

### CHAPTER III

#### The Impact of the Main characters' Being Colored and Their Attitudes Towards It.

In this Chapter, I analyze the impact of Skin Color in Richard Rodriguez's "Complexion", Mary Mebane's "The Scheme Color" and Zora Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" in order to illuminate and to define the statement of the problem. In conducting the analysis, I use two theories,

namely the literary theories, which are Conflict and Characterization and the Psychological theories, which are Depression and Defense Mechanism. Nevertheless, I do not use all parts of the literary theory; instead I will only use theory of characterization and the theory of conflict to be mostly applied in the analysis. Furthermore, since I conduct a comparative study, I also use the theory of comparative study in order to compare and to contrast the three short stories; "Complexion", "The Scheme Color" and "How It Feels to Be Colored Me."

The three main characters, Richard, Mary and Zola, in the short stories have the same problem, which is the skin problem. They feel uncomfortable with their society because of their skin. They are treated differently from the people around them, not only by other social groups in the society but also by those within their own racial groups and even by their own family like what happened to Richard Rodriguez-the main character in 'The Complexion.' Basically, they all are rejected from their society. Therefore, it is important that I prove the existence of the rejection before analyzing the three main characters' attitudes. Due to this importance, I firstly analyze the interactions between the three main

characters and their society in showing that the rejection exists.

I divide this subchapter into three parts, where in the first part I explore the rejection by the society, towards the three main characters. Then, in the next part, I demonstrate the feedback of three main characters in facing the rejection. The way the three main characters' strive against the rejection and how they compensate in order to survive will be analyzed in the last subchapter.

### **III.1. The Rejection towards the Three Main Characters.**

Richard Rodriguez, the main character in "Complexion" has to face the rejection from his own family. As a Mexican, Richard has a dark skin, darker than the rest of the family. Being a brown boy in his family is so painful. Being a Mexican and brown is considered a menial laborer, from low class people, even though Richard is born from a quite wealthy family. Richard's mother and his aunt keep telling him for not doing something that could make his skin get darker.

"One summer weekend when I was around seven years old, I was at public swimming pool with the whole family. I

remember sitting on the damp pavement next to the pool and seeing my mother. I heard her shout over to me. In Spanish she called through the crowd: 'Put a towel on over your shoulders.' In public, she didn't want to say why. I knew. That incident anticipates the shame and sexual inferiority I was to feel in later years because of my dark complexion" (Rodriguez 401).

Soon, he becomes a very sensitive person since he feels that his family couldn't accept him with whatever condition he has. To live in rejection especially when the rejection comes from the inside like what happens to Richard is so frustrating. Richard starts losing his confidence as the result of living in a frustrating life. "Simply, I judged myself ugly. And, since the women in my family had been the ones who discussed it in such worried tones, I felt my dark skin made me unattractive to women" (Rodriguez 402). Richard often receives a warning from his mother for keeping his skin away from the sun.

" On hot summer days when my rubber-soled shoes soaked up the heat from the sidewalk, I kept my head down. Or walked in the shade. My mother did not need anymore to tell me to watch out from the sun" (Rodriguez 403).

The warning from his mother that Richard gets daily soon becomes a pressure. He begins to lose his identity and loses his grip on reality. It is proved from his reaction of denying his skin color and his body shape.

"I denied myself a sensational life. The normal, extraordinary, animal excitement of feeling my body alive--riding shirtless on a bicycle in the warm wind created by furious self-propelled motion--the sensations that first had excited in me a sense of my maleness, I denied. I was too ashamed of my body. I wanted to forget that I had a body because I had a brown body" (Rodriguez 403).

To live in a pressure always gives some impacts in return. The pressure becomes bigger when Richard is also forbidden to do activities commonly done by other boys in his age, like playing football in school, since it could make his skin get darker. It is so hard for Richard to disobey his mother's rules since he is still very young and quiet.

"In high school physical education classes, I withdrew. With savage scorn I would refer to the 'animals' playing

football or baseball. It would have been important for me to have joined the football team. Or for me to have taken off my shirt, to have let the sun burn dark on my skin, and to have run barefoot on the warm wet grass. It would have been very important. Too important. It would have been too telling a gesture—to admit the desire for sensation, the body, my body” (Rodriguez 404).

It proves that Richards is, actually, eager to do what boys in his age usually do. In addition, he realizes what he does at that time is considered abnormal. In the end, since Richard is blocked and could not do anything about his condition, his burden and pressure soon lead Richard to isolate himself from his friends especially girls. He has low self-esteem and self-image and that low self-esteem alters how he wants his life to be. As the result, Richard chooses to stay at home every Saturday night and doesn't date any girls. "Fifteen, sixteen. I was a teenager shy in the presence of girls. Never dated. At home most weekend nights, I would pass evenings reading" (Rodriguez 404). From all the rules and the warnings that have been given to Richard, it is shown vividly that Richard's family rejects him, and could not accept Richard the way he is.

Then Mary Mebane, the main character in "The Scheme of Color" also has to face the rejection from her society, especially when she is in high school. Just because of her skin color, she is treated differently from lighter skin students.

"When I was a freshman in high school, it became clear that a light-skinned sophomore girl named Rose was going to get the "best girl scholar" prize for the next three years, and there was nothing I could do about it, even though I knew I was better. Rose was highly favored by the science and math teacher, who figured the averages. There was only one prize. Therefore, Rose would get it until she graduated. I was one year behind her, and I would not get it until after she graduated" (Mebane 163).

Mary is so disappointed with the unequal-treatment she has in school. She begins to feel the rejection from her society in her school life.

"To be held in such low esteem was painful. It was difficult not to feel that I had been cheated out of

medal, which I felt that, in a fair competition, I perhaps would have won. Being unable to protest or do anything about it was a traumatic experience for me" (Mebane 163).

Losing her chances to get the scholarship gives some big impacts to Mary. First she loses her hope since she cannot get the scholarship. Second, she loses her spirit to continue her education since she can neither change the system nor protest about it. Soon, Mary becomes a sensitive and pessimistic person when she experiences that some of the black teachers' treatments toward their own black students are more cruel than the whites. Mary gets confused when she has to face the reality that no one is on her side.

" One of my teachers who was from the Deep South and was just as black as she could be, had been a strict enforcer of these standards. That was another irony-that someone who had been judged outside the realm of beauty herself because of her skin tones should have adopted them so whole heartedly and applied them herself without question" (Mebane 163).



Mary is shocked when she finds out that one of her own teacher- considers her dark and ugly, and still uses the same framework applied to her. She does not expect that the rejection is so deep.

"Black skin was to be disguised at all cost. Since a black face is rather hard to disguise, many black woman took refuge in ludicrous make up. Mrs. Burry, one of my teachers used white face powder. But she neglected to powder her neck and arms, and even the black on her face gleamed through the white, giving her an eerie appearance" (Mebane 163).

Mary becomes more confused to see how her own society pretend and act like white people, denying their own faith. The situation begins out of control to Mary. She does not understand her society anymore. She loses her center because she has to face the rejection from two sides, the white and the black people alike. Like Richard, finally Mary has low self-esteem and self-image and finally she considers herself to be ugly.

"But one thing I know for sure: by the twentieth century, really black skin on a woman was considered ugly in this country. Hazel, who was light brown, used to say to me, 'you are dark, but not too dark.' I had the feeling that if nature had painted one more brushstroke on me, I'd have had to kill my self " (Mebane 162).

From the facts above, that she has to lose her chances to get the scholarship and also to be considered not pretty by one of her black teacher and by the black male students- just because of her skin, it is clear that Mary gets a lot of rejections both from the white and also her own society, the black people.

The last is Zora Hurston, a young talented black girl who also faces the same rejection from her society. Unlike Richard and Mary, Zora is a more easygoing person. Zora-a thirteen year old girl, lives in Jacksonville, a huge town filled with many white people. " Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves"(Hurston 397). In Jacksonville, Zora finds tons of un-welcome treatment from the white society. "The position of my white neighbor put me into much more difficult

situation. No brown specter pulls up a chair besides me when I sit down to eat among the whites" (Hurstons 397). Even though her society does not welcome her, Zora always faces it calmly. "I do not always feel colored, I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. Slavery is sixty years in the past. It fails to register depression with me"(Hurstons 397). From Zora's statements above that she tries to ignore her society's comments about her skin, it is clear that she is rejected from her society.

"But I'm not tragically colored, there is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of black hood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feeling are all hurt about it" (Hurstons 397).

The more she admits about her positive reactions - that she always replies her inconvenient treatment from her society with a smile, the bigger rejection she gets. It is clear that rejection also happens to Zora. As the result, the three main characters; Richard, Mary and Zora are rejected from their society. Each of them are pushed to

realize that their presence are not acceptable in their society.

**III.2. The Depression towards Richard and Mary as the feedback of the rejection and Zora's Immunity towards depression.**

Richard Rodriguez grows up and becomes a very sensitive child since the rejection that he faces from his family. The pressure and the rejection soon trap Richard in depression. Freud says that depression happens to people who are facing a rejection and involving sadness caused commonly by losing friends and relatives, substantial disappointment at home or at work, prolonged illness or pain. Freud originally theorizes that depression causes aggression, the destructive wish (O'Connor 23). What Richard does to himself when he is eleven or twelve years old proves that he is depressed. He locks himself in the bathroom and carefully regards his reflection in the mirror over the sink. Without any pleasure, he studies his skin. While he does it, he hears the swirling voices of his aunts, and even his mother's voice, whispering incessantly about his dark skin. Later,

"Slowly, with steady deliberateness, I put the blade against my flesh, pressed it as close as I could without cutting, and moved it up and down across my skin to see if I could get out, somehow lessen, the dark. All I succeeded in doing, however, was in shaving my arms bare of the hair. For as I noted with disappointment, the dark would not come out. It remained. Trapped. Deep in the cells of my skin"(Rodriguez 402).

Being depressed drags Richard into deeper psychological problem. The inferiority of his feeling frames Richard into a very low self-esteem person. His problem becomes more complicated, and develops into his downfall. As a result, Richard starts to reject himself. "Simply, I judged myself ugly"(Rodriguez 402). Richard is too ashamed with his dark skin that he cannot draw his self-portrait in the art class. "In art class, when the assignment was to draw a self-portrait, I tried and I tried but could not bring myself to shade in the face on the paper to anything like my actual tone"(Rodriguez 402). Soon this inferiority feeling changes into hatred. Richard starts to hate himself. "I grew up divorced from my body. Insecure, overweight, listless. I was too ashamed of my body"(Rodriguez 403).

The depression in Richard's life seems to force him to hate himself. He seems unable to accept himself as a dark Mexican child. A person like Richard has only two options in order to overcome this kind of problem. First option is to fight against it. The second option is to surrender and to end his life, since to commit suicide is the highest level of the impact of depression. Even though Richard tries to injure himself as the impact of his depression, he still chooses to fight against his problem.

The main character of "The Scheme of Color," Mary Mebane, is so upset and disappointed when she finds out that her own society, the African American society, has changed into a white oriented society. At first, Mary is upset about the unequal treatment that she has both from the white society and also from the black society. She becomes down hearted and depressed when she knows that the African American men now no longer consider black women pretty. Rejection, losing friends or relatives and disappointment at home and at work are an indication of depression. Not only being rejected by her society, Mary also feels that she has no friends since her own people disappoint her in her school.

"I don't know whether African men recently transported to the New World considered themselves handsome or, more important, whether they considered African women beautiful in comparison with Native American Indian women or immigrant European women. But one thing I know for sure: by the twentieth century, really black skin on a woman was considered ugly in this country" (Mebane 162).

In short, Mary is hopeless and confused with her condition she has at that time. When some of the black people around her act like white people toward their own people, Mary considers this as those people who lose their self-identity. "Uneducated black males, too, sometimes related very well to black woman. They have been less firmly indoctrinated by the white society around them and were more securely rooted in their own culture" (Mebane 164). Yet, Mary is losing her self-identity too since she has no one to rely on. Neither the white nor the black society welcome Mary.

Like Richard, Mary starts to reject herself as her depression develops up to a higher level, which is self-destruction. "Since I am black, I am ugly, I am nobody" (Mebane 165). This condition soon drags Mary to have a low

self-esteem and self-image. Later on, that low self-esteem alters how she would like to live her life. Her downheartedness and feelings of hopelessness are expressed in her depression. Mary becomes so sensitive, especially to black men. She considers that black men are good pretenders, who do not realize that they are also black.

"From then on I instinctively tended to avoid the college-exposed dark-skinned male, knowing that when he looked at me he saw himself and, most of the time, his mother and sister as well, and since he had rejected his blackness, he had rejected theirs and mine" (Mebane 164).

Like Richard, Mary soon isolates herself from the black male. Even though both of them have the same condition, Mary does not extremely hate herself like Richard who tries to injure himself as the impact of his depression. Being depressed does not give many choices to Mary. She is cornered and has to do something, whether to fight against it and to overcome the problem or to surrender and injure herself.

The last is Zora Hurston, the main character in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Zora is also facing the same



condition like Richard and Mary have. Becoming a black woman and living in the white society are nightmares for Zora. "I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall, priceless and worthless" (Hurstons 399). At first Zora is shocked with the condition she has at that time. She tries hard to adapt. "Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept" (Hurstons 397).

In the perspective of psychological studies of depression, Zora should be depressed since Zora is also facing the rejection from her society. Freud, in his studies, finds out that a person who is suffering from feeling of sadness, being rejected, and lack of self-esteem soon will be depressed (O'Connor 23). "At certain times, I have no race, I am me" (Hurstons 398). Like Richard and Mary, Zora has no one to rely on too since she moves to Jacksonville alone. Losing friends and relatives and disappointment at home or at work could drag Zora into depression. Rejection from the society is something that she cannot avoid. But since Zora is a cheerful and easygoing person, Zora does not easily get depressed. Zora does not really consider her problem as a crucial matter.

She faces every problem wisely and nicely. For example, when someone tells Zora that she is the granddaughter of slaves, she only answers it with a smile. "It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you" (Hurstons 397). In short, Zora is away from depression since she has her own way to overcome her skin problems. Unlike Richard and Mary, Zora never isolates herself. She is an easy-going person who likes to communicate with people without considering the skin color. "A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common" (Hurstons 398). Zora feels comfortable to be an American citizen and black. She tries hard to adapt to the society and Zora seems to be good at it. "I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong" (Hurstons 398).

One thing that makes Zora escape from depression is that Zora has already decided to fight against her problems when she realizes that she has problems with her skin color. Though Zora faces the same problem like Richard and Mary,

when she realizes that she has problems with her skin color. Though Zora faces the same problem like Richard and Mary, Zora does not get depressed. From the facts above, Zora is clearly different from Richard and Mary in facing their problem, the skin problem.

### **III.3. The Compensation of the Three Main Characters.**

In the three short stories, all the main characters; Richard Rodriguez, Mary Mebane and Zora Hurston have their own way in overcoming their skin problems. Since there is nothing they can do to change their environment and their society, they are defending themselves through compensation- which is a way of changing or replacing a goal with another one that will satisfy the same need. The three main characters' will, to change their society that they would never be able to, is too strong to be conquered. The possible thing that they can do is to change themselves by changing their own goal, which will satisfy the same need. Like Richard for example, since he cannot change the condition of his family, Richard becomes depressed. Then he chooses one activity to help him to overcome his skin problem. Since Richard does not have many choices to do

shy in the presence of girls. Never dated. In high school I went to several dances, but I never managed to ask a girl to dance. So I stop going" (Rodriguez 404).

Richard does not feel comfortable with his condition. So to overcome it, Richard spends most of his weekend reading. "At home most weekend nights, I would pass evenings reading" (Rodriguez 404). Since Richard never has a date, he gets no sexual experiences. But it does not stop Richard to fulfill his curiosity about sexual experience.

"Like those hidden, precocious adolescents who have no real-life sexual experiences, I read a great deal of romantic fiction. Through my reading, however, I develop my fabulous and sophisticated sexual imagination. At seventeen, I may not have known how to engage a girl in small talk, but I had read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*" (Rodriguez 404).

It is clearly shown that Richard is compensating, since he finally finds out an activity to entertain him and to make him feel relieved. Richard is too ashamed to his skin, so he never asks a girl to hang out with him. Since Richard

never has a boy and girl relationship, he spends his Saturday night reading romance novels.

Mary Mebane is also compensating in fighting her skin problem, since she has decided to fight, yet fails to change her environment. Mary creates her own strategy to overcome her problem. Like Richard, Mary is searching for an activity that can make her feel accepted. She does some research towards her black girl friends' attitude in adapting and socializing with the society. Mary points out that black women have to do many things to find a place for themselves.

"One possibility was to attach herself to a light-skinned woman, hoping that some of the magic would rub off on her. A second was to make herself sexually available, hoping to attract a mate. Third, she could resign herself to a more chaste life-style-either (for a professional women) teaching and work in established churches or (for the uneducated women) domestic work and zealous service in the Holy and Sanctified churches" (Mebane 164).

Mary points out that being a black woman at that time is so frustrating, and unfortunately, Mary is one of them.

She does not like to force herself to attach to a light-skin woman. She does not like the second option either. She does not have many choices. Mary, however, soon becomes an activist in the Baptist church since she also finds comfort in there. Just like Richard, Mary finally can find a way to compensate.

The last character, Zora Hurston, is also compensating in order to make herself get accepted in the society. Moreover, Zora is the only character in the three short stories who compensate earlier than Richard and Mary. Richard and Mary get depressed first before they go to compensation while Zora just jump into compensation without any depression attached. Since singing and dancing are Zora's hobbies, she uses them as a tool in compensating. Zora has been working as a jazz singer in the club. "They (white people) liked to hear me 'speak pieces' and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-mela, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things" (Hurston 398). It is clear that Zora uses her talent to attract people and to make herself get alleviated.

Richard, Mary and Zora have some similarities in facing their skin problems. First, the three of them are suffering from the pressure by their own society. They have same

problem, but different in expressing the reaction. Richard is the most expressive character in giving his reaction than Mary or Zora. It is clear that the three of them are rejected, but they have different ways in giving their feedback through the rejection. For example, Richard and Mary get depressed. Richard and Mary express their depression transparently. Richard who is quiet performs a desperate character. What he has done such as shaving his skin is a sign that he is hopeless. On the other hand, it can be categorized as a self-destructive action. Like Richard, Mary tends to be silent. Mary, however, still hopes that time will bring some changes to her life. Mary is not as desperate as Richard. Different with Zora who does not get depressed, I could say that Zora is more logical than Richard and Mary. Zora's ego is bigger than her id while Richard and Mary seem to be unable to control their id well for their being over whelmed by their feeling. Richard and Mary use their feeling more often than their logic in solving their problem. As a result, they will be down hearted people, and could not stop feeling sorry for themselves. Zora is more rational than Richard and Mary. Zora loves her life so much that she will not let anybody to take the happiness from her life. She is good in protecting

herself despite her condition which is not far different from Richard's and Mary's condition.

Zora who is a cheerful person, sharpens the differences between herself and other characters as Richard and Mary. Zora loves to communicate with people. This kind of positive habit supports her to have a wide perspective. Different from Richard, Zora does not need years to overcome her problems since she responds her problems positively and optimistically. That is why it is hard for her to be such a desperate person. Even though the three main characters are rejected from their society, but they have their own special way in facing it.

In short, the three of them, Richard, Mary and Zora fight to overcome their skin problem through a compensation. Three of them are compensating in his/her own way. Mary's way is almost the same as Richard's while Zora's way is different from both Richard and Mary. The three of them are looking for comfort, something that could accept their presence as they are.