

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Nathan Porath

L. Ayu Saraswati. *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 7, No. 3, December 2018, pp. 502-505.

How to Cite:

Porath, Nathan. Review of *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia* by L. Ayu Saraswati. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, December 2018, pp. 502-505.

Link to this book review:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2018/12/vol-7-no-3-book-reviews-nathan-porath/>

View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2018/12/vol-7-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

Subscriptions: <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

on Southeast Asia. The authors' general advice is to leave ASEAN members alone to work out their own internal political problems, as interference is simply too un-ASEAN. One exception to this general rule is Cambodia, where the authors come close to suggesting the Association might expel Cambodia for its sacrifice of ASEAN unity to please China (p. 143), a surprisingly un-ASEAN threat.

In a book full of ironies, Mahbubani and Sng point to ASEAN's sense of community and identity as its first major strength. After all, this sense of community is limited to a lack of outright declarations of war between member nations, and the communal identity depends to a large extent on ASEAN leaders' shared enjoyment of golf. However, evidence shows that communal identity among its member populations is growing. With upgrades to educational curricula and popular youth-oriented media programs, most schoolchildren today can name the ASEAN member nations. Recent rapid increases in discount flights and visa-less travel within ASEAN have also increased interaction and familiarity.

The adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 has strongly increased the power of ASEAN institutions, and seeing these institutions at work will help citizens develop a greater sense of ownership of ASEAN (p. 182). However, ASEAN has a notoriously weak and underfunded secretariat, and the authors make a call for change and improvements in this area.

Overall, this reviewer believes that education about ASEAN and the ASEAN identity are stronger than the evidence provided by the authors from 2007 and 2013. Though they are correct that these are still limited today, increasing knowledge among the ordinary citizens will ensure that ASEAN will most likely be around and stronger than ever by its centenary in 2067.

Jim Placzek

*Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University
Center for Southeast Asian Research, Institute of Asian Research,
University of British Columbia*

Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia

L. AYU SARASWATI

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.

In some Southeast Asian countries, there is a trend that promotes an aesthetic appreciation for lighter or whiter skin tones. This ideology of "colorism" is the theme of Saraswati's stimulating and sophisticated monograph, which explores how the white-skinned beauty ideal has been articulated and negotiated in Indonesia from pre-colonial times till present. The author frames her analysis within a historical transnational model of the Indonesian archipelago. She reveals how the

archipelago drew and developed these notions from various sources of influence, first from India, then the Dutch Empire, followed by the Japanese occupation, the post-colonial nationalism and finally present-day cosmopolitanism. Her analysis of Indonesian whiteness ideology is also anchored in theories of affect and feminist cultural studies of emotion. In this innovative combination, Saraswati rather successfully brings to the foreground the manner in which “power” has subtly entered the domain of Indonesian women’s emotions through the constructed white-skin beauty aesthetic affecting their gendered sense of self.

Starting her presentation with an analysis of metaphors of beauty ideals in the Javanese text of the *Ramayana* (a transnational text originally composed in India and later adopted in a number of Southeast Asian societies), Saraswati shows that the white-skin aesthetic in Indonesia pre-dates the colonial racialized whiteness. She tries to, as she puts it, “gauge the colorism at work” in the text by analyzing the metaphorical color references for beauty. In this earlier Javanese period, the poetic reference to beautiful women were terms that suggested lightness, brightness and whiteness. These terms were also associated with cleanliness and purity. By contrast, negative and even frightening characters and situations were portrayed by metaphors of darkness and blackness. Saraswati argues that these hierarchic value-laden metaphors would have generated positive or negative feelings or sensations (*rasa*) in people as they listened to the tale which influenced emotional responses to people of different skin colors. For example, such metaphors would have inspired the feeling (*rasa*) of love towards the lighter-skinned subject and fear towards the darker-skinned subject.

According to Saraswati, when the colonials came to the archipelago (which she always calls Indonesia), and brought their own notions of whiteness with them, they arrived at a place where pale skin was already discursively valued and considered to be the beauty ideal. Her evidence for this comes from what she extrapolates from her analysis of the *Ramayana*. But Saraswati might also be reading too deeply about skin color in the poetics of the *Ramayana*. Although the *Ramayana* metaphors she discusses made references to white skin color during the pre-colonial period, it is possible that metaphors of brightness and radiance, and expressions like having a face radiating like “the whiteness of the moon” could also have referred to other qualities associated with whiteness but not necessarily referring to “white skin color.” It could be the case that in the pre-colonial period “whiteness” worked within a semiosis that made it a metaphor for some other positive quality. This quality could have described people regardless of skin tone, as possessing a countenance similar to the “shining whiteness of the moon.” At one point when she briefly narrates the story of the *Ramayana*, she mentions Hanuman the white monkey. She then adds in parenthesis that he embodies the color of white, further exposing the color symbolism in the *Ramayana*. However, Hanuman’s skin is white because he is an albino monkey with power; he is a magical oddity in the forest who comes to the aid of Rama. In *Seeing Beauty*, Saraswati does not discuss the role of albino whiteness in this semiosis of white skin tones—in her study of whiteness,

she should also have explored the fact that Indonesians with albino appearance can somewhat resemble blonde Europeans and that people of the archipelago called (and still do call) Western people by the same name for albino (*bule*).

Later on in the book, Saraswati makes a very important remark in her discussion of modern cosmopolitanism. She states that whiteness is not a color but a non-color or a “virtual color”; hence, people of different skin tones could in any context be virtually white. Saraswati utilizes this idea for her discussion of cosmopolitan whiteness, but she could have developed it in her analysis of the *Ramayana* metaphors as the events of this epic tale are also set in a seemingly “virtual” realm. What she writes for the post-modern period may be equally applicable to the pre-colonial period.

From the pre-colonial Javanese period, the author fast-forwards to the Dutch colonial period of 1900–1942. The gap of a few hundred years is unfortunate as we are then left in the dark about the earlier period of Dutch and European presence. The earlier period of European presence would have brought non-racialized notions of white skin color to the archipelago, and although the information might be scanty it still could have been deciphered from the accounts of the early European visitors (particularly elites) of the people they encountered. Unfortunately, Saraswati’s cultural studies approach does not stretch that far, and in her account the historical gap is felt.

During the period of Dutch colonialism that Saraswati does focus on, Europeans were already conflating the notion of white skin color with the concept of “race” and racial superiority. Asian whiteness was reclassified as yellow and was not allowed into the white-skin-tone category. For her evidence, she analyzes a number of popular magazines that were circulating in the Indies at the time. In these magazines, the images of Caucasian women were presented as symbolizing the epitome of human beauty. Caucasian women were also presented as embodying civilized refinement through the appearance of emotional restraint.

The European racialized concept of whiteness was challenged during the short period of Japanese occupation. The Japanese defined themselves as also being people of white skin color. In turn, they created the space for an Asian whiteness. But as Saraswati points out, this shift from whiteness as race to whiteness as a skin tone only rarefied whiteness as a beauty ideal that now could be equally shared between nations. Hence, in modern Indonesia (as elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia), “white” means light or pale skin and has no racial connotation. It instead works within a hierarchy of skin colorism which can be understood through Indonesian interpretations of human skin whiteness.

Saraswati argues that over the years there has been a shift in national notions of whiteness to what she calls “cosmopolitan whiteness” in Indonesia’s beauty ideals—a term she borrowed from the women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan*. From her analyses of 18 issues of the Indonesian edition of the magazine, she argues that cosmopolitan whiteness is about appearing white rather than being white-skinned. Within the cosmopolitan space, anybody can be white regardless of skin color if

they subscribe to a certain modern lifestyle and attitude. Further, whitening creams can make people appear white or what she calls “virtually white.” The author’s point is that “whiteness” mutates and coopts new forms of “whiteness” to maintain its supremacy, and one implicit aim of her argument is to reveal how this beauty aesthetic works as a symbol of power with negative affect.

To help her with her theoretical analysis, Saraswati introduces some novel terms. “Emotion-landscape” refers to globally circulating affective scripts, narrative, images, people, and ideas that crystalize locally for people into a landscape of dominant feelings about certain places and things. Another term she introduces is “gendered management affect” to refer to how people manage their feelings along gendered lines. To show how “whiteness” as a transnationally circulating beauty ideology overpowers the psyche of women in Indonesia, the author provides data from interviews with 46 Indonesian women who committed themselves to skin-whitening regimes. From these interviews, she noticed that all these women spoke about themselves in terms of being ashamed (*malu*) of their darker skin tone. Shame forces women to conform to the beauty ideology that is affecting their own self-image, she claims, and instead of challenging the power structure of transnational white colorism, women displace their negative feelings of shame onto their own skin. In that sense, women undergo skin-whitening procedures as a way to manage their *malu* feelings.

Finally, Saraswati does point out that not all Asian white skin colors are appreciated in Indonesia. Whereas there is an aesthetic preference for Japanese whiteness, Chinese whiteness is rejected. It is unfortunate, though, that the author does not tell readers more about Indonesian women’s rejection of Chinese whiteness. Neither does the author mention anything about how Indonesian Chinese women are affected by the rejection of their whiteness in the national skin color ideology of whiteness. What is also not discussed is the confidence that women with lighter and whiter skin complexion receive from the same beauty ideology and how they transnationally identify or not with white-skin-toned Asians from other countries. One final and unfortunate drawback of *Seeing Beauty* is the absence of any illustrations of the advertisements the author analyzes.

Over all, notwithstanding some of these critical points, Saraswati’s monograph of whiteness is clearly written and a pleasure to read. It should inspire more comparative research on the color ideology existent in other countries of the region.

Nathan Porath

Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Chiang Mai University