



The Complexity of Complexion: Defining Colorism

DIRECTIONS: Read the following excerpt from “In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden” by Alice Walker. Then answer the two questions below using textual evidence to support your claim.

“After our talk of all the things hoped gone forever but now “back with the wind”—the KKK, obscene national “leadership,” “good hair”—I thought somewhat uneasily of something I had said in reply to your question about Color. You may recall that we were speaking of the hostility many black black women feel toward light-skinned black women, and you said, “Well, I’m light. It’s not my fault. And I’m not going to apologize for it.”

I said apology for one’s color is not what anyone is asking. What black black women would be interested in, I think, is a consciously heightened awareness on the part of light black women that they are capable, often quite unconsciously, of inflicting pain upon them; and that unless the question of Colorism—in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color—is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black “sisterhoods” we cannot, as a people, progress.

For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us. What bothers me is my statement that I myself, halfway between light and dark—a definite brown—must align myself with black black women; that not to do so is to spit in our black mother’s face. Meaning the primordial, the Edenic, the Goddess, Mother Africa. For now I recall meeting your actual mother, who looks white, as did your grandmother, whose picture you once showed me, and whose beautiful old clothes you sometimes wear. For you, the idea of alignment with black black women solely on the basis of color must seem ridiculous and colorist, and I have come to agree with you.

Still, I think there is probably as much difference between the life of a black black woman and a “high yellow” black woman as between a “high yellow” woman and a white woman. And I am worried, constantly, about the hatred the black black woman encounters within black society. To me, the black black woman is our essential mother—the blacker she is the more us she is—and to see the hatred that is turned on her is enough to make me despair, almost entirely, of our future as a people.

Ironically, much of what I’ve learned about color I’ve learned because I have a mixed-race child. Because she is lighter-skinned, straighter-haired than I, her life—in this racist, colorist society—is infinitely easier. And so I understand the subtle programming I, my mother, and my grandmother before me fell victim to. Escape the pain, the ridicule, escape the jokes, the lack of



attention, respect, dates, even a job, any way you can. And if you can't escape, help your children to escape. Don't let them suffer as you have done.

And yet, what have we been escaping to? Freedom used to be the only answer to that question. But for some of our parents it is as if freedom and whiteness were the same destination, and that presents a problem for any person of color who does not wish to disappear.:"

1. What argument does Walker make for siding with darker, black women?

2. According to Walker, how has raising a child impacted her understanding of colorism and light-skin privilege?
