

The Eye of the Beholder

(Part II)

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Growing up in Bangladesh, especially as a girl, there is no way of remaining unaware of social attitudes to skin colour. And if your skin tone is more chocolate than chalk, you will never be allowed to forget it! So my discovery of the first brown doll I'd ever seen, at the advanced age of eight, was a welcome affirmation that it was okay to be something other than milk-white. I cherished that doll, whom I named Julia (after the TV series featuring the actress Diahann Carroll), and lavished all my attention on her. And that preference was reflected in my subsequent play with all my dolls.

In *my* world, I made the rules. So, unlike the wider world where blue-eyed blondes have always had it easy, Julia was the one who monopolized my single Ken doll, the belle of the ball at every imaginary outing to the beach or to the sophisticated (let's face it, mostly Chinese...) restaurants of my eight-year-old imagination. Meanwhile the superfluous Barbies were relegated to the status of (only occasionally welcome) *nanads*, junior sisters-in-law. When I was feeling generous, Julia and Ken invited the Barbies along for the ride on one of their many excursions.

My attitude was also in contrast to a story I heard from the veteran actress, Shabana Azmi, on an occasion when I was privileged to meet her. She described how her father, the well-known poet Kaifi Azmi, once demonstrated his capacity for progressive thinking by giving her a dark-skinned doll. It didn't impress Shabana, who was quite young at the time - "I thought he was cracked, you know," she said. "Why did he give me a black doll?! Anyway, I just put it away, and I didn't look at it again. In any case, I thought my father *was a* bit cracked. He was always wandering around the house wearing kurta-pyjama and he didn't have any kind of normal job... What was he doing? Writing poetry! I wasn't impressed by any of it."

"Then one day my teacher at school started talking about my father's poetry, and everybody was really impressed. And *then* I acted like I had been proud of him all along! I even showed my other friends the doll he had given me, and they were all very jealous because none of them had a black doll. So I really took advantage of that!" Her father gave Shabana the doll when she was about seven, and the classroom incident occurred nearly a year later, so the doll had been kept in hibernation for some time after she received it.

Alas, like the seven-year-old Shabana, the real world was very far from sharing my own somewhat unconventional standards of beauty. From being made to feel awkward or ugly for not being light-skinned, most of my generation graduated into a world besieged by the now-notorious fairness cream industry, peddling variations of their so-called product alongside other "snake-oil" brands to those who should know better. And of course the level of wishful thinking by the consumer in this world is matched only by the most amazing shamelessness and greed by companies such as Garnier and