



PHOTOS: SADMAN HOQUE

# THE DARK DOWRY

## White supremacy in communities of colour

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Aklima is the eldest daughter of a family in Mymensingh. Her father works as a vegetable vendor; her mother occasionally helps out, but during Aklima's childhood, she mostly stayed at home, grooming her to impress prospective husbands. Once Aklima reached an age to bear a child, her father began networking to auction his daughter on the marriage stock exchange. His only desire was to find her a suitable husband, and his main obstacle—her dark skin. Soon enough, men started arriving to her house to get a first look at her. She wore her best dress—beaming vermilion red, she thought, was her colour.

Her smile, her excitement all disappeared as all the men always left, most of them disgusted at her sun-drenched dark skin. Her father was distressed that he didn't have the money that would compensate for colour; he was frustrated because the problem at stake was something no one could not change. One suitor arrived after another, but with colossal price tags that her father could not afford. They chanted the all-too-common complaints: "I cannot marry a *"shyamla"*

girl without five lakhs and a job, none of which you can offer, so you've disrespected me by showing your daughter; you've wasted my time." But *"shyamla"* (dark) was the kinder word that was thrown at her; *"moyla"* (dirty) was the one she heard more—the informal bundling of mud, dirt and melanin, meant to be insulting.

After a couple of months spent in vain, Aklima's family took a hiatus, during which she cried, she stayed in bed, her parents abused her when she refused to get up. In a few months, they sent her to Dhaka, finding her a job as a domestic worker, which they perceived would compensate for the lack of worth their community had plastered on Aklima's whole existence. After working for two years and saving up some money, Aklima went home for Eid, where she met her first suitor in a while, Anwar. His broad shoulders, his height, and his cream skin fired a flock of butterflies in her stomach. Her eyes lit up with sanguine that her hardship was now coming to an end, that her fairy tale ending was near. "But he would never agree to marrying me," she apprehended the imminent rejection that would certainly follow the encounter.

In a suspicious twist, he said "yes." Two weeks later, she returned to Dhaka, where Anwar met her employers to deal a handsome amount. Meanwhile, her father had saved up two lakh taka, filling a shiny bag with the money that he handed out to Anwar when they got married. Negotiations passed by in a blur and a week after the *Nikah* ceremony, Anwar left for Dubai on the premise that he had been offered a new job. He refused to take Aklima, consoling her that it was for the best. With a heavy heart, she returned to Dhaka, waiting for his phone calls every night. She was afraid that he had left her, that he was betraying her, but he wouldn't do that, she reminded herself. He was "the only good one; he married her when so many didn't."

And then he called, "I've married someone else."

She asked, "Is she fair?"

He laughed and responded, "Yes but they have offered a fair amount as well." Tears rained on every inch of her pillow. She sat in her little corner, reminiscing the simpler times when she only imagined a married life, when the fictional image in her head had been satisfying enough.

Today, Aklima, 20 years old, stares out the window overlooking Dhaka, the city that she admired as a child, her lens now contaminated with the incident that hijacked the taste out of everything she ever loved before.

She wishes that her life would magically rewind, that she could go back in time and tell herself that she was being naive to trust that a man, much fairer than her, would ever love her. Whenever her parents call and utter "second marriage", she forcibly retracts her younger self, when she didn't know her infectious skin colour would plague the rest of her existence.

When this story was being narrated to me, I was informed that marriages are tied with the most important consideration of "decency". But for Anwar's second wife's family, the knowledge of his first marriage and first betrayal did not come near the degradation of his worth. "He is fair, like *bideshis*, he is good-looking. It's a blessing that he ever agreed to marry someone darker," I was told.

Yet, Aklima was not the only one who paid the cost of colourism with her rites of passage. Many years ago, my Lipi Khala, our domestic worker who has been with us since the day I was born, left our house with her new husband. My father had offered her husband a job at his factory, a compensation that was required for her dark skin.

This common dowry spectrum ranges from black to white, from dark to light, and the prices move in the opposite direction. Imagine that it is composed of a simple slanted demand curve, the lighter women inhabiting the lower rungs of the curve, the darker women on the upward leaning ends. Then add a horizontal axis that represents the desirability of the women, and dowry on the vertical. As you hit "play," you can clearly see that for darker women—the least desirable ones—the dowry is higher; the fairer a woman, the more desirable she is, so the lower the dowry goes.

The dire repercussions of this machination cannot be captured on a graph. It's a long journey that engulfs a person by mobilising every gradient of self-hate. For as long as I remember, my Lipi Khala herself was silently ashamed of her colour—she often sprinkled baby powder on her face and used Fair and Lovely under the impression that it would wash away the clay that fuelled clamour in her life. She always averted her face from the sun, despised humidity because it melted the fine grains of artificial whiteness smeared on her face, revealing the melanin, the enemy imprisoned in her own skin.

Not long after she relocated to Barishal, her husband left his job at the factory office. He began drinking and gambling, he abused her physically, he called her "Kalindi," and demanded more money. Four years ago, Lipi Khala returned to us with her two children, Arafat and Farzana, begging for protection, for the chance to live again. Yet, she cannot bring herself to divorce him. "What would people say?" And thus the singular grid of the demand curve pictogram fully disoriented itself—variations of colourism, dowry, sexism, domestic abuse virulently coalescing to paint the tenets of her pain-stricken predicament.

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