

**Big Brother: A Tale of Two White Women**

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Jade Goody, recently evicted from the television show Big Brother, plans to travel to India, where she hopes to make amends for her mistreatment of Indian film star Shilpa Shetty on the show. In preparation for the trip, she will perhaps watch a few Shilpa Shetty films, eat vindaloo in an Indian restaurant and learn to fold her hands when saying Namaste. We imagine that Jade will travel to the city of Patna, whose residents staged a loud protest against her behaviour. We imagine her standing with Shilpa – a hug would be nice – and declaring her love for chicken tikka, Bollywood and Bikram Yoga. Every Indian she will confront will demand and receive appropriate words of contrition from her. To come up to speed, Jade has begun a round of apologies. On the Indian television channel NDTV, she declared, “I don't want people in India to think that people in Britain are all like me.” But of course, people in India are not all like Shilpa either. In Jade's mind, Shilpa and the residents of Patna are both dark-skinned foreigners. To Indian eyes, skin colour has a dozen shades – from milky white to wheatish to chocolate brown to coal black. On that scale, the distance between “Shilpa Poppadam” and Jade is vanishingly small. To Patna, Shilpa is a Caucasian woman with skin almost as light as Jade's and an accent indistinguishable from hers, entitled to the same racist behaviour that Jade has displayed toward her.

It is odd that Jade should be so innocent, because Indian racism is quite uncomplicated. Jade's abhorrence of foreign races includes - in addition to skin colour - spicy chicken, smelly onions, odd accents and unpronounceable names. By contrast, Indian racism is elemental: as nature abhors a vacuum, so India abhors dark skin. It is the only type of racism India understands and tolerates. And Indians have practised it for three thousand years, when they first chose the word “varna”, meaning colour, for their four social classes.

As a teenager in Delhi, I got my start in theatre playing the mirror in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. A fair-skinned Indian woman – slightly darker than Shilpa – faced the mirror and demanded to know who the fairest woman in the land was. I stood behind the mirror, peered through a hole in it and proclaimed,

‘Tis you, my dear Miriam, so lovely and fair!  
No doubt, your beauty is beyond compare.

Then I told my audience of brown children about a girl whose skin was as white as snow. They sighed.

The word “fair” with its many connotations means nothing more than a skin colour to Indians. Those born with dark skin – most Indians – go about their lives like the Prince of Morocco, pleading,

Mislike me not for my complexion,  
The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun,

In Britain or America, these Indians would look no different from their fairer skinned countrymen. In India, they are forever marked, their matrimonial prospects compromised, their lives dedicated to compensating for this handicap. For decades, my father has sold a fairness cream called *Fair & Lovely*, manufactured by Hindustan Lever. A nine gramme tube currently sells for five rupees and my brother tells me sales are brisk, though he knows of no one who has reported a lighter skin after thirty years of application.

In my town, mothers often console dark children by pointing out that our two mythical heroes – Raam and Krishna – are both dark. Indeed, Krishna was the victim of Big Brother racism long before Shilpa. Writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the poet Surdas lovingly described how Balram, Krishna's elder brother, poked fun at his dark skin.

*Gorey Nand Jasoda gorii tuu kas syaamal gaat*

[Our parents] Nand and Jasoda are both fair-skinned, why are you dark?

But this offers little consolation to the hopelessly dark Indian. Krishna's skin is not the muddy brown of India but an arresting blue-grey that testifies to his status as Vishnu incarnate. And we may assume that Vishnu, Preserver of the Universe, is blue-grey by choice, which makes Balram's racism quite endearing. In any case, Krishna's darkness is forgotten as soon as it is mentioned – in television shows, Krishna and Raam are always played by fair-skinned actors with a touch of brown added in an attempt at authenticity, but never applied so thick as to offend Indian eyes.

Now, amongst the chocolate-coloured people of India, there are born a few with relatively light skin and Caucasian looks - at least in Indian eyes – because of our complex mix of races. These humans we make into film stars, and we *demand* racism from them. So the fair-skinned in India are thrust into a Jade Goody role - sometimes against their will, and sometimes only too willingly. When she stands beside her “Paki” Shilpa and engages in self-flagellation before the people of Patna, Jade might sense what is obvious to every Indian - that Shilpa is a beneficiary of racism, not its victim.

By now, Jade will be completely confused. If Shilpa is really a white woman, why did the people of Patna protest against her treatment on a television show in far away London? Ah, but there is national pride. How does it hurt Indian national pride when one white woman insults another, Jade might ask? Now our answers become vague. Indian national pride is a prickly animal. It is wounded by events much further removed than a London television show, such as George Bush's decision to name his cat India (“Mr Bush, India is lion, not cat”). Aside from national pride, there is a very good reason for the people of Patna to be offended. They are devastated when Indian whites are not given the treatment

their racial superiority deserves. The distance between Shilpa and her Indian subjects is invariant. If Shilpa moves down the ladder, they must descend a corresponding amount. So, by putting down Shilpa, Jade has sent the residents of Patna into the gutter. They must defend their white woman to stay above ground.

Once wounded, Indian pride is exceedingly noisy. Effigies are burnt, slogans shouted, window-panes broken and shops set ablaze. Our newspapers have expressed appropriate outrage. Anand Sharma, Minister of State for External Affairs, told journalists in New Delhi that “the government will take appropriate measures once it gets to know the full details.” For one full day, I was nervous that the government would confiscate my brother’s stock of *Fair & Lovely* cream, but the Indian government never acts until the full details are available, so my family business remains secure.

Fortunately, the people of Britain cannot perceive the shades of Indian skin, and think of Shilpa merely as an “Indian” subjected to British racism. They, too, have expressed appropriate outrage. We now know that Tony Blair opposes racism “in all its forms”. Gordon Brown told SKY TV that he regarded a vote for Shilpa as a positive way of showing that Britain was “a nation of tolerance and fairness.” Five million voted in the tolerance election on Big Brother, and the tally was 82 percent in Shilpa’s favour. To everyone’s relief, it turns out that only 18 percent of Britons are racists. Tolerable.

Jade will not read this essay, and therefore return from India no wiser. She will grovel before her brown audience - never suspecting that they are equally brown to Shilpa - and be rehabilitated in Indian eyes. Shilpa’s future is brighter and simpler. Even if she decides to turn down the offers that must now pour into her mailbox, she can return to the Indian screen, where she will dance with other alabaster women and be wooed by Caucasian-looking men. Her brown audience will gawk at her and thank providence that there exist entire nations whose residents are darker than the darkest Indian. That, by the way, is another nugget with which mothers in my town console dark children.