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Dark Is Not Fair

Abstract

Overview: Colorism is when individuals with darker complexions are faced with prejudice and discrimination because of their skin. Colorism is an issue that affects dark skinned people all around the world and is commonly perpetrated by people of the same race. Dark-skinned Black girls face a disadvantage from birth due to their skin tone. They feel a heavy burden to be accepted and valued by others as they grow up in a society that thinks of them as inferior. Unfortunately, the darker you are the more inferior you get. Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, hauntingly captures this reality by embodying all of the physical characteristics that are seen as ugly or lesser by both White and Black people in a character named Pecola. By examining Pecola and the circumstances she is in, we can see that negative attitudes toward dark skinned Black females are ingrained in our society and that from young ages, dark-skinned Black girls share feelings of low self-worth brought on by things like the media, beauty standards, and traumatizing relationships which ultimately ruin mental health.

Author's reflection: My name is Rachael Chukwu and I am currently a sophomore and majoring in nursing and minoring in Spanish. My second semester of freshman year was when I took the ENGL 1299 research writing class called *Race in America* with professor Reagan. At first I did not know what I was going to write about but when we read *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison in class I knew immediately what I wanted to write about. I am very passionate about the topic of colorism as I've seen instances of it growing up and even experienced it a couple of times. Although I am also Black I know colorism affects darker skinned people at an even greater rate than people who are my complexion. I really wanted to unravel the mental and emotional distress that colorism causes. This is the first research paper I've written and it was an enlightening experience to think deeply about a topic and find so many different peer-reviewed journal articles and learn even more along the way. My writing skills have definitely improved from taking this class as well as my research skills. Professor Regan supported me and was a good mentor throughout my time in the class. ENGL 1299 made me realize that writing can be an interesting process when it is about something you resonate with.

Rachael Chukwu

ENGL1299-04

Regan

April, 2021

Dark Is Not Fair

Let us face it, you do not like dark skin and neither does the person next to you. If we (society) did, the problems dark skinned people face would not exist. These “problems” can be summed up in one word: Colorism. A term coined by author and activist Alice Walker, Colorism is “...unequal treatment and discrimination based on one’s skin tone” (Landor et al, 2019, p.1886), more specifically, darker skin tones. This is a global phenomenon that is more commonly seen in areas with histories of colonialism and slavery. In the United States, the institution of slavery gave birth to colorist practices and ideals. For example, those who had white ancestry were the first to be accepted into institutions of higher education over those who had two black parents, (Keith & Monroe, 2016). Also, biracial or “Mulatto slaves, who are commonly defined as people with one Black and one White parent, were preferred for house or skilled work, roles that sometimes afforded the opportunity to learn” (Keith & Monroe, 2016, p.6). Through the rape of Black women came a lighter, more “superior” race that is preferred over black women in society. Black girls face this disadvantage from birth and feel a heavy burden to be accepted and valued by others as they grow up in a society that thinks of them as inferior. Unfortunately, the darker you are the more inferior you get. Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, hauntingly captures this reality by embodying all of the physical characteristics that are seen as ugly or lesser by both White and Black people in a character named Pecola. By examining Pecola and the circumstances she is in, we can see that negative attitudes toward dark skinned Black females are ingrained in our society and that from young ages, dark-skinned Black

girls share feelings of low self-worth brought on by things like the media, beauty standards, and traumatizing relationships which ultimately ruin mental health.

Representation

Representation, especially in the media, is a factor that plays a role in the insecurities of Black girls. In the first section of *The Bluest Eye*, we find out that Pecola admires Shirley Temple when she and Freida talk about how cute Shirley is. When Pecola is at Frieda and Claudia's house, she drinks almost all of the milk they have out of a Shirley Temple cup garnering the attention of their mother who is exasperated at the three quarts of milk Pecola drinks. Even Claudia notes that she "...knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face." (Morrison, 2007, p. 23). Unlike Pecola, Claudia who is also the narrator, hates Shirley Temple and does not join in the admiration. She knows that she is younger than Pecola and Frieda and will eventually learn to worship Shirley Temple once she gets to "...the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her." (Morrison, 2007, p.19). Interestingly, Claudia knows that a time will come when she too will love Shirley Temple.

The fact that Claudia knows the admiration of white people is inevitable, shows that there is a turning point in the minds of young Black girls where they realize the Shirley Temples are the ones who are celebrated in this world and not them. The difference between Pecola and Claudia is that Pecola has reached the point in her life where she already realizes this fact and succumbs to the worship of Shirley while simultaneously wanting to be her. The reason this turning point occurs is because there is no representation of girls like Pecola in the media. Children are especially attentive and impressionable to what is advertised to them. Young Black girls with darker complexions need to see themselves through other dark skinned black girls and

women in the media to feel accepted and know that they have worth. Even Pecola's mother took delight in the admiration of White people. At the cinema, all she saw was "White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet." (Morrison, 2007, p.123). She also used a magazine featuring only white people as inspiration for a hairstyle to wear to the cinema. Media like magazines and movies influenced her and made her look at her family in a bad light. What she saw in the media is what she desired to be and what she desired her life to look like.

The lack of representation for Black girls with darker complexions in the fictional world of *The Bluest Eye* translates over to the real world as well. We can see colorism in action by looking at the entertainment industry today, where there is not nearly enough representation. For example, an artist by the name of Lioness said she quit music for years since people kept talking about her skin complexion and how she would get further if she was light-skinned. (Wilson, 2018,). Furthermore, Matthew Knowles, the father of the world-famous singer Beyonce says "...his daughter was more successful because of her skin tone and said virtually no black pop stars with darker skin had broken through in the past decade." (Wilson, 2018,). Celebrities like Beyonce, Rhianna, Zendaya, etc. are presented as the Black women who are worthy of being beautiful and popular (Moffit, 2020). What all of them have in common is their light skin complexion and there is no doubt that their skin color is a big factor that boosted their chances of being successful and allowed them to rise into stardom. The "worthy" Black women are promoted in rap music videos as well. The rap music genre is dominated by Black men and their music videos display who they prefer. The lighter women are there in the background to boost the men's feelings of status and desirability. In a content analysis of rap music videos, it was concluded "...that Black females in rap music videos are more likely than Black males to have

Eurocentric features” (Conrad et al, 2009, p.150) and a major part of these Eurocentric features are light skin. Moffit also mentions rap music videos saying, “Hip-hop culture also reifies ideas of colorism by parading groups of scantily clad, light(er)-complexioned women in their videos or even rapping about the desired aesthetic look of women” (Moffit, 2020, p. 74).

It is obvious there is a lack of representation for dark skinned Black girls as seen in Pecola’s world and in reality. The Pecolas in the real world are bombarded with magazines, books, movies, and social media, all of which lack a decent amount of inclusion of people like them. They are rarely on the cover of magazines, the main character, or even the romantic interests. Rather, they are on the small corner in the back of the magazine, the background character, or the supportive friend of the love interest only used as the token black girl for “diversity” sake to get points for being inclusive. Of course young black girls will admire the Shirley Temples, after all those are who society deems as worthy. The difference between Pecola’s world and the real world today, is that since dark skinned Black females have been granted a little representation in the media, the bad representation seems to overshadow the good. Not only does lack of representation drive Black girls to worship light skin or whiteness but bad representation drives them further from appreciating their own image. In “Controversial Rap Themes, Gender Portrayals and Skin Tone Distortion: A Content Analysis of Rap Music Videos”, Conrad says, “Negative associations with darker skin tone and Afrocentric features also occur frequently in media” (Conrad et al, 2009, p.137). With the rise of social media came the promotion of stereotypes. Black girls and women with dark skin are either stereotyped as loud and aggressive or branded with a hypersexualized image. Many dark-skinned women in the entertainment industry are expected to show off their bodies and be sexual to get attention. Rarely will a dark-skinned woman become popular just by simply singing about anything they

want like the popular singers Adele and Taylor Swift. They have never been expected to make sexual music and show off their bodies but they are still quite famous. The point is, dark skinned women always have to do more and be sexually appealing to get anywhere near the amount of attention as other pop stars who are white or light-skinned. These stereotypes have negative impacts on how people view dark- skinned women and how dark-skinned girls and women view themselves. It promotes self-hatred and pressure to either live up to societal expectations or adamantly denounce them to people who let stereotypes fuel their judgement of dark-skinned girls and women. Maybe if Pecola or the girls like Pecola had someone to look up to in the media that promoted a good image of dark-skinned girls, they would be less susceptible to low self-esteem and a bad self-image.

Beauty Standards

Young Black girls like Pecola do not think of themselves as beautiful because they do not align with the Eurocentric beauty standard of which the opposite is dark skin. In *The Bluest Eye*, Maureen Peal is the new rich light -skinned girl in class who insults Pecola, Freida, and Claudia by calling them "...ugly black e mos" (Morrison, 2007, p. 73). Pecola's reaction to this is that of helpless sorrow because "She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (Morrison, 2007, p. 73) as the misery welled up in her eyes. Afterwards, Claudia questions what makes Maureen beautiful and not her, discovering envy in the process; a new feeling more intense than jealousy. With this encounter, Claudia takes a step closer to being like Pecola because it is only a matter of time before the pressure to be what society deems as beautiful breaks her psyche down and all she feels is profound ugliness. This feeling drives Pecola to desire blue eyes. The more her feelings of self- worth diminish, the more determined Pecola is to acquire blue eyes because "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew

the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (Morrison, 2007, p.46). Pecola believes that blue eyes are all she needs to be close to whiteness and that if she had blue eyes, all her problems would go away. This is false because at the end of the day Pecola is still a dark -skinned Black girl so even if she did attain blue eyes, her skin complexion would still be an obstacle keeping her from being advantageous in society. It is clear to see that no one, not even Pecola’s own mother who called her ugly (Morrison, 2007, p.126), is there to tell Pecola that she is beautiful. Sadly, at a young age she is left all alone to deal with the mental repercussions of feeling ugly.

In the twenty-first century the desire for dark-skinned Black girls to be seen as beautiful is still here and Pecola is not the only one who feels pressure to conform to the beauty standard. In “Skin Complexion In The Twenty-First Century: The Impact Of Colorism On African American Women”, Matthews and Johnson conduct a study in which they uncover the notion of colorism that women ages 18 to 23 possess. Results say that “Dark skin was the most prevalent selection for the question people think ___ skin is unattractive (77%).” (Matthews & Johnson, 2015, p. 15). It is then no surprise that extreme measures like skin bleaching are more common amongst those with darker complexions despite the health risks since many people view dark skin as unattractive. According to the New York Times article “Fight Against Colorism Takes On Amazon: Beauty ‘Cannot Be One Skin Color’”, Amazon had a skin bleaching cream on their website that contained high levels of mercury (Garcia, 2019). Once someone’s insecurities take a hold of them, they will take any chance they get to fix it even at the expense of their health. It shows how desperate dark-skinned women are to have approval from others to know that they are beautiful because unfortunately, attractiveness or beauty is associated with things like professionalism, worth, and respect. In a study aimed to find out how undergraduates understand

race and sexuality, Tayler, a Black woman interviewed said that when growing up she thought she had to conform to the standards because "...White women on the covers of things with straight hair and growing up around White people, who had all these attributes that I don't have – I have darker skin and curly hair – that really made an impression on me..." (Silvestrini, 2010, p.316). Beauty standards influence colorist attitudes towards dark Black girls and women especially because lighter skin is viewed as angelic or pure which is associated with femininity, while dark skin is associated with masculinity.

Males play an important role in the beauty standards as well. In the Black community light skin is worshipped and Black males with internalized colorism issues can perpetuate their self-hatred onto girls with the same complexion as them. The Eurocentric beauty standards influence who men find attractive and therefore a status symbol, because light skin is associated with higher socioeconomic status like Maureen Peal. Maureen Peal's "...case also reveals the relatedness of skin tone and opportunity. Already as a young girl she understands the advantage of being able to imitate affluent White girls" (Lobodziec, 2010, p.38). An example of this is when the Black boys in Pecola's class form a circle around Pecola to taunt her by singing a song about the color of her skin and her father. Claudia narrates, "That they themselves were Black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth." (Morrison, 2007, p.65). Evidently, once Maureen comes along to see what is going on, the boys stop and it is like her phenotype grants her a magical authoritative presence. It is clear that the boys respected Maureen and a big dissimilarity between Pecola and Maureen was their skin complexion. Although a fictional event, it is not far off from depicting reality because young Black girls are conscious that a lot of Black males prefer lighter women (Matthews, 2015).

Trauma

Traumatic events for dark skinned Black girls are normalized and expected. In *The Bluest Eye*, the main relationship that fails Pecola is the one between Pecola and her two parents, Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove, because Pecola is unloved and neglected by both. Mrs. Breedlove is not a loving mother to Pecola. This is evident by the fact that Pecola is only allowed to call her mother “Mrs. Breedlove” and nothing else (Morrison, 2007, p.108). It is also evident Mrs. Breedlove is not a good mother when she beats Pecola in front of her employer’s white daughter for accidentally knocking over a pie. In the next minute or so, Mrs. Breedlove comforts the little White girl in a way Pecola never experienced before. Claudia says, “As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl” (Morrison, 2007, p.109). Claudia interestingly mentions the little girl’s complexion as ‘pink-and-yellow’. To see Mrs. Breedlove act like a proper mother to a girl who is not even her child must have emotionally wounded and traumatized Pecola. Mrs. Breedlove makes her believe only “pink-and-yellow” girls are important enough to be comforted and not girls that look like her. It is okay for the little White girl to cry because she has the privilege of being seen as innocent and will always be comforted when she is upset. Even though Pecola is the one being insulted by Mrs. Breedlove, she does not cry because she is not afforded the same privilege to be comforted by her mother. There are not many interactions between Pecola and her mother in the novel but the interactions that are shown are important in establishing what their relationship is like because it clearly shows an unhealthy one or at least one devoid of affection.

It is likely that dark-skinned girls will experience traumatizing things like bullying because of skin complexion and one of the most important factors in buffering the damage to a young black girls’ self-esteem is her mother. In the article “‘Light-skinned people always win’:

An Autoethnography of Colorism in a Mother–Daughter Relationship,” Kimberly M. Moffit, a light-skinned woman shares incidents in which her dark-skinned daughter experienced colorism as an adolescent. Her daughter Deja shares that she received colorist remarks from classmates such as “You were left in the oven too long,” “You are dark chocolate nasty,” “You’re burnt!...” (Moffit, 2020, 75). But the one Deja could not let go of was the implication of being a field slave. “Field slave” is an insult told to people of darker complexions because field slaves were out on the plantation in the hot sun while house slaves, which were often lighter, worked in the master’s house. Deja tells her mother about the incident and Moffitt confronts a classmate’s mother. Toward the end of the autoethnography, Moffit and her daughter reach their own conclusions. Deja states “But I don’t care anymore. . . . I like my skin hue,” (Moffit, 2020, p.80) and Moffit concludes that “I must do my part to fortify her against those messages and remind her of her whole essence” (Moffit, 2020, p.82). Deja is able to grow to like her skin color because she has a mother who defends and embraces her skin complexion unlike Pecola’s mother who thought Pecola was ugly and therefore a burden. When a mother affirms their daughter’s worth it makes a vast difference in the daughters’ ability to ward off negative comments from the world around them.

While Pecola’s mother fails at protecting Pecola’s self- esteem, her father destroys the little that is left by severely traumatizing Pecola. The first clue that Cholly is inappropriate with Pecola is given by Pecola herself. Before Maureen Peal calls Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda “Black e mos” and runs off, she asks Pecola if she has ever seen a naked man to which Pecola replies that “Nobody’s father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too.” (Morrison,71). Maureen never mentions anything about naked fathers and even tells Pecola that she only said naked man and not father. From this alone, it is obvious that something wrong is

occurring between Pecola and her father. Later, any suspicions are confirmed as an uncomfortably disturbing event of Cholly raping Pecola in his own kitchen takes place and Pecola ends up pregnant by her own father. This event traumatizes Pecola. After this, not only does Pecola have to deal with disdain from others due to her appearance but also shame for something that wasn't her fault all because she was sexualized by her own father.

Adultification, or viewing black girls as more mature than their white or lighter skinned counterparts leads to hyper sexualization. This is very common for young Black girls and plays a role in their traumatic experiences. In "Countering the Adultification of Black Girls", Morris talks about the experience of Black adolescent girls and how she has "...encountered teenage girls who describe how school security and other adults on campus have made comments about the shape of their bodies, in the context of dress code enforcement or in other scenarios" (Morris, 2019, p.45). At another school, a security guard who enforced the dress code introduced a black student to sex trafficking (Morris, 2019, p.46). From a young age, Black girls like Pecola are subjected to hyper sexualization from men and women because the bodies of dark-skinned girls are sexualized. This can result in sexual assault from men or being shamed for acting too grown up from older women, even if they are not sexually active. Oftentimes, when Black girls are raped or assaulted, what is done to them is their fault according to society. Wilson includes that "a 13-year-old African-American girl was subjected to further traumatization by her school when she reported her sexual assault (Baker, 2016 as cited in Wilson, M.,2018). The girl, identified as G., reported the rape to her school" (Wilson, M., 2018, p.46). None of the teachers were supportive and her classmates said the assault was her fault. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye* Claudia and Freida overhear two women talking about Pecola and how she is to blame for Cholly raping her. Even though Pecola is a child and Cholly is a grown man, one of the women insists on

blaming Pecola for not fighting him off. Cholly's actions are a catalyst for Pecola's madness as "...his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death" (Morrison, 2007, p.206). In the end, Black girls who are victims of things like rape are usually ostracized while the rapist gets to escape.

Mental Health

Colorist ideals held by society severely impact the mental health of Black girls with darker complexions. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola navigates life as a young and dark Black girl in the twentieth century and although she does not seem like the main character at first, as the book progresses the reader becomes one of the bystanders watching Pecola descend into madness. No one helps Pecola, they either cause her demise or watch as it happens. Pecola goes to Soaphead Church, a self-proclaimed "Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams" (Morrison, 2007, p. 126) who makes a living deceiving people into believing he has supernatural powers. She asks him for blue eyes and instead of telling her it is not possible, he drives Pecola further into insanity and makes Pecola truly believe God answers her prayer. He tells her to feed meat to the dog on the porch but Pecola is unaware that the meat is poisoned. He tricks Pecola into thinking the dog's death is an answer from God that her wish for blue eyes is granted. Soaphead Church is the last hope to bring Pecola back to reality but instead he exploits her to satisfy his God complex and ego. He thinks of Pecola as an ugly "...little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes." (Morrison, 2007, p.174). People who think like Soaphead Church affirm Pecola's feelings of ugliness and low self-worth. They agree that she is ugly and girls that look like Pecola are pitiful. Towards the end of the book Claudia talks about the damage done to Pecola. Claudia says,

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind (Morrison, 2007, p. 204)

Pecola does not receive the help and support she needs to deal with her trauma. Instead she becomes mentally ill and most likely never will recover because no one cares about the mental issues of darker skinned black girls.

Unfortunately in the Black community, "...as in almost all communities worldwide, those people with mental health difficulties may sometimes be ostracized or isolated. In the words of one focus group member: You are rejected by your own community, by your own environment" (Mantovani et al., [14], p. 377 as cited in Codjoe et al, 2019, p. 226). Since Black communities tend to be more religious, mental illness can sometimes be attributed to the devil or some can assume one is cursed because of a sin they committed. Mental illness is also related to weakness and goes against the stereotype that Black girls and women especially darker ones are strong and don't need help. Although a stereotype of being strong sounds positive it does more harm than good. In "Tackling inequalities: a partnership between mental health services and black faith communities" Codjoe mentions that, "It is possible that attitudes relating to weakness and shame lead to secrecy and reluctance to seek help" (Codjoe et al, 2019, 226). The dangerous stereotype causes Black girls to internalize their problems which makes their mental health worse. Pecola is not strong after what she experiences. As she talks to herself we find out that her father raped her more than once, she gets taken out of school, and Pecola truly believes she has

blue eyes. At the expense of her sanity, Pecola believes all her problems are gone as she looks at herself and the world through her new blue eyes, believing she is white.

Conclusion

Having dark skin really is not fair; not in complexion, beauty standards, or justice. Colorist attitudes towards dark-skinned girls and women will remain the same as long as the media promotes a negative image of them, the beauty standards remain inflexible, and trauma is normalized. When society is against you, it is plausible that mental health will suffer as a result just like it did for Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Colorism still persists in the everyday lives of women and adolescents. Dark skinned girls have to grow up in a world where they are constantly reminded that the color of their skin is an obstacle that keeps them from living a life free of worry. Those with lighter complexions do not have to think about whether someone will find them attractive enough because of their skin color or if their skin puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to interactions with law enforcement or simple things like job interviews. Colorism is an ongoing problem and putting one or two dark skinned women in some movies and having a few extra foundation shades is not enough nor does it get to the root of the issue; inward reflections as a society does. The centuries of damage we as a society inflict on black girls will take a lot of time and effort to heal. After all, colorism is not the only -ism left to fight.

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