The Impact of Colorism on the Lives of African American Women

Kuharić, Romana

UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Romana Kuharić

THE IMPACT OF COLORISM ON THE LIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

Supervisor:

Tatjana Vukelić, PhD

December 2019

ABSTRACT

In this M.A. thesis I will present and explore the issue of colorism and the way it impacts the lives of African American women. The origins of colorism – oppression based on skin tone and physical features – can be traced back to the times of slavery, when lighter-skinned slaves were preferred and given easier tasks than slaves whose skin was darker. Skin tone, hair texture, facial features, and other factors on the basis of which colorism is executed will be explored, as well as many processes of modifying one's appearance which Black women subject themselves to in order to escape oppression. Colorism is twined into all aspects of a woman's life, from early childhood to adulthood, affecting their education, career, relationships, and marriage, and distorting their self-esteem, perception of beauty, and the sense of identity. Although nowadays the idea of a color-blind society is present, skin tone and physical appearance still hold a great importance, and colorism continues to be a persistent issue in the African American community, especially for Black women. The goal of this thesis is to show how and where colorism originates and in which ways it affects Black women's lives, endangering and limiting them, and to prove that it is not a thing of the past, but an everyday occurrence which should be openly discussed and thoroughly explored.

Key words: colorism, the color complex, Black women, skin tone, hair texture, discrimination

Table of contents

Introduction

Ever since the times of colonialism and slavery, people have been divided based on their skin color. Oppression and racism that have arisen then are still present today and, although they are not as severe as they used to be, are still a major issue today. While racism represents something the majority of people is aware of – or at least knows of – and is often being discussed, those who are not a part of the African American community are prevalently unfamiliar with the discrimination that exists inside the community, between its members, and is based primarily on skin tone. Colorism, the issue of discrimination on the basis of skin tone among members of the same race, has arisen precisely from racism and the unfair treatment that Black people underwent in the times of slavery. The oppression that Blacks suffered under the hand of Whites was conducive to the development of colorism, mainly because Whites treated lighter-skinned Blacks better than those whose skin tone was darker. Subsequently, the idea of light skin being "better" and more valuable has taken root inside the Black community, and has become something that remains an issue even in the modern world.

When it comes to Black women, they have had – and still have today – many more forms of discrimination to deal with throughout their lives aside from racism. Women in general face sexism and oppression every day, and Black women, on top of that, encounter racism and colorism in every aspect of their lives. Colorism has a stronger impact on women than men, mainly because they are being taught from early childhood about the advantages of light skin and body features that are more characteristic for people of the White race. Colorism is inevitably brought into their lives, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, distorting their perception of beauty and destroying their self-confidence. Many Black women then turn to different products and procedures to try to lighten their skin, straighten their hair, or alter their facial features. Aside from that, colorism is often the root of many problems in families,

relationships, and in the workplace, which all leads to many insecurities and unhappy, unfulfilled lives of African American women.

In this thesis, I will explore the issue of colorism and the different ways in which it affects the lives of African American women, starting from early childhood and family environment, to romantic and professional relationships, while also touching the subjects of self-confidence, identity issues, and beauty standards. Through all this, I will show what a huge impact colorism has on every aspect of a Black woman's life, how it sometimes defines and limits them, and all the issues that arise from it, especially considering the still-profitable industries of skin lightening and hair straightening products, as well as plastic surgery. Colorism is not something that should be taken for granted or hidden – it is a major issue in the African American community, which should be discussed and talked about, because only by raising awareness of it can it be toned down and, in the end, suppressed.

1. Historical background

Oppression of women has been lasting since the beginning of times, with women being perceived as inferior to men, less valuable, and, essentially, beings who serve only to produce children and take care of the household. That kind of discrimination is what all women – Black, White, and of any other race – had to deal with, and still do today. However, Black women have had it much worse. "Black women face problems of racism and sexism and when these two negative status positions-being Black and being female-combine with colorism, a triple threat lowers self-esteem and feelings of competence among dark Black women." (Thompson and Keith, 2004: 51) In addition to sexism, Black women also face racism and colorism, which makes them inferior not only in comparison to men, but also to White women and, as a consequence of colorism, to any Black woman with a lighter skin tone. It is not uncommon that they feel attacked and ostracized in the White world, but also within their own community, especially if their skin is very dark and their bodily features unmistakably "Black".

The roots of both racism and colorism have to be searched for back in the seventeenth century, when first slaves arrived in the newly established American colonies. From the very start, they were deemed a "lower" race and were basically treated like animals, forced to do the hardest work while having no rights whatsoever. However, even though laws and restrictions were made to separate Blacks from Whites, race mixing was something that could not be stopped. It is important to emphasize that, in spite of slavery being in full swing, there were still some African Americans who were not confined by it, and were living a free life. Mixing of the races, however, occurred both in situations where a Black person was free, and when they were a slave. Interracial relationships were not only frowned upon, they were forbidden by the law, and Black men were often punished, lynched, or even murdered for having sexual relations with White women. Black women, on the other hand, were almost always victims of their masters, since it was not uncommon for the slave owners to rape their female slaves, in most cases

leaving them pregnant with their children. Mixing of the races, in that way, produced a new, distinct group – the mulattos. The idea that children whose one parent is Black could come to be free people and even be considered White concerned White people so much that laws were made to assure that it could never happen. "Departing from traditional English law, in which the status of the child was always determined by that of the father, the colonists voted in 1662 that children in Virginia would have the same status as the mother." (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 13) This law not only made sure that the mulatto children of female slaves would also be considered slaves, but additionally encouraged slave owners to continue with the sexual exploitation of Black slave women in order to increase the number of their slaves.

The law about the status of mixed children, however, did not resolve the problem entirely, since biracial children who were legally free were still out there, born either of free Black mothers or fathers and their White partners, or Black slave fathers and White women. Some of them were light-skinned enough to pass as White, more so if their facial features and hair texture also appeared White. At that time, there was no possibility to define oneself as a biracial or mixed person; thus, there was no way to define free mulattos except from either Black or White. In fear of the possibility that such children could be considered White and have the same rights and privileges as "pure" Whites, legislators created a law that came to be known as "one-drop rule", and which determined that every person with even as little as one drop of Black or African blood would be considered Black. It did not matter how much a person appeared White – if they had Black ancestors, they were legally considered Black.

The distinction between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Blacks started with the rapid increase in the number of people belonging to the mulatto group. The children of mixed ancestry, born of slave mothers, also had the status of slaves, but were very frequently the sons and daughters of the master. Because of that, and because lighter skin was considered a sign of higher intelligence and capacity, they often had better positions than darker-skinned slaves.

While the latter were forced to endure hard labor on the plantation, the mulatto slaves more frequently did chores in the house and held positions such as that of the cook, driver, or housekeeper (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 18). Some of them, especially the children of the master, also got a chance for education, and learned how to read and write. Because of that huge distinction, made by the masters, tensions and hatred occurred among the slave population. Dark-skinned slaves resented the mulattoes and considered them privileged, and the mulattoes sometimes also thought of themselves as more valuable and of a higher position than their darker counterparts. That is precisely what spawned the problem of skin tone, which continued after slavery was abolished, when previously free mulattoes refused to mix with the newly freed slaves from fear of losing their privileged status. Although they were also subjected to racism, it was not to the same extent as Blacks whose skin was darker. In order to avoid being equated with them, those with lighter skin started to discriminate against their darker-skinned brothers and sisters, segregating themselves from them and forming their own, closed communities. Essentially, they did the same thing that Whites had been doing to the entire African American population all along, only now the discrimination and oppression against Blacks came from the members of their own race, and spread into all the aspects of one's life. Entering a college, a club, or a church often depended heavily on a person's skin tone, and there were different methods to determine whether one was worthy of entering, like the brown paper-bag test or the comb test. Anyone whose skin was darker than the paper bag (or, in some cases, the door) or whose hair could not be combed because it was too nappy, was not allowed to enter (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 27). Naturally, after those kinds of discrimination were openly executed, the gap between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned African Americans only widened, and with it grew the wish of those with a darker skin tone to be lighter, which, sadly, remains very much present today.

2. Colorism

2.1. What is colorism?

While racism is a phenomenon everybody knows about, even if it does not directly concern them, colorism is a less-known subject, one that is often swept under the rug, almost like a shameful secret. Racism is talked about frequently, in the news and papers; it is touched in many books and movies, even in music. Colorism, on the other hand, is not as broadly and openly discussed, and people who are not African Americans and do not have much contact with the Black community have probably never even heard of it. The difference between racism and colorism is that colorism does not involve members of other races – it is an issue that arises and keeps living inside a single community or race (not necessarily only African Americans – colorism is present in other ethnic groups as well), turning members of the same group against each other based on stereotypical beliefs and discrimination that go way back in the past.

In her book *Color Stories,* JeffriAnne Wilder (2015: 6) defines colorism as following:

"Colorism (also referred to as the "color complex" or even "shadeism") is defined as the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals belonging to the same racial or ethnic minority group (e.g., African Americans) based upon differences in physical features – most notably skin complexion (color), but also facial features and hair texture."

Similar, but a quite simpler definition comes from Russel, Wilson and Hall (1992: 2), who define colorism – or, as they call it, "the color complex" – as "a psychological fixation about color and features that leads Blacks to discriminate against each other." While colorism definitely came to be through all the previously mentioned historical occurrences and the unfair treatment of Black people, over the time it also became a psychologically based issue, because the beliefs about light skin being "good" and "right" have become so deeply rooted in Black people's minds that dissatisfaction with their own looks and bodies is preventing them from

living a fulfilled life, affecting their emotional stability, self-confidence, and relationships with other people. When paired up with real-life proofs of colorism – like the fact that that lighter skin and straight hair are still preferred in the beauty industry, workplace, even when it comes to romantic relationships – an individual can easily start to believe that some skin tones are truly worth more than others.

When searching for the roots of colorism in general, not only among Black population, it is enough to look at the overall view of anything that is black or white. Black has always been synonymous with bad, dirty, or evil, while white almost always represents something beautiful and delicate, pure, chaste. In fact, the mere dictionary definitions show this exact opposition: some of the explanations of the word "black" include "soiled or stained with dirt", "gloomy, pessimistic", and "evil, wicked", while "white" is defined as "morally pure; innocent", "without malice, harmless" and "opposite to black" (Golden, 2004: 17). When something is described as white, it is positive, good, and if something is black, it is the opposite. No wonder that this opposition has transferred to skin color as well.

Colorism that exists among African Americans is the same, or worse than racism they endure from White people. It is worse because members of the same race, which was once severely mistreated and continues to be oppressed today, are discriminating against each other on the basis of differences in their appearance. Essentially, colorism copied racism, and began as discrimination only against those with a darker skin tone, but evolved during time in a way that it now goes both ways: darker-skinned Blacks often judge those with lighter skin, especially if they have made some alterations to their appearance.

"Traditionally, the color complex involved light-skinned Blacks' rejection of Blacks who were darker. Increasingly, however, the color complex shows up in the form of dark-skinned African Americans spurning their lighter-skinned brothers and sisters for not being Black enough." (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 2)

For example, if a Black woman is straightening her hair instead of wearing it naturally, she may be attacked for denying her heritage by trying to be White. According to this, it seems that there really is no way to escape colorism, no matter how dark or light one's skin tone is.

2.2. Different aspects of colorism

Although skin tone is the main basis on which discrimination is executed, it is not the only one. Other features which are typical for a person who is African American also come to be problematic and cause others to judge and reject an individual, simply because they are too different from White – and White is the symbol of all that is good and right.

"Skin color and features associated with whites, such as light skin, straight noses, and long, straight hair, take on the meanings that they represent: civility, rationality, and beauty. Similarly, skin colors and features associated with Africans or Indians, such as dark skin, broad noses, and kinky hair, represent savagery, irrationality, and ugliness. The values associated with physical features set the stage for skin color stratification." (Hunter, 2005: 3)

In that way, everything associated with White or Black automatically carries the meanings of that original division, which deems all that is black as negative and ugly, and white as the opposite.

Perhaps the main feature, following skin tone, that has been a stumbling block for African Americans when it comes to their appearance, is hair texture. For centuries, nappy and kinky hair has been considered ugly, bad, and even inappropriate, despite it being the natural hair state for any Black person. Even some traditionally African or African American hairstyles, like the Afro or dreadlocks, are often frowned upon and considered inappropriate for the working environment, reducing a person's chances to be employed. This issue is especially

problematic for women, since they tend to wear their hair long. Ever since the times of slavery, the desire to straighten and tame kinky hair has existed, and many procedures and products have been made for that purpose. The market for that kind of products is still very much profitable today.

Facial features unique to African Americans are another aspect that frequently clashes with the universally accepted standards of beauty, which coincide predominantly with White, European features like blue or green eyes and a narrow nose. In a world that is highly diverse and colorful, it is exceptionally wrong that most of Black models that appear on magazine covers and in the media are almost always light-skinned, with straight hair and facial features that are closer to White than Black. Surrounded by those examples, Black women have always strived to alter their appearance, either by using old (and ineffective) methods like sleeping with a clothespin on their nose to make it less broad, or turning to plastic surgery. Some of them opt for reversible solutions, like using specific make-up techniques or wearing contact lenses in a lighter color – since the predominant eye color for Blacks is brown, which is not considered very special and attractive – but a lot of women end up actually ruining their looks through different procedures and surgeries, in a desperate try to meet the surreal standards of beauty the world has put up.

Another feature that causes Black women to be further dissatisfied with their looks is their characteristic body type. Although women in general come in all shapes and sizes, African American women are more prone to have a characteristic shape, with broad hips, thick tights, and wide buttocks. Again, this does not conform to what is believed to be the ideal of beauty, and often causes rejection and mockery from a very young age. After spending all their lives watching thin, skinny women that are deemed beautiful, a lot of Black women subject themselves to all kinds of diets, exhausting training, and even cosmetic surgery in order to alter their body shape, which can not be easily done.

Finally, colorism does not stop just at skin tone. It has many aspects, and it seems as if almost every part of a Black woman's body can be defined as wrong, ugly, or not good enough to be called pretty and attractive. The danger lies not only in the discrimination they face with, but in all the things they are willing to do to change their natural look, which are often dangerous for their physical health and well-being.

2.3. Advantages and disadvantages of being "light"

Even though light skin is no longer necessarily a sign of a higher social class, statistics show that light-skinned African Americans continue to be privileged and have many more opportunities when it comes to work and education than those with a darker skin tone. As Norwood and Foreman (2014: 15-16) state, most of Blacks in powerful positions, like CEOs of different companies, or those who hold positions in the government and legislation, are light-skinned. Similarly, tenured professors at universities are also most likely to be light. Light skin prevails in the media and advertising, especially when it comes to women: leading roles in movies and television shows, as well as dancers and singers, are rarely of a very dark skin tone. In turn, darker-skinned Blacks are more frequently arrested and imprisoned, and are also receiving longer sentences. In recent years, in cases when the police unnecessarily used the force or weapons against the civilians (sometimes even killing them), it was almost always a dark-skinned Black person. Moreover, the preference for light skin is seen even in the adoption market, where lighter-skinned children are more likely to be adopted than those with darker skin. All these facts are the evidence of the still present prejudices against dark skin, with preference for light skin being actively shown in all fields of life.

But, although it might seem that those with a lighter skin tone have it better in life, that is not always the case. While light skin brings along a lot of advantages and better opportunities

for Black people, it has its downsides as well, the main being the prejudice and oppression that light-skinned Blacks encounter from the members of their own community. Light skin, especially when paired up with other features that are characteristically White, is often seen as a lack of Blackness, which causes ostracizing and rejection. While in the past it was exclusively the lighter-skinned individuals who refused to mingle with those of a darker skin tone, with time, light skin also became a basis for discrimination. Lighter-skinned African Americans are frequently accused of not being "Black enough" or, in some cases, even rejecting their own heritage.

If a woman has a light skin tone and, in addition to that, chooses to make some alterations to her natural look, like straighten her hair, she will most likely be accused of trying to be White and thus denying her Blackness. While modifying one's look is often done in order to get access to more opportunities, for example jobs or education, that is not always the case. Some Black women choose to straighten their hair simply because it is easier to maintain that way, but they will still be discriminated because of it. It is often forgotten that Blacks themselves are in a lot of cases the cause for women to try and appear more White-like. Light skin is still preferred in a romantic partner, especially a female one, and some Black men go as far as to refuse to date darker girls, because marrying a light-skinned woman is very important to them. No wonder, then, that women make so many efforts to seem "lighter" and "Whiter" than they really are. What is to blame, of course, are once again the images that the beauty industry has forced upon all the world, as well as other factors, such as Black men being determined to "marry light" in order to have light-skinned children – because of these reasons, it is a fact that dark-skinned women are less likely to marry.

As shown above, light skin brings both privilege and prejudice, and it is not right to think that light-skinned Blacks have it so much better in life. Being rejected by one's own people because of the opportunities the lightness of their skin opens to an individual is a pretty

tough price to pay. Indeed, even though colorism was once directed exclusively against darker-skinned Blacks, that is no longer the case. As Marita Golden (2004: 128) writes in her book *Don't Play in the Sun*, "the color complex makes everyone pay, and lighter-skinned Blacks, because of light-skinned privilege (which exists side by side with racism), become victims of suspicion and mistrust by brown to black African Americans." Either way, through colorism and discrimination, damage is constantly being done to African Americans as a whole, disrupting their racial pride and unity.

3. The importance of skin tone

3.1. Skin tone stratification

Skin tone is the main cause of colorism and, at the same time, the feature that is the most difficult – if not nearly impossible – to change. Both light and dark skin bring about a lot of difficulties, and different stereotypes are attached to both ends of the skin color spectrum. However, in the middle of this basic opposition, there is a whole palette of skin tones, and many different names that have been used for years and centuries to describe an individual's skin tone. Most of the names refer to either very light or very dark skin, while the middle category, which can be called medium, has not generated that many terms, probably because it can be considered sort of "neutral". Indeed, Blacks whose skin complexion falls into the middle category – commonly known as *brown* – typically do not encounter as many stereotypical views of themselves as those who are extremely light or extremely dark (Wilder, 2015: 65). It seems that the word "brown" does not evoke as many negative connotations as the terms for light and dark skin do.

One of the most important studies made about skin tone stratification is Charles Parrish's study *Color Names and Color Notions* from 1946. Parrish questioned high school and college students, and his results showed over 125 names used to describe different skin hues, twenty-five of which were most commonly used (Wilder, 2015: 65). JeffriAnne Wilder, for the purposes of her 2015 book *Color Stories*, interviewed and talked with many Black women, and color names and terms were included in the research. She discovered forty terms that were frequently used or heard by her participants, nine of which coincided with Parrish's results from 1945 (Wilder, 2015: 66). Most of the terms refer to light skin tone, a little less to dark, and there were only a few terms regarding medium skin tone, which once again proves that the medium category can be considered neutral.

When describing light skin tone, the term *yellow* is frequently used, and in different variants, such as *high yellow* or, in Parrish's results, *"yaller"* and *dirty yellow*. Understandably, *light* is also among the most frequent terms, together with *bright* and *light bright, white, fair,* and *mulatto*. The terms for light skin are generally not negative, with some of them even being extremely positive, like *pretty skin*, but they can still be used in a derogatory way if an individual's light skin wants to be shown as something bad and worthy of mockery. The term *oreo,* also used for people with light skin tone, has a deeper meaning, and it is used to describe a person whose skin is black, but who is immersed in the White community and is doing their best to act and appear White – like the popular cookie, Black on the outside, and White on the inside (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 72). Moreover, the term *house nigga* is still used today, and it originated in the times of slavery, when lighter-skinned slaves tended to have much easier, inside-the-house jobs than slaves with darker skin. In addition to that, many terms use the color red to describe the fairness of one's skin, like *red* or *red bone*, *red-skinned, sexy red,* and *dirty red*. The color red is seen as an ideal color, and it was originally used to describe a mixed person with Native American blood (Wilder, 2015: 69). These terms are frequently used in many song lyrics, describing attractive Black women.

Moreover, Wilder (2015: 66) writes that while the terms describing medium skin tone are mostly neutral, like *brown, brownskin,* and *tan*, most of the terms that fall into dark skin category are derogatory and negative. Terms like *black* and *blackie*, *darky*, *blue-black,* and *tar baby* are present in both Parrish's and Wilder's studies, while Parrish also encountered *rusty black* and *"ink spot"*. Negative view of dark skin is pretty evident in terms such as *super black, darkness, charcoal*, *watermelon child,* and *burnt*, which all signify something bad, inferior, and in contrast with much more preferred lightness

Interestingly, many terms in all three categories are in some way connected to food, like *vanilla* and *French vanilla* for light skin, *milk chocolate* and *caramel* for medium, and *chocolate*

for dark skin. Wilder (2015: 68) suggests that one possible explanation is that they hold a sexual connotation, and are used to point to the image of Black woman as a hyper-sexualized being. That stereotypical view is nothing new, since Black women were often characterized as such, and the confirmation can be found in other terms which sexualize the color of a Black woman's skin, such as *sexy red* and *sexy black,* and are often even accepted as something positive.

3.2. Skin lightening

The "skin bleaching syndrome" has a long and painful tradition in the African American community, and it only confirms the long-lasting fixation about skin color and the obvious preference for lighter skin tones, which are the consequences of centuries of racism and colorism Black people have been enduring. Although it might seem – and many want to make the world believe that it really is so – that in today's world the desire for light skin has been toned down, and that racism and colorism are on the downfall, the truth is that many Black women are still willing to go to extreme lengths in order to lighten their skin. The market for different skin-bleaching products and procedures is huge and, sadly, still very profitable.

The earliest data confirming the usage of skin bleaches by Black women dates back to the 1850s, and already in the 1880s and 1890s, skin bleaching products were widely advertised (Glenn, 2008: 287). In the 20th century, the practice of skin lightening continued, with more and more products overflowing the market and being openly advertised, despite many Black leaders of that time speaking against both skin bleaching and hair straightening in order to encourage Black women and men to embrace their Blackness. The advertisements almost always featured a light-skinned woman who appeared to be extremely happy and satisfied with her new, lighter skin color, and they were often promoted as solutions to discoloration and freckles. Some of the most popular products in early 20th century were Ro-Zol, Black & White

Ointment, Nadinola (which is still sold today), and others. The main ingredient in most of them was hydroquinone, a chemical which inhibits melanin and causes skin tone to lighten (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 51), and some products also used mercury. Both hydroquinone and mercury, as well as some other ingredients that are commonly used in bleaching creams, are extremely damaging for the skin, and may even cause skin cancer, along with a list of other side-effects, which is why the products containing them were later forbidden from selling. However, they continue to be used, and such dangerous creams are still being sold, either in stores, or illegally.

Aside from bleaching creams, there are also surgical procedures for skin lightening, which are more expensive and way more extreme. Chemical peels involve burning off of the upper layer of skin, while through dermabrasion they are stripped away using high-speed wire or diamond-edged brushes (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 2). Both procedures require hospitalization and multiple procedures before results can be seen. They are also risky, since the skin is traumatized and can easily be permanently damaged.

For women who are not willing or are not able to afford such products and procedures, there are temporary alternatives, like using makeup several shades lighter than their skin tone. In fact, many makeup manufacturers simply do not include shades suitable for a darker skin complexion in their products and because of that, Black women (especially those with very dark skin) are sometimes compelled to use products that are not intended for them and do not suit their complexion. Surely, those who wish to appear "lighter" do it on purpose, but the effect is often not successfully achieved.

In any case, skin bleaching may result in Black women not just being attacked or ridiculed for trying to be lighter, but also permanently damaging their skin and jeopardizing their health. And yet, even with those facts being widely known, many of them continue to use dangerous products and subject themselves to horrific procedures in a desperate try to achieve

“lightness”. Some do it because they want to get married, others to have better opportunities in life, and many of them simply because they have been fed with the belief that dark skin is ugly and unattractive, so much that their insecurities and dissatisfaction just can not let them love themselves the way they are. In any case, as long as colorism exists, the market for skin bleaching products will continue to flourish.

4. Hair

4.1. “Good” and “bad” hair

The story of Black hair started with the beginning of slave trade. Brought into a new environment, a new culture, and forced to work hard in the fields all day long, African people had to abruptly change many of their customs and rituals, one of them being hair care. In African tribes, people take pride in their hair, they stylize it in all kinds of different ways, and it holds a great significance for them. “Elaborate hair designs, reflecting tribal affiliation, status, sex, age, occupation, and the like, were common, and the cutting, shaving, wrapping, and braiding of hair were centuries-old arts.” (White, White, 1995: 49-50) African women sometimes spent hours and hours on hair grooming and arranging, but that was impossible for the now enslaved women in the colonies (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 13). They had no time, nor tools to properly care about their hair, and often would just wear it wrapped in a rag to either protect it from the sun, or to hide the infections and diseases that occurred due to improper grooming. Once the cause of pride for the Africans, their hair lost its magic and soon became something they had to hide and cover.

Not only did the circumstances change the attitudes of Black people towards their hair, but also the ideal of beauty and attractiveness they encountered in the New World. “In this new land dominated by pale skin and straight hair, African hair was deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans.” (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 13) The desire for a hair that resembled the hair of White people got even stronger when the obvious preference for lighter-skinned slaves was shown, with them getting easier tasks and indoor positions, and also costing more money on the slave market, which showed their greater value. Since those house slaves were usually mulattos, often the offspring of the master or his sons, their hair tended to not be as kinky and frizzy as that of darker-skinned slaves. In addition to that, they had to maintain their appearance to avoid any potential punishment, so they often wore their hair in braids, cornrows, or some

other, neat styles. As Whites showed preference for slaves with light skin and straighter hair, a division was born between "good" and "bad" hair: the "good" hair of the house slaves was long, relaxed, without kinks, while "bad " hair of the field, darker-skinned slaves, was the opposite – nappy, frizzy, natural African hair (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 18). For a female slave, however, "good" hair did not always signify a good thing. Although Black female slaves with light skin were usually working indoors, they were also frequently raped and molested by their masters. Sometimes, female mulatto slaves were bought solely for that purpose and, if they were pretty enough, with a light skin shade and straight hair, White men would often turn them into their lovers and concubines. For women, thus, "good" was not so good after all – more of a double-edged sword.

In the years after slavery was abolished, "good" and "bad" hair continued to live on, with hair being one of the main features – along with skin tone – on the basis of which was decided whether a Black person was worthy of being a part of a social group or community. The hair comb test, conducted at the entry to many clubs and churches, required a person to try and comb their hair with the comb that hang at the door. If their hair was too nappy, that is, "bad", they could not enter. Thus, the idea of natural Black hair being ugly lived on, and hair straightening became a fairly common practice among both men and women.

The 1960s brought along a change. In the midst of the Black Power movement, the expression of Blackness and Black pride took many forms, one of them being hair and hairstyle. Suddenly, there was an urge to "go natural" as a way of expressing one's Black identity, and the most popular hairstyle of the time was the Afro. It seemed as if all African Americans have abandoned processing their hair and went for the Afro instead. The Afro was not just a hairstyle – it was a political statement. It was not only the Afro that gained popularity, but other natural styles, as well as traditional African hairstyles, like cornrows, dreadlocks, and head-wraps.

"Hair came to symbolize either a continued move toward integration in the American political system or a growing cry for Black power and nationalism. Many African-Americans began to use their hair as a way to show a visible connection to their African ancestors and Blacks throughout the diaspora." (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 50)

The tables have turned, and processed hair was no longer the "good" hair, but a sign of alienation from both Black roots and Black community. However, by the mid-1970s, the Afro lost its political significance and became just a hairstyle once again, and many Black women turned back to relaxing and straightening their hair. In the 1980s and 90s, new hairstyles emerged, like the Jheri Curl, and dreadlocks gained popularity once again, but natural hair was and continues to be frowned upon and considered inappropriate for the workplace.

4.2. Hair straightening

Hair straightening practices began almost as soon as it was realized that White-like features – light skin and long, straight hair – were associated with beauty and value, while all that appeared Black was the exact opposite. And while men can just cut their hair short and solve the problem that way, short hair on women has not always been as fashionable and common as it is today. Long before different products and procedures were invented and became available, there was not much choice. Women used what they were able to find in the household, items which were often unsafe and fairly damaging to the hair, one of which was lye. Other methods included treating the hair with bacon grease, goose grease, or butter, and afterwards either using a heated butter knife as a hair straightener, or wrapping the hair in a warm cloth (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 16-17). Until the hair care market blossomed in the 1900s – the New Negro era – such homemade hair procedures were the only thing that was available to Black women.

After the abolition of slavery, straight hair rapidly became not only the ideal of beauty, but also the means which opened doors to new opportunities for Black people, especially women. The key to being accepted and appearing worthy of respect was to look as closer to White as possible, and straight hair was definitely one of the main requirements to integrate into the society. As the need for better and more efficient products – which, at the same time, would not be too harsh and damaging – grew, more companies turned to marketing and distributing different solutions to the "problem" of kinky hair. Among the first ones to offer haircare produces that actually worked were two Black women, Annie Turnbo Malone and Madam C. J. Walker. Both of them built their own companies, which started out with products that served to repair the hair and make it grow, but also introduced new methods of straightening the hair. They founded colleges where other women could receive education on haircare and later open their own salons, in that way opening new opportunities to receive income for Black women. Madam C. J. Walker proved to be extremely successful in what she was doing – so much that she was proclaimed the first self-made millionaire woman in history (Russell, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 45). The most famous product of her work was her system of hair straightening, called the "shampoo-press-and-curl" (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 34). However, she never advertised her products as tools for straightening the hair, but rather expressed a wish to help Black women learn how to properly tend to their hair and, in the end, make them feel satisfied and happy with it.

As hairstyles changed through history, the desire for straight hair remained and different products appeared on the market. The hot comb was still used, but by the mid 1960-s, chemical products designed to straighten the hair overtook the market (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 46). Many of them, however, still used damaging and harsh ingredients, and were thus aggressive to the scalp and made the hair dry and in constant need for conditioners. Hair straightening practices continued, until the Jheri Curl appeared in the 1980s. The idea actually originated as a chemical

product to make straight hair curly, but with some reformulations, it began to be used to loosen the kinky Black hair into soft curls (Byrd, Tharps, 2014: 86). The hairstyle became widely popular and remained so for quite some time. Trends changed, for a while braids and dreadlocks gained popularity, and in the 2000s the wig and weave business flourished, but hair straightening is still present today among a great number of Black women. Nowadays, the procedures are not as aggressive and difficult as they used to be, and the products tend to lean more towards nourishing and repairing the hair, not only straightening it. However, no matter how much the fashion changes, straight hair is still considered the ideal of beauty, and as long as it remains so, the business of hair straightening is not likely to go down.

5. Colorism in everyday life

5.1. Childhood and family

The roots of colorism are nearly always found in the family. Even though the sense of Black pride is usually first introduced and learned inside the family, so is colorism (Wilder, 2015: 101-102). In fact, Wilder (2014: 102) mentions that most Black women she interviewed in her study suggested that their thoughts and beliefs about themselves and others in relation to skin color were influenced mostly by their own families. Beginning from early childhood, girls are taught that their dark skin and nappy hair will never be considered pretty, and that they have to take "proper" care of themselves in order to appear more attractive. Many mothers begin to straighten their daughters' hair from a very early age, and while some do it do simplify the process of haircare, there is almost always a different undertone to this. No matter how much the world has evolved, the belief that kinky hair appears messy and ugly is still present and, unfortunately, widely accepted. Same goes for dark skin and physical features. Darker girls are rarely called beautiful, even by their own parents and family members. They grow up surrounded with the idea that, because of their skin tone, they will only be able to achieve as much, and that everything beyond that is reserved for those who are light. In her book *Don't Play in the Sun* (2004: 22), Marita Golden describes her early memories of growing up in a color-conscious environment, and how much it impacted her when she did not even completely understand it yet:

"By the time I was nine or so I had internalized a kind of permanent ache, a persistent closing off and sometimes shutting down of my emotions on the issue of color. I knew by then that many people in my own community and most people in the White community did not consider me pretty, or valuable, or significant, solely because I had brown skin and coarse hair and clearly Black features. My mother's admonitions about playing in the sun and her ambivalence about my father's darkness were real."

Even if colorist tendencies are not explicitly forced upon a child, the subtle signs are often more than enough. Young Black girls grow up surrounded with prejudices and unequal representation, they watch every day as their lighter-skinned peers are praised and adored more than they will ever be, and inevitably become aware of the fact that their looks will set them back in life. Oftentimes, the harsh comments and praise towards a lighter, Whiter complexion come from the parents themselves, or other family members. It is not uncommon that young Black girls feel that their lighter-skinned siblings are more loved and preferred over them. Thus, growing up in that kind of environment frequently causes insecurities and a low self-esteem that follows Black women well into adulthood.

5.2. Education and friendships

Frequently, Black girls who grow up surrounded by family members of the same or similar skin tone are not truly aware of the difference that it makes until they start attending school. It is often in school that they first encounter rejection and a sense of inferiority because their skin is too dark or their features too African. Discrimination comes from both peers and teachers, who are quick to decide that a child is more intelligent and has more potential just because their skin tone is light. Just as in other aspects of life, whiteness and lightness are associated with all the good and positive characteristics, standing in opposition to darkness. Appearing or resembling White may automatically attribute virtues such as intelligence and politeness to a child, and teachers, subsequently, reward and praise that child more (Hunter, 2005: 49-50). It happens too often that darker-skinned pupils are not even given a chance to show what they know, and are nearly never motivated or encouraged by the teacher to try and work harder if they show problems in understanding.

With all the attention given to pupils with the "right" physical appearance, it is not uncommon that Black girls feel invisible and demotivated through their school years. This can result in poor grades and losing interest in learning, but also in trying extra hard to be noticed by accommodating to the accepted manners of speaking and behaving, which is sometimes encouraged by the parents, too. However, as school years are a time when friendship bonds are formed and being accepted from one's peers holds a great importance, a Black girl trying to "act White" might be judged and looked down on by her fellow Black colleagues. Scott (1993: 24) describes a situation like that in the following passage:

"There was a lot of privileges from 'acting like white folks.' Mama was always correcting me and my brother's language, so we had to speak a certain way. This meant the white teachers paid attention to me. They choose me over the other black girls. I was singled out by the teachers for the best books and games and rewards. And I wanted them. I worked even harder. This kept me in trouble with my peers. I didn't always enjoy my 'high-yellah' privileges."

While "acting White" can earn a Black girl respect and attention from the teachers, it can be disastrous for her friendships, especially in the teenage years. With beauty and popularity gaining incredible importance in those years, colorist distinctions between groups of friends become much more visible and emphasized. In high school, as well as later in college, Blacks with similar skin color are more likely to form a friendship than Blacks with a significant difference in skin tone (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 103). This seems to be truer for women than men, mainly because physical appearance is given so much importance in a woman's life that it also affects her friendships. Black women who are extremely dark or extremely light tend to share similar experiences with colorism, and that might be what pushes them together, aside from being marginalized by the opposite group. However, the importance of skin tone when it comes to friendships seems to decrease with age.

Appearance and skin tone still seem to hold importance when it comes to college education, too. The brown paper-bag test might not be in use anymore, but distinctions are evident elsewhere – for example, light-skinned women are more likely to be members of certain sororities, and their darker-skinned colleagues of others (Wilder, 2015: 123). Subsequently, even though similarity in skin tone might not hold that much importance in creating friendship bonds in college, it remains true that women of a similar skin tone are more likely to stick together. Hence, colorism is present through the entire period of a Black woman's education, whether it is highly emphasized or more subtle.

5.3. Job opportunities and the workplace

For Black women, exiting the education system does not mean escaping colorism, it just means having to deal with it in other contexts. As much as it should not be, appearance is a very important thing in a woman's life, and it affects all spheres of her life, the job market and the workplace included. Not infrequently, appearance is given advantage over other factors which should be more important, like education, competence, and experience. In a society that is still extremely sexist, for some it is unimaginable to accept that women are more than just their looks. Paired with colorism, this creates an environment in which women only feel more insecure and self-conscious about the way they look, in spite of their knowledge and capability.

Light skin should not be an important factor when it comes to the job market but, unfortunately, it still is. Despite their qualifications, African American women with lighter skin and more Caucasian features are more likely to get a certain job than women with a darker skin tone. Preference for lighter skin arises from the widely accepted stereotypes about darker women, who are often stigmatized as more aggressive, loud, and straightforward, while lighter-skinned women tend to be perceived as more delicate, civilized, and often also more educated.

In addition to that, light skin is associated with beauty, and beauty, in a way, signifies power. Hunter (2005: 37) calls beauty – in relation to light skin – a "social capital" for women, and goes on to say that women who possess it "are able to convert it into economic capital, educational capital, or another form of social capital." In her study, she discovered that Black women with lighter skin tend to earn more than their darker colleagues, and concluded that skin tone directly affects a Black woman's income – the lighter the skin, the higher the income (Hunter, 2005: 45).

Aside from having a lower income, women with a darker complexion also face more discrimination in the workplace, especially if their work colleagues are predominantly light. They are unlikely to get a promotion if competing with a lighter-skinned woman, even if they are more competent, and more frequently have to deal with harassment and unfair treatment. In most cases, the importance of color and appearance goes above all other professional characteristics.

"Color can mediate negotiations for obtaining jobs, getting promotions and raises, and as we already saw, even getting an education. Because light skin is associated with competence and whiteness, light skin is more desirable by white employers and employers of color who have internalized white racial hierarchies." (Hunter, 2005: 50)

5.4. Dating and marriage

It is no secret that White-like physical features are preferred in a romantic partner. Under the influence of the media and the all-present ideal of beauty that is unmistakably White and/or "light", many African Americans do not hide their preferences when it comes to dating and marrying Black women. Since light-skinned women are perceived as more beautiful and possessing all other virtues that allegedly come with light skin, they have a certain advantage,

which is not necessarily a positive one. Oftentimes, they might feel as if they are picked as a love interest simply because of their skin tone and other physical features, and that their relationships lack a certain depth. On the other hand, women can be as picky and as discriminative as men, choosing to only date lighter-skinned partners because they appear (or are) more sophisticated and successful.

Beauty is not the only reason why light skin is preferred in a partner. Lightness is associated with education, class, and success, and dating a light-skinned woman automatically raises a man's value in the eyes of those who surround him, signifying that he succeeded, that he has "made it" (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 109). Some believe that the reason for this kind of preference lies in history, when interracial relationships were strictly forbidden, which made White women even more desirable to Black men (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 113). Thus, the preference for light skin remained because it is as close to White as it can be.

In the African American community, the tendency to "marry light" is still very much present. Because of racism and colorism, many Blacks resent their dark skin tone, and want to wipe it out by marrying a light-skinned partner so that their children would have a lighter skin tone. That goes for both sexes, as both men and women frequently seek a partner whose skin is lighter and whose features are not as uniquely Black, in spite of who they might be attracted to. Pressure from family members to "marry light" is often the root of this preference.

While darker-skinned Black women are the ones who are primarily discriminated in the area of dating and marriage, light-skinned women face their portion of prejudice, too. As Wilder (2015: 127) found in her interviews with Black women, light-skinned women are often resented for their appearance and are thought to be shallow and conceited because they get more attention from men, which leads to them being rejected and looked down on by their darker-skinned counterparts. In any case, it seems that neither side is winning.

6. The effects of colorism

6.1. Perception of beauty

Wherever we look around us, women are constantly bombarded with images of what is supposed to be beautiful, but seems just unable to be reached. Perfectly slender bodies with curves in just the right places, fair skin with no imperfections whatsoever, long, shiny hair – these are the characteristics of a perfect, beautiful woman.

"Popular literature, media, and informal discussions in the United States, make the standard of beauty very clear. Fashion experts suggest how we can minimize, enhance, and draw attention to and away from particular physical characteristics. A cursory look at print media gives specific messages as to what is beautiful and what is not." (Sekayi, 2003: 467)

Even though nowadays most of these "perfect" images are nothing more than products of image-editing programs, women – both Black and White – are still desperate in their efforts to look as similar to them as possible.

For Black women, the perception of beauty tends to be distorted from the very beginning. Taught from their early childhood age that dark skin and kinky hair can not possibly be considered beautiful and attractive, they often grow up thinking that beauty is the exact opposite of what they are and how they look. When challenged by the universal ideal of beauty, many Black women are unable to look in the mirror and see something they like, something pretty, beautiful, or even satisfactory. Instead, they only see the things and characteristics that are "wrong" – that tends to be the case with women in general, regardless of their race, because of the unrealistic and unattainable images of what is considered beautiful, constantly shown in the media. White women struggle as well, and are no strangers to excessive dieting, specific makeup techniques that are supposed to cover all the imperfections, or plastic surgery, but African American women go beyond that, because the ideal of Black beauty is too often too

similar to the White one – and features like skin color and hair texture are very difficult, even impossible to alter. A sincere image of a Black woman – one with thick thighs, dark skin, and nappy hair – is nearly never presented as something beautiful, and is often exchanged for something more White-like. Furthermore, Marita Golden (2004: 97) draws a connection between the universally accepted ideal of beauty and the notion of White power:

"The European standard of beauty reigns and rules the world because it is an extension of White political and economic power. It also rules because Whites are willing without hesitation to define what they mean by beauty. But as African Americans we are unwilling to clearly define and hold on to a notion of Black beauty that is not merely an extension of White standards, one that makes room for Black women who span the spectrum. We do not want to say that full lips, black skin, and a broad nose, typically West African features, are our standard."

Being shamed their whole lives because of the way they look, African Americans are unlikely to consider a common Black woman beautiful. Being Black and looking Black is too connected to Black history, during which being Black was never associated with being beautiful. Whiteness was associated with civility, virtue; blackness was the exact opposite (Hill, 2002: 77). And just as White (and "light") used to be synonymous with freedom, education, and class, it gradually came to be synonymous with beauty, too.

When it comes to Black women who are considered to be appealing and pretty, they are almost always light-skinned, with long, straight hair, and a body type that is not typically African American. Their beauty might be natural, especially if they are of mixed race, but by accepting that as an ideal and a standard of beauty, an image is created that most Black women can not compete with. Subsequently, the market for skin bleaching and hair straightening products is not decreasing – in contrary, unrealistic expectations that Black women encounter on every corner only make them want to change their appearance more. Cheng (2000: 191)

mentions in her essay that the discourse of beauty represents "an attempt to discipline women's bodies." In other words, the standard of beauty that is widely accepted only pushes women to do whatever it takes to look as similar to it as possible, and is nothing more than another attempt to control and influence them.

6.2. The impact of colorism on Black identity

Identity is one of the most important things that shape a person into who they are, while at the same time representing a sense of belonging to a specific group of people who share something in common. Social identity is usually based on nationality, skin color, ancestry, and shared history and oppression (Sanders Thompson, 2014: 145). Race is, thus, one of the most important characteristics which define a person's identity. Furthermore, racial identity is based on distinct features, usually physical, which define whether a person belongs to a specific race. For African Americans, these features are the very same ones which cause dissatisfaction and shame due to colorism, so it is not strange that they often take no pride whatsoever in looking unmistakably Black. Being Black too often means being stigmatized, marginalized, rejected, because of which African Americans might choose to give more significance to some other identities over the racial one. Sanders Thompson (2014: 146) talks about a "fragmented" sense of identity that is present among the members of the Black population, and explains it in the following way:

"A 'fragmented' sense of racial identity militates against a strong sense of peoplehood. (...) Not all potential group members share an interest in the identity or identification and not all who share the identity and identification express that shared identity/identification in the same ways or with equal strength. In addition to prevailing attitudes and norms within the

group itself, group members may look to the nongroup members for cues that suggest the advantageous components of an identity."

Essentially, it means that some members of the Black community may not express their racial identity as strongly as some others do, but that does not make them any less Black, and it certainly does not mean that they hate themselves and their heritage – which is often the case. The idea of a fragmented identity is frequently (and wrongly) dubbed "black self-hatred", but that is not necessarily the case, because a person can be hesitant about identifying strictly as an African American, but that does not automatically signify self-hatred, or hatred of the Black community. Sometimes, unfortunately, a Black person chooses to not identify as Black because it makes their life easier and means more opportunities in the career and marital spheres of life. The latter one is especially true for African American women. It is a fact that light-skinned women, with features that are closer to Caucasian than Black, are preferred and oftentimes chosen over the girls whose physical features are characteristically Black. Of course, the universal standards of beauty and the representation of Black women in the media are at least partly responsible for that, but many Black men will also choose light skin over dark in a romantic partner because of the many stereotypes that accompany them. Even though they are nothing more than wrongly based prejudices, these stereotypes are still present in the community, and many take them into account when choosing who they are going to date or even just associate with.

In the light of these issues, it is not uncommon that a Black woman whose features are White-like enough will choose to alienate herself from her Black identity and start "passing" as White. In the times of slavery, passing was not as judged as it is today. Back then it served as an escape from the brutal treatment that Blacks received, but today it is seen as a renouncement of one's heritage, a betrayal of the race, and it bears harsh consequences – like cutting all the ties with family members, completely changing one's behavior, and even refusing to have

children from fear that their skin color would reveal the truth (Russel, Wilson, Hall, 1992: 73). Choosing to go through with it can seriously damage the sense of a person's identity. Moreover, many African Americans do not pass on purpose, and are simply regularly mistaken for White because of their physical appearance. In most cases, these individuals are biracial – and while some of them embrace the dual identity they feel they have, some opt for identifying as strictly Black or strictly White. This frequently depends on the social context and the situation these individuals find themselves in. If "biracial" is an accepted racial identity in the community an individual lives in, they will most likely identify as such; but, if this category is nonexistent, they will either identify as one of the two, or switch between identifying as Black and identifying as White according to the situation (Rockquemore and Brunsma, 2004: 116). Again, the sense of identity is shattered, and they might feel rejected by one racial group or the other.

While strictly Black physical features are what causes colorism to begin with, not appearing Black also does. A biracial woman with light skin and straight hair might feel Black and identify as such, but will be rejected and judged by her Black peers because she does not "look Black enough". She looks White, but feels Black, and that is an inner dilemma that is fairly difficult to deal with – being torn between what she is supposed to be on the basis of her looks, and what she really feels that she is. Russel, Wilson, and Hall (1992: 97) state that among biracial individuals, those who suffer the most are the ones whose appearance clashes with their sense of identity, and that is because colorism works in both directions. Appearing too White-like might cause the same amount of oppression and judgment as having uniquely Black features, because colorism is an issue that the entire Black community is forced to deal with, regardless of their skin tone or their sense of identity.

7. Colorism today

7.1. Color-blindness

In today's world, many would like to think that people have raised above the issues of race, gender, and color, and that there are equal opportunities and equal treatment for everyone. The truth is, we are still far from that, and trying to erase these issues from existing by simply diminishing and not openly discussing them is wrong. Race and color are not unimportant or irrelevant – they hold a great importance, and wrong ideas and beliefs about them still cause inequality and oppression towards the members of the non-prevalent racial groups. Color-blindness, or color-blind ideology is the belief that racism and discrimination do not exist anymore, and that the opportunities are equal for everyone, regardless of their skin color (Ebert, 2004: 177). It suggests that race is unimportant, and that the importance has shifted completely to an individual's competence, abilities, and behavior. "Color-blind ideology assumes a race-neutral context, and it promotes a racially assimilated society in which race is portrayed as irrelevant; thus, it serves to reinforce the current racial order." (Ebert, 2004: 177) Promoting color-blindness as a characteristic of the American society seems to be nothing more than an attempt to sweep the still-present issues under the rug and try to make the world believe that skin color has lost its relevance, even though that is definitely not true.

In reality, racism and colorism are still very much alive and present in everyday life. Black women and Black people in general are still oppressed, stereotyped, and rejected because of who they are. It simply can not be denied that their life opportunities are just not the same as the ones White people get – and yet, Whites are the ones who would love to believe that everything has fallen into place and that racism is a thing of the past. In the kind of utopian society that is the idea of the color-blind ideology, there would be no such thing as White privilege, but it still exists, and is being confirmed every day. Ebert (2004: 184) writes that Whites often deny the existence of White privilege, and yet justify their racist practices through

stereotypes they have created themselves; moreover, they are quick claim that they, too, are victims of discrimination, and that minorities, especially immigrants, have more opportunities to succeed than they do.

A nation that is as race-conscious as American can not even try to deny that race still holds a great significance and that racism belongs to the past. Sure, the practices of racism and colorism might not always be visible, and may have become more subtle or hidden, but they are still there, and they affect the lives of those who are discriminated against on a daily basis. Instead of trying to erase that issue from existence and diminishing its importance, what should be done is raising awareness of it, because that is the only way to deal with it.

7.2. Representation in the media

In a world where people are surrounded by media nearly every second of every day, representation really matters, and it matters a lot. Unfortunately, it is still not as accurate as it is supposed to be. It is enough to take a look at Black women in the television and music industries. The idea of what is attractive enough to be put in the forefront remains the same: a light-skinned woman with long, straight hair, with a figure that corresponds to the latest ideal of perfection, looking more White than Black. Nowadays, there is more diversity, and different kinds and shapes of Black female appearance can be seen, but the ideal stays the same. If a role calls for a beautiful woman, a light-skinned actress is more likely to be cast for it. And, even with all the diversity, the stereotypes live on and Black women continue to be represented as they always were, wedged into typical roles that certainly do not correspond reality.

Idolization of lightness as the symbol of beauty is not the only problematic thing. Although nowadays darker-skinned Black women are also portrayed as successful and attractive – although that is not the norm – their characters still tend to be more aggressive,

domineering, and overly sexualized, and they are nearly never the protagonist of the story. The role of a love interest, a gentle, romantic, delicate woman, is almost always reserved for a light-skinned girl, the case being the same with movies, television shows, and music videos. Dark complexion and natural hair are rarely seen on those types of characters, since they are not perceived pretty or attractive by the public. Likewise, models promoting makeup, clothes, or other products in advertisements are very infrequently dark.

In a way, representation is deeply connected with the notion of color-blindness, because it seems to serve to control the image of a Black woman that will be presented to the world. "In essence, the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America." (Hill Collins, 2004: 147) The issue of representation further deepens the problem of colorism and only serves as a fuel which continues to encourage and stimulate it, while at the same time having a devastatingly negative effect on Black women's pride, self-esteem, and the sense of value.

Conclusion

The persistent issue of colorism has its roots in the times of slavery, but it has not toned down or disappeared over the years. It is alive and it impacts every aspect of a Black woman's life in every stage of her life. Being a woman itself automatically drags behind a lifetime of discrimination and prejudice that await on every corner; being a Black woman means encountering many more obstacles and dealing with even more oppression – not only from White people, but from Blacks and other Black women, too. Black women face racism, sexism, and colorism. Of the three, colorism is the least discussed and least known, often hidden and suppressed in shame, but constantly and inevitably present.

The aim of this thesis was to show what a huge impact colorism has on the lives of Black women. As it has been shown, it is impossible for a Black woman to go through life without ever having to face colorism. Whether her complexion is dark or light, she will constantly be reminded of it, and reminded of the fact that, either way, someone will find something to criticize and resent about her appearance. Black women grow up being taught that their skin is too dark and their hair too nappy; they enter school and encounter rejection because they are too dark or too White-like; they form friendships and relationships, work, marry, have a family, and every single bit of their life seems to be influenced by the colorist tendencies they are surrounded with. Colorism hurts their self-confidence and their sense of belonging, making them believe that, whatever they do and however they look, they will never be enough. They resort to desperate measures, altering their appearance by lightening their skin or straightening their hair, and they are still criticized for what they are doing, even though they were told it is the right thing to do. A Black woman can not escape colorism. She can fight it, put up with it, choose to ignore it, but it will still be present. In an explicit or a subtle way, it will still be there.

Raising awareness of this issue is extremely important. Many women only later in life realize that they have been fed colorist beliefs since they were little girls, but were not aware of

it. Others never come to that realization, and simply live their lives thinking that that is how it is supposed to be, because their mothers believed it and their grandmothers believed it – and, someday, their children might, too. Hatred is not reserved for dark skin only, it goes both ways, and it might seem that there is no neutral position, that a woman will be oppressed whether she is light or dark – that is the paradox of colorism. The only solution is first of all embracing oneself, and then the others. Young Black girls should not be taught that the way they look is wrong because it clashes with the standards of beauty; they should be taught to love themselves and everything about themselves, including the color of their skin. In order for that to become a common practice, the issue of colorism needs to be thoroughly discussed and openly contemplated, instead of being hidden like a shameful secret.

Bibliography

Byrd, Ayana D., Tharps, Lori L. (2014) *Hair Story. Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Brown, Kevin D. (2014) "The Rise and Fall of the One-Drop Rule: How the Importance of Color Came to Eclipse Race" in Kimberly Jade Norwood (ed.) *Color Matters. Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge. 44-94.

Caldwell, Paulette M. (1991) "A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender." *Duke Law Journal*, Vol. 1991, No. 2, pp. 365-396.

Cheng, Anne Anlin. (2000) "Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Feminism, and the Aesthetic Question." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 191-217

Craig-Henderson, Kellina M. (2014) "Colorism and Interracial Intimacy: How Skin Color Matters" in Kimberly Jade Norwood (ed.) *Color Matters. Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge. 118-138.

Ebert, Kimberly L. (2004) "Demystifying Color-Blind Ideology: Denying Race, Ignoring Racial Inequalities" in Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, Hayward Derrick Horton (ed.) *Skin Deep. How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 174-196.

Erasmus, Zimitri. (1997) "Oe! My Hare Gaan Huistoe': Hair-Styling as Black Cultural Practice." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, No. 32, Race, Identity and Change, pp. 11-16.

Finkelman, Paul. (2014) “The Origins of Colorism in Early American Law” in Kimberly Jade Norwood (ed.) *Color Matters. Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge. 29-43.

Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. (2008) “Yearning For Lightness: Transnational Circuits in the Marketing and Consumption of Skin Lighteners.” *Gender and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 281-302.

Golden, Marita. (2004) *Don’t Play in the Sun. One Woman’s Journey Through the Color Complex*. New York: Doubleday.

Golden, Marita (ed.) (1993) *Wild Women Don’t Wear No Blues. Black Women Writers on Love, Men and Sex.* New York: Doubleday.

Golden, Marita, Richards Shreve, Susan (ed.) (1995) *Skin Deep. Black Women and White Women Write About Race*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hall, Ronald. (1995) “The Bleaching Syndrome: African Americans’ Response to Cultural Domination Vis-à-Vis Skin Color.” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 172-184.

Hall, Ronald E. (2005) “The Euro-Americanization of Race: Alien Perspective of African Americans vis-à-vis Trivialization of Skin Color.” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 116-128.

Herring, Cedric. (2004) “Skin Deep: Race and Complexion in the ‘Color-Blind’ Era” in Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, Hayward Derrick Horton (ed.) *Skin Deep. How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1-21.

Herring, Cedric, Keith, Verna, Horton, Hayward Derrick (ed.) (2004) *Skin Deep. How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Hill Collins, Patricia. (2004) *Black Sexual Politics. African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.

Hill, Mark E. (2002) "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 1, pp. 77-91

Hunter, Margaret. (2004) "Light, Bright, and Almost White: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Light Skin" in Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, Hayward Derrick Horton (ed.) *Skin Deep. How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 22-44.

Hunter, Margaret L. (2005) *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*. New York: Routledge.

Norwood, Kimberly Jade. (2014) "Colorism and Blackthink: A Modern Augmentation of Double Consciousness" in Kimberly Jade Norwood (ed.) *Color Matters. Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge. 158-181.

Norwood, Kimberly Jade, Foreman Solonova, Violeta. (2014) "The Ubiquitousness of Colorism: Then and Now" in Kimberly Jade Norwood (ed.) *Color Matters. Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge. 9-28.

Norwood, Kimberly Jade (ed.) (2014) *Color Matters. Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge.

Owens Patton, Tracey. (2006) “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair.” *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 24-51.

Rockquemore, Kerry Ann, Brunsma, David L. (2004) “Beyond Black?: The Reflexivity of Appearances in Racial Identification Among Black/White Biracials” in Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, Hayward Derrick Horton (ed.) *Skin Deep. How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 99-127.

Russel, Kathy, Wilson, Midge, Hall, Ronald. (1992) *The Color Complex. The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*. New York: Doubleday.

Sanders Thompson, Vetta L. (2004) “Fragmented Identity: Psychological Insecurity and Colorism Among African Americans” in Kimberly Jade Norwood (ed.) *Color Matters. Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Post-Racial America*. New York: Routledge. 139-157.

Sekayi, Dia. (2003) “Aesthetic Resistance to Commercial Influences: The Impact of the Eurocentric Beauty Standard on Black College Women.” *The Journal of Negro Eduction,* Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 467-477

Scott, Kesho Yvonne. (1993) “’Marilyn’ from *The Habit of Surviving*” in Marita Golden (ed.) *Wild Women Don’t Wear No Blues. Black Women Writers on Love, Men and Sex.* New York: Doubleday. 13-43.

Thompson, Maxine S., Keith, Verna M. (2004) “Copper Brown and Blue Black: Colorism and Self Evaluation” in Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, Hayward Derrick Horton (ed.) *Skin Deep. How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 45-61.

White, Shane, White, Graham. (1995) “Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 45-76

Wilder, JeffriAnne. (2015) *Color Stories. Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.