactions made me recognize and question my culture and my path into medicine more than ever. Was my path really that different from the that of my white peers?

I felt keenly aware of just how deeply I'd absorbed these attitudes. They emerged clearly in my ideal self-image: an individual masked in white from head to toe in hopes that she would one day fit society's standards.

This moment with my cousin sparked a process in me—a deeper curiosity about the reasons why I felt and saw myself the way I did.

As an Indian American, it felt easy to blame all my internalized racism on others: *People's lack of knowledge and awareness, coupled with their tendency to speak without thinking, should be more than enough reason for my fear and resentment of my brown skin, right?*

My own mind answered: *Wrong.*

In the months that followed, I explored and questioned my own racial assumptions and self-directed negativity. I had more in-depth discussions with patients, colleagues and people of all different backgrounds. Without excusing the blatant ignorance and racism that I encountered at times, I knew that my defensiveness about people's cultural curiosity arose partly from my own frustrations, self-judgments and insecurities. I had to find peace in myself before I could educate anyone else.

So, I began my journey of self-exploration. Through meditation, journaling and advocacy I began to regain control of my sentiments and responses.

Today, when people ask questions, I use that as an opportunity to educate rather than judge. When people are racially opinionated, I question *why* before I answer. And when people in any capacity or context wrongfully express criticism, I stand up for myself or anyone else they have harmed.

The first female in my generation of my family to pursue a career in medicine, I am breaking stereotypes to create new standards for my people to follow. I smile realizing that my color is enough, my connection to the world is enough, and enough is all I need to bring light to this world of colored darkness.

In clinic today, I examine an eleven-month-old Indian American boy who's having an eczema flare. I look at this child's brown skin with a transformed gaze. I touch his dried lesions so softly, trying not to disturb the skin, hoping to preserve every bit of skin that I can. Transmuted is the love I pour into this boy who is like a smaller me—so similar, but also unique.

Covering his hand with mine, I see our colors blend harmoniously in sync. I feel my soul connect to the soul of this boy I've met just seconds ago. The color of my skin is no longer simply a color; it is a connection to my people, to my culture and to our bright future.

I squeeze the boy's hand tight, hoping that, through my touch, he will feel and know the world I plan to create for him.