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Skin Bleaching in South Africa: A Result of Colonialism and Apartheid?

South Africa has set an example for all struggling nations by overcoming apartheid and showing the world that exceptional leaders are needed to stand up, fight, and put an end to oppression. Nelson Mandela was one of those great leaders, who fought for freedom alongside his people. Thanks to Mandela's contribution, South Africa now promises equal human and civil rights for all its citizens. This was not an easy accomplishment; in fact, many lives were lost in the effort to make South Africa's constitution one of the most liberal in the world (South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy). Today, South Africa prides itself on being called "Mandela's Rainbow Nation" and its citizens are proud of their race and heritage. Yet, South Africans have not overcome many of the psychological effects of apartheid and colonialism, some of which are self-hatred and low self-esteem. These negative psychosomatic influences often push people to alter their physical appearance to feel better about themselves, and one of the most common methods of doing so is by bleaching the skin (Abrahams, 2000; Charles, 2003; Singham, 1968). This paper seeks to determine why 35% of a nation with an estimated population of 79% black South Africans (*Paths to Pluralism*; Blay, 2011), who have every reason to be proud of their ethnicity, race, and heritage, resort to skin bleaching in order to feel good about themselves. A Few studies have been conducted on skin bleaching in South Africa, but none explores the potential link between skin bleaching, colonialism, and apartheid in South Africa. In an attempt to answer this question and bridge this gap in the literature, this paper will analyze the practice of skin bleaching and its consequences; the historical influence of colonialism and apartheid on South African skin bleachers; and the existence of gender disparity within South African skin bleachers. This analysis will provide a better understanding on how colonialism and apartheid may have influenced some South Africans' preference for a light skin tone.

Skin Bleaching Practices and consequences

Although skin bleaching (also known as skin whitening), is one of the most prevalent and dangerous methods of body alteration used worldwide (Mahè et al, 2003), very few people know

what it entails and the lengths to which some will go to attain the standard of beauty imposed by society. Skin bleaching is the application of topical creams, gels, soaps, and household products (Mahè et al, 2003) to lighten the skin. These products usually contain chemicals such as hydroquinone, mercurials, corticosteroids, and other acidic agents such as salicylic acid, sodium hypochlorite and detergents (Dadzie & Petit, 2009). The agents in these products can put users at great risk of numerous health issues. For instance, hydroquinone is usually used in industrial chemical products; however, some dark-skinned people use this product because it is effective at inhibiting the production of melanin (Dadzie & Petit, 2009). The continuous application of hydroquinone is dangerous because it can lead to skin diseases such as exogenous ochronosis, hyperpigmentation, burns, severe acne, skin legion, and even cutis laxa - loss of skin elasticity- (De Souza, 2008; Faye et al. 2005; Ly et al. 2007). Additionally, many people knowingly or unknowing used products that contain illegal elevated amount of corticosteroids to lighten their skin because of the chemical's remarkable capability to whiten the skin quickly. Because corticosteroids is quickly absorbed into the blood, long term application can result in devastating and permanent health issues such as fungal and bacterial skin infections, glaucoma, cataracts, hypertension, diabetes, and infertility (Ramsay et al., 2003; Faye et al. 2005; Ly et al. 2007). The long term use of some of these chemicals often results in mercury poisoning, which may cause kidney and liver problems as well as neurological diseases and death (Dadzie & Petit, 2009). These potential medical complications do not keep people from using those chemicals as skin bleaching has become one of the most common forms of potentially harmful body modification practices in the world.

In numerous countries around the world, a rapidly growing number of people have turned to the practice of skin bleaching in attempts to lighten their skin. However, the prevalence of skin bleaching in Africa is higher and more hazardous than most other countries where skin bleaching is practiced (Lewis et al, 2012). Skin bleaching rates in Africa vary from city to city with 25% of adult women in

Bamako, Mali being users to 70% in Lagos, Nigeria((De Souza, 2008; Pitche et al. 2005; Lewis et al., 2010). Lack of regulation of skin bleaching products in most African cities is an increasing concern primarily because many Africans mix unsafe amount of bleaching agents with other dangerous chemicals such as toothpaste, battery acid, bleach, and washing powder to create a more powerful concoctions that will lighten their skin quicker (Mayè et al. 2003; Ajose 2005; Pitche et al. 2005; Lewis et al., 2010). Uunfortunately, the use of these products only offers short-term satisfaction. Once people start using skin lighteners, they become dependent on them because if they stop, they will have to deal with re-pigmentation and steroid withdrawal (Ly F., et al. 2007; Mahé, A., 2003). Consequently, they feel obligated to continue to use skin lighteners in order to maintain their newly found lightness, knowing that any attempt to stop will result in discoloration and sometimes excessive rashes (Ly F., et al. 2007). These detrimental effects, however, do not prevent 35% of South Africans from using skin-bleaching products because the stigma left by colonialism and apartheid causes them to attribute success and beauty to the lightness of their skin.

Historical Influence of Colonialism and Apartheid on South African Bleachers

Skin bleaching in South Africa cannot be attributed exclusively to colonialism or apartheid; however, both concepts play an important role in determining the reasons for self-hatred and low self-esteem that push some South Africans to bleach their skin(Charles, 2003; Blay 2007; 20011; Thomas, 2008; de Souza, 2008; Glenn, 2008; Mire, 2001; Wallace, 2009). The residual racism left after colonization is an important factor in understanding some South Africans' preference for Eurocentric standard of beauty and lighter skin tones(Charles, 2003; 2009;). During colonization, one of the methods used to control the slaves was to establish white supremacy, which meant the oppressors had to make sure that black South Africans knew that the colonizer was superior in every way (Dorman, 2011). The oppressors maintained this supremacy by establishing a racial hierarchy in which black people were subservient to white Europeans. This hierarchy warranted exploitation, domination, and

unequal allotment of resources (Mire, 2001). During this era, slaves' body image was portrayed as backward and unattractive, while the white body was portrayed as virtuous, beautiful, and lovable. To further reinforce their domination, the colonizers associated blackness with dirt, disease, pollution, and immorality (Blay, 2011). They also instilled misconceptions that conditioned colored people to believe that white skin people are more entitled, dominant, and better than any other group (Keith & Herring, 1991). Additionally, to ensure their predominance, white people passed the Native Land Act of 1913, which granted black South Africans less than 10% of the country's territory to live in and forbade them from buying land outside of these areas (Hebinck, Fay, & Kondlo, 2011).

The end of colonialism did not change how black and white South Africans were perceived in that country. In 1948, the institution of apartheid further emphasized white supremacy by reinforcing segregation (*Colonialism and segregation ;* Clark & Worger, 2011; Shefer, 2010). During apartheid, the oppressors controlled black South Africans by making new laws that established racial separation and suppressed blacks' political involvement. They also established laws to prevent non-whites from voting and exercising their civil rights (Clark & Worger, 2011). Additionally, non-white children were required to learn in Afrikaans instead of English(*Bantu education*; Naidu, S. , 2011). By imposing such a language restriction, the oppressors were attempting to keep black Africans under their control (Kallaway, 2002; Naidu, 2011). The idea was to provide a low quality education to black South Africans to ensure that they were only qualified to perform lesser paying jobs(Mariotti, 2012; Naidu, 2011). This climate and all the injustice black South Africans experienced throughout their lives conditioned them to believe that only fair-skinned people were entitled to success and happiness. They also carried the belief that the reason they were struggling was because of the color of their skin. In *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela (1995) makes reference to this conditioning, explaining that when he was a little boy, he thought that if he behaved very well in his current life, he would become a white man in his next life. These indoctrinated beliefs often push many South African, mostly women, to

bleach their skin.

Gender disparity on the effect of Colonialism and Apartheid on South African Skin-Bleachers

Although many men bleach their skin in some region of Africa, skin bleaching is more prevalent amongst women (Ajose, 2005). There is a high rate of skin bleaching within South African women, according to Blay (2011), one in every three women in South Africa practices skin bleaching. One of the reasons for this alarming number might be because the way in which the South African media, including billboards, portrays attractiveness panders to women's motivation to lighten their skin (Hunter, 2011). According to Lewis et colleagues' (2011) research with Tanzanians, there are six key motivators to why people, particularly women, bleach their skin. The authors reported that people, may bleach their skin: to remove skin imperfections such as rashes, dark spots, and pimples; to make or maintain softer skin; to whiten their complexion so they can meet the westernized standard of beauty; to correct uneven skin tone or excessive damages caused by skin bleaching; to make themselves look more attractive to current or potential partners; and to impress and meet their friends' approval (Lewis et al. 2011).

South African women are more affected by the stigma left by colonialism and apartheid than men. The residual effects of colonialism and apartheid play a primordial role in South African women's self-hatred and low self-esteem (Charles, 2003; 2009; Lee, 2009). During colonialism and apartheid, South African women were treated as inferior, not only because they were dark-skinned but also because they were considered the weaker sex (Shefer, 2010). They were, therefore, domesticated and treated by their oppressors and spouses as less than equal to men (Lee, 2009). During colonialism, black women were viewed as objects of the colony and, during apartheid women were seen by their husbands as submissive and brainless creatures (Sullivan, L., 2010). They were always slaves or servants to their white counterparts during both periods, leading them to believe that only white was

right (King, 2007). They were not treated as human beings during either era, which consequently left them with an inferiority complex and a desire to always please others (King, 2007). Owing to this emotional baggage, these women believe that their apparent unattractiveness is the cause of most of the mishaps in their lives. They, therefore, feel that in order to compete and to keep their spouse happy, they must lighten their skin. For some of these women, the lightness of their skin is associated with socioeconomic status (Hunter, 2009; 2011). The lighter a woman's complexion, the more likely she is to get a well-paying job, promotion, spouse, and/or to receive respect (Hunter, 2011; Perry, 2006). This conditioning and ingrained culture is undeniably the reason women ignore all the health risks associated with skin bleaching and continue to use potentially dangerous chemicals to lighten their skin.

Conclusion

Like many countries that have been colonized, South Africa still battles the stigma of colonialism and apartheid. One of the numerous negative effects of these two systems is the practice of skin bleaching. Some people associate skin bleaching with the need to be beautiful; however, beneath the aesthetic reasons, there is the underlying issue of self-hatred and low self-esteem (Blay, 2011, Charles, 2003). Therefore, many South Africans practice skin bleaching, using chemicals that are potentially harmful to their health. During both colonialism and apartheid, Black South Africans were oppressed and conditioned to believe that they were inferior to Whites; therefore, the historical influence of these two systems has impacted how South Africans see themselves and has, therefore, led them to practice skin bleaching. Black South Africans, especially women, believe that being dark skinned makes them inferior in the eyes of society; consequently, in their view, they will never meet the Westernized standard of beauty that is portrayed in the media. They have been conditioned to believe that "White is right"; therefore, to attain social status, they put their lives at risk by using products that are detrimental to their health. Research suggests that African government should intervene by

assisting its people to overcome their self-hatred issues (de Souza, 2008). This suggestion can also be applied in South Africa. The government can also initiate campaigns that promote different standards of beauty, and regulate how the media portrays people, especially women. Additionally, there is a need for stricter regulation of the harmful chemicals used in skin-bleaching products. Individual sale of chemical agents, such as hydroquinone, corticosteroids, and other acidic agents, should also be banned completely to prevent people from making their own concoctions. Finally, the South African government must establish educational programs to sensitize the public to the risks of skin bleaching.

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