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The bleaching syndrome as melanin vehicle of stillbirths: a dark skin pathology vis-à-vis African and African descent women

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ABSTRACT

African and African descended women who bleach their skin incur risks to their health, leading to the disruption of organ performance and potentially stillbirths. Corporate executives dedicated to the bleach cream business are confident that the obsession by African and African descended women with light skin will remain profitable. Those who succumb to the bleaching syndrome require the application of bleaching creams to compromise the melanin in their skin. Whether they are commercially manufactured or home-made concoctions, bleaching creams contain pathological toxins. Resolution of the problem will necessitate an alternative to Eurocentric ideals as pertains to women of Africa and African descent, African people in general and all dark-skinned, non-African populations worldwide who suffer the consequences of denigration due to their dark skin. The objective of this paper is to challenge the Eurocentric beauty standards and to examine the dangers of skin bleaching.

KEY TERMS: Africa, African women, women of African descent, bleaching syndrome; dark skin, stillbirths

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INTRODUCTION

African and African descended women and are subjected to Eurocentric beauty standards. Among such standards are light skin as the feminine ideal. African and African descended women are dark-skinned. In an effort to acquire light skin and enhance their feminine appeal they resort to using toxic bleaching creams. The creams pose health risks in the form of skin cancer and stillbirths. Women who apply these creams to their skin also manifest the bleaching syndrome. Victims of the bleaching syndrome may be totally unaware of the health risks involved. Therefore, the bleaching syndrome is both a psychological and physical phenomenon. It is self-denigration driven by the desire to assimilate into whiteness. This desire leads to the process of skin lightening despite the harms it exposes people to. The objective of this paper is to challenge the Eurocentric beauty standards and to examine the dangers of skin bleaching.

BACKGROUND

In Canada, a 16-year-old woman of African descent who is a college student gets up in the morning and while standing in front of the mirror is discouraged by what she sees of herself (Obaahema Network, 2002). The image that is reflected in the mirrors is one which causes her to succumb to severe depression. She is averse to her kinky-permed-straight African hair in an environment where the ideal for hair is Caucasian straight. Her broad African nose and her pronounced African lips are located in an environment where ideal noses are Caucasian keen and lips are Caucasian thin. Her prominent brown eyes and dark skin suggest to her that she is unattractive and having no way to escape her disgust resorts to applying bleaching creams to attain an ideal skin tone. Each time this student resorts to the bleaching creams is an opportunity she is convinced to escape her despised features. With every application of the cream she fantasizes rescue from her dark-skinned ugliness to arrive at the idealized femininity of a light-skinned Western beauty. Once the cream dissipates this student confronts the fact that she despises her physiological heritage. She is convinced that she is undesirable to men and only by bleaching her dark skin lighter can she be freed from her despicable fate (Obaahema Network, 2002).

A similar woman of African descent is a 17-year-old Jamaican who is determined to bleach her skin which the locals call "brownin" (Obaahema Network, 2002). "Brownin" is a Jamaican ideal term used island-wide in reference to African descended persons who have light skin. By application of significant layers of bleaching creams to her face this woman exposes herself to dangerous steroids. Absent concern she goes about daily bleaching because she is convinced by what she sees of herself. "When I walk on the streets you can hear people say, 'Hey, check out the brownin'.' It is cool. When you are lighter, people pay more attention to you. It makes you more important" (Obaahema, 2002).

A middle-aged 50-year-old African woman started bleaching her skin "with the aim to brighten up the skin." Her counterpart is against the idea of bleaching as a practice for beautifying ugly dark African skin. She contends that "fading" as it is called does little good. African women fade "because they think they might look beautiful" she contends. Others are inclined to be even more direct. "In Ghana, some of the men want bleaching girls." Despite the fact obtaining a desired ideal light skin is all but impossible for the naturally dark-skinned African woman. "I started bleaching two years ago but stopped because I started developing very bad stretch marks" according to one 28-year-old. Added to the incidence of stretch marks, is the fact that those who bleach their skin usually eventually begin to look as if they have been sunburned. Their faces incur a "brick red and puffy" appearance commensurate with black grotesque looking splotches (Chisholm, 2001).

Aside from abuses of the skin African descended women who bleach their skin incur other risks to their health, leading to the disruption of organ performance and ultimately stillbirths (Opala 2001). Many such women who do not have the financial means to purchase store-bought commercial creams concoct their own. Research into this activity revealed the potential damaging effects of the various bleaching concoctions fortified with dangerous toxin additives, such as arsenic and mercury. Members of the African medical community contend that African women who suffer from damaged kidneys are a result of the mercury present in home-made bleaching creams (Opala, 2001). What's more are major health risks to unborn fetuses of women who bleach their skin and an increased risk for the development of skin cancer. Other risks are due to the affinity of mercury for the human brain and its ability to compromise melanin which protects them from skin cancer. All too often, offspring exposed to mercury during gestation risk severe and/or significant brain damage. Until recently, such information was ignored in the sale of beauty products by Western interests in African countries. In the aftermath markets, were flooded with toxic skin bleaching products which were then sold to African women specifically to Westernize their physical appearance for those who could afford it (Opala, 2001).

Unfortunately, too many such African or African descended women who bleach do not seek medical help until it is too late. As a result, not a few develop such bad skin problems that they can no longer go out into the sun without risking more damages. This behavior is becoming so widespread that some African governments are beginning to exercise caution. For example, in Gambia, the government has decided to outlaw all skin-bleaching products, including Bu-Tone, Madonna Cream, Glo-Tone, and the American-made Ambi. They decided to be

lenient on those caught with bleached skin. Furthermore, European officials have also begun to take issue with the practice of skin bleaching as Denmark has banned skin bleaching creams and soaps. Danish officials have then traveled to a number of local African shops and gathered up their products. Unfortunately, Tura, which is a product outlawed by the Danes, is still popular in Ghana and other African countries. While the business community may find these actions extreme, doctors concur that they are reasonable and necessary (Opala 2001).

Corporate executives dedicated to the bleach cream business are confident that the obsession by women of African descent with light skin will remain profitable. As a result, beauty business enterprises in America and Europe are in an intense struggle for a share of the bleaching cream business. Such brands as Avon, L'Oreal, Lancome, Yves Saint-Laurent, Clinique, Elizabeth Arden, Estee Lauder, and Revlon, have their own line of bleaching products that they market. As with most lucrative business ventures there also exists less expensive options such as "Cure and Lovely." By the sale of such creams manufacturers have been accused of engaging in "unfair trade practices" by "using a social stigma to sell their products." Some of them responded by reducing advertisements. In a change of strategy one company's marketing manager announced that her corporation was committed to the women "who, though immensely talented and capable, need a guiding hand to help them take the leap forward" (Leistikow, 2003). Despite the fact in some countries profits from bleaching cream sales have reached \$140 million in a single year. Many of these enterprises are owned by Europeans and located in London (Leistikow, 2003).

THE BLEACHING SYNDROME

As pertains to the aforementioned skin bleaching the denigration of dark skin via idealization of light skin is a vehicle of stillbirth pathology which compromises the normalization of childbirth among dark-skinned women of African descent. The influence of Eurocentric forces motivated by somatic assimilation paradigms has extended this phenomenon to African descended women in particular manifested via reference to the melanin pathology of the Bleaching syndrome. As defined by the authority of Webster's Dictionary (Mish, 2009) "bleach" is a verb which pertains to the removal of color and in the case of the bleaching syndrome to make one's appearance and hence identity less native and more alien Eurocentric by denigrating dark skin. A "syndrome" consists of a compilation of symptoms i.e.: behaviors which include skin bleaching that occur in conjunction with other applications and make up a recognizable pattern (Mish, 2009). These literal definitions provide a context for comprehension of the Bleaching syndrome that incorporates a somatic assimilation paradigm containing three basic components. Said components are contained in the following elements: (a) psychological according to internalized ideals; (b) sociological according to the behavioral reactions to those ideals en-masse; and (c) physiological according to the extent of personal somatic alterations applied by the victim which, as pertains to African descended women the reduction of melanin contained in their dark skin. As a result, the bleaching syndrome herein is then defined succinctly as the internalization of physiological and/or sociological pathogens relative to the denigration of dark skin which disrupts the normal birth process.

For African descended women, worldwide the bleaching syndrome begins with what they perceive about Caucasian light skin. Their acceptance of a negative connotation denigrating dark skin is not compulsory to their psyche but merely a manifestation of the post-colonial Eurocentric assimilation experience (Ortega & Verdugo, 2015). Unlike women of the dominant group Eurocentric mainstream characterized by light skin, this causes among women of African descent existential conflict. Psychologically, the negative implications of the denigration of dark skin via idealization of light skin having been internalized by women of African descent create obstacles to their self-esteem. What they perceive as necessary for preferred quality of life assimilation paradigms then takes hold of their preferred self-concept. In an effort to reduce the psychic conflict caused and be simultaneously enabled by quality of life assimilation, those women of African descent affected by the bleaching syndrome make a conscious decision to act out various forms of self-alterations. This behavior is manifested in a sundry of psychological, sociological and physiological objectives as they resort to a somatic assimilation paradigm (Hall, 2001).

The bleaching syndrome is also the conscious awareness of the cognitive and attitudinal levels of the similarities and differences between the light skin ideal and the denigration of dark skin to negate for African descended women their native "self" for the purposes of preferred quality of life assimilation. The quality of life that this may infer commensurate with Maslow (1999), include the fulfillment of such physiological needs as food and shelter, such safety needs as protection and security. The need to satisfy belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs are irrelevant to victim perspective in the context of somatic assimilation paradigms, which means that the bleaching syndrome prevents them from advancing beyond the base of Maslow's hierarchy. The process in toto requires substantive knowledge and empathic appreciation of alien Eurocentric Western culture at the expense of the native non-Eurocentric culture (Jandt, 2014). The bleaching syndrome is also a metaphor not limited to skin color but may include a broader, more inclusive range of native identity characteristics such as surnames, hair texture, eye shape, speech patterns, marital patterns, dress styles, social preferences, religious persuasion, political preference, and pastimes, etc. Ultimately the bleaching syndrome prevails as a quasi-

functional societal strategy that eventually leads to emotional and/or psychological dysfunction extended from various pathogens pertaining to self-acceptance. This enables a compromise of the normal childbirth experience (Hall, 2010). Such a critical existential feature encountered by women of African descent has been mainstream-subjugated as academic trivia or academic exotica and hence all but dismissed by the academy in its exchanges of significant intellectual discourse. The fact of this dismissal in the exchanges of intellectual discourse is verified by the popularity of bleaching creams despite their apparent toxicity.

BLEACHING CREAM TOXINS

The necessity of bleaching creams is rooted in the Western perpetuation of light skin as the ideal. Relative to this ideal and women of African descent in the approximate year of 1936, the son of an American businessman named Breck took control of a shampoo company that he'd inherited from his father in Springfield, Massachusetts (Minnick, 2000). His first order of business in management of the company was to contact and hire an artist named Charles Sheldon. Mr. Sheldon was a commercial artist who resided as a citizen of the local area. For marketing purposes his artistic challenge was to illustrate the ideal Breck Girl in "provocative, even sensual, female poses executed in pastels, with soft focus and haloes of light and color to create highly romantic images of feminine beauty and purity" (Minnick, 2000). Eventually Mr. Sheldon was superseded by Ralph Williams. Ralph Williams illustrated in his art the ideal of American feminine beauty not irrelevant to the idealization of light skin. The result of illustrating the essence of feminine beauty was the total absence of color in a Caucasian woman having light skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair. In fact, her skin was so light, as to appear alabaster-like to those who observed it. What's more blue eyes and blonde hair are indicative of light skin to the extent that it represents the absence of melanin similar to skin color. Melanin is a physiological ingredient that when existing in small quantities, characterizes light skin. This depiction dominated Western imaginations and was internalized by women of African descent whose only prospects of acquiring light skin existed in the necessary application of bleach creams.

The necessity of bleaching creams in Africa is brought by the melanin contained in human skin. Melanin in human skin is the ingredient that produces skin color (Hu, 2008). It is a dark biological pigment which occurs throughout the fauna universe and found not only in skin, but hair, feathers, scales, eyes, and a number of internal membranes. Melanin is most obvious in the dark skin moles of humans; also in the dark dermal melanocytes or pigment cells of most of the world's dark-skinned peoples including women of African descent. It may also occur as brown, scattered spots located in the skin's epidermis. When melanin is lacking, the result is a condition called albinism (Javangwe and Mukondyo, 2012). Subsequently as pertains to homo-sapiens dark skin is the ideal and normal condition that when absent melanin dysfunction precipitates numerous organism dysfunctions.

Women of African descent who succumb to the bleaching syndrome require the application of bleaching creams to compromise the melanin in their skin as symptomatic of the disease. Whether they are commercially manufactured or home-made concoctions bleaching creams contain pathological toxins. As pertains to a technical definition of toxins is a poison manufactured by the metabolic actions of a microorganism, flora or fauna. When a toxin is consumed by a living organism it responds in the production of an antigen which causes the organism to generate antibodies. In common vernacular toxins are expressed as little more than a poison (The American Heritage Science Dictionary, 2002).

Among the most common toxins contained in commercial creams are mercury and hydroquinone. Mercury is a potent chemical substance known by its chemical symbol Hg. It is Greek in origin from the term hydrargyrum translated to mean "liquid silver." This "liquid silver" description of mercury extends from the chemical's shiny, metallic appearance. Mercury is also known as "quicksilver" by reference to its mobility and hence its association with the fastest moving planet in the solar system. However, as an additive in bleaching creams, mercury for humans is extremely toxic. It may transition into the body via breaks in the skin, inhalation through the lungs or oral ingestion. Most importantly as pertains to women of African descent when pregnant mercury can damage the nerves, the kidneys and the liver via creams applied by the mother and via the placenta attached to the unborn (Williams, 2016).

Hydroquinone is a manufactured chemical. Its designated formula is $C_6H_4(OH)_2$. Its primary purpose is to lighten the skin that has been darkened by "freckles", "age spots", and "liver spots" which may extend from pregnancy, birth control pills, hormone medicine, etc. Hydroquinone is a common ingredient of bleaching creams but it has been found to be a carcinogen linked to cancer. Creams sold commercially where hydroquinone is present contain a maximum of two percent for health reasons despite the fact of its association with skin cancer for the mother and toxicity for her unborn child. Additionally, hydroquinone has been linked with a skin condition called "ochronosis" which leads to a skin thickening and a skin discoloration (WebMD, 2017).

Distinct from the aforementioned chemicals home-made bleaching concoctions may contain arsenic. Arsenic is a chemical generally used commercially as a poison given that it is frequently found in pesticides. The chemical symbol for arsenic is As. It was originally introduced by Albertus Magnus in 1250. The technological use of metallic arsenic is in the improvement of alloys such as copper and lead. What's more Arsenic compounds are

found in herbicides and used in the treatment of certain wood products. Given these applications arsenic is a potent toxin when consumed by living organisms, especially multicellular life (Lenntech, 2017).

Various ailments may accrue from the consumption of arsenic including irritation of the stomach and intestines, reduced red and white blood cells, as well as lung and skin dysfunctions. Increased amounts of arsenic may also facilitate skin, lung, liver and lymphatic cancers. Increased amounts may furthermore cause infertility, stillbirths, reduced resistance to infections, heart problems, brain damage and impaired DNA (Lenntech, 2017).

Aside from the effects of chemical toxins bleaching creams may pose other health risks for pregnant African and African descended women. Of note are allergic reactions to the ingredients which function to lighten dark skin. Said reactions include skin burning, skin itching, and the formulation of lesions on the skin. Other reactions may cause the skin to flake or crust disrupting its normal function and general appearance (Williams, 2016). Inspired by the aforementioned reactions as symptomatic of the bleaching syndrome are a melanin by dark skin pathology experienced in stillbirth encountered by women of African descent.

CONCLUSION

Some African and African descended women by influence of the bleaching syndrome have internalized light skin as the ideal of feminine beauty and they bleach to acquire it. Unfortunately, the bleaching process imposes health risks which not only precipitate stillbirths when pregnant but toxic poisoning by mercury, hydroquinone, or arsenic, skin discolorations, skin cancers and ultraviolet complications necessitating they avoid sunlight. In addition to the toxicity of bleaching creams are the risks posed by steroids. The profit potential of steroids encourages both illegal usage and sale. What's more steroids can navigate the skin and emerge in the mother's breast milk causing further health risks. Resolution of the problem will necessitate African women be informed of an alternative to Eurocentric somatic ideals. Such an alternative must ultimately help African and African descended women to escape the dark skin pathology. In the aftermath, they will find solace in their dark skin and other native characteristics.

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