



Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Volume 4 | Number 1


Article 7

2019

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Recommended Citation

Cavusoglu, Lena (2019) "Hayfa el Mansur, Nappily Ever After (2018): Chasing Perfection," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*. Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 7.

DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2019-04-01-07

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr/vol4/iss1/7><https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr/vol4/iss1/7>

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Hayfa el Mansur, *Nappily Ever After* (2018): Chasing Perfection

Abstract

2018 Netflix movie *Nappily Ever After* voices the relationship of Black women with their natural hair and try to free them from the white beauty ideals imposed by the modern culture. By delving into historical connotations, this film review aims to understand how and why stereotypical narratives about African-American beauty and hair exist in media and shows the societal and psychological consequences of underrepresentation.

Keywords

hair, black women, diversity, nappily ever after

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Film Review

Hayfa el Mansur, Nappily Ever After (2018): Chasing Perfection

Introduction

“Like most black mothers, mine was consumed by the presentation of her child. I was a reflection of her as a mother. It was an ever-present source of anxiety to prove that I was just as well-groomed as any white child. They would play, hair uncombed, no shoes, traces of everything they’d eaten smeared on their faces, completely happy and oblivious to any possible defects to their appearance. I, on the other hand, had to be fixed. Once a week: wash, conditioner, and hot comb, until my hair was straight enough to run her fingers through it without one snap, crackle or pop. Only then was I perfect. But for an 11-year-old perfection was no fun. To my mom appearance was everything. We always had to be perfectly groomed because no fairy tale ever ended with words... Nappily Ever After.”

These are the opening statements from the 2018 Netflix movie *Nappily Ever After* directed by Hayfa el Mansur, which is based on the 1998 book of Trisha Thomas. When Violet's mom did not allow her to play in the swimming pool since water would spoil her perfectly groomed straight hair, Violet used these words to express how she feels. Violet Jones is a young, black woman, a frantic perfectionist who works as a successful advertising executive and believes that her buttoned-up beauty, especially her perfect long straight hair, and career success make her the perfect woman who deserves the perfect boyfriend with a perfect life. Pauletta who is Violet's mom attempts to keep Violet as her vision of perfection by pressuring her into being perfect all the time despite the effort it takes. After a series of changes in the state of Violet's hair along with emotional catastrophes, we watch the journey of Violet, as an underrepresented woman in the fashion and beauty industries, from superficial perfection to self-acceptance and eventually, self-love.

Nappily Ever After, a movie that voices the experiences of oppressed women, got the attention of and praise from African-American women all around the world for empathizing the relationship with natural hair. When Violet Jones sits on the patio with her two best friends, she cannot enjoy her time outside and keeps interrupting the conversation because she is afraid that it is going to rain, although it is a sunny day. She is anxious

because her hair is straightened, and she avoids anything that will destroy the perfection of her hair. Many Black women who related to Violet's anxiety used Twitter to share their experiences. "*The amount of strength, pride, and identity that black women hold in their hair is both mentally/physically exhausting and completely liberating,*" wrote a Twitter user who watched the movie (Film Daily 2019). And another Twitter user added, "*No diss those who perm, fry, or weave, to fit the majority's beauty standards that we've been conditioned to accept. All hair is 'good hair,' no matter the texture*" (Twitter 2018).

What we perceive as beautiful and fashionable come to us through a variety of media narratives that we are bombarded with daily (Patton 2006). Black woman presented in media with long, straight blonde hair, retouched lighter skin tone, and a narrow nose is the proof of likeness to Whiteness. Thompson (2009) noted that the majority of advertising directed to black women are about hair relaxers and other hair products that should be used with relaxed hair. The proposed woman who carries White female features in Black skin encourages racism by "othering" women of color and implying that a non-White woman who resembles her ethnicity is not attractive. Therefore, both the beauty and entertainment industries fail to embrace the culturally diverse world we live in by defining ideal beauty based on a narrow segment of female population and by encouraging aesthetic sameness.

Due to the inadequate representation of their appearance, women of color in all ages feel left out from the beauty scene. *Nappily Ever After* is an important film that voices the wrong beauty perceptions about Black women, frees them from the white beauty ideals imposed by the modern culture, and encourages the audience that natural is beautiful. By delving into historical connotations, this film review aims to understand how and why stereotypical narratives, which contributes to oppression and externalization, about African-American beauty and hair exist in the media. Furthermore, it shows the societal and psychological consequences of underrepresentation based on Violet's fictional story.

Globalization of Western Beauty

Ideal beauty standards are set by global fashion and beauty media, which promotes narrow face with high eyebrows, large, round, light-colored eyes, high cheekbones, thin noses and lips, long-straight hair, and lighter skin that are associated with Whiteness (Cunningham et al. 1995). The constructed, so-called Western standards of beauty and femininity have "*racialized* beauty, [in] that it has defined beauty per se in terms of White

beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white [people] are more likely to have” (Taylor 1999, p. 17).

Globalization has given rise to the Westernization of beauty by diffusing the Western, primarily American, beauty ideals (Jones 2011). As Western beauty ideals became globalized, ethnic beauty ideals and practices were abandoned. This shift did not occur overnight, but it happened through shaping aspirations. So, due to their influential global reach, beauty firms, fashion magazines, and Hollywood remained the trendsetters in fashion and beauty. The concept of “world fashion,” which is embedded in Western culture and history, began the global diffusion of ideal beauty standards and the appropriation of Western beauty, and it caused profound societal, cultural, and individual impacts for non-Western women.

Beauty Whitewashed

An ongoing global critique towards the fashion industry involves the lack of race and ethnic diversity found in mainstream media. For instance, on the runway, the idealization of Whiteness remained constant when it comes to the ethnicity of models. White models walking down the runways of New York, London, Paris, and Milan for the spring 2017 season were 74.6%, and non-White models were 25.4%. Among these, 10.33% were only Black models (Tai 2016). Critics believe that the lack of racial diversity promotes a blond-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian ideal, and it is considered racist.

Wissinger (2015) delves into the racial discrimination aspect of the fashion industry and specifically focuses on the experiences of Black models in the high-end fashion market. According to her research, Black models’ success in the editorial market depends on two ironically different conditions: 1) the ability to meet White beauty standards and 2) exoticism or primitivism. Looking the Whitest, such as having European American-looking straight hair, lighter skin, and narrow facial features, helps Black models to stand out and find jobs in the high-end fashion market. On the other hand, a dark-skinned woman who is quite different from White beauty standards is exploited for her exoticism by being forced to “pose and style in exotic juxtapositions to the normative white body” and is presented as an exotic creature with animalistic hyper-sexuality, rather than as a woman. This representation of Black women is used to serve the cultural fascination of the West about non-Western women’s bodies and reinforce the superiority of “pure” white femininity in the social hierarchy (Mears 2011, p. 174–175).

Furthermore, Leong’s (2013) concept of “racial capitalism,” which is defined as “*the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person*” sheds light on the motivations behind the

industry's desire to show a degree of racial diversity (p. 2152). Racial capitalism views non-Whiteness as particularly valuable because it delivers specific social and economic benefits to White individuals and institutions. In this process, since White women are presented as privileged, underrepresented non-White women feel enormous pressure to express themselves and ultimately to belong to the dominant group. Finally, they attempt to assimilate to the standards of the dominant culture and forget their own ethnic and cultural identities.

Straightened, Weave, Blonde, Bald

Nappily Ever After demonstrates a connection between hair and identity for black women. After Violet and her boyfriend Clint break up, we watch Violet's emotional transition from rage to being hurt, and to fear. Each phase reflected in a new hairstyle, which is also the chapters of the movie: "Straightened," "Weave," "Blonde," and "Bald." When Violet changes her hair in the mentioned order, her personality and emotional life change as well. She feels perfect and confident with her straightened hair. When Violet wears hair weave, she becomes the facsimile of herself. She tries to be sexy with her platinum blunt cut bob. Lastly, when she shaves her hair in bald, she feels invisible and insecure, which then takes an unexpected turn and frees her from the pressure of perfection mentally and physically.

Violet Jones grows up feeling "unacceptable" due to the underrepresentation of Black women in the dominant narrative who have been taught to assimilate their natural hairstyle by pressing or chemically strengthening (Wallace 1979). Since the beauty industry advertises long straight hair as the only signifier of beauty for women, it is not surprising that hair was highlighted repeatedly in *Nappily Ever After* as essential for the concept of beauty.

The crucial importance of body image and hair in black women's lives can be traced back to pre-slavery times in Africa (King and Niabaly 2013). In many tribes in Africa, hair was significant as a symbol of one's status in society, identity, religion, and ancestry (Byrd and Tharps 2001). The symbolism in hair became even more dominant in determining one's status during slavery in the United States. The beauty of African American women, particularly regarding their skin color and hair, has been compared to White beauty standards. During slavery, Black women who had Western features such as lighter skin, White facial features, and wavy or straight hair, were used as house slaves, while women with darker skin color, kinky hair, and broader facial features were enslaved in the plantation fields (Patton 2006). Since White masters had control over house enslaved African women, despite their looser hair texture, they still had a considerable pressure to

have a presentable image as close to White as possible (Thompson 2008). Imitating white standards of beauty, particularly for hair, meant a higher social status, the possibility to be free and even survival (Patton 2006). The children of home-slaved women from slave masters had straighter, looser, lighter colored and softer hair, which was considered "good hair," which added more pressure to the shoulders of Black women to look as white as they could (Tate 2007). This White supremacist classification based on stereotypical beauty standards, termed "The Lily Complex" by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003, p. 177), is defined as,

“altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive...As Black women deal with the constant pressure to meet a beauty standard that is inauthentic and often unattainable the lily complex can set in.”

Therefore, women of color, such as Violet Jones, strive to change their appearance, especially their hair, to belong to the Euro-centric beauty ideal, loathe their natural looks, and believe that “Black is not beautiful...that she can only be lovely by impersonating someone else” (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003, p. 177).

Black women have been taught that wearing their kinky hair in braids or dreadlocks and embracing their natural beauty may be considered a radical act or political statement and may convey socioeconomic status (Patton 2006). As a result, rather than wearing their afro hair in its natural state, many African American women chose to wear wigs and weaves or undergo harsh chemical processes to fit in with mainstream hairstyles and eventually be accepted in society. Similarly, Violet fixes herself, particularly her hair constantly to be perceived as “acceptable” and “perfect” and thus to fit into what society views as beautiful.

Many women who do not have the privilege of getting reaffirmation for their facial and physical features from the fashion media feel that their look is not a kind of beauty that is worth celebrating. These underrepresented women are forced to feel “ugly” and “different.” The assumption of being perceived as ugly and different leads to the fear of social and romantic discrimination, the lack of access to economic and social power, and overall the dismay of social exclusion. Therefore, underrepresented women such as Violet strive to recreate their appearance through hair treatment and many other beauty and fashion consumption practices.

King and Niabaly (2013, p. 5) noted that “it is harder for black women with natural hair to secure jobs as their hair often does not conform to

'corporate grooming policies' that deem afros, dreadlocks, braids and such styles as unprofessional, radical and subversive." The problem of the lack of racial diversity in fashion and beauty media goes beyond employment issues, and it dramatically influences the well-being of society as a whole (Padula 2016). Greene (1994, p. 18) stated that "*the United States idealizes the physical characteristics of White women and measures women of color against this arbitrary standard*". Therefore, for non-White women, Western standards of beauty cause internalized self-hatred and push them to strive for beauty by changing their natural physical appearance with practices such as plastic surgery, skin-lighting creams, and hair straightening chemicals to fit in society. Unsurprisingly, African-American women spent \$54.4 million on ethnic hair and beauty products, out of \$63.5 million total industry spending in 2017 (Nielsen 2018). However, it should be noted that Black consumers do not only spend on beauty products specifically designed for them. African-American women spent significantly higher cash on personal appearance products, such as \$473 million out of the \$4.2 billion industry in total hair care, \$127 million out of the \$889 million industry in grooming aids, and \$465 million out of the \$3 billion industry in skincare preparations (Nielsen 2018).

On the other hand, all this image construction through hair chemicals, such as straightening hair is potentially a dangerous process that may cause hair breakage and loss, skin and scalp burns, and eye injury (Lester 2000). The fact that women of color carry higher levels of beauty-product related chemicals in their bodies than white women due to the use of more cosmetic products to comply with Western beauty ideals is striking (Zota and Shamasunder 2017). These facts and statistics demonstrate how non-Caucasian women experience social inequality based on their natural appearance and face a physiological threat to their well-being.

Conclusion

"Don't let someone's negative opinion of you become your reality"
Violet Jones

Today's society is taught to define universal beauty by the "golden ratio," which dates back to Ancient Greece and rates characteristics including but not limited to hair texture, eyes size, and nose width, while never ranking non-European features as most beautiful (Pallett, Link and Lee 2010). Therefore, valuing Whiteness as beauty also highlights Anglicized features, which are more than just skin color and include hair texture, less prominent curves, smaller noses, and thinner lips. Although aesthetics is subjective in creative industries, producers assume that creating an image of beauty entails only working with White women that match the "golden ratio," which

is discouraging for all non-White women, because it is genetically unattainable.

Femininity and identity are closely linked with beauty and its representation in media. Regardless of race, women take their cues from the dominant images, which is the Caucasian look. This norm creates unrealistic beauty ideals that women must live up to regarding how a woman should look like.

Through Violet's story, *Nappily Ever After* represents African American women and voices the psychological consequences of underrepresentation in the fashion and beauty industries. However, these consequences do not only belong to Black women. Any form of underrepresentation in the fashion media either through race, ethnicity, age, or gender put tremendous pressure on women all around the world. Therefore, representation in every form of beauty is so essential for not only Black women's physical and emotional well-being but all-female population. Media producers should consider that beauty lies in differences and that no women should be made ashamed of their uniqueness. As Violet did at the end of the movie, it is time to leave the conventional gold beauty standards of the past behind—for good.

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