

The South Asian Perspective(s): Desi & disabled*

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Skin Tone Part 1 (Women) Transcript • 32:09 mins

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

disability, people, beauty, skin, woman, growing, men, marriage, standards, beautiful, skin tone, family, person, skin color, dark, listener, reject, cook, talk, dissertation

SPEAKERS

Grishma, Nargis, Jeetendra, Mumtaz, Helen, Dharmendra, Rekha

Grishma 00:02

In March of 2021, the world was given a rare opportunity to spend some intimate time with Oprah Winfrey, Megan Markel, and Prince Harry. During this interview, we learned that there were concerns from the royal family regarding Archie's skin tone, even before he was born (Picheta, 2021). In other words, there were talks about how dark the unborn baby would be.

Welcome listener to the episode on skin tone. (Begins to whisper) Just between you and me listener, I have somewhat of a superpower. I can get pretty pale, so pale, I can pass for zombie (end of whispering). And for a long time, I was zombie pale. Even if I got a tan, it didn't last very long. While I was constantly reminded that I was a disabled, Desi woman, I wasn't criticized for being dark. Until the date came when I was no longer anemic. And poof, went by zombie pale status. When I got a tan, it stayed for a long while. Though, I think I'm just a few shades darker, compared to a zombie. I'm dark. And when I look at myself in the mirror, sometimes I have a hard time recognizing ME. But that wasn't the strangest part. What's even stranger is that people around me act differently. I've had folks ask me where I'm from, originally? Well, others I've even said I should go back to my country. And some folks have even held their purses and extra extra bit tightly around me. At one restaurant, folks seated a party after us before us. And I don't think this place took reservations. When I left the organization, no, it didn't go very well. This was before the killing of George Floyd. I'd like to believe if the same organization got similar feedback, they'd approach it with a bit more of an understanding tone. What I learned from my former zombie days was that white skin or light skin deems you more worthy or beautiful from the rest. Whether you're in the

United States where I grew up, or in India, where I was born. At one point I thought having light skin trumped having a physical disability, if you were a woman. As my life unfolded, I quickly learned that did not hold true, at least in my case. So for my dissertation, I decided let's talk about skin tone. Though, I was only able to find one storyteller who identified as Desi, a woman with a disability and had fair skin, Mumtaz. She as you may remember from earlier episodes has an invisible disability. So you may not know she has a disability at first, second, or even third glance all you would see is that she's tall, and thin and have fair skin and straight black hair. When I interviewed Mumtaz and I asked her, *how do you think these these standards of beauty and worth have impacted you?* This is what she had to say.

Mumtaz 03:39

I guess a good way to explain it would be that I know that I am a potential mother-in-law, Desi mother-in-law's dream (laughter). And I know that! And, it's certainly made you know, some of these events and stuff that I've had to go to (laughter) a lot easier, not gonna lie.

Grishma 04:03

And what is this potential mother-in-law's dream category?

Mumtaz 04:07

Kind of what we were talking about, like, you know, just the stereotypical, or the accepted beauty standard that we talked about, like the tall, fair skin, long hair, crap, and the education as well, or the profession so. Yeah. I think it's so ridiculous (laugh).

Grishma 04:32

Mumtaz was telling me about a family wedding that she had attended many years ago in Pakistan. And she knew that based on how she looked, she could be shown around.

Mumtaz 04:45

And I just wanted to not be a source of bitching, you know (laughter). I knew she could take me and show me to whoever. I think if you grew up with all of that, I mean, you would feel like you were never going to win. There's a lot of, it depends, you know, having a more invisible disability, and meeting a lot of those requirements under the beauty standards, I think I probably had the best case situation to be honest. What people see when they meet me is the tall, fair skin, you know person. I don't know much

about fairness creams (laughter). But like, you know, there's advertising (Jones, 2020)* you know, *to fix some of those problems* or whatever...if you have a disability, and Desi culture tells you that like, you're not even really worth a human being, you have no value in society, cause there's something wrong with you, or your parents are being punished. You know, you're their, like punishment, that's very heavy. And there's no like, cream (chuckles) that's going to fix that, you know, that you're seeing. So that would be such a hurdle to get through mentally and to accept that about yourself. If you can't see anyone with, with any of the qualities that you have, like, successful, I think that's what would make you or break you.

Rekha 06:19

With women I feel like physical disabilities are seen as more of a disadvantage (Ghai, 2002) because of the emphasis that we place on female physical beauty. And I think with men, because of their view as like the providers, and the people that are supposed to be able to uplift a family, I do think there's a higher stigma against mental disabilities for men than there is with physical disabilities. And that's how I see. I feel like because of our country's like, colonial past, right, and also just social and cultural pressures, it's not easy with the beauty standards and stuff that we have. But especially being a girl, it's not easy. Like growing up, being super skinny is like the norm in India (Austin, 2012) right...so like, growing up, even when I was a child like, like random Aunties at parties would call me fat. And I'm like, I'm like, Who are you? Like, I don't even know who you are. And then another thing is, like, stuff that you can't even control like how, like light skin is held as like, amazing within our culture (Jones, 2020). But we're all brown people. So like, why is our beauty standard, something that 90% of us can't even attain right? And so, it's like not only do we face scrutiny from other people for our skin color, within our own society, we do not accept ourselves because of our skin color. So then it's like, how can we expect other people to accept us, if our own community doesn't even accept us? And that's like, another difficulty there is.

I think the more religious I've gotten, the more beauty has become less of an exterior thing. To me, I feel like the only person who can truly tell me if I'm beautiful or not, there's two people, there's me and there's God, right. Who else has the authority or the information really, to make that distinction, right? (Be)cause sometimes I have like, the most beautiful thoughts, right? Who's there to see them? Me. You know, no one else is there. So, I think the introspective nature of faith has brought me closer to accepting myself but also accepting other people. Because now like, when I meet people, I'm not colorblind, cause that's a very negative approach, right, to not notice people's intersectional identities, notice people's different identities, but to me, their identity does not contribute to how I view their worth.

Grishma 08:59

I wanted to wait till this episode to tell you about Rekha. That's because I wanted you to get to know Rekha before you got to know her age. Maybe you assumed she was twenty-something. Well, you're sort of right. At the time of this interview Rekha was just twenty years old. She was the youngest of all the storytellers that I interviewed for this dissertation. She also happens to be the youngest of two girls and was born in the United States to a Hindu family. A lot of people want to be like Michael Jordan when they grow up, the basketball player. Not me. I want to be like Rekha when I grow up.

She mentioned that random Desi Aunties she didn't know would talk to her and tell her she was fat. A Desi Auntie isn't related to you by blood or family, but because she's part of the basic community, to show respect. We would call her aunty, because she's old enough to be our mom. The same goes for a Desi Uncle. Regardless if you know them or you don't. Well I think the act of respect was supposed to be more in our actions towards others. It became more for namesake, like so many other things in life (laughter). So now that we covered Desi Aunties and Uncles, I want us to zoom in a little bit on what Rekha said.

Rekha 10:35

Like, how can we expect other people to accept us, if our own community doesn't even accept us?

Grishma 10:42

That's pretty fucking deep, right? This is the question I want you to have in the back of your mind as we continue with this dissertation. I believe this question can single handedly change how you see yourself. And yes, I did sneak in an amputee joke.

Nargis 11:03

Honestly, Desi culture's probably taught me all the wrong things about beauty and worth. I can remember, you know, being told, I wasn't beautiful because of my skin color. Or that, you know, I should do this to lighten my skin. Or my hair was...my hair was curly when I was younger, and like my sisters was like, smooth and straight and beautiful, you know. And so they would always compare, like the color of my hair, because it was so dark compared to hers. So I think that I grew up with a really, really insecure with myself. And I think like still to this day, I have a little bit of that left. But for the most part, I've gotten over it because I've recognized now that there's so many other things that make you beautiful, right, not just the way you look or your skin color,

or what we're seeing in Bollywood movies. I try as hard now not to even look at, you know, some of those things from Indian culture. And not to surround myself with people that have those same views. I think someone's, this sounds like really cheesy, but I think you can, you can tell a good person, can tell when a person has a good heart and is, is trying to make the best for themselves and, and their families and whoever's around them they love. So I don't know that I really characterize anything anymore as like, superficially beautiful. I think I just...I think about what a person represents at this point. And however they want to represent themselves.

There are several members (chuckles) of the family who, when we were growing up would tell me and my siblings like different things. And so my brother was a little bit overweight as a child. There were multiple family members, would say that to him and my mother. About how, you know, he needed to get on a diet. He was like nine or ten years old at the time, you know, but like they needed to, you know, have him eat healthier, things like that. And my sister was she, she wasn't overweight, she was just, you know, she was a little bit, I guess, chubbier. They never used to say anything like that to her. But she had very, very fair skin. She has very, very fair skin. And so you could always tell that, you know, they always said things positively to her that she always looked like a little doll when she was walking around because her skin was so fair. And that she looked like a little princess and stuff like that. And my brother and me wouldn't get the same kind of comments by any means. It would be more about his weight or the fact that I wasn't as fair as her.

Grishma 14:18

That was Nargis, a thirty-something, medical professional who was born in the United States into an Indian, Hindu family. Listener, she looks so much like a famous actor, it is ridiculous! And yet, she grew up hearing she wasn't beautiful. And to this day, it affects her, though at a much smaller scale. Nargis and Reka both hinted what lens we'll be using to explore skintone. In case you didn't catch it, I'll be exploring this episode through the lens of change (Ganz, 2020). What I learned from Marshall Ganz teaching was that, we aren't so much initiating change in this framework. Rather, it's about how we're responding to change, whether we want to or not, whether we like to or not. This change could be a job or relationship, an environment or a change in the world. I think a good example of change, that everyone in this world can relate to is, COVID-19. Change can also be personal or wider affecting a society, like in the case of George Floyd's killing. The key takeaway for me with this lens is that we want to tap into our shared values to respond to a situation instead of going on autopilot and reacting. I was taught to look at change in the form of an old story and a new story. One side of the old story is to *reject continuity*, meaning that you completely reject change to ensure the continuity of the old story continues. On the other side of the old story, spectrum is

accommodation, meaning that you will accommodate some change to keep the old story going. On the flip side is the new story. On one side of the new story is *adaptation*. So we're enabling change, but we aren't throwing out the old story just yet. We're just adapting how continuity will look. The other side of the new story spectrum is *reject continuity*. This is where we completely reject the old story, throwing it out to ensure that change is here to stay. Nargis mentioned that once she changed how she saw beauty, it was no longer about superficial stuff like skin color, straight, long, dark hair, face symmetry, fill in the blank here. I would argue that she's completely *rejecting continuity*, and what Bollywood movies taught her. The same goes for Rekha, she no longer sees beauty through the eyes of those Auntie's, or what they defined as beautiful, thin, fair skinned, etc. Like Nargis, beauty for Rekha is internal.

Where do you think Mumtaz fits in, old story or new story? Mumtaz told us that she had the best case situation, she has light skin, she's tall, she's thin, she happens to have straight, long dark hair. And though she has a disability, because it's on the invisible side, she can be shown around and not be a source of bitching. I think she falls more into *adaptation*. Because the old story of beauty still feels palpable, but she is enabling change. According to an NPR article (Donnella, 2019), a lot of current beauty standards in the United States focus on one type of beauty, a sort of white femininity that's available to only a few people. The article was referring to blond hair, thin, blue eyed white women. The United States isn't the only country or culture to subscribe to *colonial beauty standards*-as they put it. As Rekha mentioned, the majority of Desis have brown skin, yet white skin is favored. These colonial beauty standards continue to propagate Desi culture through storytelling in the form of advertisements of fairness creams, which promise to make your skin lighter (Jones, 2020), or through Bollywood movies where the lead actress has lighter skin than all her friends. While there may be some skin tone flexibility with the lead actor, there isn't much. And according to one article (Gandhiok, 2020), ancient text describes the various gods and goddesses with dark skin. Look at MahaKali, Shiva and Krishna. The article (Gandhiok, 2020) very eloquently states that seeds of colorism were planted by the Mughals but the British watered these seeds very, very well. Folks who had lighter shades of brown, were given better jobs by the British. And so the story of whiteness equals beautiful and powerful continued. Now, it's time to talk about something that makes me uncomfortable. The M word, marriage (noise of discomfort). Even if I'm watching a show, and something like marriage or a proposal is in the air, and I'm watching it with someone. I start to have like this out-of-body experience. And it's not the good kind either. I couldn't figure out why it would happen. Until I saw the animated series Avatar, The Last Airbender (2021). This avatar also has out-of-body experiences. And it only happens when his life is in danger. It's his defense mechanism acting up. And during this out of body experience, he's at his absolute strongest, and his most vulnerable. Everything just starting to make sense. The responsibilities that come in marriage are no joke, according to me, and maybe, Helen (laughter). You heard Helen, in a previous episode talk about how a woman would work

the same hours as a man. And then when she comes home, she can't plop on the couch and start playing video games, she's likely got to make dinner for the family. Probably has to do the dishes, especially if the rule of the house is that if you use the dish, you must wash the dish. Doesn't matter if you use the dish to make dinner, to feed people. And even if she wants to play video games, she's got like zero energy left. I was talking to my physician friend who's married and has kids. And she told me her daily schedule from the time she woke up to the minute she went to bed. Just listening to her, I was having an out-of-body experience (noise of discomfort). But if we didn't talk about marriage, then we would be missing out on a theme that just kept coming up, especially around skin tone. So listener, let's talk about marriage.

Mumtaz 21:47

I can't do things like cook and clean. Like that was actually something, I mean, it's not really a beauty standard, but like a wife, or a good, good woman standard of some kind—that you should be able to like cook. And I did not want to cook ever. Like I never wanted to learn how to cook growing up, I totally rejected that. The last picture of me with like a rolling pin I was like two-years-old. And I knew that was part of the standard. Because I knew my mom was always cooking for everyone, always making tea for everyone. I saw that and I'm like, I'm not doing this.

Helen 22:19

I think it's always that, you know, the fairer skin is called beautiful, the darker skin is not. So, if somebody's calling someone beautiful, it's definitely going to be a fair skin person. Similarly, like, even when somebody places, you know, these matrimonial advertisements on either the websites or newspapers, they always say they're *seeking a white skin person*, or whatever (laughter). I think that's how people perceive beauty. I think they're linking it more to the skin of the color than the features of the face, I think. So I just feel that, that's how it was when I was growing up, maybe it has changed now. But it was certainly how it was when I was growing up. Definitely, just because all of these opinions, I would definitely not think of myself as attractive as such (laughter). But now I'm like, *Well, I am good the way I am*. I'm independent, I have my own opinions, I can say them out loud, I can save them out to whoever I want. So now I don't question those things. But I know growing up, it kind of sometimes you know, impacts or it affects confidence as well. When things are constantly put in your head about the way you look or like you're supposed to have a particular skin color. It kind of makes you feel Oh, I can never be that beautiful or like when there are constantly those kind of comparisons that feed into you. But like when you get the knowledge and then you're exposed, like all these things don't mean anything, they don't have to be a part of your

personality. Like there are other things that are more important. That's when you're kind of like, whoever created these things? Why like were we taught that these things are even remotely important to your existence? I'm trying to remember if there was like an event, but kind of just triggered it where I was like, *No, I'm good looking. I am the way I am* (laughter). I don't think so, that there was this one particular thing but like, I would just look at myself in the mirror. I think once I started working and getting my dream job. I was like, to hell with all these opinions, but I think I'm attractive. I'm good at what I do. So I think that's, that's what changed it.

Grishma 24:57

How old were you when you had that real realization.

Helen 25:01

I think twenty-five, twenty-six maybe.

Jeetendra 25:06

This is just me, you know, being very frank with you. There's lot of time I've seen, especially in arranged marriage- I've seen a beautiful, Desi woman with a very unattractive man. So, you wonder, it's a one way road really. So it's you, you focus on what's attractive physically, right. It's obviously a woman, but the woman doesn't really have much say in, in who they're choosing, as long as they (the groom) don't have a mental disability, as long as a person is, again, go back to the educational, you know, they are strong in their educational background and can provide, makes good money. They don't care about the physical.

Grishma 25:53

According to a study (Nagar, 2018), 108 Indian moms who had children of marriageable age, and were seeking for a partner for their child, were shown pictures of women and men that were made wider or more dark through technology. So, imagine I took your photo listener and made you darker or lighter than you are. Then you will become two different people, but with the same qualifications. The studies suggested the Indian moms favored the lighter-skinned highly attractive woman more. But what was interesting was that ratings for the highly attractive dark-skinned women were not significantly lower than ratings for the highly attractive dark-skinned men. So according to the study, Indian moms were more likely to recommend lighter-skin men to their daughters, and we're more likely to recommend lighter-skin women to their sons. The study also mentioned that if the Indian woman is "highly attractive", and has "superior

educational and professional qualifications", then she may not suffer from the term double jeopardy as much-meaning being a woman and dark-skinned. The literature on perception of physical attractiveness and education and work experience to reduce skin color bias is that best scarce according to this study (Nagar, 2018). What happens if you add disability to this arranged marriage mix? That may be called multiple jeopardy (Nagar, 2018). Speaking of marriage, there was a study, (Hussain et al., 2002) conducted in the UK, about disabled young South Asian people and their families. And one of the things that study talked about with disability and finding a marriage partner. According to this study, in some ways, women were seemed to have greater difficulties because of the social constructs around housework. Impairment was perceived to affect housework. One participant flat out said that women with disabilities had it harder than men with disabilities, since the guy expects that she's gonna do the cooking and the cleaning and other domestic work (Hussain et al., 2002, p. 14). What else? Men with disabilities were more likely to be hitched than women with disabilities, and even more engaged around conversations about marriage. Men too were affected by disability, as they felt they needed to be able to provide for their family to fulfill their breadwinning role. According to another study, (Pal, 2010) India appears to have more men with disabilities than women, at least among the upper-caste groups. Within Dalit and scheduled tribe communities, disability rates among men and women are more comparable.

Dharmendra 28:54

They never push the girl the same amount as they are pushing the guys to become independent, because they know that hey, it's not about independence- it's getting a good groom.

Grishma 29:03

What were things that the girls did have to learn?

Dharmendra 29:07

I think everyone started when they were in early twenties.

Grishma 29:11

To make tea and cooking?

Dharmendra 29:12

Yeah, learn something so when you go or even though you are living with your husband, at least someone know how to, you know, make food. It was assume(d) that guy will not know. And now you're living with either with their family or just two of you, one person has to know and it's going to be you. And that's... I can see it very straightforward, you know. That mentality that you know, getting a good groom, just learn this, this is... because that's what they did, you know. When they are teaching you, you see that.

Grishma 29:41

Why do you think that is? Why do you think it's been, like boys-education, girls-like house cleaning?

Dharmendra 29:50

Because they haven't seen or they haven't experience or they, they are not born in a family that both of them are independent and working side-by-side.

Grishma 30:02

I have a confession. When I heard Dharmendra talk about working with your partner side-by-side, my avatar out of body response went on vaycay (vacation). If only there were more men like Dharmendra and Jeetendra that respected their wives as their equal. Taking another look at the lens of change. I'd argue that the folks who don't reject the idea of a woman having a career, and yet still expect that she cooks and clean and makes sure the kids by age three are coding experts are sticking to the old story of men equal breadwinners, women equal take care of house. At best, they're accommodating to allow a few areas of change, like more money coming into the bank account. I have a friend who has three young kids and took early retirement from the medical field. After listening to everything she does as a stay at home mom, I needed a nap! And I got to thinking that there's really no way to kick out that old story completely. Unless, of course, you're married to people like Dharmendra and Jeetendra. Who I'd argue are completely rejecting the old story because they clean and cook on a regular basis. They definitely got the memo of happy wife equals happy life. And if Dharmendra and Jeetendra have kids, their kids will also learn about the new story of working *with* your partner. Isn't that beautiful? I'd say it is.

And that concludes the first part of our skin tone episode. Please join me in part two, where we get to hear what the men have to say about beauty and worth.

End of SkinTone Part 1 Transcript

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