

**B**lack women's hair is a subject that arouses strong emotions and controversy. In *Hair Power Skin Revolution*, a collection of personal essays, stories and poems by black and mixed-race women, Nicole Moore ignites a new dialogue on the subject, poignantly and powerfully chronicling why black women need to develop an eternal love affair with their natural hair and skin.

"Hair and identity are intrinsically linked. Whether you think you are just wearing a hairstyle, your hairstyle does say something about you," says Moore matter-of-factly, an indication of her passion to create through the book a platform where black and mixed-race women could have an interactive dialogue of visual and written expressions about the road to 'Nappy-turality'.

Angela Davis, below, became an iconic feature after wearing her hair afro-style

ceptable definition of "good hair". For some it is the norm. For others, it is a matter of convenience. It is estimated the US hair and skin industry is worth over \$9bn - in 2008 sales of home relaxers were a staggering \$45.6m. The subject of talk shows and films - from Chris Rock's *Good Hair* to Akila Chopfield's, *The Politics of Black Women's Hair* - the web/blogosphere is always sizzling with numerous articles dedicated to the rights and wrongs of black women's hair. Growing up as a mixed-race child, Moore, who now wears her hair in locks, admits to feeling trapped because of her skin and hair. As such she tried to form her own identity and managed to "define a strong sense of self and develop a positive black identity. This kept me safe and strong in a society that measures people mostly from a white male and western perspective. I realised I couldn't

# Power! To the kinky!

By **Belinda Otas**

Reading the diverse voices featured in *Hair Power Skin Revolution*, two questions kept leaping out:

Do black women, regardless of their geographical location, not like themselves the natural way they were born? And what constitutes good hair and beautiful skin - by extension what defines black beauty?

"In my opinion, no one has the authority and right to define what is beautiful. However, beauty standards exist and because they are westernised and one-dimensional, one-size-fits-all standards, there does appear to be a lot of pressure for women to adopt these impossible to reach standards, putting themselves through unnecessary and hard to sustain beauty regimes," says Moore. For a long time now it seems having straight hair is seen as the most culturally ac-



**"No one should feel under pressure to wear their hair a particular way to be accepted, just like no one should feel the need to lighten their skin"**

change the colour of my skin, what I had to change was how I felt about my skin."

Moore adds that she was glad to have the likes of Angela Davis (pictured left), who became an iconic figure for sporting an afro during the civil rights struggle, as role models.

In April and September 2010, the stories of Janet Bellow, Jackie Sherrill and Patrick Richardson raised eyebrows in the US once again about the issue of

black hair. It was reported by Black Voices online that in the case of Richardson, his school had told him that in order to attend Homecoming festivities he would have to cut his dreadlocks. Meanwhile Bello and Sherrill were refused employment because their dreadlocks did not meet their company's grooming policy. If the way black people choose to wear their hair is still a determining factor in how they are treated in social and work circles, is this a valid reason to do as society demands?

"The main issue arises because we are taking control of our hair and this goes against the status quo and in some sections of society, like schools and most institutions, there is a sense of confronting and fitting in rather than being an individual and being unique," says Moore, adding:

"Unfortunately, wearing natural hair is still a real issue for lots of black women, particularly those who may be the only black woman in their corporate work environment and I imagine it is the same for men with locks. We live in a westernised society that is extremely visual and places emphasis on how we look. You might think London and its multicultural society would provide the opportunity and platform for every look, but the media is dominant and still gives more authority and credibility to European features and Africa-Caribbean people who are the closest to that look."

When Moore is asked to comment on the oft-quoted reason that chemically-straightened black women's hair is "easier to manage", Moore says: "It's difficult. I have in the past relaxed and permed my hair, and continued to do so. There was a pressure to keep going to hairdressers to achieve the 'look' but this continuous hair regime puts our hair under a lot of stress and can cause long-term damage. It's a vicious circle and takes some conscious soul-searching to stop and consider other alternatives."

She adds: "But who am I to judge how black women should wear their hair? People should make their own decisions. It is not enough to blame what society expects as the reason black women bleach their skin or process their hair and wear weaves. The issue of responsibility goes both ways."

Margaret Auguste, one of the book's contributors writes: "Our physical relationship to our skin colour is not only external but both personal and intimate."

Moore adds further: "The hierarchy of skin complexion is a dominant issue within westernised beauty standards, as the beauty and fashion industries still maintain a closed shop when it comes to the selection and promotion of models. In women's magazines, on catwalks, even shop dummies, dark skin is rarely seen. In this context, light skin and straight hair affirm superior human status."

"It must be acknowledged that black women must search and question themselves as to why they feel the need to invest in creams which do them more harm than good. The argument that fair skin is perceived to be more beautiful and desirable will no longer cut it because there is information out



Nicole Moore through book, inset right, has given black women a platform to debate the issue of black hair

there which talks about its dangers. They must also ask why they are not affirming themselves in spite of external forces, since it is claimed that beauty is skin deep."

Based on the experiences of the women whose voices we hear in the book, the negative relationship with their hair and skin started at a young age, as Moore, Nicole Epe and the other contributors talk about their painful hair days. Moore points out that contributors share how they had no control over their hair and were often on the receiving end of negative comments about their hair, especially if it was hard to 'manage', with a profound effect on their identity. "This leaves a legacy of continuing the journey of trying to 'manage' hair usually with the use of chemicals. Black women then have to undo the socialisation, which is a real challenge and usually one that they have to confront single-handedly. I think it is crucial that we as adults don't use terms such as 'good' hair, which often means straight hair, because black hair is naturally curly and there is nothing wrong with that."

Some of the strongest themes that come through in the book are 'acceptance' and 'empowerment'.

"Acceptance is essential as you do have to like what you see when you look in the mirror and it is important that you have a choice. Acceptance of ourselves, first and foremost matters; no one

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should feel under pressure to wear their hair a particular way to be accepted, just like no one should feel the need to lighten their skin," says Moore.

She concludes: "The more we challenge the stereotypes which seek to influence our lives, the more society will be forced to accept us on our own terms and that can only happen when we collectively share and confront our own fears of wearing our hair the way we want to." ■

**Hair Power Skin Revolution: edited by Nicole Moore.**

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