

'In Persia I was called "The Blonde"' : An Attempt to Analyse how a Jewess Practices Whiteness

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'In Persia I was called "The Blonde"'.

The words are Rachel's. She is a grey-haired and blue-eyed Jewess in her eighties, a widow with five children and eleven grandchildren living in Stockholm. Rachel was born in Austria, fled the Nazis to England and Palestine, lived for some time in Iraq and Iran (Persia), and came to Sweden in the 1950s.

In this article I want to contextualize Rachel's words. I argue that these words, and other comments made by her about appearances are ways of practicing whiteness. Furthermore, inspired by the Skeggs seminars, I would like to problematize and discuss the notion of whiteness as a theoretical tool, and its implications in the study of identity-making amongst Jews in Sweden. I conclude that, although the concept of whiteness is illustrative of how racism is inscribed in daily practices in the seemingly non-racist Swedish society, it lacks methodological precision and also tends to simplify the complex practices of passing as white.

Since the end of the 1700s Jews have lived in Sweden without the government demands of converting to Christianity, and today approximately 20,000 people in the country call themselves Jews. In the middle of the 1990s the Government ordered all public institutions to consider that Sweden had become a multicultural society. Prior to this date, and despite the fact that the country is home to minorities with a long history, Sweden has always claimed to be homogeneous (Svanberg and Tydén 1992). Consequently, during the 1990s the Swedish national minorities were rediscovered and 'etnified' (Klein 2002: 47).

Despite this new and growing interest in the Swedish Jews, their heritage is not immediately recognizable. Most Jews appear highly integrated into Swedish society and a vital part of the cultural and academic landscape. This seemingly harmonious picture produces the notion that discrimination of Swedish Jews does not exist. At the same time it is blurred by growing anti-Semitism and the fact that many Jews feel discriminated (Nylund Skog 2006). That integration is the safest way to avoid discrimination is by no means sure, considering that the German Jews prior to Hitler probably were even more integrated than the Swedish Jews of today. The fact that the old images of 'The Jew' still circulate (Feiler and Sauter 2006) and that many of the Swedish Jews do not want to expose their Jewishness is telling, and further destroys the harmonious picture of a non-anti-Semitic Swedish society.

Jewish whiteness

Within the field of Critical Whiteness Studies (see, for example, Frankenberg 1999) it is claimed that whiteness is a norm that is taken for granted in racist societies. Whiteness is only partly about skin colour; it includes a range of other aspects and is to be understood as a changing historical construction. In this sense, whiteness does not correspond to an essence or a given set of characteristics. Instead it is understood as a position of power and a practiced relation.

It is important that in this perspective there is no direct natural and indisputable connection between identity and skin, eye and/or hair colour. Rather Critical Whiteness Studies and my analysis point to the contrary; such connections are constantly and arbitrarily established, disputed and denied in ongoing processes of identity-making.

The fact that most Swedish Jews can pass as ordinary white Swedes poses both an opportunity for investigation and a theoretical dilemma in relation to the field of Critical Whiteness

Studies. Are Swedish Jews to be considered as white, and if not, can they be analysed as practicing whiteness?

Sara Ahmed (2004) finds fault with Critical Whiteness Studies. She argues that Critical Whiteness Studies is a project of making whiteness visible that only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible (2004:§1). If one is studying whiteness as Whiteness there is always a risk, she writes, of essentializing whiteness, of making it yet another racialized other. 'Calling for whiteness to be seen', she continues, 'can exercise rather than challenge white privilege, as the power to transform one's vision into a property or attribute of something or somebody' (2004:§15). This means that the transformation of whiteness into a colour can work to conceal the power and privilege of Whiteness, and as such it can exercise that privilege (2004:§42).

American Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb writes that within the North American construct of racism she is Jewish and she is white, but she also claims that her whiteness is different from that of other white Americans. She is often tempted to deny whiteness all along since it makes her alert to the flaws and non-white aspects of her Jewishness, not least expressed in her Jewish appearance (Gottlieb 2005). The same seems to be the case with Rachel. She is considered by me and others to be white, while at the same time she herself is, I argue, practicing Whiteness in such a way that it is obvious that she is not sure of always being considered white or of always wanting to be white.

'Whiteness studies makes that which is invisible visible', Ahmed writes, 'though for non-whites the project has to be described differently, it would be about making what can already be seen, visibly in a different way', she concludes (2004:§2). Inspired by Sara Ahmed I will try to avoid reproducing the power of Whiteness and show that Rachel in telling her life story makes whiteness visible in a different way.

Rachel's life story

When considering Rachel's life story one finds that appearances are often mentioned and my interpretation is that they have a direct connection to shifting norms of whiteness. The first time that the connection is actualized is when Rachel tells about when Hitler in 1939 occupied Austria and made the country a part of the Nazi Empire. Rachel tells me that until that day she had been a happy and cheerful teenager. Almost straight after the Nazi takeover she was forbidden to skate, use a bicycle, sit on public benches, shop in certain shops and use the same spaces as those considered Aryans by the Nazis. It did not take long before Rachel's father was arrested.

Rachel said that after a period of constantly searching for him she and her mother found out that her father had been taken to Dachau concentration camp. With the help of a lawyer Rachel's mother did everything to get her father out of there, while Rachel explored the possibilities of leaving the country and found an opportunity in England. She told me that all the while her mother prepared a 'big bluff' with the help of the lawyer, pretending to convert back to Christianity, divorcing Rachel's father and taking over the family factory, sending photos of Rachel and her sister to Goebbels to prove that they did not look Jewish.

Rachel's mother had converted to Judaism when marrying her father. Now in sheer desperation she was prepared to convert back, and in the process save her children from the destiny of being Jewish. This could only be possible if someone in power (here Goebbels) agreed that Rachel and her sister did not look Jewish but Aryan, that they would pass as white. 'The bluff' never succeeded. The father returned miraculously from Dachau, and the family were temporarily scattered around the world until they were reunited in Palestine three years later.

Rachel tells me that it was in Palestine (later Israel), Iraq and Iran (former Persia), where Rachel later came to live, that she was considered 'The Blonde'. When first listening to the

interview with Rachel I presumed that ‘The Blonde’ had positive connotations. But when analysing the interview, and others I later made with her, I became aware of the ambivalence captured in the name ‘The Blonde’.

Rachel’s marriage

Rachel tells me that her marriage to David was against the will of his parents. Like David she was of Jewish heritage, but at the time she was a divorced European Jewess and mother of a daughter, while David was an Oriental Jew. Rachel tells me that the situation was impossible and that after their first meeting she returned to Israel and tried to forget about David. But they could not forget one another and got married in secret. Rachel said that it was not until she and David had their second child that Rachel first met David’s parents.

When I asked Rachel if David being Jewish was of any relevance to her marrying him, her answer was without hesitation: ‘What attracted me was that he came from a very religious Jewish family from Baghdad. Really it is them who are, one can say, Jewish aristocrats. They have never been mixed, from Mesopotamia. And they are much more Arabic than anything, their whole manner.’

I cannot help but wonder if Rachel’s bloneness had something to do with David’s family’s aversion to her. It is as if her bloneness manifested her European heritage. In considering this part of Rachel’s life story being ‘The Blonde’ does not seem to have been a privileged position.

In Rachel’s description of why she fell in love with David she explicitly makes a close connection between Jewishness and Arabness, a connection that collapses the dichotomy of black and white, where the Arabic in a Western perspective most often is seen as representing the dark. Seen in that perspective her statement is a powerful claim and an answer to Westernized notions of how to consider and handle what is claimed as dark.

In Palestine and Sweden

After the Second World War many of the surviving Jews came to live in The British Mandate Palestine, later Israel. Rachel was one of them. During the interviews she describes her first years in Palestine as almost the best years she can remember.

One Jewish woman writes about her surprise at all the blonde people in Palestine, when she arrived there in 1946 (Frey 2006: 69). In telling her life story she reflects upon the Nazi propaganda that depicted Jews as dark and dangerous. It seems, she writes, that not only Germans were indoctrinated by the propaganda; also she herself had obviously been affected by it since she could not imagine Jews as blonde and blue-eyed (ibid.).

Although Rachel did not talk about if it was problematic for her to be considered blonde in Palestine during her time there, blonde seems to have been a loaded term. And considering that Rachel had been exposed to the same propaganda as the woman cited above, it at least must have been an ambivalent position for her.

Other instances in the interviews when talk about appearances actualized norms of whiteness were when Rachel talked and worried a great deal about those of her grandchildren who she considered dark. She was concerned that their curly dark hair and dark skin colour would let them be mistaken for immigrants and/or Muslims and because of that they would be subjected to racism. Rachel also worried about growing anti-Semitism as a consequence of the growing Muslim population in Sweden. By that logic, Rachel's dark grandchildren are placed in an inevitable dilemma; on the one hand, their darkness makes them targets of racism, on the other hand, if claiming their identity as Jews, they will be exposed to the perceived threat of anti-Semitic Muslims. In Rachel's view there is really no way out if you are considered a dark Jew in Sweden in the beginning of the 21st century (cf. Goldstein 2006:224).

In Rachel's opinion Muslims represent a threat and a danger to Jews, and to the Western world, as she knows it. Her attitude

might be explained by the current situation in the Arab world and especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For Rachel it is important to tell me that she is not part of the conflict in the region. When she lived there it was peaceful and people were tolerant and accepting of each other.

Sara Ahmed argues against the logic that says that if whiteness is defined as unseen then if I see whiteness, then I am not white, as whites don't see their whiteness. And if I am not white I am not a racist (Ahmed 2004:§16; cf. Alcoff 2006). Although in Sweden Rachel is considered white, she herself is aware of and reflects upon the norm of whiteness. Maybe Rachel by reflecting upon her appearance claims herself as being non-white and therefore being an innocent and powerless non-racist, despite her critical attitude towards Muslims.

Conclusion

To conclude, although Rachel in her life story argues against a division between Arabs and Jews, she still establishes a similar one in her understanding of Muslims as being a threat. She also talks about the West and the Orient, immigrants and Swedes, Muslims and Jews, dichotomies that at first glance seem to fit the Westernized hierarchical dichotomy of black and white, but after some consideration do not fit at all, but rather, in her life story they are turned upside down and even at times destroyed.

Therefore, in my analysis appearances seem to be the term that connects empirical observations with structural conditions. It allows me to analyse practices of whiteness and offers an opportunity to explore the complexity involved in such practices. To simply regard the Swedish Jews as a natural part of the ruling class or as wanting to be white is a mistake. They might use strategies to portray themselves as ordinary Swedes, but in passing they are also acutely aware of the cost it entails and many of them work hard at keeping their Jewishness intact and alive (cf. Goldstein 2006:208).

It is often explained that it is only in relation to black that white becomes white, meaning that whiteness cannot see itself except through the reflection of what it sees itself as not (see, for example, Morrison 1993). No matter how true this claim is, it risks simplifying the complexity involved in naming, claiming and relating black, white, blonde, dark, light, grey, beige and all the other nuances important to Jews and others who need to be skilled in the art of passing (see, for example, Frankenberg 1999: 23).

Hence, in order to avoid the trap of the rigid dichotomy of black and white I claim that analysing how appearances are talked about and handled will lead to an understanding of how whiteness is practiced amongst Swedish Jews, and at the same time questioned and argued against.

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