



THE LAADLI BLOG

# Navigating Shadeism and Racism as South Asian Women in Canada: Safe Space Anywhere?



Image by zhkdesigns

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“You’re too dark. You will have a hard time finding a handsome and well-established suitor who would want to marry you.”

“Inner beauty matters the most. Don’t bother about how you look!”

“She’s so fair-skinned, so pretty.”

“Oh! The newborn is darker-skinned.”

Ever heard these comments? I understand how it feels. I want to ask those who have uttered these comments: Who defined the concept of beauty based on how “lighter” someone’s complexion is? Why wouldn’t darkness be counted as “outer beauty” that matters?



I am a darker skinned South Asian Canadian woman. I have grown up watching lighter-skinned actors and actresses in Indian (Bollywood) films, television shows, and commercials, which made me feel like an “other.” In childhood and adolescence, I compared my skin tone with that of my family members and my friends. Although my loved ones are extremely supportive, I have heard shadeist comments, like the ones I mentioned above. Isn't it interesting that South Asian men do not receive such comments or are not judged because of their complexions? At my wedding, I was turned into a “lighter-skinned” bride. How? Well, the beauticians groomed me, using lighter shade makeup products, believing that I would look the prettiest in my wedding pictures if I looked “white.” So, what exactly am I trying to pinpoint at?



Photo of the lovely Bidushy Sadika

**Shadeism** refers to prejudice and discrimination based on skin shade. It is an outcome of European colonization, as white beauty ideals are based on white privilege and supremacy. The colonizers described darker complexions as “poor, unclean, and labourers,” and lighter complexions as “noble, rich, higher social class, and beautiful.” In modern South Asian communities, the multibillion-dollar skin-lightening industry and media privileging lighter complexions promoted preferences for lighter skin shades. Thus, lighter-skinned women are appreciated, respected, received attention, and considered “prettier” and “marriageable,” and darker-skinned women are viewed the opposite. Darker-skinned South Asian women experience shadeism when pursuing their careers and (heterosexual) romantic relationships. In arranged marriages (i.e., a customary practice where parents/families search life partners for their children), grooms and their families explicitly show a bias toward lighter-skinned brides, with marital sites and newspaper ads having the option to indicate desired complexions for brides.

Reading so far, you probably think that shadeism is geographically restricted to South Asia. Well, technically, it's not! South Asian communities are located globally. As they immigrate or migrate to various nations, they bring in their ideologies and norms with them in countries where they settle. Thus, moving to Canada complicated experiences of



shadeism for me. To me, Canada is a multicultural nation with a greater acceptance for diverse skin colours. Indeed, I witness skin tanning practices and people have complimented my darker skin tone. Yet, I am connected to my South Asian culture. I attend South Asian traditional events and visit my home country every 2-3 years. Every time I find myself in a South Asian-centric space, I am self-conscious about my skin tone and constantly comparing mine with everyone around, who is lighter-skinned.

What is even more difficult to navigate? That I am a racialized (visible minority) woman, appearing visibly different from white women because of my non-white skin colour. I am privileged to live in an “academic bubble” wherein I did not openly encounter racism; however, I have had people in social spaces (e.g., beauty salons and bus stops) asking me, “Where are you originally from?” and “Is there a war going on in your country?” and commenting, “You speak very good English as an immigrant.” Once I went to Halifax, NS to present at an academic conference, and someone in Walmart parking lot yelled at me and my husband: “You immigrants! Go back to your f\*cking country.” Being a Muslim woman, I unintentionally use religious words to express my emotions. However, I fear doing so in public when I read the news of hate crimes against Muslims, one of which recently happened in London, ON. So, where is exactly a safe space for me as I try to navigate white beauty ideals in my own ethnic culture and racism in Canadian mainstream spaces?

Recently, I finished my master’s research on shadeism, and interviewing 13 South Asian women living in Canada has made me realize that I am not alone. Their narratives resonate with what I shared above – that is, they experienced shadeism enacted by their families, relatives, and ethnic communities. Those who were lighter-skinned received social benefits associated with lighter complexions in South Asian communities; however, they faced racism in broader Canadian society. Additionally, interviewees explained that maturity, resilience (e.g., self-acceptance), resistance (e.g., education and awareness), living in Canada (e.g., multiculturalism and witnessing skin-tanning practices), and acculturating into Canadian culture served as protective factors against the negative impact of shadeism. Similarly, I cope with shadeism by self-identifying as South Asian-Canadian (rather than just South Asian). This helps me to understand that women in Canada spend money to tan their skin tone, which is something that I already have. I became resilient against shadeism by prioritizing my academic career. I aspire to be a university professor to convey that my skin colour matters and represent myself as a successful darker-skinned South Asian Canadian academic woman. Through my research emphasizing lived experiences of racialized women, I attempt to advocate against shadeism, racism, and other social issues that negatively impact these women, and highlight their act of resistance against these issues.



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In conclusion, each one of us has a significant role to play in educating South Asian communities and broader society about the negative impact of shadeism and racism in the lives of darker-skinned South Asian women living in Canada or anywhere else in the world. Creating an awareness on this topic starts from challenging the idealization of lighter complexions and whiteness in interpersonal and social spaces, to actively getting involved in a non-profit organization like Laadliyan in order to advocate for the rights of South Asian women. Lastly, I would like to share a quote from an interviewee of my master's project. In response to shadeism as a product of our colonial history, Alex (19, Bangladeshi, lives in Saskatchewan, and immigrated to Canada 8 years ago) described the importance of "decolonization" in believing that darkness is beautiful:

"I'm in a process of decolonizing myself and what starts ... just accepting myself and seeing all dark-skinned people as beautiful is one of the ways of decolonizing my mind. And it is very difficult; I'm not gonna to say that ..., every day I wake up and I feel beautiful, it's not that. ... But it's a process and it's hard work, and some days I don't feel like it, but I want to inspire girls around me, or even my little sister to understand that how we see beauty is very complicated and there is relations of power and violence all incorporated into it, and I think the more ... I educate myself, it becomes apparent to me."

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**Bidushy Sadika** is a darker-skinned South Asian Canadian woman living in Saskatoon, SK. She immigrated to Canada with her parents in 2010, and is an incoming PhD student at Western University. Bidushy has personally experienced gender and racial discrimination across South Asian and Canadian cultural spaces. Hence, through her research, she aims to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of racialized women, including those who self-identify as South Asian.

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