"How Black Women Educators in Middle School Are Instrumental in Young, Black Girls' Development of Self: Sharon Flake's The Skin I'm In "

By: Shanelle Minta

A Senior Comprehensive Project in English

Submitted to the Department of English at Allegheny College

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree

April 12th, 2024

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Professor Jennie Votava [Director] _____

Professor Sarah Buckner [Second Reader] _____

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the college community as a whole.

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INTRODUCTION

"Melanin is an incomparable beauty. From the lightest to the darkest skin tone, Black women and Black girls are exquisite beauty in every shade. Yes, Black females have that special something that just can't be ignored. We are Melanin Queens, beautifully created! Respect the complexion."

— Stephanie Lahart

Black women are beautiful. Black women come in different shades and sizes. The different shades of melanin make us individually ourselves. Black women's beauty has not been appreciated. Black skin has always been used as a way to separate and be mistreated by White Americans. This mistreatment and prejudice has trickled down to the black community and has caused internalized hate and colorism. Many young African American women struggle with their beauty because they have been told for years that their black is not beautiful. Black women have been subjected to years of hate and beratement from white America and even in their community. I dedicate this comp to open up the conversation on the effects of colorism in schools and the importance of having black educators. I will also highlight different deep rooted issues that black girls endure in the African American community such as bullying, colorism, and self-hatred. These situations can be traumatic to African American women and cause them to feel displaced within their bodies. The African American community struggle to believe in the benefits of therapy has caused many women and men to live in silence about their struggles. They are made to feel that their feelings should not be expressed because it will come off as them complaining. This stigma against therapy and being open about your emotions has caused Black women to never truly have a safe space to be vulnerable. They rather hide their feelings and feel the

obligation to be strong for everyone around them while they suffer in silence. This comp will go into depth on the effects that colorism and bullying have on young African American girls. *"The Skin I'm In"* by Sharon Flake will be the novel that I will be using to be in conversation with my topic.

Published in 1998, *The Skin I'm in* is a story about a young girl named Maleeka, who goes through her journey of self-love and finding her voice. Maleeka is a black girl in middle school who is subjected to mistreatment by her classmates. Maleeka and her Mother Mrs. Madison is dealing with the unexpected passing of her father. While she is trying to deal with the grief of losing a parent, she is also dealing with the bullying from her classmates. With the passing of her father, Maleeka's mother is struggling to make ends meet. In order to save money, Maleeka's mother begins to sew Maleeka's clothes for school. Due to Maleeka's mother being a beginner to sewing , she struggles with stitching Maleeka's hand me down clothes properly. Maleeka's clothes were one of the reasons that caused her to be bullied by her classmates for being poor. Maleeka also gets bullied for her dark skin complexion. Maleeka's classmates John-John and her "friend" Charlese called her names constantly because they did not see her as beautiful. Maleeka befriends Charlese because she wanted to have protection from bullying, but also access to the clothes that she did not have. The bullying and colorist comments from her peers causes an internal struggle for Maleeka about her beauty because she believes the words that are being spoken to her. Though Maleeka is seen as poor and ugly, she is one of the most intelligent young women in her school. While Maleeka is dealing with the trauma of losing a parent, she is dealing with traumatic interactions with her classmates.

Early on in the book, we are introduced to Miss Saunders, who worked at a successful ad agency, but is given the chance to teach English at McClenton Middle School. She is introduced

as having skin a condition called vitiligo, which is a chronic autoimmune disorder that causes patches of skin to lose pigment or color. At the very beginning of the text, Miss Saunders is already a very strong presence in this book. She encourages Maleeka by reciting a poem about how beautiful Maleeka's black skin is. Miss Saunders is at first ridiculed by many of the students, including Charlese and Maleeka. Her confidence in her vitiligo despite the comments that were made by people in her past and her students. Miss Saunders does not let their harsh words discourage her from what her purpose is for coming to teach. She talks about her journey to finding contentment within herself and is candid that the journey was not always easy. She also challenges her students to reach their full potential by assigning them work that pushes them to think critically while improving their writing skills. She is the epitome of a strong black woman because she defeated the odds that were stacked against her. Her impact on students such as Maleeka shows the importance of Black Educators. Black educators are essential to the journey of students of color because they are able to provide advice, guidance, love and life experiences that can validate the experiences of being a student of color.

Maleeka is apprehensive of getting close to Miss Saunders because she felt that she was a freak. As time went on, Miss Saunders and Maleeka develop a close-knit relationship. Miss Saunders speaks words of affirmation to Maleeka in regards to her beauty. Miss Saunders assigns her class a writing assignment and takes notice of Maleeka's writing skills. She helps Maleeka recognize her writing gifts and encourages her to continue to write the story that she had assigned for class. This encouragement is very impactful to Maleeka because she finds writing empowering and a way to express her suppressed emotions. With Miss Saunders' encouragement, Maleeka goes on to win a library writing competition. Miss Saunders also helps Maleeka find her voice when it comes to standing up to Charlese's bullying. She intentionally

separates them during class time and also sets Maleeka up with a job in the principal's office. Miss Saunders is doing everything in her power to make sure that Maleeka stays out of trouble. Maleeka still struggles with Charlese bullying and having power over her. Throughout her time with Miss Saunders, Maleeka feels both protected and encouraged which causes her to stand up to Charlese. Miss Saunders' strength and unwavering support of Maleeka helps her feel more confident within herself. Their relationship demonstrates the importance of having black educators who care about your education, but also who you are as a person.

Skin I'm In opens up the conversation about colorism that is very prevalent in the African American community as well as in the world. Lighter skin complexions are favored and treated better than darker skin complexions. I am going to be joining in on the overall conversation of colorism by talking about how the effects of colorism not on Maleeka but on black girls.I will also add some of my own personal experiences with colorism throughout the school system and how I developed a relationship with my guidance counselor. School is a place that is supposed to be another safe space from home, but it can cause the most damage to students. If you do not fit into the social and beauty standards set by people around you, attending school can do harm. In the article,"Colorism as Historical Trauma: Exploring School Racial Context, Peer Dynamics, and Counternarratives Among Black Women," Current research on Black youth and young adults' schooling experiences suggests that students' racialized experiences with peers play a key role in their sense of belonging and school adjustment (Butler-Barnes et al., 2019; Byrd & Hope, 2020)." The feeling of displacement in school is the reality of many young African American girls who come from low-income families. It is important to talk about these struggles in Maleeka's story because school trauma for black girls can have negative repercussions on their self-esteem and their idea of beauty standards as they go through life. Due to my own personal

experiences with colorism and bullying, I still struggle till this day to see myself as beautiful. I was told the opposite for so many years that it has causes me to cringe inside when I get a compliment from people.

Though this book is opening up the conversation about these issues of colorism throughout schools, this book is not talked about in the way that it needs to be. During my research process, I was able to find only one article called "There ain't no accounting for what folks see in their own mirrors.: Conjuring Colorism within a Sharon Flake Narrative" by Wanda Brooks, Susan Browne, and Gregory Hampton. This article is the only one that delved into the needed literary conversation that is taking place in this book. The lack of conversation about this novel raises an issue because this book talks about the reality of darker skinned black girls. It also gives insight to the experiences within the school system that is not talked about much. Many young black girls have these experiences like Maleeka and do not know how to process them because we are not exposed to books such as *The Skin I'm In*. If I had been exposed to this book when I was in middle school and going through my journey, I would have found comfort in that I was not alone. The lack of literary conversations for books such as Flakes' narrative can cause many black girls to continue to suffer in silence about their struggles because they might feel that they do not have anyone who might understand their feelings. This book validates the experiences of black girls in school and puts the exact struggles of black girls to forefront. More schools and educators need to expose their students to books that talk about these topics because it can help them navigate situations as they go through their lives.

In schools, we need educators who are candid about their experiences of being black in America. Black educators can relate to black students in a way that white educators can not

because of their shared experiences. Miss Saunders and Maleeka's shared experiences are the basis of their connection because the black women's experience is unique to black women. Miss Saunders also shows how important it is to cultivate solid bonds of understanding, patience, firmness, and love. At times, black students just want to be told that they are worthy and that they are beautiful. There is beauty in having an adult who loves and believes in you when you do not. Miss Saunders's mentality is one that teachers, especially black educators, should have when dealing with students of color because they should not be written off due to behavior. If Miss Saunders had done that with Maleeeka, then she would not have found her voice and her true passion for writing.

I dedicate this comp to talk about the deep-rooted issues of colorism and bullying that are prevalent in the school system and how having an outlet such as a black educator can help young black women navigate these feelings. Sharon Flake's novel talks about issues that are still relevant today in regards to the black women experience. I can relate to the story of Maleeka because, throughout my school career, I was bullied as she was. I attended a predominantly Black and LatinX school like Maleeka. I was constantly criticized about beauty and my clothes when I attended middle school. I remember how detrimental the comments were to my self esteem because it made me question myself every day.A moment that I will never forget is when I was standing in the hallway and one of my female classmates named Courtney looked at me and said " you are such an ugly black bitch". She also did that in front of my other classmates who laughed along with her comments. In that moment, she made me feel like the smallest person ever. I went through the school year trying to prove myself as being cool so I would start to act like my bullies. I did not want to be subjected to the hate from them anymore, so I started to join them when they misbehaved. This continued until I met a woman named Miss Desuze,

who was my guidance counselor. She and I did not connect automatically because it takes me a little while to open up to people that I do not know. Once we got to know one another, she became one of the most influential educators in my life. I opened up to her about the struggles of feeling beautiful and my yearning to be accepted. Miss Desuze saw my need to be seen and understood, so she took her time to get to know me as a human being. She showed me patience, love, understanding, and firmness which helped me get on the right path for the rest of my seventh-grade year. My relationship with Miss Desuze inspired me to want to become a guidance counselor myself. The time that we spent together shifted me as a person. She became my safe space as Miss Saunders became Maleeka's safe space. I want to be able to be a Miss Saunders and Miss Desuze to young black women who needs support just like I did.

In The *Skin I'm In*, Sharon Flake addresses the issues of colorism, self-esteem, and peer pressure through the lens of a young girl's coming-of-age journey. Maleeka's story is a powerful reminder that self-acceptance and self-love are essential in overcoming the external pressures and expectations that society places on individuals. As Maleeka learns to embrace her true self, readers are inspired to do the same and to challenge the harmful stereotypes and prejudices that limit our understanding of beauty and worth. Although this book was written in 1998, the struggles that Maleeka goes through such as colorism and bullying are still a relevant issue in 2024. There have been conversations about the issues of colorism, but we are now in a generation where these taboo conversations about the experiences that Maleeka is going through are always being talked about.

Despite the mistreatment of black girls being talked about there are no actions behind the words. There is no trying to make improvements for black girls to have a better schooling experience. During the pandemic, the whole world was shut down. Black Children had to start

attending school on the computer and parents had to take on more responsibility to also teach their children at home. Though the pandemic was a trying time for everyone, black children were able to leave the struggle that they face in schools. They were now in the comfort of their home which can be a safe space for them. The article, " When I Think of Home: Black Families Supporting Their Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic", says " Consequently, research (e.g., Hough, 2021) and reports (e.g., Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 U.S. Department of Education, 2021) indicates that a substantial percentage of academic gains made by children of color have been "lost" in the process of school closures over the past year .(Wright)" Black students were already struggling in school academically and the pandemic exacerbated their feelings of inadequacy regarding their education. Due to the transition of parents becoming the teachers in the home, black students were not retaining the information in the ways that they were when they were in the school building. Though the educational side of things for black students dwindled, black students were feeling accepted. As the article continues Wright says :

> We believe the regard for Black humanity is missing in action among U.S. schools and classrooms. The pervasive gaslighting of explanations offered by schools and society, more recently "learning loss," do little to improve the longstanding rift and lack of trust that many Black families have with schools in their diligent efforts to protect their children. Contrary to the belief and concept of "learning loss," (a white-centered term) we argue herein that Black children have gained psychologically during the pandemic in their homes' safety, nurturing, and protective environments. Black homes are where Black children's identities are affirmed, encouraged, and appreciated in a loving environment that allows them to flourish, which is an asset to learning. (521)

Many children of color have to deal with the prejudices already in the school system. They need to fight to be seen and to get the help that they need. During COVID-19, there was a lot of transition that was taking place. Parents becoming the teachers in the home gave them insight into how hard the school work that the children are learning.

Even though black students struggled with maintaining their academics during the pandemic, they were learning in a safe place. Black children were obtaining knowledge not educationally, but psychologically which taught them how to understand how to advocate for themselves when needed upon returning to school. They were no longer in a place where they had the deep feeling of inadequacy. They were attaining knowledge that can be taught, but the teachers were the people most dearest to them. Their parents were not put in a position where they can fully understand their children.The text says “Black homes are where Black children’s identities are affirmed, encouraged, and appreciated in a loving environment that allows them to flourish, which is an asset to learning.” Black students need to have a space where they are nurtured and can feel that they can learn. Despite the world being at a standstill, being at home pushed black students to learn who they are.

This book is an important read for young black girls because it addresses these issues and brings awareness to the unique struggles that young black girls face when it comes to body image and self-esteem. Society needs to do better in supporting and uplifting young black girls, rather than sexualizing and shaming them for their natural features. *The Skin I'm In* sheds light on these important issues and provides a platform for young black girls to see themselves represented and validated. It is crucial for young black girls to have positive role models and to feel empowered in their skin. Miss Saunders and Maleeka’s relationship shows why we as a

black community must continue to have open conversations about body positivity, self-love, and the importance of embracing our differences. These societal norms that are being perpetuated cause harm in young black youth. Their relationship also shows why educators should create a culture of acceptance and appreciation for all skin colors, body types, and cultures.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One will be dedicated to Maleeka. She is only 13 years old which is the start of her teenage years. I go into depth about her struggles of dealing with colorism, bullying, the loss of her father, and the effects that those experiences had on her. The teenage and middle years are essential in the foundation of young women's views on life and themselves. I want this particular chapter to be candid and affirming to black girls who are suffering in silence about the struggles that they are going through. Maleeka's journey is inspiring to read because she was able to find her voice at the end of the novel. Her story speaks to how important it is to go through the process and how it can end beautifully. It is important to highlight that as she is going through this process she did not do it alone. Miss Saunders helps her along the way and that is important to note. Black women supporting, nurturing, and loving the younger generation heal and break cycles.

Miss Saunders will be the focus of the second chapter. I focus on her own personal story because it is important to hear about her journey to confidence.. I will then delve into her relationship with Maleeka and the influential part she played in her journey. Miss Saunders' journey is important to focus on because she is the epitome of a strong black woman that did the work to love herself. She is very honest about her struggles with loving her skin because of her vitiligo. Miss Saunders is proof that even though the journey is a struggle, you will always end up on the right path in the end. Her truthfulness was able to teach Maleeka that loving yourself

takes work especially when the world is trying to tell you differently. Hating the skin you are born with can cause a lifetime of self-hatred and can affect how you maneuver in your day-to-day life. Miss Saunders broke that cycle with Maleeka and she was given a safe space to learn how to love herself.

Maleeka and Miss Saunders' friendship was healing for me as a 22-year-old because I related to the struggles of existing as a black woman in the American school system. School has always been presented as a place where you go and expand your knowledge. The fact of the matter is that school can be the cause of many traumatic things in people's lives. This story speaks to how deeply important self-esteem is for black women. I have personally struggled with being comfortable in my skin and body for years because I am not considered to be the standard of beauty. I want this comp to be a love letter to all black women especially my younger sister Sharon because I do not want the cycle of low self esteem within the darker skin community to continue. Black women's struggles need to be talked about, but there needs to be action taken so that healing within the black community can start.

CHAPTER 1: Maleeka

Maleeka, the black adolescent girl, the protagonist of Flake's novel, the Skin I'm In has a rough experience in her school. She is dealing with countless degrading comments by her classmates while also trying to deal with the grief of the passing of her father. She befriends Charlese so she can borrow her clothes as well so she can avoid the bullying. As Maleeka's story unfolds through the novel, she builds a connection with Miss Saunders, who gives her the protection that she craves. Their relationship also gives her the courage to find her voice to stand up to her adversaries. Maleeka and Miss Saunders relationship is a testament to the importance of black girls having an older black woman to where they can go to seek refuge.

Maleeka deals with bullying about her skin color by her classmates since she was in elementary school. She has transitioned to middle school and has been still subjected to this treatment. Her main bullies are students who have the same skin color as her, so she struggles with why she is subjected to this treatment from people who look like her. Charlese and John-John are the bullies that are named in the book. Maleeka becomes "friends' " with her bully Charlese because she knows that Charlese will give her the clothes that she can not afford. She is constantly bullied for her own so she allows this treatment from Charlese and John-John because she feels that is the only way she can cope. She suffers in silence because she is scared that she will not have access to the clothes and "protection" that she gets from Charlese. As she gets closer to Miss Saunders, she begins to get the support that she needs from an adult to be able to stop allowing herself to be treated horribly. She finally finds her voice and stands up to the bullies that have been tormenting her. Maleeka's story of bullying, colorism, school trauma, and self-hate, is the story of many African American children going through the public school system. They are smart like Maleeka, but the focus is on the outside appearance. Due to the lack

of black educators in schools, black students are always as fortunate to meet someone like Miss Saunders, who would encourage them.

John-John, who has attended both elementary and now middle school with Maleeka. He is consistently berating Maleeka because of her skin color and her clothing. Maleeka begins to talk about her experiences with John John and says, "John-John McIntyre is the smallest seventh grader in the world. Even fifth graders can see over his head. Sometimes I have a hard time believing he and I are both thirteen. He's my color, but since second grade *he's* been teasing *me* about being too black. Last year, when I thought things couldn't get any worse, he came up with this here song. Now, here this woman comes talking that black stuff. Stirring him up again" (Flake 4). Maleeka and John-John are both black.

Maleeka gets a compliment on her skin by Miss Saunders and John-John overhears the conversation. John-John begins to make comments about Maleeka's skin which causes her to give a background on her relationship with John-John. Due to both John-John and Maleeka sharing the same skin complexion, many readers would think that they would stick together during school simply because they feel a need to protect one another. Unfortunately, that is not the case for Maleeka; her fellow black classmate is her main bully. Maleeka says, "He's my color, but since second grade *he's* been teasing *me* about being too black." As Maleeka is talking about John-John, "he" is italicized because it emphasizes John-John also being black. "Me" in the sentence is also italicized because Maleeka is genuinely confused by John-John bullying her for 5 years when they have the same complexion. His actions towards Maleeka bring up the idea of self-hatred and colorism that is deeply prevalent in the African American community.

Colorism is a form of discrimination in which people of certain ethnic groups with darker skin are treated differently based on their darker skin tone. Rosario, Minor, and Rogers note that:

> "Darker-skinned Black girls experience more name-calling and teasing (even compared with darker-skinned boys), and Black girls' social status in school is heavily contingent upon these racialized and gendered beauty standards, such that lighter-skinned girls are afforded higher social status and are more desirable as friends and leaders of groups. (Glenn, 2008; Wilder, 2010). These social consequences in the school context can negatively influence psychological well-being and important school outcomes (Blake et al., 2017; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019). (Rosario, Minor, and Rogers 506)

This article delves into the reasoning behind John-John's actions towards Maleeka. The issue of colorism in the African American community is so prevalent because of how deeply darker-skinned people are always made to feel shame for their skin color. His actions also speak to how darker-skinned girls are treated in schools because John-John is treating his fellow black person like she is not a person. Maleeka continuously being bullied causes her to have negative opinions of herself and her appearance since she is constantly berated for it.

John-John and Maleeka's interactions are an example of the very traumatic instances that young black women face during school. The self-hatred that is being felt by the young men is being inflicted on the women which causes a cycle of self-hatred within young black people. They begin to feel uncomfortable with their people because they do not feel that they can be truly accepted. I can relate to these experiences because I was bullied by young black men throughout middle school. They would hypersexualize me due to my body being more "advanced" than my other classmates. Their comments on my appearance and body caused me to have severe self-esteem issues because I never felt that I was pretty enough. I would try to

change things about myself because of how ugly my peers made me feel. It is not realistic for everyone to like one another, but there should be a sense of obligation that John-John should feel towards Maleeka to make each other feel safe because they are both black. They are both not treated fairly in the school system, so that should cause some comradery between Maleeka and John-John.

Maleeka is confused and intimidated by Miss Saunders' presence when she first encounters her. Maleeka begins to speak about her first impression of Miss Saunders. She became uneasy at the sight of her because her vitiligo made her stand out immediately. Maleeka was not used to seeing a black woman who was confident in herself and that made Maleeka feel uncomfortable. Maleeka begins to talk about her initial feelings about seeing Miss Saunders and she expresses, "The first time I seen her, I got a bad feeling inside. Not like I was in danger or nothing. Just like she was somebody I should stay clear of. To tell the truth, she was a freak like me. The kind of person folks can't help but tease. That's bad if you're a kid like me. It's worse for a new teacher like her" (Flake page 2). Maleeka sees her and she immediately feels that she should steer clear of her. She says, "Just like she was somebody I should stay clear of. To tell the truth, she was a freak like me. The kind of person folks can't help but tease. That's bad if you're a kid like me. It's worse for a new teacher like her" (Flake 2). Maleeka says she "was a freak like me." Maleeka feels that because both Miss Saunders and herself do not fit into the Eurocentric beauty standards they are freaks. A "freak" means that you are a person who has an unusual physical abnormality. Maleeka's dark skin and Miss Suanders's vitiligo make them stand out from the rest and that makes them seen as not normal. Maleeka should have seen Miss Saunders and felt encouraged to have someone that looked different. Though Miss Saunders may have some white patches on her skin, she is still a black woman. Maleeka goes on to say "the kind of

person folks can't help but tease. That's bad if you're a kid like me. It's worse for a new teacher like her." Due to her patches of white skin, Maleeka is saying that she is bound to be made fun of. Her differences are so apparent that she is bound to get bullied or talked about. The immediate comments that Maleeka makes about herself and Miss Saunders show the internalized self-hate that she has. She immediately deemed their differences as a means to be made fun of and to be seen as outcasts.

The idea of bullying also comes up in this section because she says how bad it would be for a new teacher like Miss Saunders. Maleeka is talking about the verbal abuse that Miss Saunders will receive from the students due to the different patches on her skin.. She also talks about her bullying and in a way is comparing their bullying experiences. She is saying that as a student, she is bullied badly, but Miss Saunders is going to be bullied worse than she is. Maleeka seems to be relieved in the section because though she is going to experience bullying as well, it doesn't matter to her that Miss Saunders will receive it worse than her. That is a problem because Maleeka knows how verbal abuse can sting, but because it is not her she does not care.

Maleeka begins to express her feelings and frustrations about the mistreatment that she receives from her classmates. She talks about how there is a hyper fixation on the outside of her body instead of the inside of her. She says:

> " It's bad enough that I'm the darkest, worst-dressed thing in school. I'm also the tallest, skinniest thing you've ever seen. And people like John-John remind me of it every chance they get. They don't say nothing about the fact that I'm a math whiz, and can outdo ninth graders when it comes to figuring numbers. Or that I have a good memory and never forget one single, solitary thing I read. They only see what they see, and they don't seem to like what they see much" (Flake 4)."

Maleeka talks about the verbal abuse that she endures as she is navigating her day. This verbal abuse that she is subjected to has also made her feel the same way about herself. The focus is not on her intelligence, but on the material things that she does it have. This is the struggle of many young low-income black girls in the school system, there is never a conversation about how smart they are and the great things that they are doing in their classrooms. They can not afford the expensive and luxurious things that their classmates may be able to and they are ashamed because of it. Schools over the years have become a fashion show for students and less on academics. Even in low-income schools, many people are hyper-fixated on "looking rich" instead of the education that they are receiving in school. Maleeka talks about that struggle because it is not her family or her fault that they are not able to afford the clothes that are deemed acceptable or fashionable. She says " I'm the darkest, worst-dressed thing in school." Maleeka's first instinct is to talk down about herself because that is what her classmates always point out to her and is the first thing that sticks out about her.

They make her feel like her skin is the most undesirable feature. They continuously pick at her self-esteem and in this sentence, she starts to believe the lies that are being told are her truth. Appearance in middle school is focused on very much especially by young men like John-John because they are starting to feel attraction. When you are deemed unattractive then you start to feel that about yourselves. She goes on to refer to herself as the "worst dressed thing" in school because she has been made to feel like she is a mere object because of her skin color and her social status. She has started to believe the verbal and emotional abuse that she is receiving from her classmates. This is a struggle that many black girls face from their fellow black boys where they are treated like they are undesirable and this causes deep-rooted insecurities because they are rejected by men that are in their race. There are plenty of African

American girls who are low income such as Maleeka who are not able to afford certain things and are consistently bullied for it.

Maleeka's story is very similar to many black girls like myself. I come from a low-income family and was bullied because of my looks and because of my lack of "luxury" clothing throughout middle school. My family tried to give me the best that they could provide but it was not seen that way due to the standards of people and society. Similar to Maleeka, I was bullied by my black peers, girls, and boys because I did not have the latest shoes, clothes, or even bookbags. I wore Skechers and my bookbags came from Marshalls and my black peers would always call me names because they saw me as being broke. During that time, many of my classmates were very materialistic. They did not care or pay attention to grades or the contributions that I would make in a class similar to Maleeka. The focus was always on the material things and that was the determining factor of what wealth truly is. This is also a deep-rooted idea in the African American community. Your family could be struggling to pay bills and keep food on the table, but as long as you had the new Jordans on, you were seen as rich.

Maleeka befriends Char, who is "popular" as well as rich, in the eyes of the middle schoolers. Maleeka befriends her so that Char can start to bring her clothes to wear so that she does not have to wear her "poor" clothes. Due to this Maleeka subjects herself to bullying from Char so that she can be accepted. Maleeka says," Char says the dress would look perfect if I had some hips and boobs to go with it. Char blows a fat ring of stinking gray smoke in my face. I laugh, like everybody else. You got to *go* along with Char if you want to *get* along with her. You can't be all sensitive. That's what Char says" (Flake 12). Maleeka is receiving up-to-date clothes from Char and does not want to sever any relations so that she can keep getting the clothes she's

getting. Maleeka says Char blows a fat ring of stinking gray smoke in my face. I laugh, like everybody else. You got to *go* along with Char if you want to *get* along with her. You can't be all sensitive. That's what Char says." She is putting her self-respect to the side because she wants to keep up with her other classmates.

Maleeka and Char show the danger of bullying and mistreatment. Maleeka forces them to become friends with Char because she wants to have access to new clothes. In exchange, Maleeka is doing Char's homework for her. This transactional relationship shows the detriments of bullying and colorism because Maleeka deals with Char disrespecting her in the process. She equates her accepting the disrespect to not being "sensitive." Char, like other young black girls, sees themselves as better than the person that they are helping instead of letting their kindness just be. Char is treating Maleeka like she is not on her "level" and is embarrassing Maleeka in front of others. These actions establish the social hierarchy and remind Maleeka that despite her borrowing her clothes, she is still seen as less than. Maleeka goes on to say that she is accepting of the mistreatment because she doesn't want to be seen as "sensitive. This is a harmful lesson that is taught throughout the African American community. This toxic lesson makes many young black people accept certain behaviors from their counterparts for the sake of fitting in. Maleeka feels the need to be accepted so much that she borrows clothes from a girl who treats her as if she is a thing like John-John.

Maleeka's story again reminds me of myself. There was a time when I was standing in the hallway and a lighter-skinned peer of mine looked at me and said "You are so ugly" and then started laughing with others. I did not say anything to her because she was also popular and I did not want to have to fight her for defending myself. This was quite a common occurrence in my middle school experience with this particular individual because as Char she felt that I was

below her. I had unknown shoes, an ugly bookbag, and an acceptable designer jacket, so I was poor in her eyes. Due to this treatment, there was a time when I asked one of my "rich" friends if I could borrow her shoes for one day on a trip. I wanted others to see me have at least one pair of Jordans that was acceptable in their eyes. I craved their acceptance like Maleeka. The people who looked like me made me feel worse about myself despite how smart and driven I was when it came to school. Maleeka decided to join them because she did not feel that she could defend herself against them all. She'd rather have Char as a friend than as an enemy because having Char gave her a sense of security. Maleeka and I wanted to assimilate into what was seen as "popular" and made us cool in the eyes of our peers that we silenced ourselves. We were not accepted so there is a saying that if you can not beat them then join them which is exactly what we did because we wanted to protect ourselves from the constant verbal abuse that we were receiving.

As the book progresses, Miss Saunders assigns a writing assignment to Maleeka and her classmates. Maleeka does an amazing job on the assignment so Miss Saunders encourages her to continue to write the story that she has begun. Maleeka begins to write the story of Akeelma, who is Maleeka's imaginary inner self. Maleeka wrote Akeelma's story as a reflection of her own life and she would have confronted her problems. This inspires Maleeka to confront John-John about why he is so comfortable with constantly bullying her. Maleeka walks into class with the clothes that her mother sewed and John-John says:

> "New clothes, huh?" trying to be smart. I stop walking and turn to him and ask real smart people like, "Why you always picking on me?" I ain't sure what's come over me. I guess thinking about Akeelma makes me wonder why people treat others like they're nothing."Chill, Maleeka," John-John says, strutting down the hall alongside me.

He gets quiet, and I hear his big sneakers squeaking every time they hit the floor. “(Flake 63)

The encouragement that Miss Saunders gives Maleeka to continue to write the story of Akeelma, helps Maleeka find her voice. John-John becomes quiet when Maleeka confronts him because he is not used to her standing up to him. Maleeka’s change stems from her gaining confidence in herself . She no longer tolerates disrespect from the people that she once did because she knows for this berating to stop, she has to fight for it. John-John’s response is sometimes very common with bullies because they get surprised that the victim is finally talking to themselves. This moment is one of the many achievements because this is evidence that she is now seeing herself in the way that she should be. She is no longer going to be anyone’s “doormat”. This moment is so impactful for young black girls to read because they can see that the journey may be tough, but you will be able to get to a place of confidence with time. Maleeka showed immense courage and resilience.

As time progresses throughout the book, Miss Saunders gets Charlese in trouble with her sister. She convinces Maleeka to help her trash Miss Saunders Classroom. Ridden with guilt and feeling comfortable with Miss Saunders, Maleeka admits that Charlese forced her to help her. Miss Suanders talks to both girls and Charlese begins to attack Maleeka verbally for snitching on her. As Maleeka is standing there she begins to gain the courage to speak up for herself and says,“

Call me by my name! I hear Akeelma say, and I scream it out, too. “Call me by my name! I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I’m black, real black, and if you don’t like me, too bad ‘cause black is the skin I’m in!” (Flake167)

Maleeka's courage to stand up to Charlese at this moment is very pivotal. Charlese had a hold on Maleeka for a long time which caused her so much damage to her self esteem. Maleeka realizes that she is more powerful than she has given herself credit for. At this moment, she is breaking every word that was spoken to her. To young black girls that read this text, they will see that they do not have to continue to allow people to treat them like they are nothing. They have an example of how powerful they can become once they fully understand who they are. Maleeka goes from allowing people to verbally abuse her to fully understanding that her black is beautiful.

CHAPTER 2: Miss Saunders

Miss Saunders comes in as an unconventional teacher. She comes in very confident and that makes students such as Maleeka feel uncomfortable. She does not let the comments from her students discourage her from what she came to do at middle school. She makes sure that she has open communication with her students about her personal struggles with loving herself. Her vitiligo makes her stand out and she was subjected to years of bullying as well. This bullying causes her to hate the skin that she is in. Through her life honey, she ends up accepting that the difference makes her stand out beautifully. Her confidence and deep care for her students such as Maleeka and even Charlese causes her to continue her work in the school. Miss Saunders grows close to Maleeka and encourages her to continue to write. She sees that Maleeka is struggling because of her issues with her skin and her yearning for being accepted. Deposit Maleeka pushing back at Miss Saunders advances to help her, she does not give up on her. This relationship between Miss Saunders and Maleeka shows the importance of black women educators. Miss Saunders opening up and also encouraging Maleeka no matter the situation made her a safe space and

As discussed in Chapter 1, during an activity in class, Maleeka writes a fascinating story about a girl named Akeelma and Miss Suanders encourages her to continue the story. Akeelma's story is Maleeka's story. She writes about the experiences that she is going through. Maleeka starts to feel comfortable with Miss Suanders and comfortable with her knowledge. As she is writing this story about Akeelma, Miss Saunders is encouraging and says,"this is powerful stuff. "Writing is clearly one of your gifts, Maleeka". This section is so important because Miss Saunders is edifying Maleeka by calling out her gift and pushing her more into it. This novel is

written in first person, Maleeka tells the reader," I know it sounds stupid, but when I was leaving Miss Saunders's classroom, I hugged them papers to my chest like they was some boy I've been wanting to press up against for weeks. It feels good doing something not everybody can do." In this moment, Miss Saunders words meant so much to Maleeka and made her finally feel seen as the intellectual that she is. Maleeka talks about how she is only talked about in regards to her skin color and clothes and her desire was to be seen for her brightness. Miss Saunders validates Maleeka and that is what it is all about. Miss Saunders being a black woman makes this exchange even more meaningful because Maleeka is being seen from her own. Representation in school matters because of this moment between these two women, a confident black woman sees the potential in this young black woman and is pushing her more into her purpose. That is the beauty of having black educators ,they are able to see and feel the story of the younger black generation and allow them to feel safe. Maleeka feels safe to express the deep parts of herself that she is not able to show to everyone to Miss Saunders.

Like Maleeka, I had a guidance counselor named Miss Dueszue who I would leave my meetings with her feeling like I was on top of the world. She was the only adult in that school building that took the time to get to know me and push me in the ways that I needed too. Miss Saunders and Miss Desuze know the value of relationships and are comfortable with students which is why they took the time to get to know Maleeka and I. Representation matters because black educators can protect and create a safe space for their students to be who they are without any limitations.

Miss Saunders is a new teacher at Maleeka's middle school and she starts her new job. Miss Saunders asks Maleeka to help her to the principal's office as she is about to start her first day teaching. John-John hears Miss Saunders talking to Maleeka and says "she aint nothing

special”, she begins to walk off but then turns around to come back. Miss Saunders looks at Maleeka and begins to say, “ Maleeka, your skin is pretty. Like a blue-black sky after it’s rained and rained,then she smiles and explains how that line comes from a favorite poem of hers' ' (Flake 2. Miss Saunders first interaction with Maleeka is complimenting her dark chocolate skin. She is emphasizing how Maleeka’s skin is as dark as the sky after it rains to show how rich in color her skin is. Miss Saunders saw that Maleeka is falling victim to bullying by John-John so she takes the opportunity to speak life into Maleeka. This interaction between Maleeka and Miss Saunders is very powerful because this is the first interaction that both of these women have. Miss Saunders could have chosen to ignore what she heard from John-John and continue on with her day, but she chose to come back and make sure to let Maleeka know that she was indeed special. This interaction shows the importance of having black women in schools because Miss Saunders is immediately protective of Maleeka.

In many public schools, the protection of black students is lacking. Black students at times do not have the safe space or the teachers that look like them to go to comfort. Black educators such as Miss Saunders being in schools gives black students a sense of protection because as soon as Miss Saunders saw that Maleeka was being treated unfairly, she finds a way to protect Maleeka in her own way. The beauty of having Black educators is that they will make sure to show up for you in different ways even if you do not accept it.

Maleeka’s reluctance to Miss Saunders also brings up the idea of young black women not being comfortable with having strong black women in their presence. As soon as Maleeka saw Miss Saunders she says, “My skin starts to crawl before she even opens her mouth.” Maleeka is so bothered by Miss Saunders because she does not have confidence in herself so seeing Miss Saunders makes her uncomfortable. This goes back to show the importance of Black educators

because they can show young black people how to be confident in themselves and in the power that they have inside them. Black educators can relate to black children because they may have also gone through the pain, discomfort in themselves, and the uncertainty of who they are in society. Having teachers like Miss Saunders can teach children like Maleeka, who are growing into their bodies and into themselves, a way to embrace every part of what makes them who they are.

Miss Saunders sparks up a discussion with her class about what their face says to the world. She goes around and asks everyone including Maleeka what they feel about their face and the story behind it. As she goes on with the discussion she asks her class what they see when they see her and Maleeka says “freak” and after that a conversation sparks. Miss Saunders talks to her class and specifically to Maleeka and says:

> "Liking myself didn’t come overnight,”. “I took a lot of wrong turns to find out who I really was. You will, too.” Everybody starts talking at once, asking her questions. Miss Saunders answers ‘em all. Some kids even go up to her face and stare and point. She lets them do it too, like she’s proud of her face or something.It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. To see the poetry in your walk. To look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn't look like anybody else's idea of beauty” (Flake 20).

During this conversation, she allows the students to interact with her vitiligo by touching her face and asking the questions that they wanted without anger. Miss Saunders talks to the class about her own personal journey of self love and self discovery. She is very candid about the process not being easy which is important because the children that she is talking to are still very young.

At that age, there is an unrealistic standard that many of the young women and men hold themselves too. Miss Saunders says,"Liking myself didn't come overnight." Miss Saunders is talking about her journey to loving her vitiligo because like Maleeka she was most likely bullied and made fun of. Vitiligo is a skin condition that causes black people to have patches of white skin. Due to not having a consistent skin color, Miss Saudners went through bullying comments and insecurities within herself. Insecurities become very prevalent in young black girls and boys in middle school because they are growing into their bodies and the changes can cause them to see themselves in a different light. Saunders' full transparency about her self love journey is very crucial to teach young black middle schoolers because that is a crucial part in their lives. They go through hormonal changes and are starting to grow in their bodies. These changes can cause insecurities and bullying if many of the young people's changes are not deemed as "acceptable" by others. This conversation that she has with these young people is planting a seed so that they are not too hard on themselves and to trust their personal journey to loving themselves. Though the hyperfixation of their looks will happen, her words are encouraging because she knows that the kids she is teaching are different from others and they need to learn to love themselves.

As Miss Saunders continues to have this conversation with her class about her self love journey, she allows the students to come up to her and examine her face. Maleeka speaks about the class discussion and says , "Miss Saunders answers 'em all. Some kids even go up to her face and stare and point. She lets them do it too, like she's proud of her face or something. (Flake 20). Miss Saunders is so confident in her blackness and her differences shows the importance of candid conversations with black youth. She spoke about her journey in authenticity and realness while also allowing the children to interact with her body shows the young black children that she is teaching the result of going through the process, the good the bad and all. Miss Saunders

goes on to say," It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. To see the poetry in your walk. To look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn't look like anybody else's idea of beauty" (Flake 20). Miss Saunders is the epitome of black self love which is not really talked about in the African American community. Black educators having these open discussions with young black children and allowing them to be free in their language and true to how they feel allows them to have a sense of freedom with their teachers.gone through the pain, discomfort in themselves, and the uncertainty of who they are in society. In the article Love Yourz: Developing Black Students' Positive Racial Identities in ELA Classrooms by Kisha Porcher says:

> " For educators, centering Blackness within racial literacy shows constant, unwavering love for Blackness, while intentionally focusing on identifying and examining the effects of anti-Blackness and the social construction of Blackness within the classroom. For this study, Black racial literacy was used as a lens to examine the ways that Black educators elevate the beauty, brilliance, and complexity of Blackness. It was also used to examine Black teachers' own deep excavations of their racial identities, the ways they develop the racial identities of their Black students, and their manner of addressing anti-Blackness within their classroom practices. (Porcher)" .

Black educators allowing black students to have a safe space is very important in public schools because they are not allowed that topically. Miss Saunders also understands what it means to be a black person in a society that rejects you, so her confidence in herself shows the kids that it can be done. Black educators show black kids that confidence in themselves can be achieved by trusting their own personal journeys. Self love is hard to achieve, but Miss Saunders shows these young black children that it can be a reality for them as well. Having teachers like Miss Saunders

can teach children like Maleeka, who are growing into themselves, a way to embrace every part of what makes them who they are.

During an activity in class, Maleeka wrote a fascinating story about a girl named Akeelma and Miss Suanders encouraged her to continue the story. Akeelma's story was Maleeka's story. She was writing about the experiences that she was going through. Maleeka starts to feel comfortable with Miss Suanders. As Maleeka is writing this story about Akeelma, she goes to Miss Saunders and she says," This is powerful stuff. "

Writing is clearly one of your gifts, Maleeka". This section is so important because Miss Saunders is edifying Maleeka by calling out her gift and pushing her more into it. As Maleeka is leaving she says," I know it sounds stupid, but when I was leaving Miss Saunders's classroom, I hugged them papers to my chest like they was some boy I've been wanting to press up against for weeks. It feels good doing something not everybody can do." (Flake 90)

In this moment, Miss Saunders words meant so much to Maleeka and made her finally feel seen as the intellectual that she is. Maleeka talks about how she is only talked about in regards to her skin color and clothes and her desire was to be seen for her brightness. Miss Saunders validates Maleeka and that is what it is all about. Miss Saunders being a black woman makes this exchange even more meaningful because Maleeka is being seen from her own. Representation in school matters because of this moment between these two women, a confident black woman sees the potential in this young black woman and is pushing her more into her purpose. That is the beauty of having black educators ,they are able to see and feel the story of the younger black generation and allow them to feel safe. Maleeka feels safe to express the deep parts of herself that she is not able to show to everyone to Miss Saunders. I had a guidance counselor when I was

in middle school that was my closest confidant throughout my years. I was a kid that was smart, but in ways did not want to push myself because I wanted to fit in. Miss Desuze, like Miss Saunders, made sure to build that personal and deep connection with me so that I felt comfortable with her enough to share my experiences. Like Maleeka, I would leave my little meeting with her feeling like I was on top of the world. She was the only adult in that school building that took the time to get to know me and push me in the ways that I needed too. Miss Saunders and Miss Desuze know the value of relationships and are comfortable with students which is why they took the time to get to know Maleeka and I. Representation matters because black educators can protect and create a safe space for their students to be who they are without any limitations.

Conclusion

Miss Saunders and Maleeka's relationship shows how important it is to have a strong black woman that will see your potential and cultivate it. Maleeka was able to achieve who she truly wanted to be towards the end of the book because she was seen as a person instead of her color. She was made to feel that all she would be in life was just a darkskin girl who was poor. She was given a new perspective on herself. Black girls such as myself need to read this novel because it will encourage us to not let our circumstances define how we see ourselves and also our relationship with school. Black Educators such as Miss Saunders can cause black students to have the confidence in their education and their abilities that the school system causes them to feel uncomfortable in. This comp is a way to encourage black students and black educators that the work that they do is not in vain. It is to encourage them the words of society should not define their relationship with themselves and with their education. Black educators and students are important and the work that they do is valued.

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