

Our Obsession With Fair Skin

NABIHA NUSAIBA

I was three when I had my first encounter with the “fair skin police”. I was playing with my grandmother when a distant relative visited our house and purposefully commented on my skin tone, “Oh, so light you’ve become! You were dirt-skinned like your grandmother when you were born.”

At four, I looked on as kids from my neighbourhood shot down my friend’s advances to befriending them. “You’re too dark, we cannot be friends with you!” one of them said before tossing out all the candies Sameeha Fyroz – my friend – had given them as a token of a prospective friendship.

At six, I asked my father to buy me fairness cream. I thought it would make me more desirable to people who refused to play with Sameeha and me. And as soon as I understood the basics of makeup, I realised that my mother was wearing makeup that was much lighter than her skin. “It does not look good if you do not appear a little whiter,” was all she had to say.

When I was thirteen, I took part in my first-ever school play as a dancer. The professional makeup artist had only five shades of foundation for the extremely diverse cast, all in different hues of beige. We all got on stage, looking identical to one another, forgoing what made us, us.

Since ancient times, herds of people have settled on our land. Hundreds of wars have broken out over territory, and wars highlight differences. And what better way to differentiate than what is easily seen? Throughout time, we find instances where the colour of one’s skin is the only deciding factor in whether a person will rise to rule or be reduced to nothing. It wouldn’t be a shocker if our ancestors consciously, or subconsciously, believed that the only way to get rid of their sufferings was to somehow resemble their “blue blooded” counterparts. They married people with fairer skin, applied and fed various concoctions to their families and avoided the sun as best as they could. But 73 years after the end of the British rule, why do we still adhere to this mentality?

Every day, a large chunk of the population is taunted and bullied for their skin tone without a single thought on how it wrecks their self-confidence. Sameeha, now 21, says, “I get comments on how I should use certain products or avoid going out in the sun, or else no one would marry me. At this point, I really couldn’t care less but people make it seem like it’s my fault. I feel as if my own people actually disapprove of the fact that I am comfortable in my own skin.”

Sometimes, colourism is traced back to educational years. Rasha Jameel, 21, says, “In school, I used to be called out to the front for photographs while my friends with darker skin were sent to the back.”

Most of the time, colourism does not stay limited to bullying but extends to the point where it affects one’s condition of life. Often, people are denied jobs where appearances are linked closely to requirements, such as in the hospitality or entertainment sector. The latter, especially, fails to uphold the diversity in our subcontinent. Roles for actors with darker complexions are rare. In fact, actors with fairer skin tones are more likely to take on dark-skin roles instead of people casting actual actors with dark complexions.

In a web interview, model Azra Mahmood recalls, “Initially when I started, I was young, I brought an open and fresh mind to work in the industry. They called me short, but I was okay with it. I chose an industry where being tall is a requirement... In the next stage, when I heard that I’m dark in complexion, I was like, ‘Is this a problem?’... People have it in their heads that when you’re dusky, you’re ugly, you’re not worthy.”

If you take some time to think about it, you’ll realise how trivial skin really is. It shouldn’t be a divider for relationships or a silent requirement for jobs. It shouldn’t be the difference between respectful treatment or unfair lynching. It’s an organ that is meant to protect our bodies, let’s start by treating it as such.

The writer often forgets to write down her contact details. Remind her at n.nusaibaah@gmail.com

GASLIGHTING

A Guide to Understanding an Abusive Phenomenon

RASHA JAMEEL

What I’m about to discuss isn’t anything particularly foreign, just widely unacknowledged or downplayed. I suggest this time you pay attention.

The term “gaslight” was first popularised by dramatist Patrick Hamilton whose 1938 play *Gas Light* gave meaning to the word in the psychiatric discipline.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as such: *To manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity.*

Simply put, gaslighting is a deceptive act which involves lying in order to distort a person’s sense of reality and confidence. The victim ends up torn between multiple perspectives on a matter and begins to question their own state of mind. The outcome isn’t just mere confusion, it’s a complete loss of faith in oneself that can eventually assume terrifying proportions stemming from self-doubt.

People often misunderstand how gaslighting works, partly due to the reasons given above, and partly because it’s easier to just blame a scapegoat – the person on the receiving end of this form of emotional abuse. It’s quite common for cases of gaslighting to go undetected, with the victim’s psyche enduring varying degrees of trauma that can either dissipate in a short amount of time or continue to plague the mind indefinitely. There’s no such thing as “coming out unscathed” from a gaslighting incident.

Victims often fail to recover from the trauma they experience at the hands of their bullies. This is due to victims being subjected to further scrutiny and contempt exhibited by people who attribute the matter of “gaslighting” as fantasies. Thus, victims’ lives become marred with damages suffered within the walls of their own houses, classrooms, workspaces, and every other place infested by these bullies. The gaslighting goes undetected.

This ignorance, when sustained through years within a group of people, be it family or community, can gradually become ingrained into their faith, paving the way for an abusive cycle. The abuse might not always be a product of malicious intent, but rather, part of someone’s inheritance. Soon enough, the abuse becomes the norm since nobody else knows any better.

The following are possible signs of gaslighting to watch out for:

1. Frequent usage of words and phrases such as, “you’re overreacting”, “you don’t know what you’re talking about”, “you’re being too uptight”, “you’re not in the right state of mind”
2. Instigating unnecessary comparison by repeatedly saying how “someone else has it worse” or how the situation “could’ve been worse”
3. Trying to deviate from the issue by shifting the blame
4. Your emotional state being belittled
5. Withholding of information related to the matter at hand.

To the victims of gaslighting, your sanity has not failed you.

To the acquaintances, friends, and family of the victims, it’s important to treat an incident of gaslighting with sensitivity considering the emotional stress it can exert on the victims. All it takes is the willingness to properly acknowledge and understand it. Offer emotional support, not unwarranted criticism.

Rasha Jameel is your neighborhood feminist-apu-who-writes-big-es-says. Remind her to also finish writing her bioinformatics research paper at rasha.jameel@outlook.com

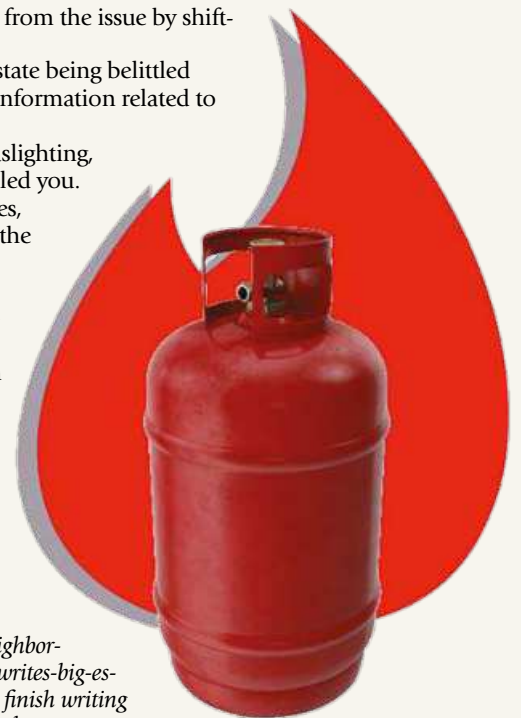


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