RESISTING THE EFFECTS OF COLORISM ON IDENTITY FORMATION AND HEALING IN TERESA ANN WILLIS'S *LIKE A TREE WITHOUT ROOTS*

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Abstract

Colorism is a prevalent issue that influences the self-perception and emotional well-being of individuals, particularly within marginalized communities. While much research has focused on the psychological consequences of colorism, less attention has been given to the portrayal of how internalized colorism shapes identity development in Black youth in literary works. This study utilized a qualitative research approach, employing literary text analysis to explore how internalized colorism affects identity formation in the protagonist, Jasmine, in Teresa Ann Willis's Like A Tree Without Roots. Through a close reading of the novel, the study examined the impact of internalized colorism on the development of identity in Black youth. The study investigated the experiences of Jasmine, a dark-skinned African American teenager, as she struggled with societal and peer-imposed beauty standards that prioritized lighter skin and Eurocentric features. The analysis revealed how Jasmine's exposure to colorist messages in media, school, and her neighborhood fostered feelings of self-loathing and isolation. However, the study also highlighted growth and healing through educational and familial support. The findings emphasized the role of culturally responsive education and intergenerational affirmation in counteracting the damaging effects of colorism, showcasing that recovery and empowerment are achievable despite the deep psychological impact of colorism.

Keywords: Colorism, Internalized racism, Identity development, Critical Race Theory, Internalization, Self-esteem

Introduction

Identity a complex construct influenced by internal perceptions and external sociocultural forces that comprises of the memories, experiences, relationships, and values that create an individual's sense of self. It is also comprised of external physical characteristics over which an individual has little to no control over. These include socioeconomic class, skin color, height, race, etc. Parents, peers and experiences of childhood and adolescence majorly influence a person's sense of self (Psychologytoday.com). Hall (2016) suggests that among the colored people of the world the implication of skin tone plays a role in all matters of life (relationships, marriage, education, etc.) and public affairs. Distinct from racism, which operates across racial groups, colorism refers to preferential treatment within a racial group based on skin tone, often privileging lighter skin. People faced with colorism are able to manage with the oppression they face, yet more often than not give in to feelings of inferiority and the belief that they are less than because of their skin color. The psychological toll of this phenomenon is profound, especially among youth.

Colorism in North America has led to educational, economical, and social disparities and thus is a prominent theme in African American literature as discrimination based on skin tone is a topic still relevant today. Within the African American community, many literary works directly address the colorism. Some works include Candy Dawson Boyd's *Fall Secrets (2004)*; Gwendolyn Brooks's, *Maud Martha (1992)*; Betty K. Bynum's *I'm a Pretty Little Black Girl! (2013)* and Jessica Crutcher's *I Love Me and the Skin I'm In (2016).* Pinkney (2012) postulates that because of the mixing of races from the time of slavery, different skin tones and features were added to the African American society and colorism has become an influential factor in shaping individuals' self-perception and social experience.

This paper investigates the real-life implications of colorism, emphasizing both its potential to inflict psychological harm and to serve as a source of personal empowerment through a literary analysis of the protagonist's experiences in *Like a Tree Without Roots* by Teresa Ann Willis. It centers on Jasmine, a dark-skinned pre-teen who initially internalizes colorist beliefs but later changes through education and family guidance. The Critical Race Theory specifically the tenet of Internalization will be used to explore how colorism, while entrenched in unfair systems, can prompt serious reflection, cultural consciousness, and positive identity development.

A Brief History of Colorism in the African American Society

Society has made skin color a signifier of identity and value. European colonialism and slavery established skin color hierarchies that persist today, with lighter skin often associated with higher social status and privilege (Hunter, 2002; Jablonski, 2020). Recognizing the complex social and cultural meanings attached to skin color is crucial for understanding its profound influence on individuals' lived experiences and social well-being (Chen & Jablonski, 2019). These color-based hierarchies have been reinforced by diverse forces, manifesting as racism, colorism, and implicit bias (Jablonski, 2020).

The belief that one race is superior to the other is known as *racism* (Smith 43-52). It is the prejudice or discrimination of an individual because they are from a different cultural group, irrespective of their intelligence or financial standing; "the belief that humans maybe divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called 'race'; that there is an unpredicted link between hereditary physical traits and personality, intellect, morality and other cultural and behavioral features; and that some races are superior to others" (Smedley, 2021). According to this system of belief, individuals are categorized into superior and inferior races based on social development, their behavior, their way of living and their capacity. This is built on the skin color of an individual and is shown through actions and attitudes as well as reflected in both public and private systems and institutions.

Racism may be indirect or overt. Racism includes all obstructions that may prevent an individual of a certain color or cultural background from enjoying self-respect and egalitarianism. The terms racism and colorism are made use of often in discussions surrounding discriminative acts.

Colorism, in contrast, occurs within a particular ethnicity, especially among colored individuals. It is a by-product of racism, wherein the individuals affected by racism perpetrate on a micro-scale similar prejudices and discrimination as faced in racism. This done in an effort to be closer to the supposed superior race or ethnicity and to distance themselves from the unwanted parts of their ethnicity that cause them to be victims of racism. This colorism impacts various aspects of life, including education, income, and marriage (Hunter, 2002).

Colorism, a branch of racism is a global phenomenon that includes the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination based on skin color within races (Burke, 2015). The term colorism was first coined by Alice Walker, a renowned Feminist, in her essay, *In Search of Her Mother's Garden*. She stated that it is the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color." Baxley (2014) states that it is "the interracial discrimination and privilege system based on skin color *and other phenotypical characteristics such as hair texture, broadness of nose and lip thickness.*" Mathews and Johnson (2015) support this stating that the colorist ideology is not based on just skin tone but other physical features as well. They further state that in addition to being perpetrated at the level of society is also perpetrated at the familial level. This is important as an individual's identity, perceptions and life experiences are majorly influenced by interaction with or socialization by family. Reece (2019) defines colorism as "the process by which people of color... are awarded advantages based on their phenotypical proximity to whiteness."

Western influences precipitate a social hierarchy that does not ascribe any attractiveness or positive recognition to be attributed to people of dark skin tones. Hall (2016) asserts that western nations hold a starring role in the creation of the skin color hierarchy, as it exists in every country colonized by the Europeans. During slavery, slaves with lighter skin tones were generally placed in indoor positions with better food quality, clothes and shelter while those with darker skin tones were placed in the harder outdoor positions with more exposure to sunshine and other harsh elements, poor food quality, clothes and shelter. This led to a rift in the African American community that has only grown with over the years. Dark skinned people began to view marriage with a light-skinned person as an accomplishment and a way to step up in society while on the other hand marriage to a dark-skinned person was viewed as stepping down in society. (Pinkney, 2012).

Among colored people, the lighter-skinned, mixed-race offspring of the colonized people attained higher economic status and managed to gain control in the public and private sectors of their societies. They noticeably occupied positions of power and gained economic advantage over the more common dark skinned populous (Johnson, 2004; Reece, 2018; Goldsmith et al., 2007). Among colored people, darker skinned Africans and their American counterparts more often than any other racial, ethnic, gender, or social/cultural group are victimized and oppressed.

According to Pinkney, (2012) the ideology of "the whiter the better," has led to black-on-black color discrimination. The negative implications of dark skin being internalized create obstacles to an individual's self-esteem and good quality of life. This often leads to dangerous behavior and self-destructive mentality. People of darker skin color try to meet up to their lighter-skinned counterparts in order to receive better benefits. Conversely, colored people with lighter skin are not considered a part of the society or community or 'black enough' due to their appearance being closer to that of the white people. Light-skinned Blacks may be perceived as mixed-race or even White, leading to conflicts about racial identity and belonging (Cunningham, 1997). The concept of "Blackthink" further marginalizes those deemed not sufficiently Black, labeling them as "Sell-Outs" or "Oreos" (Norwood, 2004). There is an unbalanced amount of social, economic and cultural pressure.

Pinkney (2012) further states that due to the problems faced during slavery African Americans have adopted specific attitudes that color the way they view themselves, beauty, relationships and other aspects of society. Eyerman (2002) postulates that the African American identity starts with self-loathing, considering the fact that the "whiter is better" ideology has been drilled into the minds of generations of African Americans. As a result, black people view straight silky hair as best and natural hair as "unpleasant". During slavery, slaves were required to straighten their hair or cover it so as not to be offensive to white society. This was passed down to other generations. He goes on to state that skin color and hair together are key to black identity. Other scholars agree with Eyerman that slavery is the root of beliefs held by the African American community and is key to their identity.

In addition, Pinkney (2012) quotes Palmer et al. (2004) that skin color is key to physical attractiveness in the African American society where skin, hair and other features that are more European are the standard of beauty. She goes on to say that as a black child grows up they are surrounded by stereotypes of skin color and through negative experiences develop into adults with twisted views on color in their own society, thus making them easy to be manipulated by society and other influences.

Theoretical Framework
Critical Race Theory

The Critical Race Theory is a theory that reveals the appearance of race and racism and its by products across leading cultural means of expression. It was advanced during the mid-1970s in response to the slow progress of Civil Rights in the 1960s. The theory puts forth the belief that race is a social construct, and a way to sustain the control of the white population (Sulé, 2020; Rollock & Dixson, 2016). According to CRT, racial inequality is a result of the social, economic, and legal differences created by white people to preserve their interests in politics, society and the labor market thus bringing about poverty, criminal and other societal problems to the minorities who are not white (Critical Race Theory (1970s-present), 2019; Curry, 2019). It emphasizes the significance of endeavoring to comprehend the social and cultural forces that shape how people of different races recognize, experience and react to racism and its by product, colorism.

CRT endeavors to understand how victims of unceasing racism are affected by cultural opinions of race and how they are able to overcome prejudice. The critical race theory emphasizes the importance of endeavoring to understand social and cultural forces that shape how individuals of different races identify, experience and react to racism. CRT establishes that racism continues to be widespread in dominant society and as a result repeatedly denies individuals of the rights they are guaranteed by government. This theory draws attention to the concerns of those affected by the racism and by those propagating the racism. However, CRT also emphasizes resistance. Through education, cultural awareness, and support systems, internalized beliefs can be confronted and reshaped. (Critical Race Theory (1970s-present), 2019). CRT is appropriate for the analysis of the experiences of the characters as well as their responses to the effects. It also provides a better understanding of the nature of colorism as it affects the experiences of the character portrayed in the novel in this study. While there are many tenants contained in the CRT theory, this study applies the tenet of Internalization.

Internalization

Kholi (2017) defines internalization as a phenomenon that affects all communities of color, occurs through a cumulative on-going exposure to racism and results in the conscious or unconscious normalization of a racialized power structure. Karen D. Pyke, a sociologist defines this element as the internalization of racial oppression by individuals who have been racially subordinated or discriminated against. She postulated the term "defensive othering" as an individual or group of individuals who actively distance themselves from other individuals within their race that have a closer

proximity to negative stereotypes. This occurs when victims begin to accept their own situation and the dominance of another race over their own. Different experiences solidify the victim's belief that they are inferior and they stop fighting for better experiences. Internalization is not due to any weakness or ignorance, or inferiority, or other shortcomings. The authority and power of the dominant race causes these feelings of inferiority and inequality in the supposed inferior race. It materializes in several forms some of which include self-image/beauty standards, stereotype threats, intra-racial discrimination, and education (Pyke, 2010). Individuals, who have internalized the belief that they are inferior, stop seeing what is wrong and begin to distance themselves from anything that brings them closer to what makes them inferior with discriminatory actions or derogatory words.

Synopsis of *Like A Tree Without Roots*

Teenager Jasmine is on the cusp of leaving middle school and joining high-school. In her world what seems to matter most is having light skin and good hair. Surrounded by colorist messages from peers and media, Jasmine wishes to look like her light-skinned mother instead of her dark-skinned father and grandmother. She is ashamed of her skin color, hair and as a result, she tries hard to deny her identity and roots, working hard to change her appearance. She dreams of marrying someone with lighter skin so her children will be born with good hair and light skin just like her cousin and not suffer as she does. Jasmine's low self-esteem leads to conflict with friends, denial of her heritage, and aggressive behavior. She does not realize that her quest for "better" is sending her away from the love and acceptance she is chasing.

However, her perspective begins to change when her Social Studies teacher begins to introduce the class to the real history and facts about African Americans. Initially quite angry at white people in general, Jasmine's journey continues during a summer stay with her grandmother. Her grandmother, who is proud of her dark skin and African roots, teaches Jasmine to see beauty and strength in her features. Jasmine finally embraces her identity, recognizing her skin as a blessing and her ancestry as a source of pride.

The Impact of Colorism on Identity Development in *Like A Tree Without Roots*
Internalized Colorism and Conflict

From a young age, Jasmine is relentlessly teased by the children in her neighborhood and at school with derogatory names that target her dark skin. This is evident in the following excerpt:

> Throughout elementary school it was the same thing
> every day: 'Oooh, you dirty, wipe that dirt off your face.'
> Or 'Tar Baby' Or ' She burnt' or 'bead-a-bead.' And
> when they were really trying to be hateful. 'African booty
> Scratcher!' (Willis 3)

The children's behavior how deeply colorist attitudes are embedded in Jasmine's environment and how these experiences contribute to her internalization of self-hate. Insults like "Tar Baby," "burnt," and "African booty scratcher" frame her complexion as something dirty, undesirable, and shameful. These repeated verbal assaults do not occur in isolation but are part of her daily reality. When she lies about a girl she does not like to her best-friend, the girl, Ylenny calls her a "Black bitch". Even when she is insulted by someone else, what stings most is not the crudeness of the language but the use of the word "black." This incidence causes Jasmine to feel sick and that quickly morphs into anger at being called 'black'. This emotional response, feeling sick, then angry, shows how she has internalized the message that blackness is an insult in itself. She doesn't have a problem with being called a 'bitch'

but is angry with being called 'black'. Jasmine's reaction also portrays how normalized colorism becomes in environments where such language and behavior are unchallenged.

Even those with the same skin tone as Jasmine participate in this cycle of abuse, revealing that colorist attitudes are so widespread that they influence peer-to-peer relationships regardless of skin tone. This is portrayed when a girl as dark as Jasmine also calls her derogatory terms. This leads to Jasmine herself becoming a perpetrator of colorism. She attacks back calling the girl a "black cockroach". Her anger at being called "black" and her willingness to retaliate with equally demeaning slurs like "black cockroach" shows how the victim can easily become the aggressor. Jasmine did not pause to reflect on the harm she was projecting. The environment, through both peer interaction and cultural norms, taught Jasmine that to be dark-skinned is to be lesser, and she mirrored the very hatred she has endured.

The children, including Jasmine, have absorbed society's colorist ideologies to the point of weaponizing them against each other. Her ongoing conflict with Ylenny and taunts from peers, such as "We know where to find Your Black Ass!" (Willis 39) and "Damn, she black as my hoodie" (Willis 94), reveals how consistent public shaming is tied to being dark-skinned. These statements aren't just insults but declarations of social hierarchy, with darkness being equated to something undesirable or laughable. They occur in casual settings, like on a train ride or in the street. Jasmine is constantly reminded of her skin tone, not as a neutral trait, but as something that marks her as inferior.

Colorism is well embedded in the everyday lives of the children. Even though they share the same neighborhood and socio-economic reality, they relate differently with each other based on complexion. Jasmine finds it ironic that despite living the same lives and facing the same limitations, they still treat lighter skin as superior and darker skin as something to ridicule. In this case colorism isn't just taught by adults or media it is upheld by peers and perpetuated within marginalized communities themselves.

Effects on Self-Perception and Emotional Well-being

Colorism is not without effects on its recipients. While the perpetrators may not feel or experience anything, the victims are affected and the effects manifest both internally and externally. Because of colorism, some individuals develop irrational behavior, and others end up having their social and economic status affected. Colorism distorts self-perception and deeply harms emotional well-being, particularly for young girls like Jasmine. She is consumed by an obsession with becoming lighter and embodying Eurocentric standards of beauty. This is because she has constant exposure to media images, magazine models, music videos, and beauty products that reinforce the idea that beauty and worth are tied to light skin, long silky hair, and sharp facial features. Jasmine internalized these ideals to the point her own reflection is erased. This is evident in the following excerpt:

> I'd seen the picture on the boxa million times – in beauty salons where my mom got her hair done, in Teen Scene magazine, in the music videos and in my head. The woman on the box stared in the movie in my head that I played over and over and over – on my way to school, on the way home from school and when I looked in the mirror. When I brushed my teeth she smiled at me with her cocoa butter skin, high cheek bones, arched eyebrows, her slender White-girl nose and her hair – her hair, parted down the middle was long… silky….black… shiny (Willis 1-2).

Instead of seeing herself when she looks in the mirror, she visualizes the woman on the perm box, turning her internal mirror into a screen that projects someone else's features. This mental detachment from her own identity leads her to seek physical transformation, begging her mother for a perm to mimic what she believes is beauty. It is a tragic example of how colorism not only influences aesthetic preferences but causes psychological alienation from one's own body.

This internalized obsession is not short-lived, as it bleeds into Jasmine's daily life, school experiences, and emotional stability. When in the school bathroom, she fixates on reshaping her eyebrows to look like a fairer, popular actress, further showcasing how deeply rooted her self-loathing has become. The mirror, which should be a space of self-recognition, becomes a battleground of imagined perfection and real disappointment. She is so fixated she burns accidentally burns her ear and is upset that another black spot has been added. Her emotional reaction further shows how her desire to change herself has turned destructive. Instead of embracing her natural features, Jasmine sees them as obstacles to beauty and social acceptance.

Colorism, doesn't just lead to external mimicry but corrodes self-esteem, triggers obsessive behavior, and erodes a sense of identity, replacing it with unattainable ideals that leave lasting emotional scars as is evident through Jasmine. It fuels a destructive cycle of anger and self-loathing within Jasmine, affecting how she views herself and how she relates to others. This is evident in the following excerpt:

> I can't stand Puerto Rican girls. You think you all that.
> Just because you can go out with Puerto Rican boys
> Dominican boys and African American boys you think
> you mad cool. You ain't no better than us, really. Living
> in the same projects and getting pregnant at fifteen, just
> like us. Twelve really (Willis 13).

Her internal monologue is bitter, resentful, envious revealing the emotional toll of constantly feeling inferior because of her skin color. She is frustrated with Ebonee, her best friend who is lighter-skinned and ethnically mixed and thereby having some perceived social advantage she is also frustrated with her enemy, Ylenny's ability to attract attention and acceptance across different racial groups, including African American boys who ignore or mock Jasmine. Instead of processing her feelings, Jasmine internalizes them as personal failures. Her anger is both outward-facing, resenting others who "fit in" and inward-facing, manifesting as a painful awareness that her dark skin disqualifies her from desirability and social acceptance.

The emotional damage of colorism is further emphasized in Jasmine's rejection of affirmations from those who love her. When her aunt calls her beautiful, Jasmine refuses to believe it. The image she holds of herself has been so negatively shaped by colorist messages that she longs instead to bleach her skin like her childhood crush, whose own mother started bleaching him at the age of five. This desire is a clear expression of internalized hate, a wish to erase the part of her that society has taught her is ugly or unworthy. Her distress over the burn mark potentially making her skin even darker reinforces the mindset that blackness, to her, is something to escape, not embrace. By believing her friends will eventually hate her because of her "black ass," showcases just how far-reaching and insidious colorism's effects can be. Isolating, distorting her self-worth, and convincing her that love, attention, and happiness are reserved for those who are lighter-skinned.

Consciousness & Intergenerational Healing Through Educational Intervention

Mathews and Johnson (2015) postulate that the discrimination made due to skin tone or color negatively affect the mental state and self- perception of affected individuals. They go on to state that self-esteem plays a serious role in the life of an individual in that how he/she views themselves goes

hand in hand with how they react to the world at large. Basically, a person with high self-esteem views their place in life as flexible depending on the situation, while a person with low self-esteem develops beliefs that their place is static and out of their control. They further state that being in touch with one's self influences a person's life outcomes. Colorism's damaging effects on self-perception and mental well-being can be countered through consciousness, education, and intergenerational healing. Jasmine's early struggle in the novel, questioning her dark skin and wishing she resembled her lighter-skinned family members, her inability to see beauty in her own reflection stems from internalized colorism, fueled by societal beauty standards and her lived experiences emphasized the negatives of colorism. Jasmine reached a turning point when her class teacher intervenes by teaching African American history to her students. Jasmine gained access to knowledge that reshaped how she saw herself and her heritage. Education became a tool, offering Jasmine a broader and more empowering narrative of her identity as an African American and a dark-skinned girl.

Jasmine's transformation continues through intergenerational healing, particularly during her visit to her grandmother. At her grandmother's she receives positive messaging different from what she used to receive in her daily environment. Her grandmother affirms her worth and the beauty of her dark skin. The connection and cultural affirmation Jasmine received acted as counter-narratives to the shame and rejection she had internalized. Going through learning about her roots, coupled with love and validation from an elder figure close to her, helped her reconstruct a positive self-image about herself. She is able to heal her emotional wounds and is equipped with the confidence to reclaim her identity. Teresa Ann Williams shows in the novel that education and family-based affirmation, that the psychological damage caused by colorism is not irreversible. With conscious effort and supportive environments, individuals like Jasmine can begin to heal, resist internalized racism, and grow into a more self-assured and empowered version of themselves.

Emergence of Self-Esteem and Identity Empowerment

Jasmine's transformation and the emergence of her self-esteem and identity are aptly portrayed in the following excerpt:

> No matter what had been said and what was done, I'm not cursed. I'm the great-great-great-granddaughter of Viola Mae Miles. And I'm dark like the night sky under a South Carolina moon. I'm Black, like my father and my grandmother too….. in that moment I knew. I knew that all this time, I'd been wrong too… I was beginning to believe the truth. I'm not cursed by the sun. I'm blessed by the sun. Rooted in love. And ready to bloom (Willis 256).

Once burdened by self-loathing and a deep desire to change her appearance, Jasmine now embraces her identity with pride. She no longer views her dark skin as a curse but instead reclaims it as a source of strength, beauty, and ancestral connection. She now sees herself as "not cursed by the sun" but "blessed by the sun" recognizing her Blackness not as something to hide or fix, but as something to celebrate. By gaining connection to her lineage and to figures like her grandmother and great-great-great-grandmother, Jasmine grounds her self-worth in history, heritage, and love. Her declaration in the excerpt signifies her rebirth, rooted in acceptance, nourished by cultural pride, and ready to thrive on her own terms.

Findings and Conclusion

This study revealed that colorism, can significantly affect the self-perception and emotional development of young individuals, particularly through the internalization of harmful societal messages. Jasmine's journey showed how colorist insults, issues with peers, and media representations contribute to deep-seated feelings of shame, inferiority, and self-hate. The study, also illustrated how victims of colorism sometimes project the same prejudices they suffer onto others, creating a cycle of intra-racial discrimination. However, the study also revealed that there are some avenues for healing and empowerment. Through educational intervention and intergenerational affirmation, especially from her grandmother and schoolteacher, Jasmine was able to reclaim her identity, and see her dark skin as a symbol of pride and connection to her heritage. Ultimately, the study affirmed that while colorism causes psychological wounds, they are not irreparable. With guidance, affirmation, and education, individuals can resist internalized colorism and cultivate a renewed sense of self-worth.

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