

A commentary on “Being Darker Makes Being a Migrant Much Harder”

This article (2019) written by Melissa Tandiwe Myambo discusses xenophobia experienced by migrants in South Africa and India, in particular racial discrimination based on skin tone, a concept often referred to as colourism. Colourism can be defined as discrimination against individuals with a dark complexion, and often occurs between members of the same racial or ethnic group. Whilst Myambo mainly discusses research on migration to South Africa and India, it highlights the important issue of discrimination and prejudice experienced within the same racial group, and prevailing perceptions that lighter skin equates to status and wealth. Myambo highlights key factors beyond skin colour that contribute to the prevalence of racial prejudice, such as socioeconomic status and country of origin. She presents a comparison of how light skinned and dark skinned migrants' experiences differ, which offers qualitative insight into how issues of race and skin tone affect real lives.

In the western world, race is an evocative topic of discussion, however such discussions tend to focus on sociocultural interactions between white and non white people. It categorizes race into two boxes which results in othering individuals who aren't white, and it ignores that othering occurs within various racial groups. The complexities of racial prejudice and the power imbalance that exists between light and dark skinned individuals is rarely discussed or addressed, meaning that the views and beliefs that perpetuate the prejudice are rarely challenged.

Skin whitening products are commonly used in African and Asian countries. One report (World Health Organization, 2011) found that 77% of women in Nigeria reported using skin whitening products on a regular basis, as did nearly 40% of women in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea. In India, skin whitening products account for 61% of the dermatological market. The report also found that a number of skin whitening products were found to contain mercury, an ingredient which is hazardous to health. Although products containing mercury have been banned in many countries, they continue to be available online. This demonstrates how widely valued lighter skin is in Asian and African countries, even to the detriment of one's health. Myambo suggests this is because light skin signifies power and prestige.

Rahman (2020) suggests that much like modern racism, colourism has roots within slavery and colonialism. Colourism was present throughout the history of slavery, manifesting in ways such as domestic tasks being assigned to lighter skinned slaves and more arduous work to those with darker skin. However, he also acknowledges the prevalence of colourism in East Asian countries such as Thailand, Japan, Korea, and China, which never faced European colonization. Whilst colonization and slavery were undoubtedly instigators in enforcing racist and colourist views and beliefs, it brings into debate the true roots of such views. Understanding the real roots and causes that drive prejudice and inequality is necessary in combating the issues.

Myambo also notes that skin colour isn't the sole factor which dictates one's experiences of racial discrimination and xenophobia; she proposes that a migrant's

country of origin is a significant factor in influencing how they're perceived by locals, and found that African Americans, Black British, and Afro-German migrants experienced less xenophobia or racism than migrants from Asia or Africa. This highlights the variable dependant nature of prejudice and discrimination.

Disciplines such as cultural studies and anthropology can serve to highlight and bring awareness to issues such as colourism, racism, classism, and overall socioeconomic inequality. The perpetuation of racial discrimination and colourism is fed by generalizations and stereotypes, something which anthropologists work to deconstruct (Filzmoser, 2012). Deconstructing the views, values, and beliefs that perpetuate inequality is a crucial step in addressing social injustice. It is necessary to bring attention to the complexities of racial issues and the multiple variables that dictate a person of colour's experience in the world, as Myambo does in this article, in order to highlight the issues and amplify the voices of the unheard.

References

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Aria Anderson

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