Colorism in Media

Colorism is embedded in the fabric of this nation, and it is especially woven heavily in black-centered media. Colorism refers to the “practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin.” In this essay I will be giving a short history of colorism in media, focusing on how Tyler Perry’s film Madea’s Family Reunion, and his stage play of Diary of a Mad Black Woman, draw to the surface deep issue regarding the hierarchy of dark skin versus light skin in media. I will look at the ways in which he chose to cast the roles and how each person was characterized in the film and the play. Finally, I will end by investigating how black media created for children, such as Disney’s The Proud Family, portrays younger black children, setting children up to internalize the negative stereotypes that result from colorism and its skewed view of black people within society. In blaxploitation films, black comedies, and even black television shows and cartoons we see far darker-skinned back women portrayed as hypersexual, rude, untrustworthy, belligerent, and unattractive. DarDarker-skinned black men are typically portrayed as thugs and or unintelligent. On the opposing end, Lighter-skinned women are usually portrayed as delicate, needing to be rescued, the utmost desirable, intelligent, and comparatively graceful. The same goes for lighter-skinned black men, the additives being closely related to gender expectations, so chivalrous, highly intelligent, and the typical hero. These are the main topics I plan to analyze and unpack.

To begin, colorism, as previously mentioned according to the National Conference for Community and Justice’s website, is the “practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin.” To finish the quote “This practice is a product of racism in the United States, in that it upholds the white standards of beauty and benefits white people in the institutions of oppression including media, the medical world and more.” Historically, slaves of a lighter complexion would work inside the house. These, more often than not, were the byproduct of the slave master taking advantage of the young slave women. They were often mistreated by the mistress of the house on top of what they were already going through. Despite this, they were still favored due to their proximity to whiteness. Later along in history, the idea of having fair skin led to better employment opportunities or employment at all.

A tactic called the “brown paper bag test” was used to determine who was a qualified hire, among Black people. They would compare skin tone to that of a brown paper bag and if the person was lighter, they could have a job, if not, they couldn’t. As recent as the 1940s Black people used to list “Light colored” as a primary qualification on their job applications according to an article by Nadra Kareem Nittle on ThoughtCo. Down the line, dark skin began to fall into the negative characterizations men mentioned in the opening paragraph. Darker skin was deemed unattractive and less than desirable in a multitude of ways. Eurocentric features were the beauty standard and the closer they were to that as a person of color, the higher they were viewed in society. There was even an old children’s rhyme that perpetuated the narrative, it goes “If you’re black, stay back; If you’re brown, stick around; If you’re yellow, you’re mellow; If you’re white, you’re all right.” To this day, lighter-skinned people are being paid around $5k more than darker-skinned people in some communities.

A big staple in the black community and probably one of the best examples of colorism being deeply woven into black media would be Mr. Tyler Perry. Many of his stage plays and movies depend heavily on stereotypes, and they typically come at the expense of darker-skinned individuals. The first example is the stage play “*Dairy of a Mad Black Woman.”* In this play we follow a woman named Helen, in the stage play, she’s married to a lawyer named Charles who owns his own Law firm. From the start of the play, the audience is shown that the relationship between Helen and Charles is strained. Helen was unable to have children and Charles resents her for that. He doesn’t talk to her when he comes home, they don’t sleep together anymore, and he’s even gone as far as to hit her. On their 20th anniversary, he leaves her for her best friend, but not before embarrassing her by making her bark so he doesn’t leave her and serving her the divorce papers.

As Helen starts to pull herself together and starts seeing someone new, her now ex-best friend returns Charles to her in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the neck down. Helen then begins to take her revenge on him by neglecting to feed him for days, leaving him in the shower running alone, and leaving him sitting in the living room. All the while, she’s dating a new man who also owns his own company and is presented as the better man. Suddenly, Charles regains the ability to walk, this is explained away by him saying the doctor gave him some form of extreme nerve relaxers to reverse whatever happened that put him in the situation in the first place, which wasn’t disclosed in the play, but in the movie, he’d been shot by an unhappy client. Helen’s date comes to pick her up while she and Charles are hashing things out. Helen signs the divorce papers and leaves with her date. She comes back later and has a conversation with her mom, and they talk about God and forgiveness and Helen toils with how to forgive him and still leave him because she’s unhappy with him and happier with the other man. The way the stage play ends indicates that she ends up forgiving him, but not that they get back together.

The casting in this play is where the colorism becomes very prominent. The actress who plays Helen is a very light-skinned woman. Often in the play, they question her “blackness,” and she’s characterized as acting “too white” when she reacts to the wrongdoings being done to her. The actor who plays Charles is a darker-skinned man and he’s one of the worst characters Tyler Perry has ever written. He’s narcissistic, cold-hearted, and selfish. When he could no longer get what he wanted from her he left him for the closest woman who seemed to be offering what he wanted. He dropped his wife without a second thought and was characterized as violent. Helen’s best friend was a dark-skinned woman, and she was characterized as and selfish, untrustworthy. Many times throughout the play her skin tone was the butt of the joke. She was hypersexualized and her entire characterization shifted that way when Charles chose her. The other man that Helen began to see after Charles was played by a light-skinned man. He had money, was patient, religious, and characterized as a good man. His skin was often brought up and used as some sort of a positive for Helen with characters saying things like “lockdown that hard-working yellow bone,” and calling him “light bright.”

Another Tyler Perry movie that was heavy on colorist ideals, some blatant and some subtle, was the 2006 *Madea’s Family Reunion*. The film opens with one of the main characters, Lisa, waking up to a bubble bath prepared for her by her fiancé Carlos and his servants, introducing their relationship. Lisa’s sister Vanessa and their cousin go out to celebrate her engagement and come back to her and Carlos’ apartment where they try to surprise her with a stripper. Despite her protests, the stripper proceeded to grab her anyway to dance. Carlos comes home at this time, catching the dance as it’s happening, and requests everyone go home. As soon as the other women leave, he slaps Lisa and berates her for letting that happen. Victoria, Lisa and Vanessa’s mother takes Lisa out for lunch to talk about her engagement and the wedding. Lisa tells her mother that Carlos beats her, and her mother responds by telling her to stop making him angry and he’ll stop hitting her. She pressures her to stay with him so as to not end up like her sister Vanessa who’s divorced with two kids and is working at a bridal store. Cutting to Vanessa, she’s being asked on a date by the handsome bus driver she ran into the previous day. After finding out she has children, he reveals he also has a son and invites her to bring her children to a park he brings his child to. She accepts and they go on their first date. When Victoria finds out, she shames her for dating a bus driver. After more abusive incidents and Carlos threatens her life by saying he “loves her to death,” Lisa plans to leave in the night. During her attempted escape, Carlos catches her and says the only way she’s allowed to leave him is over the balcony of his penthouse apartment. He drags her to the balcony, and she breaks down and says she’ll stay.

The next day Lisa tells Vanessa what’s going on and Vanessa has her stay with her while she tries to find the courage to actually leave. Victoria goes to talk to Carlos and tells him to stop hitting her daughter and she’ll tell her he’s going to counseling. It’s revealed here that Victoria has been using Carlos to tap into the trust fund Lisa’s father left for her. Carlos demands that Lisa come back home, and Victoria says she’ll make that happen. Victoria arrives at Vanessa’s house to retrieve Lisa, but Vanessa stops her. Victoria begins to insult Vanessa, telling her that she’s jealous that she always loved Lisa more, and blaming her and her father for her shortcomings. Vanessa then exposes the fact that Victoria gave Vanessa to Lisa’s father to make him stay, letting him have his way with her. From there, she would take Lisa on trips, go shopping, and get her nice gifts while claiming that Vanessa was being punished. Victoria said she had to do what she had to do. She also tried to justify her actions by saying she herself was traded by her own mother for a drug fix and $10. After Vanessa had another run-in with her mother at the family reunion and Carlos threatened Lisa again, she fought back and called off her wedding. Frankie proposes to Vanessa, and they use the wedding instead. Victoria calls her a beautiful bride and that’s the last she’s shown.

The colorism in this film comes mostly from the way the mother treats her children. Victoria and Lisa are lighter-skinned women, associated with class and money. Vanessa is darker than her sister and her mother, and though she wouldn’t be considered dark-skinned, her lifestyle and characterization were heavily insinuated to be far lesser. She’s a single mother of two children, and even though she does find love, she finds love with a man that the society presented in the movie would be considered lesser than. Everything about her life is presented to be subpar, and though it can be argued that the lesson in all of this is that money can’t buy happiness and that you shouldn’t have to be mistreated just to get by, in films and plays similar to this by Tyler Perry these characters are more than likely darker skinned women. They often get the lower end of the stick in one way or another.

In both of the works by Perry, we can see some of the principles of colorism very present. The brown to dark-skinned men in the films were both depicted as violent, abusive, and controlling. Most, if not all, of their actions were completely self-serving, leaving no room for anyone who didn’t fit their agenda, even if it were family. The men who were considered “good men” or “saviors” were of a much lighter skin tone. They knew how to treat women, they were very religious, usually family-oriented, and, painted in every way to be the good guys. If the darker-skinned women were the lead, she was always impoverished, had at least one child, and the father wasn’t present in their lives. If she was light-skinned, she was a damsel in distress. If the darker-skinned woman wasn’t the main character, she was a villain or was left behind in favor of a lighter character.

These ideals aren’t just present in Tyler Perry productions, they were also prominent in media that was created for children. The Proud Family was created by Bruce W. Smith and aired on Disney Channel between 2001 and 2005. Many of the underlying deals of colorism existed within the character, both permanent and guest appearances. One of the episodes that stood out the most to me was season 2 episode 6 titled “Behind Family Lines.” Penny’s younger baby twin siblings BeeBee and CeeCee are being Christened and to celebrate her mother Trudy invited her side of the family to stay with them. Unbeknownst to Trudy, her husband Oscar invited his “country cousins.” They fight over the fact that there isn’t enough room in the house for everyone to stay. The families clash immediately because Trudy’s family, the Parkers, and Oscar’s family, the Prouds, have very different lifestyle choices. The Parkers look down on them because they come from money and the Prouds don’t. They also see themselves as smarter and often come off as condescending and disrespectful. After Penny and her cousins sneak away in one of their dad’s mind-powered cars and get caught, the families clash again, resulting in insulting the children’s character and causing the families to leave. The kids trick everyone into coming back together for the twins and they end the episode by finding a way to get along with one another.

The colorism rooted in this episode comes from the characterizations of the families. The Parkers were lighter-skinned and thin. They were characterized as intelligent and rich. They flaunted their wealth and looked down on Penny’s family because their house was too small for their liking. Chanel, the cousin that was Penny’s age, was introduced by being rude to her aunt and uncle’s home and making back-handed compliments. When the Prouds show up, they are darker-skinned and characterized as loud and uneducated. They were overweight, the kids ate everything in sight. The Prouds had a baby who was supposed to be 10 months old but was the same height as the 14-year-olds and two to three times the weight of them. They were constantly the butt of the joke and most of the jokes in the episode were made at their expense. Even when they made up, they ended the episode with fat jokes.

The proud family as a whole had several instances of deep-rooted colorism. The character Dijonay Jones. She’s written to be Penny’s best friend. She’s a dark skin girl who’s drawn plus-sized with ill-fitting clothing. Her characterization is stereotypically “ghetto” and loud. She’s not trustworthy and has absolutely no loyalty to Penny. She has been known to drop Penny for any and everything that seems to be more entertaining or less work. Dijonay was also often hypersexualized but made to be very unattractive to the people she was attracted to most of the time. Her “man” of choice is another character named Sticky who she’s very possessive over and is always following and clinging on to. He’s made it abundantly clear in every interaction they have, which almost every episode, that he isn’t interested in her. She’s constantly throwing herself at him despite this fact. Dijonay’s stereotype-like characterization continues in her home and family life. She has 9 siblings and each of them is named after a different condiment. They were influenced by the movie BeBe’s Kids. Her house only has 3 bedrooms, which means she shares her bedroom with 5 of her 9 siblings. Her parents aren’t very present in the series. Dijonay has even once dumped her siblings on Penny to sneak and go to a concert that they both were supposed to go to. Penny gave up her night and the concert to help her friend and Dijonay left her behind, showing her flakiness.

With that being said, it seems that Dijonay was written to be Penny’s foil in some ways. Penny is a light-skinned girl who is depicted to well-rounded as far as education is concerned. She lives in a large house with both of her parent and only 2 siblings who are babies. She has her own bedroom and though she is expected to watch her siblings from time to time, their characterization isn’t chaotic the way Dijonay’s siblings are. Penny is meant to be an overachiever and can usually get what she wants or have things go in her favor even when she doesn’t deserve it. An example of this is in the episode “A Star is Scorned,” in which Penny and her friend group Dijonay, LaCienega, and Zoey perform in the talent show as a girl group called “LPDZ.” They get discovered by Wizard Kelly and immediately signed to a record deal and begin touring the country. Penny quickly becomes the favorite and lets it go to her head, becoming a full-blown diva. The Wizard fires the rest of the band and Penny goes solo under the name Penne. Though Penny ends the episode by going back to her friends, if she didn’t feel bad and made that decision, she could’ve made a lucrative career on her own. They want to paint Penny as the more caring person between the two, even in moments of lapsed judgment.

With these things in mind, going back to consuming this media as an adult, it’s easy to see the problematic undertones even if fond memories exist around them. Penny is often always presented as the sympathetic character regardless of her actions in the episode, even when she’s in the wrong. Dijonay is always depicted as the worst character in the episode, even if she’s in the right. In the episode, “a star is scorned” previously mentioned, Penny’s grandmother mentions Dijonay specifically as a fake friend that she should avoid, noting that “she’s faker than her fake friends.” The Proud Family often makes great efforts to show you who you should be rooting for. They created Dijonay as an obnoxious caricature of a black girl and made her the darkest character aside from the Gross sisters who are colored blue because they’re supposed to be “ashy.” As an honorable mention, the Gross Sisters are three blue sisters who bully and rob other kids every day. As previously stated, they’re blue to indicate that they’re ashy and a few episodes have given the impression that they come from a rough home life and are children of Caribbean parents. Their characterization is just to be mean and dusty, and they don’t really go beyond that save for an episode or two, and they just revert back to normal like the growth never happened.

In conclusion, some of the most popular media created for adults and children alike perpetuate negative colorist ideas and have just been called to attention in the last decade. In order to stop the dangerous ideals that plague the Black community and society as a whole, people need to continue to call these things out and make a conscious effort to write different stories. Tyler Perry is a very talented individual and he has done great things for the black community by telling their stories and giving something familiar to see on the stage and screen, but it’s time to move past these same stories and create new ones. With the Proud Family reboot coming in 2022, there’s hope that these stereotypes will be tackled and taken care of, but only time can tell.

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