

Dan Baker  
Paper #4/Flake

Sharon Flake's *The Skin I'm In* is a poignant young adult novel. Flake's primary focus is on the story's protagonist Maleeka Madison, a clever African American teenage girl struggling with seventh-grade and an extremely dark skin tone. Deftly, Flake challenges readers to thoughtfully peel away and investigate each layer of Maleeka's teenage life, and to pay attention to how Maleeka's skin color influences her attempt to affirm an adolescent self-identity. Doing so not only provides young adult readers with opportunities to discuss issues related to adolescence and identity, but also with the chance to explore some unique critical questions related to oppression, culture, and the African American experience.

Like many 13-year-old teenage girls, Maleeka has her share of problems when it comes to family, friends, and school. Apparently, Maleeka's father died when she was eleven. Apparently, during her mother's two years of mourning, Maleeka took care of her mom ("Momma") and their home all by herself. Moreover, Maleeka says that she and Momma are as "poor as dirt" (52); they are so poor that Momma has to make Maleeka's school clothes by hand. Speaking of school, Maleeka's life as a middle school student is just as challenging. Readers learn, for instance, that she is repeatedly bullied and teased by others for wearing "lopsided" (4), hand-made clothing; she is also picked on because of her darker-than-average skin tone. Students are constantly reminding her that she is the "darkest, worse-dressed thing in school" (4). Maleeka feels that everyone at McClenton Middle School views her as a "Skinny, poor, black" girl (13). Ultimately, to make school more bearable, she relies on an uncaring, "crazylike" (7) creep named Charlese for

protection – a girl who gives Maleeka stylish clothing to wear in exchange for doing all of her homework.

Clearly, Maleeka faces a lot of personal and social obstacles. During adolescence, plenty of kids do. However, based on details in the story about her life, especially the details on the negative reactions to her dark skin color, it is safe to say that Maleeka's transformation from child to adult is more challenging and burdensome than most. No doubt, this is due to the intricate nature of Maleeka's search for selfhood. In an interesting plot twist involving skin tone and self-assertion, Flake wants readers to see that Maleeka's struggle to assert an identity goes beyond general issues related to poverty, gender, or schoolyard bullying. To Flake, her most difficult challenge is with race and larger identity issues affecting the black community. Again, Maleeka's skin color is darker-than-average, African American skin. Considering this country's white, Euro-center, being black would normally be enough to cast her as a societal pariah in many American neighborhoods. However, Maleeka's racial problems in Flake's story have little to do confronting small-minded, white racists from middle-America. Instead, the race-prejudice affecting and shaping Maleeka's identity springs from a number of African Americans, particularly from young black students at her school.

At Maleeka's school, there are strict, student-created social codes governing racial identity. One of the harshest codes has to do with skin tone, and at Maleeka's predominately black school, her darker-than-average black skin classifies her as a "black thing" (94). For instance, a student name John-John (who is also African American) is always teasing her about "being too black" (4). Constantly, he is reminding Maleeka that she is not pretty – that she is just a "whole lotta black" (3). Likewise, another student named Larry Baker says that Maleeka's face "needs to stay out of

the sun” because it is too black (16). Even Maleeka admits that being white is better than being black. For example, when discussing a black student named Malcolm Moore, she says: “Malcolm is fine. He’s got long, straight hair . . . Gray, sad eyes. He’s half and half – got a white dad and a black momma. He’s lucky. He looks more like his dad than his mom” (17). To quite a few young African Americans (including Maleeka), having lighter, butterscotch milkshake-colored skin is preferable to having dark, “Almond Joy-colored” (39) skin. As a result, Maleeka’s darker-than-dark complexion casts her as an outsider within her own culture and makes her worthy of ridicule. Clearly ironic, among her own people – African Americans with a cultural history brimming with bigotry, marginalization and oppression – Maleeka encounters the harshest opposition and criticism. No doubt, Flake wants readers to explore this irony and how it affects Maleeka’s teenage struggle to assert her identity and self-worth.

As important, Flake also wants readers to consider the racial in-fighting and race-prejudice surrounding the story’s African Americans, and what effect this bickering is having on the identity of the black culture as a whole. To repeat, all of the distorted images of blackness, all of the oppressive behaviors over dark skin tone, and all of the disagreements about blackness are being created and sustained by African Americans in the story, not whites. Why is this happening? More than likely, it has something to do with the assimilative nature of American society. Regrettably, African Americans and other minorities in America continue to be trained to accept white ideology. Societal institutions such as schools, governments, and the media reinforce white culture and images of whiteness; tacitly, they teach the American citizenry to accept the idea that social worth as a human being should be based on white skin color. Ultimately, blacks, like so

many other diverse cultures, continue to alter their values and morals, and allow themselves to be absorbed into America's white-skinned, dominate culture.

Having said this, it should not be surprising to learn that the social acknowledgement many of the story's African Americans crave is based on fictive ideas related to whiteness and white skin color. As proof, again consider John-John. He obviously thinks he is better off than Maleeka, and every time he teases her for being too black – every time he sings that hurtful “boom-boom song” (6) – he is trying to show it. Why? Because he has been taught to think that lighter-colored black skin – skin that is closer to white – is preferable to having darker-than-average, African American skin. Plainly, to John-John and students like him, Maleeka's dark skin poses a threat to images of white, societal normalcy that they (and most Americans) have been taught to believe in: her skin is a dark reminder of a cultural difference that they feel detracts from their social lives. Of course, what John-John fails to realize is that his self-identity has more to do with the societal master than the slave. Like slaves on a slave ship, he willingly obeys white social norms, sacrifices his identity, and happily eats the white culture's societal mush, even though it is “crawling with maggots” (62), assimilative ideals, and half-truths. In the end, the story's message about skin tone, society, and black identity seems clear enough. To Flake, John-John's ignorant behavior and distaste for Maleeka's skin tone is dangerous to the health of the black community. It reflects an unsophisticated willingness by some African Americans to submit and swap their cultural identity for the white culture's dominant ideology.

True, Flake's *The Skin I'm* does provide readers with a satisfying ending to Maleeka's story. With the help of a caring school-teacher, Maleeka eventually asserts her blackness, overcomes her identity crises, and resolves most of the battles affecting her search for self-

awareness. However, Flake offers readers much more than a story about a poor, black girl successfully dealing with adolescent angst. Ultimately, not only does Flake provide readers a chance to enter into broad-minded critiques American society and how it negatively affects minorities, but it also affords them with an opportunity to discuss the importance of cultural identity, and the importance of finding ways to overcome bigotry and hate.