Critical Reflections on Ethnicity and Colourism in Africa and the Diaspora

'Ethnicity' is a subjective term that is widely debated, however, broadly it is identified as the belonging to a social group of common traditions or interests including; territory, forms of religion, values and social norms (Williams 2015: 147). Identifying and differentiating people by the colour of their skin is a specific type of behavioural pattern or archetype, also linked to ethnicity. This division of individuals based on difference of appearance, has often led to discrimination and violence, most commonly reflected in the act of racism. However, it also manifests in other forms, such as colourism, a concept intertwined with racism but distinct in its own respect (Harris 2008: 54). Colourism is a prejudicial manifestation within ethnicities, which discriminates people, according to the tone or shade of their skin (Walker 1982: 290, Jones 2000: 1489). As scholar, Hunter (2007) recognises, colourism lies within the second system of discrimination, he argues that those of African descent can experience discrimination because of their race and ethnicity (the first system), but the 'outcome of that discrimination will differ dramatically by skin tone' (the second system) (Hunter 2007: 238). Moreover, colourism can operate in both intra-racial and inter-racial terms, meaning that it can be seen in a racial group to a member of their own race, or amongst those of different colours and race (Jones 2000: 1498).

The concept of colourism is not exclusive to the black community, nonetheless this essay will be focusing on how colourism negatively represents African ethnicity through feelings of lack of authenticity among those with lighter skin compared to feelings of inferiority among those with darker skin (Hunter 2007: 238). Thus, causing a divide between those who identify within the 'black African' ethnic group (Hunter 2007: 237). The exploration of the concept of colourism will occur through the utilisation of a documentary named 'Dark Girls' (2011), as the primary source. The documentary outlines the intra-relational characteristics of colourism Dark Girls (2011). However, this essay wishes to take this concept further, by drawing on a wider range of academic literature. This will allow this essay, to not only explore why certain skin tones are exposed to forms of prejudice but to also look into the colonial and imperial legacies that still manifest within our society and how they transcend, particularly through media platforms and globalisation processes (Dark Girls 2011). However, it is important to note, that this essay maintains that not every individual who identifies themselves within particular ethnic groups would necessarily experience this form of discrimination.

The documentary Dark Girls, released in September 2011, is directed by Bill Duke and Channsin Berry. Both of the directors were largely encouraged to produce the film after their own personal experiences in the face of acts of such discrimination, due to an individual's shade of skin (Dark Girls 2011, Stewart 2013:1). The film explores the issue of colourism, a socially constructed form of bias, within black culture against individuals, particularly women, of darker skin tones. I chose to reflect on this specific issue, as it is a contentious matter, which often lives in the shadows behind the topic of 'racism', and although racism is an equally important matter, colourism is a different phenomenon, which must be addressed. The documentary itself is structured through a series of interviews, whereby numerous scholars, teachers, celebrities and others explain the concept of colourism, the discrimination that surrounds it and the way it manifests within society. The strengths of using this particular documentary is that it speaks directly to those within the black community about their own experiences, therefore providing first-hand knowledge (Dark Girls 2011). Furthermore, it systematically goes through different aspects and implications of colourism including; historical events, the media's effects, proposes global healing process and how this has impacted both African

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Americans and native Africans of light and dark skin (Dark Girls 2011). Furthermore, the film tells the experiences of individuals from various social groups. It is suggestive of the notion that colourism is not exclusive to certain classes or people but is able to transcend social barriers, thus increasing the applicability of the film (Dark Girls 2011).

However, there are certain weaknesses in using this documentary. It mainly looks into the damages of colourism on women. With even the men who do appear, mostly describing experiences they have witnessed towards dark skinned women. Although, this essay also mainly reflects on the damaging effects colourism has on women, as primarily, colourism is a phenomenon that harms women. Although, this essay mainly focuses on women, therefore it may also be a strength in this case. Furthermore, a weakness of the film in a globally conscious perspective is that it focuses mainly on African experiences. However, this may also be a strength for this particular essay, as that is the focus of my writing. Finally, although the documentary principally focuses on the first hand experiences of inter race discrimination of darker skinned individuals, this essay would like to broaden the scope by looking into these more societal subconscious implications of those with darker skin in order to expand on how colourism does not just remain discriminatory between ethnicities.

Introduction to Colourism as a Colonial and Imperial Legacy

"The house N**ggers vs. the slave N**ggers" (Dark Girls 2011)

'Black people were treated like cattle…nothing more than animals or beasts' from 1619 to 1865, whilst black enslavement existed within the United States (Dark Girls 2011). The slaves brought over to the 'New World' were seen, as commodities, unworthy of the juridical recognised rights and commonality that white people were able to benefit from. The ownership of slaves often led to their exploitation, not just in terms of work, but slave owners would regularly physically harm or rape their slaves, thus, leading to the conception of 'race mixing' in the 1600s (Jones 2000: 1499, Dark Girls 2011). A certain social hierarchy was produced through 'race mixing', as those named as 'Mutalloes', individuals with mixed black and white ancestry, had some privileges over those with darker skin colour (Dark Girls 2011, Gabriel 2007: 23, Jones 2000: 1504). While judicially, Mutalloes were regarded as 'lower than the law'; many slave owners displayed a preference towards them (Dark Girls 2011). This was shown by assigning them less onerous positions where they could remain inside, rather than work outside in the horrifying conditions (Jones 2000: 1507). As time went on 'society attached various meanings to these colour differences, including assumptions about a person's race, socioeconomic class, intelligence, and physical attractiveness (Jones 2000: 1500). In the documentary of Dark Girls, a historian describes the racial profiling as the beginning of the division between the 'house negroes and the slave negroes' (Dark Girls 2011). This socially constructed split allowed prejudice to take shape between those that could successfully pass the 'brown paper bag test', a test that looked at whether you are lighter ('preferable') or darker than a paper bag, against those that could not (Dark Girls 2011). Social scientists argue that this contributed to aspects of colourism as it acted as a signified 'birthplace' for the adaptations of this ethnic discrimination (Norwood 2015: 538). Therefore, allowing for the internalisation that those with darker skin were socially seen as the lowest form of 'human', but also the internalisation that those with lighter skin should be thought of as superior among descendants of African ethnicity (Dark Girls 2011, Norwood 2015: 599).

Colourism is also evident within the native continent of Africa, which many scholars have also identified as a colonial legacy, as it was socially implemented from European settlers in the 19th Century through concepts of racial profiling (Dark Girls 2011, Norwood 2015: 587). The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, are examples where Europeans used differences in African Ethnicity as an instrument for applying western social constructs of hierarchy (Pareisse 2014: 15). Colonial administrators attempted to form order and decentralise the tribes by giving certain power and privileges, to the Tutsis, as they were 'whiter' than the Hutus (San 2010: 8). The Europeans would measure the noses, skin colour, temples and faces of the African ethnic groups, to determine who was the superior ethnic group by being closer to the westerners themselves (Thompson 2007: 11). They declared that the Tutsis had fine features that resembled more to 'lord like people' than the Hutus did (Thompson 2007: 13). Thus, the colonial administrators arbitrarily gave more power to the Tutsi's as they were seen as closer to the westerners as they were more 'white than the Hutus' (San 2010: 8). This allowed for a complex of social superiority to evolve over time amongst the different groups (Gabriel 2007: 14). The Belgians also introduced ethnicity papers, which further enforced the divisions and tensions between the ethnic groups up until after the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, where

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the papers were abolished (Uvin 1999: 258). However, this is not to say that all discrimination and subordination stems from the colonial powers in all countries within Africa, nor is the act of grouping individuals together a colonial invention. Nevertheless, the colonial powers were the first to exaggerate this form of hierarchy by enforcing stereotypes and ranking people based on their features linked to ethnicity (Thompson 2007: 14). A similar case to the 'rules of enslavement' performed by the slave owners in the US (Jones 2000: 1500).

The Implications of Colourism on both Dark and Light Skinned Individuals

"Dark Skin just isn't deemed as beautiful, whereas light skin just isn't truly black'' (Dark Girls 2011)

There are various ways in which both dark and light skinned individuals can be affected by the implications of colourism, when looking at the social practices and policies that perpetuate this form of 'structural racism', a name given in the documentary (Dark Girls 2011, Norwood 2015: 587). This essay will focus on the aspects highlighted in Dark Girls, including the socio-economic implications of those with darker skin and ontological questions in regards to ethnic identity of those with lighter skin (Dark Girls 2011, Hunter 2007: 238).

Skin whitening cream is increasingly becoming one of the biggest industries within the global beauty sector, as sales grew from $40 billion to $43 billion in 2008 (Dark Girls 2011, Norwood 2015: 588). Within this amount are large portions of sales are bought by those of African descent, in both Africa and America (Dark Girls 2011). Theorist, Hall (1994), argues that this response of bleaching skin is 'as a means of assimilating into American Society', as a result, of cultural domination (Gabriel 2007: 21). The increase in sales is not just occurring amongst black ethnic groups living in the 'western world', as a woman in the documentary 'Dark Girls' describes; 'across African billboards are campaigns supporting skin bleaching cream' (Dark Girls 2011). This is evident in a recent study, which found that 77% of women in Nigeria use skin whitening cream, thus confirming scholar, Norwood's (2015) hypothesis, which suggests that implications of colonialism in the 'motherland', that 'white is better', still exist today (Dark Girls 2011, Norwood 2015: 587). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest a correlation between colonialism and ethnic representations (Norwood 2015: 587). For example in the pre-colonial Congo, dark skin was preferred to such an extent that babies were put in the sun to become darker', however, in today's climate 30-40% of women in the Congo, use skin whitening cream (Norwood 2015: 587). Thus many have argued that this is suggestive of the change in social dynamics that has led to a preference in lighter skin, because of the socially constructed archetypes that are associated with being of lighter tone (Dark Girls 2011, Norwood 2015: 587).

The manifestation of colourism within society also affects other aspects including levels of education, job prospects and healthcare (Harris 2008: 65). Social theorists suggest that in the global marketplace, those with lighter skin often participate in more positive employment experience (Hunter 2007: 240). With call back and interview information suggesting that those of lighter skin was preferred over academic credentials (Norwood 2015: 594). Scholars, such as McDougall (2016), have suggested that whiter skin has become synonymous with higher income classes, therefore individuals are continuously attempting to change their appearance in order to conform to these social constructed pre-existing stereotypes (McDougall 2016: 7). Therefore, because of the white supremacist framework that exists, which subconsciously infers that to live successfully, one must conform to the social appearances of society. Furthermore, the education system also plays victim to colourism, with one particular study showing that the education gap between black students and white students was almost identical to the gap between those of light skin to those with darker skin (Hugh and Hertel 1990: 1105). The documentary Dark Girls, displays an interview of a dark skinned women, recounting the experiences she had when attending school, where discrimination occurred where teachers would continuously favour those of lighter skin (Dark Girls 2011). Those same teachers, recounts the women, would also separate those of lighter skin from those with darker skin, thus further enforcing ideas of difference (Dark girls 2011). The children separated because of fighting but this then lead to further prejudice and discrimination amongst the children, further enforced by media and parental comments they have heard in other situations (Dark Girls 2011).

Although, having light skin is seen by many as a 'privilege', it does also harness harm especially in regards to questions of ethnic identity (Dark Girls 2011, Hunter 2007: 244). In many communities, having dark skin suggest legitimacy in regards to African ethnicity (Hunter 2007: 244). This can lead to many individuals questioning their

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authenticity, as many report feelings of conflict or discomfort by other members of the same African ethnic groups (Dark Girls 2011). In the documentary Dark Girls (2011), those of lighter skin commented on how they felt the need to 'prove themselves' or to 'establish that they were black enough' when in front of those members of the community who were of darker skin tones (Dark Girls 2011). Furthermore, evidence of questions surrounding 'ethnic legitimacy' is shown in media representations, where individuals such as Barrack Obama and Bill Richardson were charged with 'not being black enough' (Hunter 2007: 244). The articles, published by major media publications such as 'Time Magazine' and 'Los Angeles Times', used headlines including 'Is Obama Black Enough?' (Coates 2007: 1) Therefore the paradox surrounding questions of ethnic identity, propose issues for those with lighter skin as they are 'caught in the middle', by being discriminated against for obtaining certain privileges, yet they are not able to escape those who deem them as ethnically illegitimate by not being 'black enough' (Dark Girls 2011).

The Effects of the Media and Globalisation

"White women are even the primary women of the internet in black music videos" (Dark Girls 2011)

The documentary, Dark Girls (2011), accurately encapsulates the damaging effects media plays in the role of shaping colourism and allowing for its perpetuance, through the choice of actors, presenters and musicians that are broadcasted globally (Dark Girls 2011). The opening scene of the documentary, Dark Girls, shows a young girl of African ethnicity. When asked to choose what kind of 'colour' she thought the smartest and prettiest young girl was, she chose the girl of white ethnicity (Dark Girls 2011). Which begs the question, highlighted within the documentary, of how an individual of such a young age is able to differentiate and understand the potential social implications for those with darker skin tones? The socially constructed concept of colourism affects individuals of all ages, through the effects of the media; one psychologist in the documentary suggests (Dark Girls 2011, Gabriel 2007: 23, Harris 2008: 60).

The media continues to broadcast those of lighter skin tones through its continuance of choosing those of lighter skin (Gabriel 2007: 20). Once those of darker skin do make it to the media outlets, their image is often photo shopped often leads the skin colour of darker skinned individuals to be altered to lighter skin tones (Gabriel 2007: 20). A recent study conducted found that black people portrayed in advertisements or films were 'less black' than the black individuals used for editorial photography (Gabriel 2007: 20). The negative portrayal of dark skinned individuals in media is not just exclusive to real life media platforms, but is also depicting within films (Dark Girls 2011). Scholar, Gabriel (2007) explores how dark skin women are often depicted as being welfare reliant and dark skinned men are shown to be gangsters or criminals, whereas black individuals of lighter skin are shown to be the 'leading woman' or 'heroines' (Gabriel 2007: 18). Media platforms, therefore, allow for this continuance of imperialist social domination through exporting images around the world of western beauty standards, subconsciously encouraging women and men to alter their appearance (Gabriel 2007: 23, Harris 2008: 60).

Not only do media outlets, contribute to the continuation of colourism but another infiltrating method is shown through globalisation processes, by allowing the negativity of dark skinned individuals to perpetuate but also to travel around the world (Dark Girls 2011). As globalisation has meant an influx of different traditions around the world, one would think that various different social aspirations would also be exchanged and altered. However, by drawing on colonial ideologies of the 'New World Order', in the global context of discrimination and 'US domination', imagery of western constructions of appearance ultimately lead the way (Hunter 2007: 248). Whilst the US simultaneously exports imagery of the 'good life' with 'white western beauty', it allows 'African Americans to internalise the ideals of white dominated American society and seek participation in the American Dream by becoming whiter (Gabriel 2007: 24). This socially created form of 'capital' has echoed through the public sphere to encourage those of various skin tones to become lighter, not just those of African ethnicity but also members of Asian and Hispanic ethnicity (Hunter 2007: 244). Thus, media outlets and globalisation maintain the US cultural imperialism form of 'structural racism' through consistently displaying white beauty and success and negative images of black people being synonymous with crime, poverty and unhappiness (Gabriel 2007: 21)

Conclusion

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To conclude, one can find the negative implications of this social phenomenon in various areas globally. Not only does it cause discrimination between those of the same ethnicity, but also has various other subconscious implications that transcends the boundaries of cultures to allow prejudice to take shape and form a preference for those of lighter skin within our global society (Dark Girls 2011). This essay maintains that colonialist and white imperialist legacies have contributed to this conception of prejudice, through early forms of racial categorisation and role assignment, and has been able to infiltrate various cultures through the media and globalisation processes (Dark Girls 2011, Norwood 2015: 288). Finally, this essay finds the prospect of colourism particularly detrimental to representations of African ethnicity as it is encouraging those darker skinned individuals of African descent, to attempt to alter or change their appearance or employ feelings of lack of authenticity or legitimacy because of their appearance, based on the subjective western beauty standards (Dark Girls 2011, Gabriel 2007: 20). But here lies the conundrum of colourism: on one hand dark skin is associated with poverty, lack of education and backwardness, yet those who are considered 'light skinned' are evidence of not being 'ethnically authentic' (Hunter 2007: 244). To finish on a comment similar to that of the primary source, this essay maintains that to 'heal from colourism', one must start with consciousness in order to relieve those of such discrimination and accept differences amongst people, if our society is to continue to progress (Dark Girls 2011).

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Date written: April 2019