

Manisha Singh / MY WAR AGAINST RACISM

Once I longed to be white. I couldn't wait to fall asleep. Maybe this was a caterpillar state and tomorrow I'd emerge a butterfly. Maybe one day the good fairy would come and purify me — a dream that never came true.

I was manure then. The other children called me manure. I was the color of manure. I smelled like manure, or curry — same difference. Every time India was mentioned in class, every time I heard an imitation of the accent, I turned browner. I couldn't even turn red. All the children teased me. They flushed my gym bag down the toilet. They flushed my spirit away.

I was dark; the beautiful people were fair. They had colors: blond, blue, green. I was only muddy brown, devoid of light, of spirit, of love. My vision darkened. I hated looking at myself.

My heroes were Charlie's Angels. I worshipped them more than any white girl could have. Blond hair meandered seductively through my dreams. Blue eyes were the pools where I tried to scrub myself clean. I prayed to be white like them. Why were there no beautiful Indian women on T.V.? No beauties with thick lips, plaited hair and tea-stained skin — nobody to look like me.

I began to clothe myself in imaginary white skin. My appetite was insatiable. I straightened my hair, hungered for the styles. I turned against my parents' food, hungry for white nourishment. I was consumed by hatred for everything Indian. I remember my mother's tears when I told her I wished for a white mother. I told her this as she combed the knots out of my thick, rough, black hair. Her hands trembled only slightly.

When a white man liked me I was thrilled. When men my color liked me, I hid from them. I was afraid of the dark. It angered me when my white sisters (my friends), tried to match me up with my kind. My kind smelled. They were unattractive. My kind were manure. I was "white" then.

It wasn't until I graduated when one of my friends held me in a cold embrace and whispered, "I never even notice that you are

different. You are white just like the rest of us.”

I cried, because I couldn't see myself in the mirror anymore. I was invisible. No one could hear me, because I couldn't speak. I hadn't spoken for years. I was silent. Silence is starvation. Silence is suicide. I resurrected myself that day ... my Indian self. I still bear the scars, but I survived because my mother cradled the silence, nurtured me when I wasn't looking.

Today I see. I have a vision and a voice.