

**Scrutinising Eurocentric stereotypes against Afrocentric underpinnings of beauty  
through Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*****Malesela Edward Montle** ✉Department of Language, English Studies, School of Languages and Communication Studies, Faculty  
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This paper has probed into stereotypical attitudes towards Afrocentric underpinnings of beauty through Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*. The genesis of these stereotypes against African beauty could be traced from the colonisation of the African continent. It is the interface between Africa and the West that engendered a shift of identities, which resulted in many Afrocentric depictions assimilated by Western influence. Despite the decolonisation attempts, the Eurocentric notions that had defined Africa during the colonial period persist in galvanising stereotypes that marginalise Africans, especially those that embrace Afrocentric ideas of beauty in the post-colonial age. Today, Africa is besieged with remnants of colonialism, which include Eurocentric ideals of beauty. This paper employed the qualitative method to scrutinise the stereotypes against Afrocentric beauty through the literary criticism of Matlwa's novel, *Coconut*. It is undergirded by the theory of Afrocentricity, which has been utilised as a lens to crystallise the indigenous African identities and their relevance today. It finds that these Eurocentric notions have navigated through the peripheries of post-colonial Africa and influenced societal reactions, attitudes and perceptions of beauty. This is reflected in Matlwa's *Coconut* where African beauty is stigmatised and disparaged whereas Eurocentric ideals of beauty are exalted.

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The colonialists during their rule in Africa championed Eurocentric notions that still menace Afrocentric identities notwithstanding their dethronement from power (Montle & Mogoboya, 2018). The colonialists' perennialised Eurocentric influence has manifested in the question of beauty in African societies today. Many Africans, especially women have succumbed to the Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Murray (2012, 91) confirms that beauty is more of a hieroglyph of prosperity for women than men, "for a woman to

be properly feminine, she must thus manipulate her appearance to conform to the very specific ideals of beauty that flow from distrust of the female body in its natural state." These women have resorted to ventures such as skin whitening in an effort to beautify themselves, which is an exaltation of Eurocentricity at the expense of Afrocentricity. The colonialists during their rulership used several tactics such as religion, media and education to portray and manipulate Africans into believing that Eurocentric identities are better than African ones. Montle (2020) notes that these colonialists sought to eternalise the

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perception of black (African) as ugly and white (European) as beautiful. Thus, black women have become the most active subscribers of skin whitening activities because a light skin is linked to whiteness, which is associated with sophistication and beauty (Hunter 2002). To this note, “ideas of beauty are placed within a historically racist as well as gendered framework” (Riazuddin 2011, 2).

The study identifies the role of Eurocentricity in the perception of beauty in the present day as a gap that has not been adequately addressed by previous studies that mostly stressed the apparent preference of light skin tones over dark ones without probing the genesis of this preference, which is rooted in colonialism. Matlwa’s novel is found to reflect on this problem satisfactorily, thus, it is chosen to be utilised as a reference point. Furthermore, physical beauty is postulated to play a pivotal role in women’s confidence and interaction in society (Abrams 2016), hence black women who are mostly stigmatised and scorned because of their black skin colour, are often tempted if not impelled to use skin whitening products to whiten their skins. This could mean that “authentic beauty can be understood as a counterpoint to notions of what beauty means in society, and could be seen as a point of departure from ideas of oppressive systems of beauty that the west is said to perpetuate” (Thomik 2014, 60). This skin whitening evinces a peril to Afrocentricity, as the black identity is denounced and underrated by its own bearers. The black identity is one of the important insignias of Africanity. Thus, the majority of black people around the globe are perceived as descendants of Africa. Adams (2020: 1) opines that “for a long time in our country’s [America] history, black people were most likely direct descendants of enslaved Africans.” Equally important, according to Sekayi (2003, 467), “black women are aware of the Eurocentric ideal of beauty, many of them accept this standard as reality and understand that whether or not they embrace it as their own, they will be judged according to it.”

### **Theoretical interpretations**

Afrocentric identities have undergone a crucial transition as a result of Eurocentric interventions in African matters. Pre-colonial African societies perceived beauty outside Eurocentric standards where the black identity epitomised the grandeur of aboriginal Africanity (Shizha, 2005). The African natives merited and made sense of the depiction of beauty in their own terms until the advent of colonialists in the African continent, which resulted in a battle for power between African natives and European elites and the latter emerged victorious. This triumph saw the trivialisation of Afrocentric identities, hence the black identity of the conquered Africans was inferiorised and the white identity of the victors glorified. Today, the “racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty” (Erasmus 1997, 12). Eurocentric ideas have infiltrated and dominated the beauty industry in African societies. Beauty has become agonised and appreciated as per Eurocentric views, “If you are white, you are alright, if you are black, get back, if you are brown, stick around” (Byrd and Tharps 2001, 52). Thus, the fundamental assumptions of the theory of Afrocentricity rest on the thought that Africans must activate a sense of agency (Asante, 2009). This includes directly combating “European hegemonic discourse in order to negate its inherent Eurocentrism as a pole diametrically opposed to that associated with Africanists” (Rafapa 2005, 11). Furthermore, Asante (1998) depicts the Afrocentric theory as a lens that “seeks to uncover the masks behind the rhetoric of power, privilege, and position in order to establish how principal myths create a place. The method enthrones critical reflection that reveals the perception of monolithic power as nothing but the projection of a cadre of adventurers.” To this note, the theory of Afrocentric becomes a relevant *modus operandi* to crystallise the Eurocentric stereotypes against Afrocentric depictions of beauty. It is complemented by the Negritude movement that defends the African cultural heritage by embracing African beauty. The Negritude movement sought to challenge the Eurocentric ideas that decry African identities. As the colonial perception of

beauty claims that white is beautiful and good, the Negritude opposes these notions and declares black being beautiful and good. The movement is depicted by its resistance to colonial influence and celebration of Africanism, which is interpreted as savage and inferior by colonial forces Owomoyela (2009, 1) notes, “Négritude proclaimed all things African superior to all things European. Even in colour symbolism, négritude asserted that black is more beautiful than white, and the soft, dark night is preferable to harsh daylight.”

## METHODS

This paper has used a qualitative research approach, which comprises collecting, reviewing and examining non-numeric information to understand certain behavioural patterns, reactions and experiences (Bhandari, 2022). Likewise, Creswell and Creswell (2018) aver that qualitative research aims to comprehend the phenomenon being observed in a natural background as a primary tool of data collection. The paper has hinged on the aforementioned qualitative method to scrutinise Eurocentric stereotypes against Afrocentric identities in the modern-day and has collected its primary data from a literary text and supplemented it with data from secondary sources. Furthermore, the paper utilises a textual analysis to intently study, analyse and interpret the literary text used as a case in point in the study.

### Sampling

The study has utilised a purposive sampling technique, which encompasses the researcher’s consideration of a sample due to its characteristics that are applicable to the phenomenon being studied (Black, 2010). For this paper, the researcher has selected Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* out of other African literary texts by virtue of its reflection of the effects of Eurocentricity on African identities in the present day. Moreover, Matlwa is one of the African writers that explore the issues of African identities in their literary work and has brilliantly anatomised the Eurocentric stereotypes towards African identity in her novel, *Coconut*, which was awarded the European Union

Literary Award and the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa.

### Data analysis procedure

The data acquired from Matlwa’s *Coconut* will be intently presented and discussed in themes. This noted, the researcher has adopted the thematic analysis method, which is a technique applied to generate significant themes to present the collected information.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Matlwa’s *Coconut* unearths the remnants of colonialism that have and still influence the lives of many Africans. This paper gives special attention to Eurocentric ideals of beauty in the African context amongst other vestiges of colonialism that are haunting Africans in the present age and are portrayed in Matlwa’s novel. The novel presents two black female characters, Ofilwe and Fikile whose lives are conflicted by Eurocentric influence. It is through these characters that stereotypes against Afrocentric identities are unveiled.

### Stereotypes against African identities

The stereotypes include abhorrence against the African identity. The colonial influence has proselytised many African natives into Western belief systems. This is reflected in the lives of Ofilwe and Fikile whose perceptions of beauty, wealth and success depend on the white skin colour. Fikile is an impoverished young girl and her ultimate goal is to emancipate herself and attain a financial breakthrough. To break away from her abject poverty, Fikile contemplates adopting the white identity at the expense of her black identity. She desires to be “white, rich and happy” than be “black, dirty and poor” (*Coconut*, 118). Fikile’s association of the black identity with infirmity and the white identity with perfection champions the colonialists’ early image of Africans that they had “no cultural traditions of their own, no religious, economic or political background worthy of serious attention” (Roscoe 1970, 1). She postulates that being black is the reason for her

struggles in life, especially socio-economically. She states, “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” (*Coconut*, 181).

### Self-hatred and Identity-crisis

Fikile berates her own identity as a black woman and places a premium on whiteness, which she perceives as a catalyst for success. Hence, she starts idolising white women and wishes to be like them by “wearing emerald coloured lenses and caramel blond hair” (*Coconut*, 117). Mushere (2010) asserts that African women’s utilisation of hair extensions that come in many forms including the cited blond hair in the novel is a manifestation of self-hatred and a sense of acceptance that their race is inferior. Furthermore, Fikile identifies a white woman and aspires to be rich, classy and perfect like her. She always anticipates perfection from her idol, thus, when her idol errs, she states “stop acting black!” (*Coconut*, 31). The aforementioned words imply that in Fikile’s view, it is the black identity that is usually found at fault, unlike the white identity. This is why she is so determined to find a new identity that shifts her from blackness to whiteness, “It was like a puzzle piece, pulled out of a puzzle and bent and now I could never fit back in. I’d seen pictures of another life, a better life, and I wanted it” (*Coconut*, 168).

In the same fashion, the other central figure of the novel, Ofilwe also develops repudiation towards the black identity. She also idolises Whiteness and perceives it as her destiny. Ofilwe, unlike Fikile, comes from a wealthy family that resides in a white-orientated suburb. Her identity-crisis unfolded when she perused a magazine and appallingly failed to recognise black characters in it,

White. White. White. There was not a single factor of colour on the wall. I had noticed. Honest. It was only after he pointed out that I saw it too. I mean, why on earth would I do something like that intentionally? What did it matter anyway? It was purely a coincidence; perhaps there were no black faces I liked in the magazines I cut out from (*Coconut*, 92).

Ofilwe’s failure to discern the black identities in the magazine, to her meant that the white identity that she described in the magazine is

the “one she is born to live” by (*Coconut*, 92). Equally important, it is believed that Eurocentric standards of beauty are the ones that define women’s fashion and beauty magazines (Smith 2000). In addition, Thomik (2014, 63) states that “If one looks back to advertisements from the 1950s and 60s, one can see an upsurge in black female beauty products, and many of these products were aimed at making black women appear more white.” Ofilwe’s newly germinating idea is vitalised by her experience during the spin a bottle game; a game usually played by teenagers where participants stand in a circle and round a bottle in the centre and each one of them gets a chance to spin the bottle, and are obliged to kiss whomever the bottle points when it stops spinning. In line with the above point, during the game, the bottle points at Ofilwe and another white teenager who refuses to kiss her because of her black skin colour, “No ways! Her lips are too dark!” (*Coconut*, 45). Furthermore, Ofilwe experienced another racial discrimination when she desired to be in a romantic relationship with Junior Mokoena who sent his friends to give Ofilwe the message, “Tell her I only date white girls” (*Coconut*, 24). To this note, Dlova, Hendricks and Martingcgh (2012) assert that many people prefer a lighter complexion and therefore, perceive pigmentary conformists as ugly. Furthermore, Perry (2005, 582) postulates that “blackness and femaleness are subject to inferiority owing to the hegemonic past of Africa.” It is then that Ofilwe makes efforts to beautify herself according to Eurocentric standards. She starts to “shield her face from the glaring sun as she is afraid of losing her complexion” (*Coconut*, 51). Moreover, Ofilwe succumbs to the myth, “God made some races [white] superior so that others [black] can follow” (*Coconut*, 157). She also acknowledges the impact of the colonial past in her identity crisis, “the old rules remain and the old sentiments are unchanged” (*Coconut*, 12). Reischer and Koo (2004, 298) aver that “cultural ideas of beauty are an index and expression of social values and beliefs, and that the west has perpetuated a particular idea of beauty, one that has become the prevailing idea of beauty due to a hegemonic

cultural dominance that circulates idealised images of beauty throughout the world via forms of media.” Hence, Murray (2012) notes that Ofilwe deems being beautiful more essential than eluding physical pain, “what hurts is beauty” (*Coconut*, 219).

### Skin tone and identity-crisis

Fikile and Ofilwe’s obsession with the white identity over their black identity, like many black African women, propelled them to engage in precarious activities such as the use of oils, creams, steroids and injections to reduce the melanin in the body to effect a lighter skin colour. Whitehead, Daniel, Xiao, Ozakinci and Perrett (2012, 7) postulate that the “variation of skin colour among individuals is mostly caused by variation of the content of melanin in the skin with little or no melanin is almost white.” In the novel, Fikile finds a box, which in it, she stores her beautification products that she considers as the “most expensive things in her life” that were earned through “many months spent scrubbing grease and sweeping storerooms after hours” (*Coconut*, 117). With these products, Fikile aims to alter her dark skin colour (Black) to become bright (White), thus, she refers to them as her “life treasures” (*Coconut*, 117). Moreover, Marco (2012, 3) notes that “beauty has been imagined as part of people’s social and psychological lives in various ways since antiquity.” Fikile goes to extreme measures to achieve and maintain a bright skin colour and uses Lemon light skin-lightener cream (*Coconut*, 117). She also avoids being exposed to the sun as she believes that her “skin will get dark” (*Coconut*, 113) if she has contact with the sun. Perry (2005, 589) notes that “rational individuals will reasonably make attempts to lighten their skin to achieve social benefits in a society and world where a darker skin makes one less valuable-as a mate, as an employee.” In the novel, Fikile envisaged herself wearing “emerald-green coloured lenses, caramel-blond hair and using Lemon Light skin-lightener cream” like a white woman (*Coconut*, 117) and being “white, rich and happy” (*Coconut*, 118). Davids, Khumalo, and Jabionski (2016) note that the inspiration for enkindling this skin

whitening is the desperation to brighten one’s skin due to the idea of advanced privileges, higher social status, and greater chances of employment and amplifying marital prospects linked to lighter skin. Hence, “by late 1960s, 60% of urban African women reported using skin lightener formulations, making these formulations the fourth most commonly used household product (after soap, tea and tinned milk)” (Davids et al. 2016, 2). The use of skin whitening products seems to be emboldened by the belief that the brighter the skin colour the more opportunities one is exposed to. Hence, black African women have fallen victim to skin whitening and are considered to be “some of the biggest consumers of skin bleaching products, which include potentially harmful local concoctions made from household chemicals (e.g. automotive battery acid, bleach, laundry detergent, toothpaste), and over-the-counter creams, putting them at greater risk for a variety of negative health outcomes” (Giudice and Yves 2002, 69). The women’s desire to be beautiful and reap the rewards that come with the ideal of beauty seems to surpass their endeavour to be healthily safe. According to Ajose (2005), the side effects of skin whitening include delay in wound healing, skin cancer and the necessity for corrective surgery. Further evidence that expatiates on the above mentioned point could be noted from the confession of *Nombulelo Pakkies* (49) from Lamontville in DailySun Newspaper (26 August 2016) who admits to using a face lightener for over 18 years unaware of its side effects until her skin began to become itchy when exposed to the sun “I didn’t know there was a problem until a doctor told me how the cream was affecting my skin.”

Eurocentric ideals have not only institutionalised beauty according to the brightness of the skin colour but also the nature of hairstyles and body structure. The colonial definition of beauty has transcended to a degree of the female body becoming one of the delineating traits of beauty. This is substantiated by the stereotypical views against women whose bodies are deemed not “rigorously confined” (De Beauvoir 1997). Murray (2012, 92) notes, “The female body is, of course, always simultaneously inscribed by gender,

race, class, geographical location and sexual orientation.” Moreover, the distinction between black and white people, as a result of colonial rule, led to the stereotypical ideas about black people, specifically black women that have “historically been considered as different, as standing outside of normative western models of beauty, and are often considered to be ugly in relation to white western beauty” (Thomik 2012, 65). Matlwa’s *Coconut* mirrors the rejection of the black female body. Fikile envies being inside the body of a white woman than her black body that the “west has traditionally assigned overly sexualised, uncivilised, traditional, exotic, and primitive connotations onto the black female body” (Caslin 2009, 5). Matlwa stresses the intensity of influence that the colonial past has in the present age. This is conveyed through post-colonial Africans such as Fikile that are acclimatised by colonial mind-sets to denigrate their black bodies. Furthermore, the discrepancy between the black and white female bodies acquaints with “the biological aspects of a black woman’s stereotyped body such as big lips and round buttocks” (Erasmus 1997, 3) and “the various tropes of beauty amongst white women...the stereotypes of whiteness, thinness, and youthfulness” (Thomik 2014, 64).

### **Hair and Identity-crisis**

In the novel, stereotypes against African hairstyles emerged. Montle (2020, 111) notes that “African identity has been epitomised by natural hair that often portrayed African women in short hair. However, the colonial intervention has eroded this African understanding of beauty through Euro-centric hair-styles by making Africans believe that this age-old hair-style tradition of growing short hair is backward and barbaric.” Thus, Fikile and Ofilwe’s acquisition of the white identity includes moulding their hairs as per Eurocentric standards. In 3rd degree (2012), Deborah Patter states:

here is an important part of our identity, we spend an oddment amount of time and money on it and is not just about looking good, it says something about us, whether we colour it, straighten it or make it curly, it is intimately connected to our self-image, for black women,

it is even a more complex issue, natural hair versus the weaves [and] it may sound frivolous but that frivolity lies beyond a far deeper issue, it is about race, Western versus African ideals, and what exactly defines beauty.

Fikile wishes to be a “charming young waitress with soft, blow-in-the-wind caramel-blond hair (pinned in perfectly to make it look real)” (*Coconut*, 117). Her perception of beauty with hair is aggravated by the stereotypes she endures at work. Fikile’s boss, Miss Becky informs Fikile that her hair is unacceptable and she should consider doing “something about it, anything, just don’t come to work looking like that again” (*Coconut*, 122). Hunter (2002, 188) affirms that “racial constructions continue to hold sway and, as a result, light skin and straight hair are associated with whiteness which, in tum, is linked to competence and intelligence.” As a result, many African women like Fikile and Ofilwe resorted to straightening their hair and using hair extensions in an effort to qualify for Eurocentric standards, which are believed to come with benefits. Tate (2007, 301) avers the colonialists have engendered “radical shift, from beauty aesthetic in elaborate hairstyles – braids and other plaited styles.” Ofilwe recalls her experiences in Ous Beauty’s salon where many customers would come to style their hairs in line with Eurocentric ideals, “washing, blowing, dyeing, cutting, penning and styling” (*Coconut*, 3). This fortified Ofilwe’s notion that to be beautiful, one’s hair has to be “straight and silky soft” (*Coconut*, 4). Thus, she also desired a Eurocentric hairstyle at the salon and with this hairstyle she was “delighted to be beautiful again” (*Coconut*, 4). Ofilwe informs the hairstylist that she wants “every last tiny weenie curl straight” (*Coconut*, 4). Montle (2020, 112) notes,

The perception of beauty is one of the vexing intricacies in the post-colonial age of Africa, by virtue of, the inclusion of Euro-centricity as the defining lens of beauty in the African societies. The Western identity of hairstyling has become a prevailing blue-chip prospect in the modern-day Africa... African women were proselytised into believing that everything that is Western-orientated is beautiful.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the extent to which the notion of beauty in the African context today is altered by the colonial past. The findings from Matlwa's *Coconut* have revealed that the abhorrence against the black identity and the exaltation of the white identity through skin whitening and hair straightening is moulded by Eurocentric ideas that were perpetuated by colonialists in the African continent. This was established through the critical analysis of Kopano Matlwa's literary text, *Coconut*. The novel reflected on moral deficiencies experienced by black women through the characters of Fikile and Ofilwe. These women valued another identity more than theirs owing to the odds stacked against their true identity. As such, they embarked on a quest for white identity. Nonetheless, Fikile and Ofilwe indulge in detrimental measures in the process of reasserting their identities. Hopps and Bunn (2013, 1) note that "consequences of inappropriate use of lightening treatments or those containing active ingredients in excess of safe levels or illegal ingredients are, permanent skin bleaching; development of visible blood vessels; thinning of the skin; uneven, patchy skin colour; and redness, stinging and irritation." The women (Fikile and Ofilwe) used the Lemon light skin-lightener cream and avoided being exposed to the sun (*Coconut*, 131) and also straightened their hair if not wear blond hair extensions. However, a variety of scholars throughout the study have sought to validate that beauty does not depend on the brightness of one's skin tone (see Perry 2005; Thomik 2014). As has been argued that the concept of beauty is a dire issue that comes with life-threatening agents such as skin whitening and body shaming, it is, therefore, crucial to conscientise the skin whiteners about the hazards that come with this practice as well as its effect on Afrocentric identities. More importantly, discriminatory attitudes to African identities as a result of the existing Eurocentric influence menaces the decolonial turn that the African continent has embarked on upon reclaiming independence.

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