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LIGNE EDITORIALE DE *PARTICIP'ACTION*

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Titre,
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Résumé en français. Mots-clés, Abstract, Keywords,
Introduction, Méthodologie, Résultats et Discussion, Conclusion, Bibliographie.
Par exemple : Les articles conformes aux normes de présentation, doivent contenir les rubriques suivantes : introduction, problématique de l'étude, méthodologie adoptée, résultats de la recherche, perspectives pour recherche, conclusions, références bibliographiques.

Tout l'article ne doit dépasser 17 pages,

Police Times new roman, taille 12 et interligne 1,5 (maximum 30 000 mots). La revue *Particip'Action* permet l'usage de notes de bas de page pour ajouter des précisions au texte. Mais afin de ne pas alourdir la lecture et d'aller à l'essentiel, il est recommandé de **faire le moins possible usage des notes (10 notes de bas de page au maximum par article).**

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Les passages cités sont présentés en romain et entre guillemets. Lorsque la phrase citant et la citation dépassent trois lignes, il faut aller à la ligne, pour présenter la citation (interligne 1) en romain et en retrait, en diminuant la taille de police d'un point. Insérer la pagination et ne pas insérer d'information autre que le numéro de page dans l'en-tête et éviter les pieds de page.

Les figures et les tableaux doivent être intégrés au texte et présentés avec des marges d'au moins six centimètres à droite et à gauche. Les caractères dans ces figures et tableaux doivent aussi être en Times 12. Figures et tableaux doivent avoir chacun(e) un titre.

Les citations dans le corps du texte doivent être indiquées par un retrait avec tabulation 1 cm et le texte mis en taille 11.

Les références de citations sont intégrées au texte citant, selon les cas, de la façon suivante :

- (Initiale (s) du Prénom ou des Prénoms de l'auteur. Nom de l'Auteur, année de publication, pages citées) ; - Initiale (s) du Prénom ou des Prénoms de l'auteur. Nom de l'Auteur (année de publication, pages citées). Exemples :

- En effet, le but poursuivi par **M. Ascher (1998, p. 223),** est « d'élargir l'histoire des mathématiques de telle sorte qu'elle acquière une perspective multiculturelle et globale (…), d'accroitre le domaine des mathématiques : alors qu'elle s'est pour l'essentiel occupée du groupe professionnel occidental que l'on appelle les mathématiciens (…) ».

- Pour dire plus amplement ce qu'est cette capacité de la société civile, qui dans son déploiement effectif, atteste qu'elle peut porter le développement et l'histoire, S. B. Diagne (1991, p. 2) écrit :

Qu'on ne s'y trompe pas : de toute manière, les populations ont toujours su opposer à la philosophie de l'encadrement et à son volontarisme leurs propres stratégies de contournements. Celles-là, par exemple, sont lisibles dans le dynamisme, ou à tout le moins, dans la créativité dont sait preuve ce que l'on désigne sous le nom de secteur informel et à qui il faudra donner l'appellation positive d'économie populaire.

- Le philosophe ivoirien a raison, dans une certaine mesure, de lire, dans ce choc déstabilisateur, le processus du sous-développement. Ainsi qu'il le dit :

le processus du sous-développement résultant de ce choc est vécu concrètement par les populations concernées comme une crise globale : crise socio-économique (exploitation brutale, chômage permanent, exode accéléré et douloureux), mais aussi crise socio-culturelle et de civilisation traduisant une impréparation sociohistorique et une inadaptation des cultures et des comportements humains aux formes de vie imposées par les technologies étrangères. (S. Diakité, 1985, p. 105).

Pour les articles de deux ou trois auteurs, noter les initiales des prénoms, les noms et suivis de l'année (J. Batee et D. Maate, 2004 ou K. Moote, A. Pooul et E. Polim, 2000). Pour les articles ou ouvrages collectifs de plus de trois auteurs noter les initiales des prénoms, le nom du premier auteur et la mention ''et al'' (F. Loom et al, 2003). Lorsque plusieurs références sont utilisées pour la même information, celles-ci doivent être mises en ordre chronologique (R.Gool, 1998 et M.Goti, 2006).

Les sources historiques, les références d'informations orales et les notes explicatives sont numérotées en série continue et présentées en bas de page.

Références bibliographiques (obligatoire)

Les divers éléments d'une référence bibliographique sont présentés comme suit : NOM et Prénom (s) de l'auteur, Année de publication, Zone titre, Lieu de publication, Zone Editeur, pages (p.) occupées par l'article dans la revue ou l'ouvrage collectif.

Dans la zone titre, le titre d'un article est présenté en romain et entre guillemets, celui d'un ouvrage, d'un mémoire ou d'une thèse, d'un rapport, d'une revue ou d'un journal est présenté en italique. Dans la zone Editeur, on indique la Maison d'édition (pour un ouvrage), le Nom et le numéro/volume de la revue (pour un article). Au cas où un ouvrage est une traduction et/ou une réédition, il faut préciser après le titre le nom du traducteur et/ou l'édition (ex : 2nde éd.).

Ne sont présentées dans les références bibliographiques que les références des documents cités. Les références bibliographiques sont présentées par ordre alphabétique des noms d'auteur. Il convient de prêter une attention particulière à la qualité de l'expression. Le Comité scientifique de la revue se réserve le droit de réviser les textes, de demander des modifications (mineures ou majeures) ou de rejeter l'article de manière définitive ou provisoire (si des corrections majeures doivent préalablement y être apportées). L'auteur est consulté préalablement à la diffusion de son article lorsque le Comité scientifique apporte des modifications. Si les corrections ne sont pas prises en compte par l'auteur, la direction de la revue *Particip'Action* se donne le droit de ne pas publier l'article.

AMIN Samir, 1996, *Les défis de la mondialisation*, Paris, Le Harmattan.

AUDARD Cathérine, 2009, *Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme* ? *Ethique, politique, société*, Paris, Gallimard.

BERGER Gaston, 1967, *L'homme moderne et son éducation*, Paris, PUF.

DIAGNE Souleymane Bachir, 2003, « Islam et philosophie. Leçons d'une rencontre », *Diogène*, 202, p. 145-151.

DIAKITE Sidiki, 1985, *Violence technologique et développement. La question africaine du développement*, Paris, Le Harmattan.

NB1 : Chaque auteur dont l'article est retenu pour publication dans la revue ***Particip'Action*** participe aux frais d'édition à raison de **50.000** francs CFA (soit **75 euros** ou **100** dollars US) par article et par numéro. Il reçoit, à titre gratuit, un tiré-à-part.

NB2 : La quête philosophique centrale de la revue ***Particip'Action*** reste: **Fluidité identitaire et construction du changement: approches pluri-et/ou transdisciplinaires**.

Les auteurs qui souhaitent se faire publier dans nos colonnes sont priés d'avoir cette philosophie comme fil directeur de leur réflexion.

La Rédaction

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LITTERATURE

PHILOSOPHIE ET SCIENCES SOCIALES

RETHINKING FEMALE IDENTITY AND CULTURAL IDENTIFIERS IN KOPANO MATLWA'S *COCONUT*

Kouadio Lambert N'GUESSAN[♣]

Abstract

Since the legal demise of apartheid in South Africa, there has been a sustained debate on African identity. The South African socio-political landscape has undergone a great deal of change in the last three decades and great strides have been made with regard to social, cultural and political dynamics at play therein. In spite of dramatic constitutional changes, South Africans remain stuck in the apartheid ways of thinking and living in a society fragmented by racial discourse. A particular focus is on black female identity formation and class position in the post-apartheid nation. This article is about a critical examination of young black women's disassimilation and cultural awareness through a postmodernist approach that deconstructs essentialist and oppositional notions of African culture and identity.

Keywords : Africanness, culture, demarginalisation, disassimilation, female identity, race.

Résumé

Depuis la fin légale de l'apartheid en Afrique du Sud, l'identité africaine est constamment sujette à débat. Le paysage socio-politique sud-africain a fait l'objet d'un grand changement ces trois dernières décennies et des avancées notoires ont été faites, et ce, au regard des dynamiques sociales, culturelles et politiques en jeu dans le pays. En dépit des changements constitutionnels spectaculaires, les Sud-africains demeurent enlisés dans les pensées habituelles de l'apartheid et vivent ainsi dans une société divisée par le discours racial. Une attention particulière est accordée à la formation de l'identité et de la classe sociale de la femme noire dans la nation post-apartheid. Le présent article vise à faire une analyse critique de désassimilation et de prise de conscience des jeunes femmes noires à travers une approche postmoderniste qui déconstruit des notions essentialistes et oppositionnelles de la culture et de l'identité africaines.

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Mots-clés : africanité, culture, démarginalisation, désassimilation, identité féminie, race.

Introduction

Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007) is made up of a double narrative of two black girls, Fikile and Ofilwe, growing up in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel narrativises each girl's struggle to define her own identity in a space where culture is conflated to signify class positions. Matlwa's story depicts how young black women negotiate the ways in which their home cultures mix with the increasingly globalised and media-saturated reality they see around them. Culture markers or cultural identifiers are the aspects of a culture that create a feeling of belonging and identity.

South Africa is universally known not only as a "melting pot" of cultures, but also as a country which offends the principles of equality in the world with diverse racial discrepancies influencing young black women's socialisation and interactions with different cultures as depicted in *Coconut*. The apartheid constructs are deeply embedded in black South Africans' psyche, and they continue to live in a society fragmented by racial discourse. It is against the background of this identity crisis that *Coconut* highlights the legacy of Apartheid as it continues to stigmatise and marginalise black women. How does Matlwa confront women's anti-blackness while seeking to respond to the South African heritage? What are the literary tools Matlwa uses to expound young black women's demarginalisation and disassimilation?

In order to adequately account for pejorative stereotypes peddled by the apartheid regime, I shall first examine black female's identity formation and class position, then review constructive disassimilation and cultural identifiers in the light of postmodernism coupled with social identity theory to delve into the significant features of Africanness.

1. Black Female's Identity Formation and Class Position.

Coconut's exploration of the issues of female Black's identity and culture in post-Apartheid South Africa is focalised through the two accounts of Ofilwe and Fikile, which run parallel to each other and at times intersect. The fictional work's title derives from a derogatory term used to refer to a person who is "black on the outside but white on the inside" (C. McKinney, 2017, p. 17). This "white on the inside" part refers to many cultural markers of identity, particularly language. As Lynda Spencer elaborates, "[the term] refers to one who speaks English most of the time, choosing it over an African language, or who is unable to speak an African language, and who is considered to act white" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.67). Matlwa uses dual protagonists and narrators to examine the cultural identity of contemporary Black South African women. In order to showcase the identities of the protagonists, Matlwa details intricate cultural landscapes for the characters. *Coconut* explores some notions of national identity, though at a slightly earlier historical moment the Tlous were one of the first recipients of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) benefits. The narrator and protagonist of the first half of *Coconut* is Ofilwe Tlou, or Fifi, the daughter of one of the early beneficiaries of black capitalist or BEE. Fikile, or Fiks as she prefers to be called, relates the second half of the novel: she is an orphan who stays with her destitute uncle in the Mphe Batho Township.

The structure of *Coconut* is peculiar since it is certainly not chronological and has a break in the middle of it where a different story is told by a different narrator. The two narrators and protagonists, Fifi and Fiks, each recounts one day in their lives, but the accounts are littered with flashbacks and asides. Fifi's is the story of not fitting in as a young black child inserted into a white world. Her deep desire to fit in socially is contrasted with her resistance to her Pedi rituals and heritage. Fiks' is the story of a young girl growing up in a township and desperately wanting to attain and be all that her glossy fashion magazines advocate. The two young

ladies meet at the Silver Spoon Café, where Fifi and her family are customers and Fiks is their reluctant waitress. Here, Lynda Spencer contends that "by having two narrators the author succeeds in providing the different perspectives of two characters located on each side of the socio-economic fence while struggling to negotiate self-identity in post-Apartheid South Africa" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.68).

The fictional work's structure mirrors Stuart Hall's concept of differences in cultural identity as "the unstable points of identification… which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning.* Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'" (S. Hall, 1994, p.226). Hall further problematises this notion by noting the occurrence of the "idea of otherness as an inner compulsion [which] changes our conception of 'cultural identity'. In this perspective, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture" (S. Hall, 1994, p.226). Matlwa does exactly this, by having two females of the same nation, race, and age group dealing with similar identity struggles from two different economic and cultural settings she emphasises, as Ralph Goodman notes, "the experience of emotional diaspora, of being divided against oneself – and the restlessness of mind caused by it" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.110). Hall goes on to add that each individual has "negotiated their economic, political and cultural dependency differently. And this 'difference', whether we like it or not, is already inscribed in our cultural identities" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.228). Hall's concept of identity illuminates my reading of Matlwa's *Coconut* which is not simply a narrative of black and white identities, occurring in one fixed time and space. Rather, it stages the marginalised identity of these young black girls in a diverse South Africa and the hindrances they face in their search for inclusion.

In *Coconut*, the question of identity is about interpretation, and the question is about the grass being greener on the other side. Matlwa deals heavily with the issues of identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Even though the majority of the "issues" have been settled in South Africa, there is still an overwhelming sense of confusion among the emerging group of young adults. The most important feature in *Coconut* is the loss of identity due to the confusion of everything happening around young black women. The fictional work presents a juxtaposition of two young black females, set up to allow a direct comparison of their wants, desires, and identities. Matlwa's novel goes back and forth between two characters' points of view – Fikile's and Ofilwe's – who struggle with their identity in South Africa.

Telling a new story with new characters in the new South Africa implies an entirely new style of narration on the basis of a postmodern text marked by the mixture of cultures, identities and languages, real facts, the past, the present and the future. Ralph Goodman contends that in "working to call into question former ways of framing and narration, the manner of story-telling itself here suggesting how shifting performativity strives against the dominance of traditional racial stereotypes in order to define identity in a postmodern era" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.109). The fiction of Matlwa, from the perspective of postmodernism, presents a society devoid of identity, a society cut off from its transcendental roots. Postmodernism is to undermine the destruction of the central arguments that dominated ancient and modern Western thought, language, identity and culture. In South African society, black women and men are lost and marginalised; all their actions become senseless, absurd and useless. The society portrayed in *Coconut* is not conducive to the progress of the black citizens. Seen from this point of view, Goodman goes on positioning the notion of "binary thinking as inextricably complicit with racism in the impoverishment of life during the apartheid era," and it is in this vein that "… the concept of

entanglement offers a useful way of framing the current South African dilemma" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.109). It is these racial stereotypes in concurrence with the multitude of external factors which are explored in depth in Matlwa's piece of fiction.

The depiction of identity is in line with what Spencer calls a trend for "emerging female writers", such as Matlwa, to "focus on representing conflicting, contradictory and ambiguous identities and revealing the complexities of the female experience in both public and private spaces" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.67). There are several instances in *Coconut* which help to map out the terrain of the two main characters by not only showing glimpses into their psyches but also by flashing back to critical moments in their respective lives and interrogating their identities as it pertains to public and private spaces. Public and private spaces are important in regard to interrogating identity in *Coconut*.

There are many defining moments throughout Matlwa's fiction as the characters have to interact, however reluctantly, with their communities. Ofilwe's narrative focuses mainly on her complicated interactions with her community, and her attempts to understand and define what constitutes her community. She notes that at Pedi ceremonies her interaction is limited, mostly "standing in reverence, [staying] out of everybody's way," and, "feeling most inadequate amongst a group of people who all seem to know exactly what roles they play in the age-old Pedi rituals" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.8). She notes her status as an outsider in the midst of her family and people. Matlwa is careful in the way she articulates Ofilwe's perspective, tempering it to reflect her successful assimilation, as well as her ignorance. Ofilwe states, "I attend this ancient church because I am comfortable here. I understand nothing of the history of the church. I do not know what the word 'Anglican' means nor can I explain to you how the church came to arise" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.9). As such, Ofilwe fits into church just fine, but

the social circles of her peers are far more challenging, and we witness Ofilwe constantly and consistently being rejected and corrected.

During a game of spin-the-bottle at a slumber party she is refused a kiss by a white boy who exclaims in terms of protestation, "No ways! Her lips are too dark!" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.45), a phrase that reverberates in her thoughts. One of the only other black boys at her school rebuffs her, declaring that he only dates white girls (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.24). She is also taught lessons on a 'proper' pronunciation by her friend, Belinda, who attempts to correct the way she says 'oven', '*uh-vin*'… not '*oh-vin*' (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.49). Ofilwe reflects on these moments and the pains of her assimilation. She explains the toll that her parents' customs take, mentioning that even the other "brown kids" tend to "treat [her] like the scum that they believe they are" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.49). After recalling her memory of Belinda correcting her articulation of English, she exteriorises her thought as follow: "Hate sits heavy on my heart. It reeks. I can smell it rotting my insides and I taste it on my tongue" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.49). These are moments which really separate Ofilwe from Fiks, this sense of not wanting to be changed completely. Ofilwe even strives to try to incorporate Pedi words into her everyday speak in an apparent attempt to reconnect with her culture. Fiks, on the other hand, wishes not to be associated with anyone in her community. From a young age Fikile is reluctant to associate with her peers. Gogo, her grandmother and primary caretaker, urges Fiks to play outside:

> "'They are all the same', 'they are boring', 'they can't speak English', 'they are stupid', 'they steal my stuff'. You always have an excuse, Fikile. I am fed up with you sitting in here all day reading those fashion magazines. I have a good mind to take those magazines away from you. I thought that they would be a fine way for you to practise your reading but they have taught you nothing but to be a snob. Go outside and play" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.131).

Matlwa consistently shows Fikile's lack of connectivity to her community, but more than that, her unusual lack of sapphic relationships. There is even an episode where a mother and a small child are sitting next to Fiks in a taxi and the sleeping child leans and drools on to Fiks. This is followed by a loud outburst to the boy's mother and a scathing inner-monologue with the continued wishes to be extracted from her situation:

> I am not one of you, I want to tell them. Some day you will see me drive past here in a sleek air-conditioned car, and I will roll up my windows if you try to come near me, because I am not one of you. You are poor and black, and I am rich and brown (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.140).

Fikile's identity and self-awareness is consistently mediated through race, even to the point of preferring the term 'brown' to 'black' as shown above. This reductionist account of identity is also mediated through wealth which is fitting for the job she has, waitressing at an up-market café, not-so-subtly called The Silver Spoon Coffee Shop. The café is the touch-point for the two protagonists, but at the same time it is the setting for many interactions and detailed dynamics. Fikile's practice of her false identity is her attempt to gain the appearance of having an adequate social and economic background: "My name is Fiks Twala. I have a second name, Fikile, which I never use because many find it too difficult to pronounce and, I must admit, I really do like Fiks better. I grew up in white environments for the most part of my life, from primary school right through to high school" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.146).

As the reader could realise, Fiks' childhood is not at all how she portrays it. She goes on to explain, "I have never been able to relate to other blacks, that is the honest to God truth. Gogo with her endless praying, Uncle and his laziness, the dirty kids at school, I understood none of that. And the part about my name, well, I mean, everybody that matters to me calls me Fiks so it might as well be my first name" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.147). In a somewhat uncharacteristically reflective moment Fikile justifies the lie:

"The pretend stories of my life serve the purpose they are required to fulfil, 'Fake it' 'til you make it" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.147). Fikile's identification stems from her cultural identity to the extent that Hall claims that "Cultural identity … is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'… Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation (S. Hall, 1994, p.225).

The [trans]formation of identity is also significant in the naming of the characters or, rather, the self-naming of them, as seen here with Fiks, though it can also be pointed out that Ofilwe is often referred to as 'Fifi'. Fikile's waitressing job allows her to "mix with the who's who of this country" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.141). She coddles every whim and each request from her glamorous, white customers yet refuses outright to wait on black families, declaring that "they're just an annoyance and a waste of my time" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.164). Thereby, Fikile confirms her feeling about the Tlous : "Of course they go without leaving a tip, but then again, what more does one expect from black people?" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.176). Fiks' maligning of the entire black race continues when she sides with a white patron who has offended her black co-worker Ayanda by stating: "Don't 'Ma'am' me, I can read, thank you very much. If it wasn't for us you wouldn't be able to read so don't you patronise me. Just take it back and bring me a cheese sandwich without dairy products, please!" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.150).

Another instance occurs when she is propositioned by one of her regulars, an older white man who consistently over tips and flirts with Fiks. She considers his offer at one point: "Anything worth having comes at a price, a price that isn't always easy to pay... He seems to really like me and I enjoy his company, what is there to lose?" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.176). This is in obvious contrast to her revulsion for black men. Fikile's categorical refusal to interact with black people is challenged on the train, where a

black man tries to speak to her. Fiks is eyeing his briefcase, which she assumes is too fancy for the man, "I do not look at this man, this man who is a thief like all the other men in this train, and probably an alcoholic and a rapist too" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.133). She meets this man again on her way home. The man relates that he was picking up his daughter at school and was observing the children, "And then suddenly a little chocolate girl walks past me, hand in hand with the cutest half-metre milk bar I have ever seen in my life" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.188). His story takes a turn from its initial positivity to mention that he had "been thinking of home-schooling [his daughter]. She refuses to speak a word of Xhosa and I know it is the influence of that school" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.188). The man notes that the children "were so joyful, those kids. But, you know, I couldn't shake the feeling that they were only happy because they didn't know... And she is just so happy, you know. But, I can't shake a certain feeling" (K. Matlwa, 2007, pp.188-189). He goes on to outline the plight of the new generation, "I just got so confused as I stood there at the edge of that playground, because I knew that they were happy and I was happy that they were, but listening to all those little black faces yelping away in English, unaware that they have a beautiful language at home that they will one day long for, just broke my heart" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.189). As the man says this, the reader becomes aware of the complexity of the man's position: integration is encouraged and preferred to segregation, but with assimilation comes the consequence of wiping out diversity. The man is standing at a cultural and generational cross-road that Fiks refuses to acknowledge or examine. The man's statement does seem to directly address Fikile's full adoption of Western values, with no interest in, or even nostalgia for, what she is leaving behind. Fikile is uncertain of what she ought to say to this man's pronouncements which imply her own position as well. He continues:

> Standing at the edge of that playground, I watched little spots of amber and auburn become less of what Africa dreamed of and more of what Europe thought we ought to be. Standing at the edge of that

> playground I saw tiny pieces of America, born of African soil. I saw a dark-skinned people refusing to be associated with the red soil, the mud huts and the glistening stone beads that they once loved (K. Matlwa, 2007, pp.189-190).

Basically, the story urges one to comment on the future of South Africa and the dilemmas that assimilation brings about. *Coconut* does not have a clear end or any indication of what eventually happens to the main characters. Ironically enough, the man's story of the school children is the closest the reader gets to closure in the girls' stories. As Spencer succinctly puts it, all the characters "are forced to negotiate a continuous tension between ethnic African ideals and global values of 'whiteness', life in the black township and the cosmopolitan promises of the city, the traditional prioritizing of family and community and the allure of self-invention" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.69). These are indications of parallels which can be seen in Fikile's private moments. The one that stands out the most is Fiks' private thoughts about her uncle. Other than the overt molestation that is outlined, one of the most telling instances is one in which Fiks is looking at a photo album of her Uncle with a white family that Gogo had worked for, "White children *smiling* for Uncle! I remember being filled with such a wild envy and rage that I was unable to understand why that couldn't be me in the photo, why the Kinsleys hadn't thrown such a party for me, why nobody had ever thrown any kind of party for me" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.123). Fikile's desire to be accepted is shown in *Coconut* as delusional, based on superficiality rather than reality.

Matlwa consequently scrutinises cultural awareness with the purpose to empower young black women to better understand themselves, their culture and society. Her questions cleverly present the fact that just like blackness, Africanness is not one monolithic thing, it is as eclectic as its people and is defined just as broadly as it is constantly evolving.

Africanness in a pre-dominantly black space is often defined by the state or quality of being African including the spoken language.

2. Reviewing Constructive Disassimilation and Cultural Identifiers

Fiks and Ofilwe in Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* both have issues with their identity, which is caused by their interpretation of what is around them. Fiks and Ofilwe are trying to adopt someone else's identity as their own. Identity cannot simply happen, as Fiks and Ofilwe are struggling to find out; identity is something that is developed from the acceptance of what one is. A person cannot adapt an identity from someone else, they have to construct their own through the fires of their experiences.

Fiks refuses to identify with the people who are like her. Even her skin colour reflects her desire to be something else: she is not black, she is brown. She believes that if enough is done, if she distances herself enough from these people – these black people – she will no longer be black. Fiks believes that she can make herself white. While talking with the people who come to the café where she works. Fiks thinks:

> The more time I spent with these people, listening to their stories, peeking in on their day-to-days, the more certain I was that the lives they lived were a reflection of the life I was born to live. I never did have the stomach for poverty. I am too sensitive. I could never deal with all that trash (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.169).

This just seems very ridiculous. She is basing her judgments on the snapshots she gets of these people's lives when they come into a restaurant where she is a waitress. They only reveal what they want to reveal. Fiks is making her choices based on incomplete information; she does not know what else is out there and anything about the challenges, because it is not all roses. Her lack of information causes her to deny who she is at this time because she is identifying with her ideal.

A large part of Fiks' identity is tied up with her denial of who she is. After making a mistake at work and being scolded in front of a customer, Fiks thinks: "I am tired of waiting, waiting for the day when it will all be different, when it will be my turn, my story, my rose" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.181). Fiks believes that by denying everything that happens, by waiting for what she wants to happen, she will magically get everything. That her life will magically change. Her embarrassment over what happened causes her to distance herself even further from her identity as a waitress and a black woman because that is not what is going to get her anywhere. Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* shows how "emerging voices are finding cracks in which to foreground, interrogate, engage and address wide-ranging topics which lacked a form of expression in the past" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.67). From the first page of *Coconut*, there is a concentration on unattainable beauty portrayal of Kate Jones opposed to "… little black girls scattered helter-skelter, doing her favours in return for a feel of her" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.1). Kate Jones' natural beauty arouses in the black waitress a complex identity conflict and it creates in her a painful awareness of her blackness.

Subtly, Ofilwe is contrasted with Kate Jones, which shows a dichotomy between whiteness and blackness. Ofilwe's scalp is covered with potent chemicals that are meant to straighten her naturally tightly curled hair. The agony is emotional but also very much physical and is detailed in the narrative: "[she] was not bothered by the tenderness of [her] scalp... No, [she] was just delighted to be beautiful again" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.4). It is in this way that *Coconut* focuses on the representation of women by attracting attention to the politics of hair and beauty.

Fifi describes the image of "The black American TV girls" radiating from the box of relaxer while she is experiencing "A painful exothermic chemical reaction. Burn. Burning. Burnt" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.4). Jessica Murray asserts that "the pain mentioned in the phrase from *Coconut* ... extends to the pain that women experience when they are obliged to

construct their identities in a social milieu that is fundamentally hostile towards them" (J. Murray, 2012, pp.91-92). The situation here implies a lot about Fifi's lifestyle in the narrative, namely having the luxury of getting her hair done at a saloon. Butler argued that gender is performative and is "produced as ritualized repetition of convention" (J. Butler, 1995, p.31); following that logic, hair care and styling become a performance in adherence to beauty standards (T.O Patton, 2006, p.36). Derek Hook expounds on the Fanonian concepts of identity noting that:

> Practices of hair-straightening, skin-lightening... and the enthusiastic adoption of the accent and language of the oppressor, all of these are examples of *inauthenticity* for Fanon. They are voluntary kinds of masking, symptoms of what is wrong in the colonised subject's psyche. These are negative bids at identity – processes of negation – that constantly *affirm* the coloniser's culture as the superior term, and dismiss the colonised culture as inferior (D. Hook, 2003, p.115).

The concept of beauty is defined, moderated and perpetuated by the hegemonic culture in western society. The shared belief that the female body is in some way imperfect and in need of altering is a patronymic concept that goes back centuries to Chinese foot-binding (T.O Patton, 2006, p.25). Matlwa goes to lengths not only to convey the painful processes that need to be endured, but she is also careful to position the act of beautification in the Black feminine space. Zimitri Erasmus asserts that "Black hair is politicised by class and gender. It is also racialised," highlighting the fact that "racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty" (Z. Erasmus, 1997, p.12). Murray contends that "in hair we …see a powerful example of the well-known feminist insistence that the personal is political and that a rigid separation between the public and private spheres is untenable" (J. Murray, 2012, p.92).

In the mirror of the saloon, Fifi observes "a comb with the finest of teeth. In the mirror in front of me sat a girl with the coarsest of hair. That

the two could work in harmony, I would never be convinced. Such pain" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.3). What is most telling here is that the idea of harmony is sustained by the pain of straightening and taming her natural curls. Murray notes that "Ofilwe's narrative reveals that she considered attaining beauty to be more important than avoiding physical pain" (J. Murray, 2012, p.94). It could be argued that this is a metaphor that is contributing to the motif throughout *Coconut* which is an 'entanglement' of often contradictory identities: black/white, traditional/Western. To get through this beauty session, Fifi gives herself a pep-talk drawing on fictionalised wisdom, "Pain is beauty, grandmother used to say. Well, not *my* grandmother, but I am certain *somebody's* grandmother used to say that, and if my grandmother cared for such, I am sure she would say it too" [emphasis in the original] (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.3).

Tradition is something that does not need to be real: it is a matter of belief. As the story progresses, I note that Ofilwe makes a concerted effort to assimilate into the world of her white classmates, at one point choosing a slumber party at a friend's over a funeral in the township where her family used to live (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.9). In using these signals and metaphors, the text "interrogates the various ways in which cultural tensions created by the historical legacies of apartheid, conjoined hands with American global power, produced a cultural hegemony that privileges 'whiteness' over 'blackness', and results in 'whiteness' becoming a new form of aspirational identity" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.68). For Ofilwe, her indoctrination to the so-called dominant culture takes her by surprise to an extent, for she only realises there are no faces of colour on the walls of her room when Tshepo points it out to her. Ofilwe is somewhat ashamed at her brother's acknowledgement of her '*coconutiness*,' asserting that "In his eyes I saw what was only to hit me many years from then. I think it was on that day that Tshepo saw me for what I really was. I wish I had then too; maybe things would have worked out differently" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.92-93). Just

before the transition into Fikile's narrative, Ofilwe adds this ominous yet profound appraisal of the process of racial and cultural assimilation in post-Apartheid South African schools:

> In every classroom children are dying. It is a parasitic disease, seizing the mind for its own usage. Using the mind for its own survival. So that it might grow, divide, multiply, and infect others. Burnt sienna washing out. DNA coding for white greed, blond vanity and blue-eyed malevolence. IsiZulu forgotten. Tshivenda a distant memory (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.93).

Here Ofilwe outlines the pervasive cultural assassinations that happen in the educational institutions of the country. As a result, there is an inherent preference and desirability for whiteness over blackness. This sentiment is echoed at the end of Fikile's narrative. Fiks, actively seeks an association with whiteness and white people. Most of her narration is focused on her negation of her black identity and disparaging her surroundings and the people around her. As she sorts through her belongings, she tells the readers that the items serve a dual purpose and that is to "serve as a constant reminder to me of what I do not want to be: black, dirty and poor. This bucket can be a daily motivator for me to keep me working towards where I will someday be: white, rich and happy" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.118). She maintains this sentiment in her descriptions of the people she passes and sits near on her way to work: "The men disgust me. All of them are a bunch of criminals. A bunch of uneducated criminals. They look at me like they want to rape me and I know they would do it if there weren't so many people around" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.129). Her self-loathing and outright racist convictions seem to show her conscious alignment with the hegemonic ideas of the white society. Fikile curses, "Black people! Why must they always be so damn destructive? And to think, they have never invented a thing in their squalid lives and yet they insist on destroying the little we have" (K. Matlwa, 2007, pp.134-135). Her words suggest that she holds herself apart from blackness. The blackness is the unknown, everything Fiks

is not and everything she does not want to be. Her story is unfinished, and she wants to be something greater, something more than could have been expected of her. She has not reached the end of her journey yet, but is still trying to find herself and figure out who she is. Fiks is not mature, and may never be mature because she is so tied up with her idea of who is better and who she should be. Fiks' alienation from her original background is such that she is accused by a black man of being one of the "*abo mabhebeza* who are always wishing to be something that they ain't never gonna be" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.133). In Xhosa language, "*abo mabhebeza*" refers to women who reject black traditional ways (R. Goodman, 2012, p.16). *Coconut* shows that this self-alienation has been present since from an early age. In a confrontation with her grandmother, Fikile defends her preference for staying indoors with her fashion magazines by stating that "It's hot outside and my skin will get dark" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.131). Her concern with not appearing 'black' is "shaped by contempt for blackness, it is also informed by her life experience, which has shown her that power and privilege are associated with whiteness" (J. Murray, 2012, p.103). Here, a blind conformity appears in Fiks' description of the precious items found in her special box, which include some fashion magazines she has collected since her youth. It helps to illustrate Spencer's point that "despite inhabiting freedom in a new political dispensation, masses of black people continue to be socialized into whiteness *via* mass media" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.75). The most expensive item she owns is green contact lenses. Fiks explains what the lenses represent to her:

> The dainty little emerald-green coloured lenses that float gracefully in the sapphire blue contact-lens solution are a reminder of how far I have come, from the naive orphan child living in a one-bedroom house with her incompetent Uncle in another family's backyard in yet another decrepit township to the charming young waitress with pretty green eyes and soft, blow-in-the-wind, caramel-blond hair (pinned in perfectly to make it look real), working at the classiest coffee shop this side of the equator (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.117).

The box includes skin-lightener, sunscreen, makeup, blond hair extensions, and continuing Patton's argument of the economic standards of beauty, Fiks notes "the pieces of caramel blond hair extension which were brought for me as a child to braid my hair with but never used because Uncle misplaced the money he was supposed to pay the braiding lady with" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.117). Beauty for Fikile is understood in terms of money and whiteness; however, her character is far from flattened. As Murray discusses:

> Despite these very problematic notions about the superiority of whiteness, Fikile does exhibit many strong and laudable qualities. To dismiss her as a mere victim who has intemalized racist assumptions would be an oversimplification that does a disservice to the rich totality of her character. Her determination is clear when she asserts that she knows what she wants and that she is prepared to do anything in [her] power to get it (J. Murray, 2012, p. 103).

Just as Spencer notes, "Matlwa explores the extent to which the body becomes the site where culture and identity encounter the individual in the construction of an identity" (Spencer 75). Fifi too puts effort and energy into her appearance, but she displays awareness, albeit a fraught one, of her blackness. Fiks, as Spencer discusses, is amongst "those who do not have access to an alternative world-view that affirms and celebrates blackness", and as such she begins "to internalize white supremacist thought and values" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.75). She is constantly surrounded by images that enforce whiteness as the dominant standard of being.

From Ofilwe's realisation that she only had white celebrities covering her walls (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.92) to Fiks' recollection of answering her teacher's inquiry about what she wanted to be as an adult to which she replied, "White, Teacher Zola. I want to be white" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.135), the idea is the influence of Western culture. Ofilwe is lost as well, and is nowhere near the end of her allusion towards her identity. When she is tired of trying to please everyone Ofilwe thinks "Right there I would

sit and not take another step. That would be OK, too: I do not know where I am going anyway" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.62). Ofilwe is still troubled to discover who she is; she has not reached a point where she can stop and think, 'this is it. I know who I am now.' Her trouble is still being shaped and she has not thrown off the youth that she used to know. She is caught up in her need to please everyone; she wants to fit into the mold they have of her and because of this she is lost. She never does find herself. *Coconut* closes with a final thought, not attributed to either of the characters, so perhaps it belongs to both:

> I have come to realize that many things are seldom as they seem. Sometimes what you think is your greatest obstacle turns out to be the least, and what you thought would be easy to conquer troubles you still. I do not know how to make it pretty. I do not know how to mask it. It is not a piece of literary genius. It is the story of our lives. It is our story, told in our own words as we feel it every day. It is boring. It is plain. It is overdone and definitely not newsworthy. But it is the story we have to tell (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.191).

In Matlwa's *Coconut*, Western culture influences the protagonists, as a matter of fact, to the point of resulting in glancing through the notions of rootedness in the all-encompassing ways in which the young black women present themselves, including beautification and language/ethnicity as cultural identifiers. Constructive disassimilation therefore goes hand in hand with cultural recognition resulting in discarding white culture in so far as Matlwa's fictional text deftly handles the complexities of being a free black in a new democracy.

Conclusion

The post-Apartheid era recommends the rethinking of black identities in South Africa. Problems surrounding the frustrating and challenging identity issues Blacks are facing are the central topic of Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* as she focuses on the notion of identity of the black female in a white-favoured class position in new South Africa. By depicting

the lives of Ofilwe and Fikile, *Coconut* addresses racialistic prejudices related to cultural depravity and identity crisis. Matlwa is a postmodernist writer who uncovers the lives of black South African girls and the false notion of "Rainbow Nation." She refers to the dynamics of Africanness in emphasising female's real identity formation, constructive disassimilation, class position and cultural awareness.

In considering language as a rampant feature of the social environment, not transient, Matlwa purports to preserve indigenous culture through concentration on beauty portrayal and significant language accents as identifiers/markers of identity in the post-Apartheid context.

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RETHINKING FEMALE IDENTITY AND CULTURAL IDENTIFIERS IN KOPANO MATLWA'S *COCONUT*

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Abstract

Since the legal demise of apartheid in South Africa, there has been a sustained debate on African identity. The South African socio-political landscape has undergone a great deal of change in the last three decades and great strides have been made with regard to social, cultural and political dynamics at play therein. In spite of dramatic constitutional changes, South Africans remain stuck in the apartheid ways of thinking and living in a society fragmented by racial discourse. A particular focus is on black female identity formation and class position in the post-apartheid nation. This article is about a critical examination of young black women's disassimilation and cultural awareness through a postmodernist approach that deconstructs essentialist and oppositional notions of African culture and identity.

Keywords : Africanness, culture, demarginalisation, disassimilation, female identity, race.

Résumé

Depuis la fin légale de l'apartheid en Afrique du Sud, l'identité africaine est constamment sujette à débat. Le paysage socio-politique sud-africain a fait l'objet d'un grand changement ces trois dernières décennies et des avancées notoires ont été faites, et ce, au regard des dynamiques sociales, culturelles et politiques en jeu dans le pays. En dépit des changements constitutionnels spectaculaires, les Sud-africains demeurent enlisés dans les pensées habituelles de l'apartheid et vivent ainsi dans une société divisée par le discours racial. Une attention particulière est accordée à la formation de l'identité et de la classe sociale de la femme noire dans la nation post-apartheid. Le présent article vise à faire une analyse critique de désassimilation et de prise de conscience des jeunes femmes noires à travers une approche postmoderniste qui déconstruit des notions essentialistes et oppositionnelles de la culture et de l'identité africaines.

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Mots-clés : africanité, culture, démarginalisation, désassimilation, identité féminie, race.

Introduction

Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007) is made up of a double narrative of two black girls, Fikile and Ofilwe, growing up in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel narrativises each girl's struggle to define her own identity in a space where culture is conflated to signify class positions. Matlwa's story depicts how young black women negotiate the ways in which their home cultures mix with the increasingly globalised and media-saturated reality they see around them. Culture markers or cultural identifiers are the aspects of a culture that create a feeling of belonging and identity.

South Africa is universally known not only as a "melting pot" of cultures, but also as a country which offends the principles of equality in the world with diverse racial discrepancies influencing young black women's socialisation and interactions with different cultures as depicted in *Coconut*. The apartheid constructs are deeply embedded in black South Africans' psyche, and they continue to live in a society fragmented by racial discourse. It is against the background of this identity crisis that *Coconut* highlights the legacy of Apartheid as it continues to stigmatise and marginalise black women. How does Matlwa confront women's anti-blackness while seeking to respond to the South African heritage? What are the literary tools Matlwa uses to expound young black women's demarginalisation and disassimilation?

In order to adequately account for pejorative stereotypes peddled by the apartheid regime, I shall first examine black female's identity formation and class position, then review constructive disassimilation and cultural identifiers in the light of postmodernism coupled with social identity theory to delve into the significant features of Africanness.

1. Black Female's Identity Formation and Class Position.

Coconut's exploration of the issues of female Black's identity and culture in post-Apartheid South Africa is focalised through the two accounts of Ofilwe and Fikile, which run parallel to each other and at times intersect. The fictional work's title derives from a derogatory term used to refer to a person who is "black on the outside but white on the inside" (C. McKinney, 2017, p. 17). This "white on the inside" part refers to many cultural markers of identity, particularly language. As Lynda Spencer elaborates, "[the term] refers to one who speaks English most of the time, choosing it over an African language, or who is unable to speak an African language, and who is considered to act white" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.67). Matlwa uses dual protagonists and narrators to examine the cultural identity of contemporary Black South African women. In order to showcase the identities of the protagonists, Matlwa details intricate cultural landscapes for the characters. *Coconut* explores some notions of national identity, though at a slightly earlier historical moment the Tlous were one of the first recipients of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) benefits. The narrator and protagonist of the first half of *Coconut* is Ofilwe Tlou, or Fifi, the daughter of one of the early beneficiaries of black capitalist or BEE. Fikile, or Fiks as she prefers to be called, relates the second half of the novel: she is an orphan who stays with her destitute uncle in the Mphe Batho Township.

The structure of *Coconut* is peculiar since it is certainly not chronological and has a break in the middle of it where a different story is told by a different narrator. The two narrators and protagonists, Fifi and Fiks, each recounts one day in their lives, but the accounts are littered with flashbacks and asides. Fifi's is the story of not fitting in as a young black child inserted into a white world. Her deep desire to fit in socially is contrasted with her resistance to her Pedi rituals and heritage. Fiks' is the story of a young girl growing up in a township and desperately wanting to attain and be all that her glossy fashion magazines advocate. The two young

ladies meet at the Silver Spoon Café, where Fifi and her family are customers and Fiks is their reluctant waitress. Here, Lynda Spencer contends that "by having two narrators the author succeeds in providing the different perspectives of two characters located on each side of the socio-economic fence while struggling to negotiate self-identity in post-Apartheid South Africa" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.68).

The fictional work's structure mirrors Stuart Hall's concept of differences in cultural identity as "the unstable points of identification… which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning.* Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'" (S. Hall, 1994, p.226). Hall further problematises this notion by noting the occurrence of the "idea of otherness as an inner compulsion [which] changes our conception of 'cultural identity'. In this perspective, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture" (S. Hall, 1994, p.226). Matlwa does exactly this, by having two females of the same nation, race, and age group dealing with similar identity struggles from two different economic and cultural settings she emphasises, as Ralph Goodman notes, "the experience of emotional diaspora, of being divided against oneself – and the restlessness of mind caused by it" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.110). Hall goes on to add that each individual has "negotiated their economic, political and cultural dependency differently. And this 'difference', whether we like it or not, is already inscribed in our cultural identities" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.228). Hall's concept of identity illuminates my reading of Matlwa's *Coconut* which is not simply a narrative of black and white identities, occurring in one fixed time and space. Rather, it stages the marginalised identity of these young black girls in a diverse South Africa and the hindrances they face in their search for inclusion.

In *Coconut*, the question of identity is about interpretation, and the question is about the grass being greener on the other side. Matlwa deals heavily with the issues of identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Even though the majority of the "issues" have been settled in South Africa, there is still an overwhelming sense of confusion among the emerging group of young adults. The most important feature in *Coconut* is the loss of identity due to the confusion of everything happening around young black women. The fictional work presents a juxtaposition of two young black females, set up to allow a direct comparison of their wants, desires, and identities. Matlwa's novel goes back and forth between two characters' points of view – Fikile's and Ofilwe's – who struggle with their identity in South Africa.

Telling a new story with new characters in the new South Africa implies an entirely new style of narration on the basis of a postmodern text marked by the mixture of cultures, identities and languages, real facts, the past, the present and the future. Ralph Goodman contends that in "working to call into question former ways of framing and narration, the manner of story-telling itself here suggesting how shifting performativity strives against the dominance of traditional racial stereotypes in order to define identity in a postmodern era" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.109). The fiction of Matlwa, from the perspective of postmodernism, presents a society devoid of identity, a society cut off from its transcendental roots. Postmodernism is to undermine the destruction of the central arguments that dominated ancient and modern Western thought, language, identity and culture. In South African society, black women and men are lost and marginalised; all their actions become senseless, absurd and useless. The society portrayed in *Coconut* is not conducive to the progress of the black citizens. Seen from this point of view, Goodman goes on positioning the notion of "binary thinking as inextricably complicit with racism in the impoverishment of life during the apartheid era," and it is in this vein that "… the concept of

entanglement offers a useful way of framing the current South African dilemma" (R. Goodman, 2012, p.109). It is these racial stereotypes in concurrence with the multitude of external factors which are explored in depth in Matlwa's piece of fiction.

The depiction of identity is in line with what Spencer calls a trend for "emerging female writers", such as Matlwa, to "focus on representing conflicting, contradictory and ambiguous identities and revealing the complexities of the female experience in both public and private spaces" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.67). There are several instances in *Coconut* which help to map out the terrain of the two main characters by not only showing glimpses into their psyches but also by flashing back to critical moments in their respective lives and interrogating their identities as it pertains to public and private spaces. Public and private spaces are important in regard to interrogating identity in *Coconut*.

There are many defining moments throughout Matlwa's fiction as the characters have to interact, however reluctantly, with their communities. Ofilwe's narrative focuses mainly on her complicated interactions with her community, and her attempts to understand and define what constitutes her community. She notes that at Pedi ceremonies her interaction is limited, mostly "standing in reverence, [staying] out of everybody's way," and, "feeling most inadequate amongst a group of people who all seem to know exactly what roles they play in the age-old Pedi rituals" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.8). She notes her status as an outsider in the midst of her family and people. Matlwa is careful in the way she articulates Ofilwe's perspective, tempering it to reflect her successful assimilation, as well as her ignorance. Ofilwe states, "I attend this ancient church because I am comfortable here. I understand nothing of the history of the church. I do not know what the word 'Anglican' means nor can I explain to you how the church came to arise" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.9). As such, Ofilwe fits into church just fine, but

the social circles of her peers are far more challenging, and we witness Ofilwe constantly and consistently being rejected and corrected.

During a game of spin-the-bottle at a slumber party she is refused a kiss by a white boy who exclaims in terms of protestation, "No ways! Her lips are too dark!" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.45), a phrase that reverberates in her thoughts. One of the only other black boys at her school rebuffs her, declaring that he only dates white girls (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.24). She is also taught lessons on a 'proper' pronunciation by her friend, Belinda, who attempts to correct the way she says 'oven', '*uh-vin*'… not '*oh-vin*' (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.49). Ofilwe reflects on these moments and the pains of her assimilation. She explains the toll that her parents' customs take, mentioning that even the other "brown kids" tend to "treat [her] like the scum that they believe they are" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.49). After recalling her memory of Belinda correcting her articulation of English, she exteriorises her thought as follow: "Hate sits heavy on my heart. It reeks. I can smell it rotting my insides and I taste it on my tongue" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.49). These are moments which really separate Ofilwe from Fiks, this sense of not wanting to be changed completely. Ofilwe even strives to try to incorporate Pedi words into her everyday speak in an apparent attempt to reconnect with her culture. Fiks, on the other hand, wishes not to be associated with anyone in her community. From a young age Fikile is reluctant to associate with her peers. Gogo, her grandmother and primary caretaker, urges Fiks to play outside:

> "'They are all the same', 'they are boring', 'they can't speak English', 'they are stupid', 'they steal my stuff'. You always have an excuse, Fikile. I am fed up with you sitting in here all day reading those fashion magazines. I have a good mind to take those magazines away from you. I thought that they would be a fine way for you to practise your reading but they have taught you nothing but to be a snob. Go outside and play" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.131).

Matlwa consistently shows Fikile's lack of connectivity to her community, but more than that, her unusual lack of sapphic relationships. There is even an episode where a mother and a small child are sitting next to Fiks in a taxi and the sleeping child leans and drools on to Fiks. This is followed by a loud outburst to the boy's mother and a scathing inner-monologue with the continued wishes to be extracted from her situation:

> I am not one of you, I want to tell them. Some day you will see me drive past here in a sleek air-conditioned car, and I will roll up my windows if you try to come near me, because I am not one of you. You are poor and black, and I am rich and brown (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.140).

Fikile's identity and self-awareness is consistently mediated through race, even to the point of preferring the term 'brown' to 'black' as shown above. This reductionist account of identity is also mediated through wealth which is fitting for the job she has, waitressing at an up-market café, not-so-subtly called The Silver Spoon Coffee Shop. The café is the touch-point for the two protagonists, but at the same time it is the setting for many interactions and detailed dynamics. Fikile's practice of her false identity is her attempt to gain the appearance of having an adequate social and economic background: "My name is Fiks Twala. I have a second name, Fikile, which I never use because many find it too difficult to pronounce and, I must admit, I really do like Fiks better. I grew up in white environments for the most part of my life, from primary school right through to high school" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.146).

As the reader could realise, Fiks' childhood is not at all how she portrays it. She goes on to explain, "I have never been able to relate to other blacks, that is the honest to God truth. Gogo with her endless praying, Uncle and his laziness, the dirty kids at school, I understood none of that. And the part about my name, well, I mean, everybody that matters to me calls me Fiks so it might as well be my first name" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.147). In a somewhat uncharacteristically reflective moment Fikile justifies the lie:

"The pretend stories of my life serve the purpose they are required to fulfil, 'Fake it' 'til you make it" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.147). Fikile's identification stems from her cultural identity to the extent that Hall claims that "Cultural identity … is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'… Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation (S. Hall, 1994, p.225).

The [trans]formation of identity is also significant in the naming of the characters or, rather, the self-naming of them, as seen here with Fiks, though it can also be pointed out that Ofilwe is often referred to as 'Fifi'. Fikile's waitressing job allows her to "mix with the who's who of this country" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.141). She coddles every whim and each request from her glamorous, white customers yet refuses outright to wait on black families, declaring that "they're just an annoyance and a waste of my time" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.164). Thereby, Fikile confirms her feeling about the Tlous : "Of course they go without leaving a tip, but then again, what more does one expect from black people?" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.176). Fiks' maligning of the entire black race continues when she sides with a white patron who has offended her black co-worker Ayanda by stating: "Don't 'Ma'am' me, I can read, thank you very much. If it wasn't for us you wouldn't be able to read so don't you patronise me. Just take it back and bring me a cheese sandwich without dairy products, please!" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.150).

Another instance occurs when she is propositioned by one of her regulars, an older white man who consistently over tips and flirts with Fiks. She considers his offer at one point: "Anything worth having comes at a price, a price that isn't always easy to pay... He seems to really like me and I enjoy his company, what is there to lose?" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.176). This is in obvious contrast to her revulsion for black men. Fikile's categorical refusal to interact with black people is challenged on the train, where a

black man tries to speak to her. Fiks is eyeing his briefcase, which she assumes is too fancy for the man, "I do not look at this man, this man who is a thief like all the other men in this train, and probably an alcoholic and a rapist too" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.133). She meets this man again on her way home. The man relates that he was picking up his daughter at school and was observing the children, "And then suddenly a little chocolate girl walks past me, hand in hand with the cutest half-metre milk bar I have ever seen in my life" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.188). His story takes a turn from its initial positivity to mention that he had "been thinking of home-schooling [his daughter]. She refuses to speak a word of Xhosa and I know it is the influence of that school" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.188). The man notes that the children "were so joyful, those kids. But, you know, I couldn't shake the feeling that they were only happy because they didn't know... And she is just so happy, you know. But, I can't shake a certain feeling" (K. Matlwa, 2007, pp.188-189). He goes on to outline the plight of the new generation, "I just got so confused as I stood there at the edge of that playground, because I knew that they were happy and I was happy that they were, but listening to all those little black faces yelping away in English, unaware that they have a beautiful language at home that they will one day long for, just broke my heart" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.189). As the man says this, the reader becomes aware of the complexity of the man's position: integration is encouraged and preferred to segregation, but with assimilation comes the consequence of wiping out diversity. The man is standing at a cultural and generational cross-road that Fiks refuses to acknowledge or examine. The man's statement does seem to directly address Fikile's full adoption of Western values, with no interest in, or even nostalgia for, what she is leaving behind. Fikile is uncertain of what she ought to say to this man's pronouncements which imply her own position as well. He continues:

> Standing at the edge of that playground, I watched little spots of amber and auburn become less of what Africa dreamed of and more of what Europe thought we ought to be. Standing at the edge of that

> playground I saw tiny pieces of America, born of African soil. I saw a dark-skinned people refusing to be associated with the red soil, the mud huts and the glistening stone beads that they once loved (K. Matlwa, 2007, pp.189-190).

Basically, the story urges one to comment on the future of South Africa and the dilemmas that assimilation brings about. *Coconut* does not have a clear end or any indication of what eventually happens to the main characters. Ironically enough, the man's story of the school children is the closest the reader gets to closure in the girls' stories. As Spencer succinctly puts it, all the characters "are forced to negotiate a continuous tension between ethnic African ideals and global values of 'whiteness', life in the black township and the cosmopolitan promises of the city, the traditional prioritizing of family and community and the allure of self-invention" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.69). These are indications of parallels which can be seen in Fikile's private moments. The one that stands out the most is Fiks' private thoughts about her uncle. Other than the overt molestation that is outlined, one of the most telling instances is one in which Fiks is looking at a photo album of her Uncle with a white family that Gogo had worked for, "White children *smiling* for Uncle! I remember being filled with such a wild envy and rage that I was unable to understand why that couldn't be me in the photo, why the Kinsleys hadn't thrown such a party for me, why nobody had ever thrown any kind of party for me" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.123). Fikile's desire to be accepted is shown in *Coconut* as delusional, based on superficiality rather than reality.

Matlwa consequently scrutinises cultural awareness with the purpose to empower young black women to better understand themselves, their culture and society. Her questions cleverly present the fact that just like blackness, Africanness is not one monolithic thing, it is as eclectic as its people and is defined just as broadly as it is constantly evolving.

Africanness in a pre-dominantly black space is often defined by the state or quality of being African including the spoken language.

2. Reviewing Constructive Disassimilation and Cultural Identifiers

Fiks and Ofilwe in Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* both have issues with their identity, which is caused by their interpretation of what is around them. Fiks and Ofilwe are trying to adopt someone else's identity as their own. Identity cannot simply happen, as Fiks and Ofilwe are struggling to find out; identity is something that is developed from the acceptance of what one is. A person cannot adapt an identity from someone else, they have to construct their own through the fires of their experiences.

Fiks refuses to identify with the people who are like her. Even her skin colour reflects her desire to be something else: she is not black, she is brown. She believes that if enough is done, if she distances herself enough from these people – these black people – she will no longer be black. Fiks believes that she can make herself white. While talking with the people who come to the café where she works. Fiks thinks:

> The more time I spent with these people, listening to their stories, peeking in on their day-to-days, the more certain I was that the lives they lived were a reflection of the life I was born to live. I never did have the stomach for poverty. I am too sensitive. I could never deal with all that trash (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.169).

This just seems very ridiculous. She is basing her judgments on the snapshots she gets of these people's lives when they come into a restaurant where she is a waitress. They only reveal what they want to reveal. Fiks is making her choices based on incomplete information; she does not know what else is out there and anything about the challenges, because it is not all roses. Her lack of information causes her to deny who she is at this time because she is identifying with her ideal.

A large part of Fiks' identity is tied up with her denial of who she is. After making a mistake at work and being scolded in front of a customer, Fiks thinks: "I am tired of waiting, waiting for the day when it will all be different, when it will be my turn, my story, my rose" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.181). Fiks believes that by denying everything that happens, by waiting for what she wants to happen, she will magically get everything. That her life will magically change. Her embarrassment over what happened causes her to distance herself even further from her identity as a waitress and a black woman because that is not what is going to get her anywhere. Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* shows how "emerging voices are finding cracks in which to foreground, interrogate, engage and address wide-ranging topics which lacked a form of expression in the past" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.67). From the first page of *Coconut*, there is a concentration on unattainable beauty portrayal of Kate Jones opposed to "… little black girls scattered helter-skelter, doing her favours in return for a feel of her" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.1). Kate Jones' natural beauty arouses in the black waitress a complex identity conflict and it creates in her a painful awareness of her blackness.

Subtly, Ofilwe is contrasted with Kate Jones, which shows a dichotomy between whiteness and blackness. Ofilwe's scalp is covered with potent chemicals that are meant to straighten her naturally tightly curled hair. The agony is emotional but also very much physical and is detailed in the narrative: "[she] was not bothered by the tenderness of [her] scalp... No, [she] was just delighted to be beautiful again" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.4). It is in this way that *Coconut* focuses on the representation of women by attracting attention to the politics of hair and beauty.

Fifi describes the image of "The black American TV girls" radiating from the box of relaxer while she is experiencing "A painful exothermic chemical reaction. Burn. Burning. Burnt" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.4). Jessica Murray asserts that "the pain mentioned in the phrase from *Coconut* ... extends to the pain that women experience when they are obliged to

construct their identities in a social milieu that is fundamentally hostile towards them" (J. Murray, 2012, pp.91-92). The situation here implies a lot about Fifi's lifestyle in the narrative, namely having the luxury of getting her hair done at a saloon. Butler argued that gender is performative and is "produced as ritualized repetition of convention" (J. Butler, 1995, p.31); following that logic, hair care and styling become a performance in adherence to beauty standards (T.O Patton, 2006, p.36). Derek Hook expounds on the Fanonian concepts of identity noting that:

> Practices of hair-straightening, skin-lightening... and the enthusiastic adoption of the accent and language of the oppressor, all of these are examples of *inauthenticity* for Fanon. They are voluntary kinds of masking, symptoms of what is wrong in the colonised subject's psyche. These are negative bids at identity – processes of negation – that constantly *affirm* the coloniser's culture as the superior term, and dismiss the colonised culture as inferior (D. Hook, 2003, p.115).

The concept of beauty is defined, moderated and perpetuated by the hegemonic culture in western society. The shared belief that the female body is in some way imperfect and in need of altering is a patronymic concept that goes back centuries to Chinese foot-binding (T.O Patton, 2006, p.25). Matlwa goes to lengths not only to convey the painful processes that need to be endured, but she is also careful to position the act of beautification in the Black feminine space. Zimitri Erasmus asserts that "Black hair is politicised by class and gender. It is also racialised," highlighting the fact that "racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty" (Z. Erasmus, 1997, p.12). Murray contends that "in hair we …see a powerful example of the well-known feminist insistence that the personal is political and that a rigid separation between the public and private spheres is untenable" (J. Murray, 2012, p.92).

In the mirror of the saloon, Fifi observes "a comb with the finest of teeth. In the mirror in front of me sat a girl with the coarsest of hair. That

the two could work in harmony, I would never be convinced. Such pain" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.3). What is most telling here is that the idea of harmony is sustained by the pain of straightening and taming her natural curls. Murray notes that "Ofilwe's narrative reveals that she considered attaining beauty to be more important than avoiding physical pain" (J. Murray, 2012, p.94). It could be argued that this is a metaphor that is contributing to the motif throughout *Coconut* which is an 'entanglement' of often contradictory identities: black/white, traditional/Western. To get through this beauty session, Fifi gives herself a pep-talk drawing on fictionalised wisdom, "Pain is beauty, grandmother used to say. Well, not *my* grandmother, but I am certain *somebody's* grandmother used to say that, and if my grandmother cared for such, I am sure she would say it too" [emphasis in the original] (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.3).

Tradition is something that does not need to be real: it is a matter of belief. As the story progresses, I note that Ofilwe makes a concerted effort to assimilate into the world of her white classmates, at one point choosing a slumber party at a friend's over a funeral in the township where her family used to live (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.9). In using these signals and metaphors, the text "interrogates the various ways in which cultural tensions created by the historical legacies of apartheid, conjoined hands with American global power, produced a cultural hegemony that privileges 'whiteness' over 'blackness', and results in 'whiteness' becoming a new form of aspirational identity" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.68). For Ofilwe, her indoctrination to the so-called dominant culture takes her by surprise to an extent, for she only realises there are no faces of colour on the walls of her room when Tshepo points it out to her. Ofilwe is somewhat ashamed at her brother's acknowledgement of her '*coconutiness*,' asserting that "In his eyes I saw what was only to hit me many years from then. I think it was on that day that Tshepo saw me for what I really was. I wish I had then too; maybe things would have worked out differently" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.92-93). Just

before the transition into Fikile's narrative, Ofilwe adds this ominous yet profound appraisal of the process of racial and cultural assimilation in post-Apartheid South African schools:

> In every classroom children are dying. It is a parasitic disease, seizing the mind for its own usage. Using the mind for its own survival. So that it might grow, divide, multiply, and infect others. Burnt sienna washing out. DNA coding for white greed, blond vanity and blue-eyed malevolence. IsiZulu forgotten. Tshivenda a distant memory (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.93).

Here Ofilwe outlines the pervasive cultural assassinations that happen in the educational institutions of the country. As a result, there is an inherent preference and desirability for whiteness over blackness. This sentiment is echoed at the end of Fikile's narrative. Fiks, actively seeks an association with whiteness and white people. Most of her narration is focused on her negation of her black identity and disparaging her surroundings and the people around her. As she sorts through her belongings, she tells the readers that the items serve a dual purpose and that is to "serve as a constant reminder to me of what I do not want to be: black, dirty and poor. This bucket can be a daily motivator for me to keep me working towards where I will someday be: white, rich and happy" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.118). She maintains this sentiment in her descriptions of the people she passes and sits near on her way to work: "The men disgust me. All of them are a bunch of criminals. A bunch of uneducated criminals. They look at me like they want to rape me and I know they would do it if there weren't so many people around" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.129). Her self-loathing and outright racist convictions seem to show her conscious alignment with the hegemonic ideas of the white society. Fikile curses, "Black people! Why must they always be so damn destructive? And to think, they have never invented a thing in their squalid lives and yet they insist on destroying the little we have" (K. Matlwa, 2007, pp.134-135). Her words suggest that she holds herself apart from blackness. The blackness is the unknown, everything Fiks

is not and everything she does not want to be. Her story is unfinished, and she wants to be something greater, something more than could have been expected of her. She has not reached the end of her journey yet, but is still trying to find herself and figure out who she is. Fiks is not mature, and may never be mature because she is so tied up with her idea of who is better and who she should be. Fiks' alienation from her original background is such that she is accused by a black man of being one of the "*abo mabhebeza* who are always wishing to be something that they ain't never gonna be" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.133). In Xhosa language, "*abo mabhebeza*" refers to women who reject black traditional ways (R. Goodman, 2012, p.16). *Coconut* shows that this self-alienation has been present since from an early age. In a confrontation with her grandmother, Fikile defends her preference for staying indoors with her fashion magazines by stating that "It's hot outside and my skin will get dark" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.131). Her concern with not appearing 'black' is "shaped by contempt for blackness, it is also informed by her life experience, which has shown her that power and privilege are associated with whiteness" (J. Murray, 2012, p.103). Here, a blind conformity appears in Fiks' description of the precious items found in her special box, which include some fashion magazines she has collected since her youth. It helps to illustrate Spencer's point that "despite inhabiting freedom in a new political dispensation, masses of black people continue to be socialized into whiteness *via* mass media" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.75). The most expensive item she owns is green contact lenses. Fiks explains what the lenses represent to her:

> The dainty little emerald-green coloured lenses that float gracefully in the sapphire blue contact-lens solution are a reminder of how far I have come, from the naive orphan child living in a one-bedroom house with her incompetent Uncle in another family's backyard in yet another decrepit township to the charming young waitress with pretty green eyes and soft, blow-in-the-wind, caramel-blond hair (pinned in perfectly to make it look real), working at the classiest coffee shop this side of the equator (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.117).

The box includes skin-lightener, sunscreen, makeup, blond hair extensions, and continuing Patton's argument of the economic standards of beauty, Fiks notes "the pieces of caramel blond hair extension which were brought for me as a child to braid my hair with but never used because Uncle misplaced the money he was supposed to pay the braiding lady with" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.117). Beauty for Fikile is understood in terms of money and whiteness; however, her character is far from flattened. As Murray discusses:

> Despite these very problematic notions about the superiority of whiteness, Fikile does exhibit many strong and laudable qualities. To dismiss her as a mere victim who has intemalized racist assumptions would be an oversimplification that does a disservice to the rich totality of her character. Her determination is clear when she asserts that she knows what she wants and that she is prepared to do anything in [her] power to get it (J. Murray, 2012, p. 103).

Just as Spencer notes, "Matlwa explores the extent to which the body becomes the site where culture and identity encounter the individual in the construction of an identity" (Spencer 75). Fifi too puts effort and energy into her appearance, but she displays awareness, albeit a fraught one, of her blackness. Fiks, as Spencer discusses, is amongst "those who do not have access to an alternative world-view that affirms and celebrates blackness", and as such she begins "to internalize white supremacist thought and values" (L. Spencer, 2009, p.75). She is constantly surrounded by images that enforce whiteness as the dominant standard of being.

From Ofilwe's realisation that she only had white celebrities covering her walls (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.92) to Fiks' recollection of answering her teacher's inquiry about what she wanted to be as an adult to which she replied, "White, Teacher Zola. I want to be white" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.135), the idea is the influence of Western culture. Ofilwe is lost as well, and is nowhere near the end of her allusion towards her identity. When she is tired of trying to please everyone Ofilwe thinks "Right there I would

sit and not take another step. That would be OK, too: I do not know where I am going anyway" (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.62). Ofilwe is still troubled to discover who she is; she has not reached a point where she can stop and think, 'this is it. I know who I am now.' Her trouble is still being shaped and she has not thrown off the youth that she used to know. She is caught up in her need to please everyone; she wants to fit into the mold they have of her and because of this she is lost. She never does find herself. *Coconut* closes with a final thought, not attributed to either of the characters, so perhaps it belongs to both:

> I have come to realize that many things are seldom as they seem. Sometimes what you think is your greatest obstacle turns out to be the least, and what you thought would be easy to conquer troubles you still. I do not know how to make it pretty. I do not know how to mask it. It is not a piece of literary genius. It is the story of our lives. It is our story, told in our own words as we feel it every day. It is boring. It is plain. It is overdone and definitely not newsworthy. But it is the story we have to tell (K. Matlwa, 2007, p.191).

In Matlwa's *Coconut*, Western culture influences the protagonists, as a matter of fact, to the point of resulting in glancing through the notions of rootedness in the all-encompassing ways in which the young black women present themselves, including beautification and language/ethnicity as cultural identifiers. Constructive disassimilation therefore goes hand in hand with cultural recognition resulting in discarding white culture in so far as Matlwa's fictional text deftly handles the complexities of being a free black in a new democracy.

Conclusion

The post-Apartheid era recommends the rethinking of black identities in South Africa. Problems surrounding the frustrating and challenging identity issues Blacks are facing are the central topic of Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* as she focuses on the notion of identity of the black female in a white-favoured class position in new South Africa. By depicting

the lives of Ofilwe and Fikile, *Coconut* addresses racialistic prejudices related to cultural depravity and identity crisis. Matlwa is a postmodernist writer who uncovers the lives of black South African girls and the false notion of "Rainbow Nation." She refers to the dynamics of Africanness in emphasising female's real identity formation, constructive disassimilation, class position and cultural awareness.

In considering language as a rampant feature of the social environment, not transient, Matlwa purports to preserve indigenous culture through concentration on beauty portrayal and significant language accents as identifiers/markers of identity in the post-Apartheid context.

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