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**If Hair Is Nappy, Whites Are Not Happy:  
Representations of Black Hair in Haifaa al-  
Mansour's *Nappily Ever After***

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## **Abstract**

Eurocentric beauty standards limit and shape black people's lives and attitudes toward identity. Accordingly, most of black women feel threatened, marginalised, or mistreated due to their hair style and skin. In *Nappily Ever After* (al-Mansour 2018), racism, white beauty standards and negative traditions are represented in the hair of the protagonist, Violet Jones. From the point of view of intersectional approach, the aim of this dissertation is to analyse the different representations of hair in *Nappily Ever After* and how these representations characterise and limit the protagonist's life, actions and her attitude towards blackness and black identity. The present analysis demonstrates that the changes that Violet's hair suffer are the results of patriarchal society impositions over black women, and that they shape her life. Besides, it is debated whether this film could be considered a romantic comedy or not, and which elements belong to this cinematographic genre to determine if this film challenges the traditional conception of romantic comedies.

Keywords: Black hair, identity, Eurocentric beauty standards, *Nappily Ever After*

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
I. Black Hair: History and Slavery.....	2
II. Romantic Comedies and <i>Nappily Ever After</i> : Is It or Is It not?.....	5
III: Representations of Hair: Black Identity.....	8
Conclusion .....	14
Bibliography .....	15

## Introduction

Historically, there has always been a rejection to non-Eurocentric types of hair, which lead to an inexcusable racism towards black and latino hair and skin (see Busey and Cruz 2015). With the growing visibility of black hair textures and styles, established patterns and views of black hair, black fashion and black identity are being challenged and changed by a narrow sector of society, although this sector is thought to be growing in the following years. All of this has as a result the widening of what is considered “good hair” or “bad hair” (see Robinson 2011), and thus, the widening and spread of black identity as it is, another identity which fights and resists against the hegemonic domination of white standards. The film *Nappily Ever After* (al-Mansour 2018) is a romantic comedy in which the protagonist, Violet Jones, has to overcome a series of obstacles in order to find her true self and her identity, all in relation to her black hair. Its four-stages structure deals with Violet’s obsession with fitting into the Eurocentric canon of beauty oppressions (“Straightened”), Violet’s gradual change (“Weave”), her rebellion against being perfect (“Blonde”), her journey to find her own identity (“Bald”) to become happy with her own hair (“Nappily”). Previous literature relates *Nappily Ever After* to a journey of resistance against beauty standards and perfection (s Cavusoglu 2019; Gill 2015). Nonetheless, the representations of hair, its different consequences in African American women and the resultant acceptance of black identity have been scarcely studied in relation to *Nappily Ever After*.

Considering that the present work concentrates on romantic comedy, black identity and gender issues, the methodology followed is to interpret the characters, and the events happening to the protagonist adopting an intersectional approach, which means that the interaction between race and gender is going to be taken into account (Crenshaw 1991, 139,140). Given this, this work is located within the fields of study of Postcolonial and Feminist Studies. Accordingly, the aim of the present dissertation is to analyse the different representations of hair in *Nappily Ever After* and how these representations characterise and limit the protagonist’s life, and her attitude towards blackness. Nevertheless, while this film portrays hair as a limiting element, it also gives hair the liberating connotation which is crucial for the protagonist to find her own black identity. In order to do this analysis, some crucial moments portrayed in the film are going to be used as examples, as well as the implications of the changes her hair has suffered. The present work is going to focus on three aspects. First, a detailed section on slavery and black hair history is going to be provided to give a cultural and historical background to the following analysis, to clarify the meaning black hair had in the past, and the results of centuries

imitating Eurocentric type of hair. Then, a section about romantic comedies and its comparison with *Nappily Ever After* will be contemplated in order to discern the differences between the canonical romantic comedy and the object of this analysis to determine whether this is a romantic comedy or not. Finally, the third part will present an analysis of the representations of hair seen in the protagonist throughout the film, and the issue of identity creation through hair. On balance, the overall picture seems to be that the representations of hair in this film have negative psychological and physical consequences in Violet, and that these consequences lead the protagonist towards acceptance of her black identity.

## **I. Black Hair History and Slavery**

State apparatuses have shaped different systems of oppression on black people due to their skin, culture, pronunciation and hair. The origin of oppression through the appearance of black hair goes back to the Slave Trade. In the different countries that conform Africa, hair has some other connotations which are very different from the ones that North Americans and Europeans have, in this case “[b]lack hair denoted cultural and spiritual meanings for both men and women” (Thompson 2009, 833). As Byrd and Tharps observe in *Hair Story. Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (2014), “[e]ver since African civilizations bloomed, hairstyles have been used to indicate a person’s marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community” (17). These characteristics attributed to hair make of it an important piece of identity in Black people’s minds. Actually, communicating through hair seems very common in African countries as hair and styling can express significant of information about the person and the origin. The hair and hairstyles, apart from adding to their identity, could also tell everything about one person’s mood or behaviour, for example, “to the Mende, unkempt, “neglected,” or “messy” hair implied that a woman either has loose morals or was insane”, as well as men “were expected to keep their locs neat and tidy, whether they wore a short style or an elaborate creation” (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 21). While hair in many countries in Africa means identity, family, and social status, in Europe hair is not given this amount of importance or information, it is just hair. In addition to this, Africans tended to treat the hairdresser as one of the most important members of the whole community. As Byrd and Tharps clearly comment, the hairdresser was the one to be trusted, the one who would spend hours or even days to set your hair and adorn it the way it should be apart from being the confident and creating a bond with the person he or she is grooming (2014, 22,23).

Although the African countries were “relatively isolated in ancient and medieval times” (Lovejoy 2011, 11), Fage is confident in saying that the Portuguese arrived at Lower Guinea on 1480 approximately, and that what they were trying to do “was to profit by imposing themselves (as later they were to do in East Africa and Asia) on already existing patterns of trade” (1969, 397). The author also implies that “the idea of foreign trade [...] was already well established” (1969, 397). Nonetheless, Byrd and Tharps state that “Europeans began exploring the western coast of Africa around 1444” (2014, 25), which differs from Fage’s date in approximately 40 years. Both Fage and Byrd and Tharps agree in the European’s purpose in the African coasts, to find “unclaimed riches”, in addition, “[f]or almost a hundred years thereafter, the Europeans enjoyed a cordial trading relationship with the Africans, exchanging weapons, textiles, liquor, and shiny baubles for gold, ivory, and sometimes even a small number of human slaves, who would be taken to the European continent and sold” (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 26). These first trades are not a surprise, what indeed is a surprise is that they had already sold human beings as slaves to be taken to Europe. This already existent pattern of human trade, and the growth of European presence in the African continent made Europeans began to be interested in West African slaves as a main commercial profit to exploit the circumstances given (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Fage 1969). The existent patterns of human trade were a consequence of being both Africa and Europe willing to accept what was being offered at that specific time and place. For approximately four hundred years, “more than 36,000 voyages across the Atlantic” were recorded, and as a consequence, the slave trade caused that “more than 12.5 million men, women, and children from Africa” were removed by force from their homes, leaving family, friends, and everything they were used to (Beleza et al. 2020, 268, 265)

These circumstances cannot be excused. However, not everyone saw this fact as it is, because the “European slave-traders [...] justified their activities on the ground that they were rescuing Africans from oppression and exploitation by their own rulers” (Fage 1969, 401). In addition, religion also justified it with a theory deduced by reading Genesis 9:18-29, which stated that Negroes, the children of Ham, were black and slaves because of a curse on Noah, the author declares that “God had permanently cursed ugly Blackness and slavery into the very nature of African people” (Kendi 2016, 25). The slave trade meant, for those who were enslaved, the loss of every piece of identity and a resulting nostalgia for a place called home, in addition to “a major source of revenue and large part of the economic structure” which sustained the African monarchies (Fage 1969, 403).

The meaning once given to the black hair in Africa disappeared when the slave trade started. As Thompson asserts, “the African’s connection to their hair was forever altered” (2009, 833) when the slave traders shaved the new cargo’s head, which implied an erasure of the slave’s identity and culture (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 29), because they considered that their hair incorporated information about them. The shaving of their hair was not the only way to torture slaves, they were also “[f]orced to work in the fields all day” (Thompson 2009, 833) with the heat being a great threat to their shaved head, among others. Working under the sun for such long hours a day is the reason why women “took to wearing head scarves or handkerchiefs atop their heads, partly to shield themselves from the sun, but also to hide their unsightly, unkempt hair” (Thompson 2009, 833). The styling and the care African women gave to their hair since they were forced to move to the Americas has nothing to do with their traditional grooming custom. Byrd and Tharps assert that “treasured African combs were nowhere to be found in the New World” (2014, 31), leaving men and women without their principal tool of grooming, which resulted in the use of “a sheep fleece carding tool” to try to manage their hair and “oil-based products like bacon grease and butter to condition and soften the hair” (2014, 31, 36).

Once the slaves started to work inside the master’s house, the requirements in relation to their hair got tougher, creating a great difference between those who worked the land and those who worked directly with white people, who were the “offspring of the first African arrivals and their European companions”, meaning that they had “lighter skin and loosely curled hair” (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 37). Regarding this, Andre Powe states that “[t]he enslaved Africans laboring in closer proximity to the whites often styled their hair imitating their owners”<sup>1</sup> (2009), which was possible since they had more time to spend on their hair than those in the fields (Thompson 2009, 833). Since hair was so important for African people, and so annoying for Europeans and slave traders because of the information and identity embedded, hair became “the most telling feature of Negro status, more than the color of the skin” and eventually, a “hair-texture hierarchy” began between the slaves (Byrd and Tharps 2009, 37.38). This hierarchy stated that those slaves, sons and daughters of a white person and a slave, and those who had lighter skin and straighter hair occupied the higher ranks in the slave community (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 38-40).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are kept in their original spelling.



Because of the emergence of the black elite, black people started to be tested in order to know whether they were eligible to be part of certain institutions such as churches, colleges and universities (Byrd and Tharps 2014, 41). One of the tests that were done to African American people to determine their blackness, was that of the ‘pencil test’. It consisted of shoving a pencil through a person’s hair in order to prove if that person was coloured or black: if the pencil fell, this person was put in the coloured group, and if that pencil stayed in place, that person was classified as black (Powe 2009). In addition to that, the ‘paper bag test’ was also run. In this test, black people’s skin was compared to a light brown paper bag before allowing them to enter some organizations and churches (Robinson 2011, 362). Apart from these two tests, Byrd and Tharps also mention another one, which was the ‘comb test’, which established that black people who were not able “to pass the comb smoothly through their hair” (2014, 41) would be denied entry to some places. Blacks being tested to decide where they belong resulted in the massive use of chemicals and other products to straighten the hair to try to imitate white people. These results are present in *Nappily Ever After*, and are going to be analysed in the incoming sections. If taking into account all that has been discussed in the previous paragraphs, injustices African people had to go through during the process of slavery and even after that were at least dehumanizing, and although these stories are difficult to acknowledge and digest, as Robinson and Robinson assert, “[this] is a necessary foundation for discussing the roots of anti-Blackness and hair discrimination” (2020, 274). This anti-Blackness thought and the various discriminations that were put through by governments and society in general, have brought us to the present day.

## **II. Romantic Comedies and *Nappily Ever After*: is it or is it not?**

Considering that *Nappily Ever After* (2018), the film, which is the base of the present analysis, is believed to be a romantic comedy, certain clarifications about this famous cinematographic genre and its elements must be done, along with some historical facts to understand its phases and characteristics. In Grindon’s 2011 work, the author states that romantic comedies function as “formulaic stories promoting fantasies about love” and adds that some humour and melodrama are also present (1,2), which would fit perfectly in the definition since normally these films portray an unrealistic way of achieving love and happiness. David Shumway comments that romantic comedies “derive their identity from their concern with love and courtship” (1991, 7), and, indeed, this is a key element in this genre: romantic comedies cannot be understood without the romantic element, which is love and courtship, and the “values,

attitudes and practices that shape the play of human desire” (Grindon 2011, 2). This genre celebrates “the developments which allow men and women to reflect upon romance as a personal experience and a social phenomenon” (Grindon 2011, 2), which eventually leads to love and romance being powerful enough to “conquer class differences, erase ethno-religious tensions, and dissolve personality clashes” (Doherty 2010, 26), which ends in marriage.

Romantic comedies have been present in cinematographic genres since their origin. Maybe due to its elements and topics, which directly affect human’s emotions, and maybe just because they are appealing to the audience. The focus should be on elements and conventions, which are summarised from Grindon’s *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies* (2011, 3-12). If one element needs to be present in a romantic comedy it has to be a conflict. Grindon claims that “conflicts are as old as courtship”, and that they tend to be conflicts related to family members and their authority over a specific character, traditions over innovations, struggles between men and women, and personal and intellectual growth (2011, 3-8). There are several elements inside the ‘Master Plot’, which are the events happening in the film. Those which are significant for the object of this analysis are: ‘the Meeting’ or the different ways in which a couple has their first encounter, and which “tend to vary significantly in manner, in style (and ideological implication) from cycle to cycle” (Neale 1992, 287); the ‘Fun Together’ is also a crucial move in romantic comedies as they deal with the initial attraction, a walk in the park and a possible first kiss (2011, 9), just as Violet, *Nappily Ever After*’s protagonist does with Will. Next move is the ‘Obstacles Arise’, where the “union of the couple is sabotaged by the central conflict driving the plot”, which in this case would be either a personal growth of the protagonist or an interruption from a third party, which would be Will in this case, that leads to another act, ‘The Choice’, where “the protagonist must choose between the alternative quest and the romance”. In Violet’s case, reaching the end of the plot, there is a moment of ‘Epiphany’; to finish, the ‘Resolution’ move takes place when “the couple are reunited or they separate” (2011, 10).

Another convention that tends to appear without many changes is that of the characters. As Grindon states, “conventional characters of romantic comedy are divided into two groups: the lovers and their helpers versus obstacle figures” (2011, 12). In the case of Violet Jones, her helpers are her friends, and her obstacle figure is with no doubt her mother who is also an authoritarian figure. One of the main characteristics of this genre is that it is “an essentially white form, based on European chivalric tradition: the leading man as a sort of

knight, a powerful person who woos and wins his lady, a virginal or naive younger woman” (Edmondson 2007, 191), after all “black people weren’t a romantic subject” (2007, 191), not to mention that when there was a black character in a romantic comedy, it had “a demonic sexuality, [...] essentially primitive and violent nature” (2007, 195). This last point is subverted in *Nappily Ever After*, as it will be commented later on. Romantic comedies also tend to be imperative in the use of heterosexual couples as protagonists, reinforcing a social norm (Shumway 1991, 18), not only that but also, they tend to create a fixed pattern of male-female relationship, in which the female tends to be beautiful, and the man witty and funny (Grindon 2011, 12), which presents stereotypes of both men and women.

Taking into consideration all the features stated above, it could be affirmed that *Nappily Ever After* is indeed a romantic comedy, although many changes have been applied to its elements and plot. First, the film follows what Grindon believes is the definition of a romantic comedy. Furthermore, it also complies in the sense that the protagonists are a male-female heterosexual duo, Violet and Clint, her first boyfriend, and Violet and Will, the third party. In addition, there are many crises and obstacles between them and inside the protagonist’s mind, and that the ultimate end is to marry. Many of the moves explain before also take place in this film, “the Meeting”, the “Fun Together”, the “Obstacle Arise” (Grindon 2011, 10), so it could be said that it adheres to the conventional moves of traditional romantic comedies. Despite all of these elements that make *Nappily Ever After* a rom-com, there are also many elements that challenge the original concept. First, and as mentioned before, the protagonists of this film are black people, although the majority of them belong to the upper classes. Not to mention that these protagonists are portraying a normal couple, normal in the sense of a traditional white couple, not the “primitive and violent” black people (Edmondson 2007, 195). Edmondson clarifies that, when having black protagonists in a rom-com, the female character tends to have her focus on her profession, her beautiful house and life in general (2007, 203), which is exactly what Violet does at the beginning of the film, before the crisis changes everything. Since this genre was made for white people, it is surprising that this film deals with issues as important to black culture as hair, and that it also fights for equality between men and women. This is a film in which traditions and conventions are challenged in order to have a product which can satisfy other sectors of the audience.

### III. Representation of Hair: Black Identity

The impact slavery and its results had on black people is huge. This impact not only shaped their lives back at the plantation colonies and segregated places afterwards, but it also shaped the way black people have to look like, behave and think nowadays. This perpetuation of the same elements and patterns for centuries, which are present because of the unacceptance of natural afro hair, are due to a Eurocentric tradition passed from generation to generation, being mothers the figures in charge of passing these traditional practices. Not only do mothers pass these traditions, but they also influence their daughters' lives. Oyedemi points out that “[t]he attitudes toward the unacceptability of natural African hair on Black women is cultivated early in life through the intervention of female parents who chemically relax their daughters' hair at a very early age” (2016, 13). *Nappily Ever After's* protagonist, Violet Jones, and her mother have a “complex, diverse, lifelong, intimate connection that significantly affects all phases of development” (Everett et al. 2016, 335), as is usual between mothers and daughters.

One of the scenes that open the film is that of Violet and her mother who is hot-combing her daughter's hair in order to be perfect for that special moment in which Clint is going to ask for Violet's hand (al-Mansour 2018, 1:33). This moment is central in the development of the whole film because it shows that it is a practice that has been happening since Violet's childhood. These values and practices of straightening black afro hair have its origin in slavery (see I. Black Hair: History and Slavery), thus this practice has been pushed through as a normal habit in Violet's life, as a tradition. However, this is not just a practice that has been normalized. As Toks Oyedemi declares, “[t]he culture of pressing, straightening and relaxing one's hair is not only physical violence on the self, but also a cultural violence that is passed on from generation to generation” (2016, 3). This statement needs further explanation. First, the different procedures that African American women have to go through produce physical violence such as burns in the scalp or rashes. Second, cultural violence is understood by Galtung as “any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form”, which would lead to “seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or [to] not seeing them” (1990, 291, 295), and this is exactly what happens here: Violet is suffering cultural violence since she is straightening her hair with a hot comb in order to have it as the European or Asian hair, but this is not seen as physical harm although it causes pain, just because it is excused by means of following Eurocentric beauty standards. This is a limitation that has been imposed to her since she needs to comply with those standards to fit in society.

The figure and role of the mother is quite interesting. If the relationship between Paulette Jones, Violet's mother, and Violet herself, is taken into consideration, it is obvious that this relationship changes during the film. There is a moment, in which Violet shaves her head. When Paulette sees her daughter's head, she faints, and Violet's father explains that Paulette was "convinced [she is] a lesbian" (al-Mansour 2018, 40:43), which Greene et al. considers to be "intended to be insulting" (2000, 171). Furthermore, at the end of the film, there is a moment in which Violet is tired of keeping up the appearances. She takes advantage of that moment to let her mother know what it meant to her that she did not support her when she was young or let her play as other children did just because her hair would be ruined. All these comments and actions affected Violet in a way. Greene et al. claim that "when hair or control over hair care or hairstyle is or has been a source of conflict between an African American mother and her daughter, it may have deeper meaning" (2000. 175), and indeed this is what happened. Violet accuses her mother of teaching her "how to be the girl the guy wants, but not the girl [she] want[s]" (al-Mansour 2018, 1:27:49), she accuses her of teaching her how to be perfect for the others, how to behave, how to keep the appearances, how to maintain her hair long and straight in order to be desirable, and this is exactly what triggers the change in Violet and in this relationship. Although it is true that her mother always taught her daughter within the Eurocentric values and standards and that "mothers are held accountable in our society for the appearance, social decorum and socialization of their children" (Greene et al. 2000, 174), it is also true that no one can blame the mother for being raised with Eurocentric values, or for passing them to her daughter as she did not do it on purpose but unconsciously (2000, 179), she just followed the patterns of nowadays' society which imposed on her the same values and standards she is perpetuating. Thus, if a person needs to be found, the blame should rely on society and patriarchy as those which spread those negative values.

Considering the fact that society is still imposing roles, patterns and values on its subjects, it is important to highlight those which affect the protagonist of the film, who is not only a woman but also black. First, and since "racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty" (Erasmus 1997, 12), it should be discussed that the feminine beauty pattern which is admired and praised nowadays and since slavery times is that of the white woman. These beauty standards have defined beautiful hair as "long, soft and silky, typical of the Eurocentric texture of hair, and Indian/Asian hair for its close proximity to the dominant ideology" (Oyedemi 2016, 6), and since normally black women have not this type of hair, they usually have conflicts involving their hair, self-esteem issues, they spend a

big amount of money, time and effort in shaping their hair in order to comply with what society dictates (Greene 2000, 171). This could be noticed from the beginning of the film, where 11-year-old Violet appears with perfect straight hair. Here, the protagonist with a voice over states that perfect straight hair “was an ever-present source of anxiety to prove that [she] was just as well-groomed as any white child” (al-Mansour 2018, 2:20), which reflects how rooted those Eurocentric values were, not only in her mother but also in her.

To continue with the importance hair has for violet, it is enough to take a look at her appearance. In the next scene, called “Straightened” (al-Mansour 2018, 4:14), Violet’s obsession with perfection is clearly stated because of previous impositions during her life. She wakes up every morning at 5:00AM to get her hair fixed, by her mother in this case, in order to be perfect for her boyfriend when he wakes up (6:56). Her obsession is such that just after going back to bed, when they are having sex, she cannot let Clint, her boyfriend, touch her hair. Violet does all of this not only to feel beautiful, but also to comply with the established standards and because “pleasing men is often the object of what heterosexual women do with their hair” (Greene 2000, 180), also seen at the end of “Straightened” where a young black woman states “brothers love long hair” (al-Mansour 2018, 12:57), after the hairdresser has cut her hair. Both examples show not only a tendency to change one’s hair in order to fit in a standard, but also a tendency to create an internalized racism towards natural black hair due to all negative connotations attached to hair since the beginning of slavery until nowadays, and due to the contrast made with white people’s hair (Greene 2000, 173). This imposition that women have of being perfect no matter the time or where you are is aggravated by the fact that she is black, making her experiences different from white women (Robinson 2008, 76).

As a result of not being able to comply with all those impositions of unrealistic values and standards, Violet’s life changes concerning her love life, her job, and her hair. From the beginning of the film, she is perfect in all aspects: she has a good job, a handsome boyfriend, she has a modern house, and she is beautiful, skinny, she has good hair, and she is desired by other men. All of this changes after she breaks up with Clint as he did not want to marry her because she “never take[s] a chance [...], because [she’s] always gotta be perfect” (20:53). After this event, she cuts her hair and dye it blonde in order to be more like what Clint wanted: a girl who knows how to “let [her] hair down” (20:40). This change comes with some acts of rebellion against her stated perfection, although it is not common that a black girl with black hair dyes her hair blonde (Erasmus 1997, 15). Being a rebel and blonde is not what Clint is looking for,

nor what she wants. After a night of partying and alcohol, which included a visit to Clint, and the realization that he was flirting with another woman (33:53), she decided to go home to finish a bottle of champagne by herself. Here, she concludes to shave her head, although it is not a decision taken after giving it a lot of thought. She was emotionally vulnerable at that moment, and frustrated after seeing Clint flirting, and obviously drunk, which seems to encourage “poor judgement in business and personal decisions and act in a generally irresponsible manner” (Contoreggi et al. 2000, 1181). For Violet, this event is a liberating act. Metaphorically, this also means a break with all values and conventions of patriarchal society, and a break with her constant perfection. Again, all of these changes are triggered by the preferences of a man, supporting the idea that the aim of hair styling is pleasing men (Greene 2000, 180). Considering all that has been exposed in this paragraph, it could be said that “[t]he crux of the hair issue for Black women appears to center on the performance of beauty and to a large extent, heterosexual courtship” (Thompson 2009, 849).

Shaving her head also implied eliminating many old-fashioned values, standards, and canons since she is no longer part of the privileged long and straight-haired women. Violet realises the privilege she had just for fitting in the patriarchal beauty canon: she was looked after every morning at work, she was considered a powerful woman (9:19). All of this disappeared when her hair disappeared. Here, she starts a new journey to “learn to embrace [her] true [self], and re-learn that natural hair is normal; relaxed hair is not” (Thompson 2008, 3). This not only depends on her strength but also on other people’s actions. Taking as example her workplace, it could be seen that the treatment she received changed from the moment her appearance changed, this is due to the fact that “black women with long and straighter hair textures have been idealized [...], deemed more acceptable by the dominant culture, and simultaneously accorded a higher level of social privilege” (Greene 2000, 172). She was also asked to take a couple of days off work when she went to work looking emotionally affected by her breakup. Here, her boss followed two processes of stereotyping, analysed by Kunda and Spencer (2003, 522): he first recognised the stereotype, in this case, women being too emotional and hence unable to work properly, and then he applied the stereotype by giving Violet a couple of days to “get [her] head straight” (25:38), which diminished her professional value. Her boss’ lines “get your head straight”, and “when I said to get your head right, this isn’t really what I had in mind” (al-Mansour 2018, 47:20) also make reference to the act of cutting one’s hair as a result of a mental breakdown, normally associated with women’s emotional connection with

their hair (Greene 2000, 174). In the end, it is as Erasmus claims, “one is valued more, seen as neat and well kept, if your hair was done” (1997, 15).

If taking into account the attitude change in Violet, two events must be mentioned. First, her relationship with Zoe, a young girl with whom she had a negative start. Zoe is struggling with her hair, the same that happened to Violet at the same age. Violet thinks she is beautiful, but Zoe adds “yeah, right, except for my body and my hair” (al-Mansour 2018, 50:36). Here is where Violet starts to change her mind in terms of afro hair. Violet reinforces the idea that Zoe is beautiful, no matter what type of hair she has. As Zoe has been raised without a mother, Violet acts as one when she influences Zoe’s positive thoughts about herself (Everett et al. 2016, 347), which is normally classified as a “mother’s influence on self-esteem” (340). Furthermore, she is also attracted to a hairdresser, Zoe’s father, Will. This draws the attention as Violet is used to date men who are in a higher level in society, such as Clint, her doctor ex-boyfriend. Will teaches her to love her hair, to take care of it properly and to stop the harmful modifications because “they cause more damage than they hide” (Thompson 2008, 3). Now, Violet realises that “the resistance effort must begin with black females accepting their own individual skin color and hair texture” (Robinson-Moore 2008, 80), and that this act of resistance must be done “against white supremacy and act of self-empowerment for black people” (Robinson and Robinson 2020, 279).

Following the conventions of traditional romantic comedies, when everything goes well is when obstacles appear (see Grindon 2011). At this moment in the film, Violet is starting to change her attitude towards her hair and the way she approaches hair and identity. First, her mother helps to destroy Violet’s relationship with Will by attacking him and his profession. Violet is not able to defend her new boyfriend and ends up covering his true profession because she is ashamed of it: instead of saying that he owns an afro hairdressing salon, she states that he “owns his own business”, and that they met “professionally”, apart from letting her mother insult him by calling him a “comedian” and correcting his “ain’t” (al-Mansour 2018, 1:07:45). Secondly, Violet returns with Clint, her ex-boyfriend. At first, this is seen as a kind of reconciliation between the couple but then she realises that nothing has changed. Clint asks her to marry him, she said yes (1:20:22) and, for a moment, the glimpse of what could be a happy ending with a wedding could be sensed, as the “Resolution” movement dictates (Grindon 2011, 11). However, this moment is disrupted by his impositions over her hair, since “structural violence is [...] built into social structures of social relations [...] that display inequality and



unequal distribution of power” (Oyedemi 2016, 5), and Clint has always imposed power over Violet. She agrees to straighten her hair after a long time without doing it and after a long process of self-esteem and acceptance, and this is what makes her open her eyes again: she does not want to be subjected, she wants to be free from impositions, and to “claim the space of black beauty” (Tate 2007, 302).

After realising that she was going to fall back into negative behaviours again, she decided to break up with Clint permanently at their engagement party. Here, as the shaving scene, there is another liberating moment. Violet jumps into the pool to break free from her perfectionist mother, the impositions of the patriarchal society and her indecisive and her demanding boyfriend, without worrying that her hair “goes home” (Erasmus 1997, 13). Her jump was followed by many other people who wanted to enjoy the moment, without thinking about the consequences. This scene also contrasts with the beginning of the film, they both involve a jump into a pool, but the meanings are completely different: the first meant rebellion, and the latter meant a liberating act, creating a cyclic structure. From that moment on, she starts to find her lost identity through her hair. In her journey, she forgets about “the culture of *passing* as White” which involved “for most African women [a] complete erasure of their natural hair identity” (Oyedemi 2016, 2,8), and creates with Will a brand called *You*, which promises to take good care of the afro hair. This scene could be criticized as following the postfeminist theory due to the fact that “girlie feminists often reject overtly political activism in favour of consumer-based “cultural” activism” (Butler 2013, 42), such as launching a cosmetic line, taking advantage of the social economic opportunities that a company which focuses on selling products for black women creates (Thompson 2009, 843). If this issue is put aside, Violet’s change contributed to fight against beauty standards as “any acceptance or pride around the natural form and aesthetics of Black hair is an act of resistance against white supremacy and act of self-empowerment for Black people” (Robinson and Robinson 2020, 279).

## **Conclusion**

*Nappily Ever After* is a film that fights against white beauty standards in society, and at the same time, creates an example for those women who are not usually represented with natural hair in these kinds of productions, all of this done through the deconstruction of a character’s attitude towards identity and hair. This paper has proved that hair is represented in many ways, each of them related to the patriarchal society, and that those representations in *Violet*, function

as an act of resistance against imposed values, which limited and characterised the protagonist's life and her approach towards black identity.

Furthermore, the character of Paulette, Violet's mother, plays an important role in the plot as she is the one passing white beauty standards to her daughter, as the society dictates. Not only this, but also these impositions, usually related to hair and appearance, result in the limitation of Violet's free will to a point that she is not able to control her decisions or emotions. These emotions are the trigger of the many changes Violet's hair goes through, emotions which were caused not only by her mother but also by her demanding and indecisive boyfriend, and society in general as the builder of this violent structure of domination over women through appearance and hair. Moreover, changes in her mindset are also worth noting since the changes in appearance also motivate her to go against the established standards of patriarchal society, to resist against impositions and to inspire others to do the same.

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