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Book Review

Saraswati, L. Ayu. (2017). *Putih: Warna Kulit, Ras, dan Kecantikan di Indonesia Transnasional* [White: Skin Color, Race, and Beauty in Transnational Indonesia]. Marjin Kiri. 254 pp.

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Abstract
White skin is still the highest ideal in Indonesian standards of beauty. How this standard was built and why society keeps holding on to it are the questions examined in *Putih: Warna Kulit, Ras, dan Kecantikan di Indonesia Transnasional* (Saraswati, 2017). This review finds the book highly insightful. Its analysis is clear and well structured, linking historical, cultural, and transnational influences on beauty standards, and it shows convincingly how whiteness has been reproduced across different periods. Since the book first appeared, however, new developments have emerged that it does not discuss. The most important is the role of social media in shaping perceptions and keeping whiteness alive as a beauty value among young people, even as popular culture promotes self-acceptance. Another is the long-term psychological and physical toll of treating white skin as the standard of beauty. Both are areas that call for further research.

Keywords*: beauty standard; white skin; affect; power relations; Indonesia*

Abstrak
Kulit putih masih menjadi standar kecantikan ideal bagi masyarakat Indonesia. Bagaimana standar itu dibentuk dan mengapa masyarakat terus memegangnya adalah pertanyaan yang dikaji secara kritis dalam buku *Putih: Warna Kulit, Ras, dan Kecantikan di Indonesia Transnasional* (Saraswati, 2017). Ulasan ini menilai buku tersebut sangat inspiratif. Analisisnya jernih dan tersusun rapi, menghubungkan pengaruh sejarah, budaya, dan transnasional dalam pembentukan standar kecantikan, serta menunjukkan secara meyakinkan bagaimana gagasan kulit putih direproduksi dari masa ke masa. Namun, karena karya aslinya terbit lebih dari satu dekade lalu, ada perkembangan baru yang belum dibahas. Yang terpenting adalah peran media sosial dalam membentuk persepsi dan melanggengkan kulit putih sebagai nilai kecantikan di kalangan generasi muda, di tengah gencarnya kampanye penerimaan diri dalam budaya populer. Hal lain adalah dampak psikologis dan fisik jangka panjang dari menjadikan kulit putih sebagai standar kecantikan. Keduanya membuka peluang bagi penelitian lanjutan.

Kata Kunci*: standar kecantikan; kulit putih; afek; relasi kuasa; Indonesia*

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Introduction

Whiteness as a beauty standard is still very much alive in Indonesia. Indonesians have a wide range of skin tones because of the country's many ethnic and racial groups, yet white skin remains a powerful ideal. Dewanti et al. (2025) show that the preference for white skin reflects how a society builds its sense of physical beauty and how this is tied to racism. Ifa et al. (2025) likewise argue that colourism underpins the definition of beauty, with lighter skin ranked above darker skin in what they call an aesthetic hierarchy. These recent studies show that whiteness as a beauty standard is still worth discussing today.

Beauty standards are about more than physical features. They are shaped by social forces and, as Ifa et al. (2025) find, they help produce social stratification. How a society defines beauty says something about its social system, self-identity, inequality, and power relations. Because class matters, beauty standards also differ from one society to another.

In Indonesia, beauty standards grew out of the social hierarchy of the Dutch colonial period from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Colonial society placed Europeans at the top, followed by the "foreign Orientals", mainly Chinese and Arabs, with the indigenous population at the bottom (Gouda, 1995/2008). Skin tone became one of the markers of this ladder, and indigenous people were labelled with the slur *inlander*. Lighter skin came to signal higher status and a more desirable appearance. This link between social rank and beauty has carried over into the present, helped along by media and advertising that present fair skin as attractive, modern, and a sign of status (Sazudda et al., 2024). The country's history has thus deeply shaped how beauty standards are reproduced.

Whiteness as a reflection of social structure also affects how individuals see themselves. Ideals of beauty are cultural markers shaped by social structure, and young people often absorb them and judge themselves accordingly. Sazudda et al. (2024) found that Indonesian women measure their self-worth against white beauty standards, which pushes them to use whitening products and other beauty regimens. Skin tone can therefore lead to low self-esteem, feelings of imperfection, and even depression.

When one group is seen as more valuable and given more opportunities than others, social inequality follows. Favouring white skin over darker skin feeds colourism, a form of discrimination based on skin tone. Because skin colour is tied to social rank, it can also come to signal competence and attractiveness, and people with darker skin may face discrimination and stereotyping at work and in social life (Cynthia, 2023). Historical racial hierarchies and the modern beauty industry together sustain a system in which lighter skin is rewarded and darker skin is devalued (Pakpahan & Fajriyah, 2025; Sazudda et al., 2024). Inequality based on skin tone is thus deeply rooted in racism.

Power is visible in who gets to define beauty and who profits from it. The dominant cultural group usually sets the standard, and the beauty industry profits by playing on people's insecurities about how they look. Saraswati (2021) argues that the beauty industry promotes light-skinned women and presents "appearing white" as an ideal that goes beyond race, a notion she calls cosmopolitan whiteness. Pakpahan and Fajriyah (2025), in their critical study of white-skin ideology, likewise see the promotion of whitening products and fair-skinned models as part of a wider system of power that marginalises darker-skinned women and shapes their social value. Whiteness, then, is not just a personal preference; it reflects the power relations of society.

Studies by Dewanti et al. (2025), Garbett et al. (2023), Ifa et al. (2025), and Saraswati (2021) all confirm that beauty and white skin remain closely linked in Indonesian society. This persistence led us to revisit *Putih: Warna Kulit, Ras, dan Kecantikan di Indonesia Transnasional*. The book is the Indonesian translation, published by Marjin Kiri, of *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia*, first published by the University of Hawai'i Press in 2013. It argues that the strong preference for white skin is a social construction with deep roots in Indonesian history, culture, and transnational exchange, and it offers a solid basis for understanding how beauty standards are built, maintained, and reproduced. The original edition won the Gloria E. Anzaldúa Book Prize in 2013 and is widely recognised in women's,

gender, and sexuality studies. It has since become a standard reading on one aspect of Indonesian society: the aesthetic norms of the body and how they are tied to the ways Indonesians have defined themselves over time. Revisiting the book helps confirm its importance and lays a foundation for future studies in light of new technologies and socio-political change. The review closes by suggesting topics for further research.

Discussion

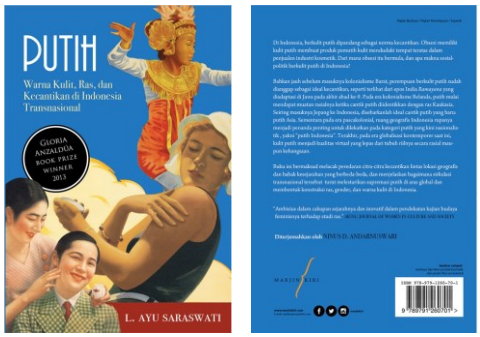


Figure 1. Front and back covers of the reviewed book (Marjin Kiri edition).

The book has six chapters on the relationship between race, skin colour, gender, and beauty in Indonesia. Taken together, they trace how whiteness came to be equated with beauty from pre-colonial times, through the colonial period, and into today's transnational society, showing how beauty standards are formed and reproduced in different historical and social settings. Chapter 1 looks at early cultural narratives such as the *Ramayana*, which link fair skin to beauty and purity (pp. 24–54). Chapter 2 examines how the meaning of whiteness shifted under Dutch and then Japanese rule (pp. 58–96). Chapter 3 discusses the construction of white beauty in the early independence period (1945–1965) and under the New Order (pp. 100–134). Chapter 4 explores how transnational media and advertising produced the idea of "cosmopolitan whiteness" (pp. 137–173). Chapter 5 focuses on women's experiences of shame about their skin colour and on skin-whitening practices (pp. 178–211). Chapter 6 reflects on emotion and rethinks race, gender, and skin colour in a transnational context (pp. 215–220).

The book's main strengths are its structure, the depth of its research, its careful historical exploration, and its poetic language. Saraswati moves smoothly between historical, cultural, and social perspectives to show that the preference for white skin has a long history and still shapes society today. From the Old Javanese *Ramayana* to cosmopolitan Indonesian women in 2006–2008, she takes the reader on a journey through the beauty of Indonesian women and the making of their identity. Her arguments are laid out methodically, so readers can easily follow how the idea of whiteness developed over time.

Saraswati treats whiteness as more than what the eyes can see. In her study, "white" is also a feeling. It involves more of the senses and carries more complex meanings: whiteness makes a person feel satisfied with being beautiful and also raises her standing in society. Unlike in the West, where "white" is a racial category, in Indonesia whiteness is linked to social class and modernity (p. 11), so not every kind of whiteness is acceptable; there are different categories of whiteness. Saraswati argues that associating whiteness with femininity is itself a sign of power relations. White skin makes a woman more beautiful and desirable. It makes her visible and is the first step toward recognition in social or political life. This wider reading of whiteness, as a way of seeing the world, social hierarchy, and power, is the heart of the book.

To analyse the relationship between whiteness, beauty, and class, Saraswati uses the lens of "affect". Affect refers to bodily changes that follow an appraisal (p. 2), as when a person is physically moved by what she sees and feels fear, shame, wonder, and so on. Saraswati argues that affect expresses human emotion and strengthens the construction of beauty. When beauty standards are shaped by transnational ideas, notions of skin colour, racial categories, and gender, the way these circulate reveals relations of power. Affect circulates through these relations, and emotion helps protect them by making them seem normal. Making a woman feel ashamed for not being white enough, for example, keeps those power relations in place. By showing how beauty standards are felt and worked out as deeply personal emotions, Saraswati shows that women are not passive recipients of beauty norms. They take action, for instance by whitening their skin, because they feel inadequate, embarrassed, or judged. Beauty standards thus work as a form of emotional governance that shapes how women see

themselves and manage their bodies, and whiteness as a beauty standard also serves as a form of social control over women. Saraswati handles affect with great skill, tying ideas of beauty to social rank.

To show that ideas of beauty have long been linked to social norms, Saraswati turns to the *Ramayana*. In pre-colonial Java, the epic served as a source of moral teaching, identity, and artistic inspiration. It shaped cultural education through performing arts such as dance and puppetry and through painting and sculpture, so the norms and standards it carried directly influenced collective identity. Saraswati shows that the *Ramayana* gives symbolic meaning to skin colour. Fair skin stands for purity and beauty, described through images such as pandan pollen used to make skin perfectly white, while dark skin is associated with punishment or moral failure. These contrasting meanings, she argues, show how closely beauty, morality, and skin colour are bound together in cultural narratives. Her analysis is rich in detail and shows clearly how these symbols work. The strength of this chapter lies in her close reading of particular images and metaphors that support her main argument about the long association between white skin and beauty in the cultural imagination.

Transnationalism is another particular strength of the study. Beauty standards are not purely local; they also respond to developments in the wider world. Saraswati uses the international magazine *Cosmopolitan*, aimed at career-oriented, upper-middle-class women, to examine ideas of beauty in modern Indonesia. Her starting point is the way the magazine presents different skin tones to its readers in Indonesia and in the United States (p. 139). She shows that while the colour white stayed the same, its meaning changed. The desire for white skin became "cosmopolitan whiteness", which is more personal and imaginative, is not tied to any particular race or ethnicity, and represents the transnational mobility of modern working women. Because whiteness is still part of the beauty standard, the pursuit of white skin, understood as a route to modernity and opportunity, continues. Interviews with 49 participants show that shame about skin colour drives modern women to look for modern ways of meeting the standard, and that they see white beauty as a way to move up the social ladder. Media and the beauty industry keep this imagined standard alive. Transnationalism, in other words, has not weakened the importance of whiteness as a beauty standard.

The book also has some limitations. Its subject is compelling, but its dense academic language may limit its readers to those used to academic writing. At a time when the beauty industry keeps growing and the market keeps changing (McKinsey & Company, 2025), the book could serve as an important reminder of what lies behind ideas of beauty and of how they relate to gender bias and power, if only it reached a wider audience. In this sense, the book also points to the importance of science communication in an age of short attention spans.

A more significant gap appears when the book is read from today's vantage point: it says nothing about the role of social media in shaping and changing beauty standards. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram do not just reproduce beauty ideals; they intensify them, and colourism often turns into digital harassment. Research on Gen Z users in Indonesia shows that beauty-focused content on TikTok continues to reinforce conventional gender norms (Sair et al., 2025). Social media users, for example, use the term "maghrib" (dusk) to mock darker skin, which shows how everyday language can normalise discrimination in new and harsher ways. The book discusses language in colonial and modern Indonesia, but it does not consider how digital and popular culture keep reproducing these forms of exclusion and racism and turning them into everyday business.

The rise of K-beauty in Indonesia, driven by the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), is another transnational influence that was not yet prominent when the book was written. Indonesian teenagers have embraced Korean popular culture as a way of life and a source of identity (Fella & Sair, 2021). K-beauty promotes a "porcelain skin" ideal, another version of whiteness, which looks attainable but remains out of reach for most because of natural differences in skin. Research suggests that this trend has increased the use of whitening products among young people (Nagara & Nurhajati, 2022), which indicates that whiteness is being reproduced through new cultural channels aimed at a younger audience. At the same time, self-love and self-acceptance campaigns on social

media are equally strong (Cahyati et al., 2024). How, then, do young people shape their sense of self, beauty, and acceptance amid a flood of messages, on social media and in schools, about beauty, self-respect, social expectations, the demands of modern life, and the value of being different?

Finally, although the book's analysis of the emotional and cultural sides of whiteness is excellent, it says little about the long-term psychological and physical effects of these standards. Saraswati does note that women in every period have put their health at risk through dangerous beauty practices involving non-medical or harmful substances, and the dangers of chemical whitening are well documented. Illegal whitening products containing mercury and hydroquinone have caused serious skin damage, including inflammation, discolouration, and long-term health problems (BBC News, 2025). Mercury in cosmetics can also damage the kidneys and the nervous system (Triasih, 2025). Psychologically, the pressure to meet white-skin ideals often leads to body dysmorphia, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Lamba, 2025). Yet the beauty industry keeps growing by exploiting insecurity and the fear of social exclusion (Nagara & Nurhajati, 2022), and women continue to take risky routes to beauty in order to conform. The long-term emotional costs of conforming to beauty standards, weighed against the emotional rewards and physical risks of being seen as beautiful, are not examined in the book and remain a gap for future research.

Conclusion

Putih: Warna Kulit, Ras, dan Kecantikan di Indonesia Transnasional is a strong and comprehensive historical and cultural analysis of beauty standards in Indonesia. It shows convincingly how whiteness was constructed and maintained as the dominant ideal of beauty across different periods and social settings, and it remains a solid foundation for the study of beauty, race, and social inequality in Indonesia.

The book is essential reading for students, researchers, and academics interested in social and cultural issues, especially race, gender, and beauty standards. It offers valuable insight into why these standards persist and how they shape society.

The book also opens the way for research on how beauty standards are formed in the digital era. Young people today are increasingly aware of beauty norms, and contemporary society is shaped by globalisation, by new technologies including those of the lifestyle industries, by new global norms such as self-love, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and fourth-wave feminism, and by a global capitalism marked by heavy consumption and the need for outside approval. Further research is needed to understand why whiteness endures as a beauty standard even as popular culture promotes self-awareness and self-acceptance. Will whiteness lose its importance, or will it take on a new form driven by the beauty and lifestyle industries? Will young people's awareness of beauty standards raise concern about the sexualisation and objectification of children and, in the longer run, about gendered power relations? These questions deserve close study.

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