Book Review Essay: Sheila Rowbotham presents A Vindication of the Rights of Woman Rhiannon Cobb

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Book Review: Whiter

By Lipika Kankaria

Whiter features a series of personal experiences of Asian-American women across ages and nationalities who are settled in America. Edited by Nikki Khanna, the book contains personal essays by women and a descriptive introduction which familiarizes the readers to the various nuances of colorism through personal examples. Whiter is divided into six sections, each focusing upon a specific thematic issue; they broadly highlight the privileges of having light-skin, anti-blackness as well as obsession with skin whiteness. The essays are mostly penned by educated women, who are pursuing various professions, with origins in East, Southeast and South Asia but this limits the range of experiences and the readers get a rather focused view of colorism. In this manner, the book provides a platform to a diverse set of voices who have challenged the role of skin color in their lives and provides access to their journey in overcoming skin-based prejudices.

In Whiter, the Khanna addresses the role of skin tone in social mobility and attempt to dismantle the ideologies associated with light skin. Some of the essays expose the notion of superiority attached with whiteness and the role it plays in case of finding suitable marriage partners. Situating colorism at the complex intersections of caste, class, race and gender, the idea of equating beauty with whiteness is explored through lived experiences.

The first section of the book, “Colorism Defined”, highlights the problem of skin color biases within the Asian community and also the racialization that Asian women are subjected to in the American society. It highlights the question of class also as lighter skin tone has been historically associated with the higher class who never engaged in manual labour; the people who engage in physical labour generally tend to have tanned or darker skin tone due to the long hours working under the sun. The second part entitled “Privilege” is dedicated to unravelling the different types of privileges associated with having fairer complexion, ranging from upward social mobility to better opportunities. Interestingly, this section also gives a glimpse of the stigma and social liability that the lack of fair skin entitles a woman to as she is considered inferior from the ideal woman. “Aspirational Whiteness” is the central theme of the third section that captures how the deep-rooted biases based on skin color have given rise to an entire industry that thrives on people who want to alter their appearance. It brings into focus the extensive usage of skin whitening products and sunscreen to protect the color of the skin. The next section, “Anti-Blackness”, highlights the juxtaposition of blackness to whiteness and how it is linked with many negative stereotypes. The personal experiences expose the racial intolerance and the internalization of such prejudices. The fifth section titled “Belonging and Identity” helps the reader to understand how skin color affects the perceptions of belonging to a community. The question of identity for women has been problematized as the skin colour is invariably linked to their ethnic identities as the shade of skin superficially determines the roots of a person. The multiracial or biracial women pose a challenge to the structurally defined concept of identity and defy the ethnic stereotypes as not all women having particular complexion may fit into a preconceived idea of ethnic identity.


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section, “Skin-Redefined”, is an attempt to shatter the various preconceptions and prejudices regarding color. The discussion attempts to redefine the concept of beauty which has always been characterized by whiteness and treated as capital for women. It also draws attention to activism regarding these issues and underscores the process of self-acceptance and self-love.

Whiter questions an entire industry which has been built around insecurities of women’s appearances. The discussion also includes the socio-economic factors that allow some women to “correct” flaws, while others are financially excluded. The manner in which colonial history and identity is explored in some of the narratives lays bare the nuanced and extremely complex ways through which whiter skin is prioritized and internalized by many women. This provokes the reader to think and question the subtle ways in which colorism is propagated. However, as the authors remind, the deep-rooted preference for pale skin dates back to centuries and its association with class is ingrained in such a way that it has proliferated every sphere of the lives of Asian women.

As a significant contribution, Whiter broadens the discussion of color beyond people of African origin to include the color-based discrimination against Asian people, a topic of comparatively limited discussion. Khanna’s focus on in-built colorism addresses a phenomenon that has always existed in societies across the world but not always spoken about in the context of Asian-Americans. Whiter highlights that women are subjected to subtle discrimination, even in a multicultural environment. The politics of inclusion and exclusion as practiced toward these ethnic minority groups poses a challenge as they are not able to identify with the “White” or “Black” community.

The appeal of Whiter lies in its contemporary references to popular culture, advertisements, bloggers and other day-to-day allusions that the readers can easily connect with. It tries to question the hegemonic notion that all things Western, in this case skin color, is superior and aspirational. The narratives provoke the readers to think critically about the myriad forms that colourism takes in their personal lives. The book adds to the existing canon of first-person narratives of instances of colourism and their struggles in undertaking the journey to self-discovery. It adds newer dimension in studies relating to gender and race by giving vent to personal stories of women who have tried to confront and challenge the inclination towards lighter skin.