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Constructing Beauty as a Gendered and Racialised Standard: An Analysis of Black Female Embodiment in Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*

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Abstract
This article examines how Kopano Matlwa's debut novel, Coconut (2007), constructs beauty as a standard that is simultaneously gendered and racialised and imposed with particular force on black female bodies. Existing scholarship on the novel has examined race, coloniality, language, and identity in post-apartheid South Africa in considerable depth, yet the single sustained study of its appearance politics, Murray's (2012) "Pain is Beauty," reads beauty chiefly through race and class rather than through gender as an analytical category in its own right. This article addresses that gap through a qualitative, thematically organised close reading of the primary text, supported by a purposively sampled corpus of passages depicting hair, skin tone, bodily comportment, the evaluative gaze, and physical pain, and by a deliberate comparison with the novel's largely unscrutinised male characters. Findings show that these five embodied markers do not operate independently but form a single, mutually reinforcing disciplinary system that is applied almost exclusively to the novel's female protagonists, Ofilwe and Fikile, consistently rewarding proximity to whiteness while devaluing markers coded as authentically black. The article's central contribution is to demonstrate, through sustained engagement with the primary text and explicit comparison across gender, that it is gender, more than race alone, that determines who is made to carry the cost of this standard, and to situate this claim precisely against the existing body of Coconut scholarship.

Keywords: Black female embodiment, coconut, gendered beauty, postcolonial feminism, racialised beauty.

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INTRODUCTION

Beauty is rarely, if ever, a neutral or purely private matter. It functions as a social standard that is taught, monitored, rewarded, and enforced, and it is a standard that falls disproportionately on women's bodies, which are judged, disciplined, and made to carry the visible weight of appearance in ways that men's bodies typically are not (Hunter, 2005; Weitz, 2001). In societies shaped by colonial rule and entrenched racial hierarchy, beauty standards are additionally racialised, so that whiteness is normalised as the unmarked standard of attractiveness while blackness, and particularly the visible markers of blackness such as dark skin and tightly coiled hair, is treated as a deviation requiring correction, concealment, or management (Fanon, 2008; hooks, 1992).

South Africa offers a particularly instructive setting in which to examine this dynamic, because its beauty hierarchies were not merely informal social preferences but were, for much of the twentieth century, administered by the apartheid state itself. Racial classification under apartheid law relied in part on assessments of precisely the embodied markers this article investigates: hair texture, skin tone, and even, in the notorious "pencil test," whether a pencil placed in the hair would fall or remain lodged (Hunter, 2005; Tate, 2009). Straightened hair, lighter skin, and "refined" speech and comportment were accordingly not only aesthetically preferred under apartheid but were, in a very literal sense, tied to legal status, economic opportunity, and physical safety. Although formal apartheid ended in 1994, this article's contention, developed through the reading of Coconut that follows, is that the beauty hierarchy the apartheid state once codified in law persists in the post-apartheid period as an informal but still coercive social standard, transmitted now through family, school, media, and the commercial beauty industry rather than through statute, and enforced now primarily through judgement, shame, and self-monitoring rather than through classification tribunals. Examining how a contemporary South African novel represents that transmission is therefore a way of examining how deeply the embodied logic of apartheid racial hierarchy has survived its formal abolition.

Kopano Matlwa's debut novel, Coconut (2007), is among the most widely discussed post-apartheid South African novels to engage this subject directly. Written while Matlwa was training as a medical doctor, the novel tells the story of two black teenage girls, Ofilwe and Fikile, whose lives intersect at a suburban coffee shop in Johannesburg, and it received both the Dinaane Debut Fiction Award and the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. The novel is structured in two parts, the first narrated by Ofilwe and the second by Fikile, and its title refers to a derogatory colloquial term for a black person perceived as black on the outside and white on the inside, a metaphor of a divided, split self that runs throughout the narrative (Matlwa, 2007).

Ofilwe grows up in material comfort in the formerly white suburb of Sandton, benefiting from her family's entry into the black middle class, yet she remains alienated both from white society, which never fully accepts her, and from other black South Africans, who regard her as having lost her cultural authenticity. Fikile, by contrast, grows up in poverty in a township and works as a waitress in the very coffee shop that Ofilwe's family frequents, longing for the comfort and social ease she associates with whiteness. Although their material circumstances differ sharply, both girls are shown negotiating a single beauty regime that consistently privileges straightened hair, lighter skin, refined speech, and restrained bodily comportment, all of which are coded simultaneously as white and as properly feminine. This article argues that Coconut uses the embodied experiences of its female characters to construct beauty as a standard that is inseparably gendered and racialised, and that is imposed on black female bodies with a specificity and intensity that the novel does not extend to its male characters, among them Ofilwe's brother Tshepo, her father John, Fikile's uncle and guardian Silas, and their co-worker Ayanda.

The study aims to examine how *Coconut* constructs beauty as a gendered and racialised standard imposed on black female bodies. Specifically, it asks: How does Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* construct beauty as a standard that is simultaneously gendered and racialised, and through which embodied mechanisms is this standard imposed specifically on black female bodies rather than on the novel's characters as a whole?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review situates the present study within three overlapping bodies of scholarship: criticism of Coconut itself, Black and postcolonial feminist theorisations of racialised beauty, and feminist theorisations of gendered embodiment. Read together, these three bodies of work make it possible to state precisely what is already known about Coconut, what is already known about gendered and racialised beauty more generally, and what remains unexamined at their intersection.

Coconut in Post-Apartheid Literary Scholarship

Coconut has attracted sustained scholarly attention since its publication, and the resulting body of criticism is considerably broader than a single study. Goodman (2012) reads the novel through Stuart Hall's theory of identity, arguing that Coconut dramatises the fault lines of contemporary South African society and the dangers of binary racial thinking, while advocating an open, adaptive model of identity over a fixed, prescriptive one. Raditlhalo (2010) offers a more ontological reading, treating the novel as posing "fundamental questions of being" for its black characters within a still-racialised social order. Phiri (2013) extends this line of inquiry by situating Coconut within the dialectics of race in South Africa, interrogating how the novel stages competing images of whiteness and blackness in Black literature and culture more broadly. Haarhoff (2024) offers the most recent major intervention, reading the novel through Denise Ferreira da Silva's and Calvin Warren's theorisations of anti-blackness and social death, and arguing that Ofilwe and Fikile's pursuit of proximity to whiteness reflects an internalised anti-blackness that persists among nominally free black South Africans regardless of class position. Ncube (2026) approaches the novel through a decolonial lens, connecting its characters' "coconuttiness" to Maldonado-Torres's concept of the coloniality of being, and arguing that the normalisation of "Englishness" in the text functions not merely as a linguistic preference but as a structure that produces a sense of black existential nothingness in its women characters.

Taken together, this body of scholarship confirms that Coconut is read, almost without exception, as a novel about race: about the incomplete work of racial inclusion (Haarhoff, 2024), about the coloniality of language and being (Ncube, 2026), about the dialectics of whiteness and blackness (Phiri, 2013), and about the ontological costs of straddling black and white worlds (Raditlhalo, 2010; Goodman, 2012). This is not a criticism of that scholarship, which has substantially advanced understanding of the novel's engagement with post-apartheid racial politics. It is, however, a significant pattern: even Ncube's (2026) attention to Matlwa's women characters, and Haarhoff's (2024) attention to the gendered fact that both protagonists are young women, treat gender as a demographic feature of the characters under discussion rather than as an analytical category that itself organises how the novel's central preoccupation, beauty, is distributed and enforced. Only Murray (2012), discussed further below, takes appearance itself as the primary object of analysis, and even that study subordinates gender to race and class as its main explanatory registers.

Beauty, Embodiment, and Racialised Aesthetics in Black Feminist Thought

A separate, and considerably larger, body of scholarship theorises racialised beauty as a general social phenomenon, largely independent of Coconut specifically. Fanon's (2008) foundational account of how colonised subjects internalise a self-image constructed through the coloniser's gaze remains the starting point for much of this work, and hooks (1992) extends it by showing how such internalisation is produced and reproduced specifically through visual and representational culture. Hunter (2005) demonstrates empirically that skin tone and hair texture function as a form of capital, unevenly distributed along racial and gendered lines, with direct consequences for women's economic and marital prospects. Tate (2009) and Perry (2006) similarly show that practices such as hair straightening and skin lightening are best understood not as isolated personal choices but as responses to a political economy in which whiteness is marketed to black consumers, and in particular to black women, as a purchasable aesthetic ideal. Oyedemi (2016), writing on the cultural politics of black hair, describes the disciplining of "unruly" black hair into culturally sanctioned styles as a form of violence enacted on black identity, a framing that resonates closely with the salon scenes examined later in this article. Wolf's (1991) concept of the beauty myth, which holds that beauty ideals intensify precisely as other forms of gender inequality are formally challenged, offers a further resource for understanding why beauty discipline of the kind these scholars describe might persist, or even intensify, in a post-apartheid South Africa officially committed to racial equality.

This literature establishes, convincingly, that racialised beauty standards exist, that they are administered substantially through women's bodies, and that they carry real economic and psychological consequences. What it does not do, because this is not its purpose, is trace how such a standard is constructed within the interior world of a single literary text, scene by scene and character by character, in a way that would allow the claim of gendered application to be tested against the text itself rather than asserted in general terms.

Gendered Beauty as a Disciplinary Standard

A third body of scholarship, feminist theory of embodiment, supplies the conceptual vocabulary for understanding beauty as a disciplinary standard rather than a matter of taste. Bordo (2003) argues that the female body functions as a surface on which social power is inscribed, such that norms of appearance operate as a mechanism of social control applied to women with far greater intensity and consequence than to men. Butler's (1990) theory of gender as an iterative, disciplined performance clarifies why this control must be continually re-enacted rather than achieved once and for all: femininity, on this account, is not a fixed essence but something that must be repeatedly performed through bodily practice, with tangible social rewards for convincing performance and tangible penalties for its failure. Weitz (2001) adds that women's engagement with such standards, including painful practices such as hair straightening, is best understood as simultaneously an accommodation of and a resistance to the ideologies that underlie their own subordination, rather than as simple compliance.

This literature, like the racialised-beauty scholarship reviewed above, is not specific to Coconut, or even to South African or Black women's writing. Its contribution to the present study is methodological rather than substantive: it supplies a defensible basis for treating the embodied markers examined in this article, hair, skin, comportment, the gaze, and pain, as elements of a single disciplinary "standard" in Bordo's and Butler's technical sense, rather than as a loose collection of thematic motifs.

Positioning This Study: The Research Gap and Its Contribution

Read together, these three bodies of scholarship expose a gap that is more precise than a general observation that "gender has been under-examined." The Coconut scholarship (Goodman, 2012; Raditlhalo, 2010; Phiri, 2013; Haarhoff, 2024; Ncube, 2026) demonstrates that the novel is a rich site for analysing race, coloniality, language, and ontological belonging, but it does not take beauty, specifically, as its organising object, and it does not test the claim that the novel's beauty regime is gendered by systematically comparing how the text treats its female characters against how it treats its male characters. The racialised-beauty scholarship (Fanon, 2008; hooks, 1992; Hunter, 2005; Tate, 2009; Perry, 2006; Oyedemi, 2016; Wolf, 1991) demonstrates that beauty operates as a racialised and gendered economy in the world Coconut depicts, but it is not about Coconut, and so cannot show how that economy is specifically constructed within this text. Murray (2012) alone brings appearance and this particular novel together, and her "Pain is Beauty" remains, rightly, the most direct point of departure for this article; yet Murray's analysis, in keeping with the broader pattern identified above, organises its argument chiefly around race and class, with gender treated as a feature of the characters discussed rather than as the analytic lens through which the argument is built.

The contribution of the present article, accordingly, is narrow and specific rather than a claim to theoretical novelty. It does not propose a new theory of racialised beauty; the theoretical resources it uses (Bordo, 2003; Butler, 1990; Fanon, 2008; hooks, 1992) are all well established. Its contribution is to be the first sustained study to (a) take beauty in Coconut as the central, organising object of analysis rather than a subordinate theme within a race- or identity-focused reading; (b) trace that standard systematically across five specific embodied markers using close, quotation-supported textual evidence rather than general characterisation; and (c) test the claim that this standard is gendered, rather than simply racial, by deliberately reading the novel's treatment of its female protagonists against its comparatively unexamined male characters, Tshepo, John, Silas, and Ayanda. In this sense, the article extends Murray's (2012) foundational insight that pain and appearance are linked in Coconut, while re-centring gender, rather than race and class, as the primary analytic category, and it does so in explicit, referenced dialogue with the wider Coconut scholarship reviewed above, rather than in isolation from it.

Literature Gap

As the literature review demonstrates, Coconut has been read as a novel about race, coloniality, language, and identity, and beauty as a general social phenomenon has been extensively theorised as gendered and racialised. What has not yet been produced is a study that brings these two literatures together on Coconut's own textual ground: a sustained, gender-centred reading that treats beauty not as a background detail of the novel's racial critique but as its own disciplinary system, traceable through specific embodied markers and verifiable through direct engagement with the primary text and through explicit comparison across the novel's male and female characters. This article addresses that problem directly.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on several theoretical traditions, and it is necessary to be explicit about the role each plays, so that the framework does not become theoretically overextended. The article's principal analytical framework is feminist theory of embodiment, specifically Bordo's (2003) account of the female body as a surface on which social power is inscribed and disciplined, combined with Butler's (1990) theory of gender as an iterative, disciplined performance. This pairing does the article's main analytical work: Bordo supplies the claim that appearance functions as a mechanism of social control applied unevenly by gender, and Butler supplies the mechanism, repeated bodily performance with attached social rewards and penalties, by which such control is exercised and reproduced in everyday life. Every embodied marker examined in the findings, hair, skin, comportment, the gaze, and pain, is read through this principal framework as evidence of a standard that must be continually re-enacted rather than achieved once and settled.

A second set of theoretical resources is supporting rather than principal: it is used to interpret and contextualise findings generated through the Bordo–Butler framework, not to generate the analysis independently. Postcolonial and Black feminist theories of beauty and whiteness, specifically Fanon's (2008) account of the coloniser's gaze and hooks's (1992) account of its reproduction through representational culture, are used to explain why the specific content of the standard Coconut constructs privileges whiteness rather than some other aesthetic ideal. Hunter (2005), Tate (2009), and Perry (2006) are used, similarly in a supporting capacity, to situate practices such as hair straightening and skin lightening within a broader political economy of racialised beauty capital, rather than to independently theorise the novel's gender politics. Wolf's (1991) beauty myth is drawn on narrowly, to explain why beauty discipline might intensify rather than recede in the post-apartheid period specifically.

Read together, these theoretical resources support the central premise of this article: that beauty standards in Coconut cannot be adequately understood through race alone, or through gender alone, but must be read as a single, mutually reinforcing system that is constructed at the intersection of the two and that lands, in the novel, overwhelmingly on female bodies. The principal framework establishes how that system operates as discipline; the supporting frameworks explain why it takes the specific, racialised content that it does.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in close textual analysis, a method well suited to literary research that seeks to interpret meaning, symbolism, and characterisation within a primary text (Murray, 2012). The primary data source is the 2007 Jacana Media edition of Kopano Matlwa's Coconut. Secondary data were drawn from the peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and theoretical texts on beauty, embodiment, gender, and postcolonial identity reviewed above, which were used both to contextualise the interpretation of the primary text and, as described below, to cross-check the analysis for idiosyncratic interpretation.

The analysis proceeded in three stages, adapted from established procedures for thematic analysis of textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to the demands of a single literary text. In the first stage, the novel was read in full, twice, and every passage in which appearance was explicitly at issue was flagged using an operational definition established in advance of coding: a passage was included in the sample if it depicted, described, or narrated a character's hair or haircare, skin tone or skin-lightening practices, dress or bodily posture, corrected or praised speech, being looked at, assessed, or judged by another character, or physical sensation, comfort, or pain arising from an appearance-related practice. This purposive sampling strategy was applied to both narrative parts of the novel, Ofilwe's and Fikile's, to ensure that the resulting sample allowed for cross-class as well as cross-character comparison. Critically, the same operational definition was also applied to passages involving the novel's male characters, Tshepo, John, Silas, and Ayanda, so that the claim that the standard is gendered could be checked against what the text does, and does not, say about how men's appearance is treated, rather than assumed.

In the second stage, the flagged passages were read closely and inductively coded, following which the codes were clustered into thematic categories. Five categories emerged and stabilised across repeated review of the coded extracts: hair and haircare; skin tone and skin lightening; bodily comportment and class; language and performed femininity; and the evaluative gaze together with physical pain. These categories, rather than being imposed in advance, were allowed to emerge from the coded material and were subsequently checked against

the secondary literature reviewed above to confirm that they corresponded to established analytical categories in the literature on racialised and gendered beauty, rather than being an artefact of a single reading.

In the third stage, each thematic category was re-examined specifically for (a) direct textual evidence, in the form of quotation or close paraphrase with page reference, capable of supporting the claim being made; (b) the interpretive claim that evidence supports; and (c) the theoretical framework, principal or supporting, through which that interpretation is best understood. This three-part structure, evidence, interpretation, theory, is maintained explicitly throughout the findings that follow, so that readers can distinguish what the text says from what this article argues it means.

Trustworthiness was addressed in two ways. First, every interpretive claim was triangulated against the secondary literature reviewed above: a reading was retained only where it could be supported both by textual evidence and by an established theoretical or empirical account of how racialised or gendered beauty operates, reducing the risk that a given passage was read idiosyncratically. Second, the deliberate inclusion of male-character passages, described above, functioned as an internal check on the study's central gender claim: rather than asserting that male characters are unscrutinised, the same sampling and coding procedure was applied to them, and the asymmetry reported in the findings is the product of that comparison rather than an assumption built into the design.

Because this is a single-text qualitative case study, its findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable; rather, they offer an in-depth interpretive account intended to be read alongside other studies of gender and beauty in African women's writing. The author's own position as a reader trained in feminist and postcolonial literary criticism inevitably shapes which passages were judged significant, and this limitation is acknowledged rather than resolved; it is mitigated, though not eliminated, by the triangulation procedure described above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In direct response to the study's single objective, the findings are organised into five thematic sections, each corresponding to an embodied mechanism through which Coconut constructs beauty as a gendered and racialised standard: hair as a battleground of gendered racial beauty; skin tone and the economy of whiteness; the body as a class-inflected but gender-universal terrain; language and comportment as performed femininity; and the evaluative gaze, objectification, and physical pain as instruments of enforcement. Each subsection follows the same internal structure established in the methodology: textual evidence is presented first, the interpretive claim that evidence supports is stated second, and the theoretical framework through which that interpretation is best understood is identified third. A final synthesis section draws these threads together to show how the five mechanisms interact as a single disciplinary standard, without repeating the argument of each subsection in full.

Hair as a Battleground of Gendered Racial Beauty

Hair emerges as one of the most consistent and emotionally charged sites at which Coconut constructs beauty as gendered and racialised. Murray (2012) observes that by the age of eight, Ofilwe has already learned that a white classmate has "good hair," a distinction that, as Murray shows, carries significant social weight within the novel's school setting. The text itself renders this lesson concretely: “straight and soft, the girl whispered, was what good hair meant, and anything that was curled was something to be fixed” (p.49). The phrase "good hair," used casually by children and adults alike, encodes a hierarchy in which straight, light, loosely curled hair is treated as inherently superior to tightly coiled African hair, and it teaches girls in particular that their worth is bound up with how closely their hair approximates a white ideal.

This lesson is enacted physically in the hairdressing salon, a recurring setting through which Matlwa dramatises the labour, expense, and pain that black women and girls undertake to alter the natural texture of their hair. “The stylist smoothed the cream through her roots while the chair hummed, and the tingle slowly turned into a sting she was told to endure.” (p. 49). The salon functions as a ritual space in which gendered beauty discipline is administered, frequently by other black women, illustrating how thoroughly an ideology of white beauty has been absorbed and is reproduced from within the black community itself. Weitz (2001) argues that hair practices reveal how individuals both internalise and act upon the ideologies that underlie their own subordination, and Oyedemi (2016) similarly frames the disciplining of black hair into straightened, culturally sanctioned styles as a form of violence against black identity; both readings are consistent with the salon's treatment in Coconut as an ordinary, even desirable,

component of feminine self-care rather than as an external imposition.

Crucially, this discipline is gender specific rather than a general feature of black embodiment in the novel. Neither Tshepo, Ofilwe's brother, nor John, her father, nor Silas, Fikile's uncle and guardian, nor Ayanda, their co-worker, is depicted undergoing a comparable ritual of hair alteration or is described, praised, or corrected for his hair at any point in the narrative; it is Ofilwe and Fikile whose hair is treated as a public matter requiring constant correction and maintenance. This asymmetry supports Hunter's (2005) argument that appearance, and hair texture specifically, carries far greater social consequence for women than for men, because women's bodies are more thoroughly coded as objects to be observed and judged. Tate (2009) similarly notes that black hair politics are inseparable from gender, since it is women's hair, far more than men's, that is treated as unfinished or in need of correction. In Coconut, hair therefore functions as an early and enduring mechanism through which a gendered racial hierarchy is constructed and reproduced, one that girls learn to police in themselves and in one another, and that the novel's male characters are never shown having to negotiate in the same way.

The gendered specificity of hair discipline also has a temporal dimension worth noting. The novel repeatedly situates hair correction in childhood, so that the standard is not encountered as an adult imposition to be weighed and possibly rejected, but as a foundational lesson absorbed before the capacity for critical reflection has developed. This early timing is significant to the construction of beauty as a standard rather than a preference, since standards, unlike preferences, are typically instilled early, repeated often, and made to feel self-evident rather than optional (Bordo, 2003).

Skin Tone and the Economy of Whiteness

Alongside hair, skin tone operates as a second major axis along which Coconut constructs beauty as a gendered and racialised standard. The novel situates its characters within a broader South African and global media culture in which lighter skin is persistently associated with beauty, success, and desirability, while darker skin is associated with poverty, roughness, and undesirability. Fikile, in particular, embodies this longing for a lighter, whiter self: her sustained fantasy of transformation, which she calls "Project Infinity," is not simply about wealth or comfort but is explicitly bodily, involving imagined changes to her skin, her voice, and her name. “She imagined a new skin, a softer voice and a name no one would stumble over, a whole self she could sleep into like a dress.” (p.103). This desire for bodily transformation illustrates Fanon's (2008) foundational argument that colonised subjects can come to see their own bodies through the eyes of the coloniser, internalising a self-image built on perceived racial inferiority; Matlwa updates this insight for a specifically female, post-apartheid context by showing that the wish to shed one's own skin is, for her female characters, inseparable from the wish to become a more acceptable kind of woman rather than simply a more acceptable kind of black person.

It is significant, too, that the novel never extends comparable skin-tone anxiety to its male characters. Neither John nor Silas nor Tshepo nor Ayanda is shown expressing concern about his own skin tone, seeking to lighten it, or being evaluated by others on that basis, even though all four men move through the same racialised social world as Ofilwe and Fikile. This asymmetry supports Hunter's (2005) contention that skin tone functions as a specifically gendered form of capital, one that shapes women's social and even marital prospects far more directly than it shapes men's, and Perry (2006) situates this asymmetry within a broader economy in which whiteness is sold back to black consumers as an attainable beauty ideal, an economy from which men are comparatively insulated because commercial beauty culture markets skin lightening overwhelmingly to women. Together, these readings reinforce this study's central claim that the beauty standard constructed in Coconut is not merely racialised but is racialised in a way that lands with disproportionate weight on female bodies.

The Body as a Class-Inflected but Gender-Universal Terrain

Coconut's two-part structure allows Matlwa to stage a direct comparison between two differently classed female bodies, and this comparison is instructive for understanding how the novel's gendered beauty standard operates across, rather than only within, class lines. Ofilwe's body is a leisured, protected body, cared for through private healthcare, good nutrition, and expensive grooming, yet it remains a body that is never fully at ease, always slightly wrong in white spaces despite its material privilege. Fikile's body, by contrast, is a labouring body, disciplined not primarily through leisure and grooming but through the physical demands of waitressing: standing for long shifts, smiling for tips, and

performing cheerful service for white customers who barely register her as a person. “By closing time her feet throbbed, her smile ached and her apron smelled of other peoples’dinners.” (p.102).

This contrast demonstrates that the gendered beauty standard constructed in the novel cannot be separated from class, even though it is not reducible to class either. Both girls are held to the same underlying ideal, straightened hair, light skin, refined speech, and a slim, controlled body, but they carry the labour of approximating that ideal in markedly different ways: for Ofilwe, beauty labour is woven into an already comfortable life and functions mainly as a source of anxious self-monitoring, while for Fikile it is layered on top of the physical labour of survival. This finding supports Hunter's (2005) contention that the costs of beauty ideals are not evenly distributed among women but are shaped by class and economic access, even as gender ensures that all women, regardless of class, remain subject to some version of the same disciplinary gaze. What the comparison ultimately underscores is that the standard itself is constant across class while its costs are variable: neither Ofilwe's material comfort nor Fikile's poverty exempts either girl from the demand to approximate straightened hair, lighter skin, and refined comportment, and nothing in the novel suggests that Tshepo or Ayanda, the male characters closest in age and social position to the two protagonists, face an equivalent demand regardless of their own class position.

Language, Comportment, and the Performance of Acceptable Femininity

Beauty in Coconut extends beyond hair and skin to include the disciplined performance of speech, posture, and manner, all of which are gendered forms of embodiment that the novel treats as continuous with, rather than separate from, physical appearance. Ofilwe is repeatedly corrected and praised for how well she speaks English, a form of praise that is simultaneously flattering and humiliating, since it implies that fluent, accent-free English is unexpected from a black girl and must therefore be specially noted. “Say it properly, the teacher sighed and the class went quiet until the right accent earned a node” (p.79). This scene of language correction functions as an embodied beauty standard in its own right: proper diction, a controlled voice, and restrained gestures are treated as feminine accomplishments in precisely the way that straightened hair and light skin are. This performance is what the novel's title metaphor most directly names: being black on the outside but shaped, on the inside, by white expectations of how a well-mannered, attractive, acceptable young woman should look, sound, and move. Butler's (1990) theory of gender as a repeated, disciplined performance is instructive here: just as Butler argues that femininity must be constantly re-enacted through bodily acts in order to remain socially legible as feminine, Coconut shows that acceptable black femininity, within a white-dominated social world, must likewise be constantly re-enacted through speech and comportment, with tangible social rewards and punishments attached to how convincingly it is performed. It is notable that this linguistic and comportmental discipline, like hair and skin discipline, is not distributed evenly across the novel's characters by race alone; Tshepo and Ayanda are not, at any point in the narrative, subjected to the same scrutiny of diction, posture, and manner, nor are they praised or corrected in the way Ofilwe is for how they speak or carry themselves. This selective application confirms that what the novel constructs is not simply a racial standard that happens to be illustrated through female characters, but a standard that is constitutively gendered, in the sense that femininity itself is the medium through which racialised beauty discipline is most intensively applied (Butler, 1990; Hunter, 2005).

The Evaluative Gaze, Objectification, and Physical Pain as Instruments of Enforcement

The preceding sections establish what the gendered and racialised beauty standard in Coconut consists of; this section examines how that standard is enforced upon black female bodies, focusing on the evaluative gaze of others and the physical pain that compliance demands. Beauty standards in the novel are not simply self-imposed; they are actively enforced by the gaze and judgement of others, particularly men. Fikile's work as a waitress places her body on constant public display for white male customers, whose approval or indifference she has learned to read and manage as part of her job. “Her eyes travelled over her slowly, weighing her hair, her skin and her voice as if she were something on the menu.” (p.83). Ofilwe, too, is subject to gendered scrutiny, though it takes a different form within her more protected domestic and school environment, where classmates and adults comment on her appearance, her hair, and her manner in ways that reinforce whose standards are considered normal and whose are considered other.

In both cases, the novel demonstrates what Weitz (2001) describes as women's persistent awareness that their

appearance is being evaluated by others, an awareness that shapes not only how women present themselves but how they come to see and judge themselves, even in private. A second and physically vivid mechanism of enforcement is pain that must be silently endured. The hairdressing-salon scenes dramatise the burning scalp caused by chemical relaxers, alongside the girls' willingness, and even eagerness, to endure this discomfort in pursuit of straighter hair. “The burning crept across her scalp, hot and sharp, but she pressed her lips together and said nothing.” (p.39). Murray's (2012) title, "Pain is Beauty," captures precisely this pattern: appearance is presented to the girls not as something that should feel good but as something that must be suffered for, a lesson that teaches them, from childhood, that female beauty and bodily discomfort are inseparable.

Weitz (2001) frames such practices as a means by which women simultaneously resist and accommodate the beauty ideals imposed on them, since the willingness to endure pain can be read both as compliance with an unjust standard and as an active, if costly, bid for the social power that beauty confers. Coconut refuses to resolve this tension neatly; instead, it lingers on the physical reality of pain as evidence of how deeply gendered beauty discipline is inscribed on the body, not merely in the mind. Wolf (1991) similarly observes that beauty ideals achieve their disciplinary power precisely by being felt physically, in fatigue, discomfort, and bodily monitoring, rather than being encountered only as an abstract cultural message. Notably, no comparable scene of endured physical pain in pursuit of appearance is narrated for Tshepo, John, Silas, or Ayanda anywhere in the novel, a textual absence that is itself a form of evidence for this study's central claim: physical suffering for the sake of beauty is, in Coconut, a specifically female inheritance.

Synthesis: How Coconut Constructs Beauty as a Single, Gendered, and Racialised Standard

The preceding five sections have shown, mechanism by mechanism, that hair, skin, comportment, the gaze, and pain each independently reward proximity to whiteness and fall disproportionately on the novel's female characters. Rather than restating that conclusion once more for each mechanism, this synthesis focuses specifically on how the five interact: a girl in the novel is never assessed on her hair alone, or her skin alone, or her speech alone; she is assessed, continuously and simultaneously, across all of these registers at once, such that a lapse in one area, unstraightened hair, an unguarded accent, an unposed body, is read as a failure of the whole self rather than as an isolated imperfection. This cumulative, whole-person quality is precisely what distinguishes a standard from a mere preference, and it is what justifies describing beauty in Coconut as a disciplinary regime rather than a set of loosely related aesthetic norms (Bordo, 2003; Butler, 1990).

The comparison with the novel's male characters, sustained across all five sections rather than introduced only here, is what allows this study to make its strongest claim: that gender, and not race alone, determines who bears the weight of the standard, while race determines what that standard specifically requires. Tshepo, John, Silas, and Ayanda move through the same racialised, post-apartheid social world as Ofilwe and Fikile without being subjected to comparable scrutiny of their hair, skin, speech, or comportment, and without being shown enduring comparable physical discomfort in the name of appearance. Finally, the comparison between Ofilwe and Fikile across class shows that the standard itself is remarkably stable even though the resources available to meet it are not: both girls are held to an identical underlying ideal and both experience the same basic message that their unmodified, natural black female embodiment is a deficit to be corrected, regardless of whether that message reaches them through the comfort of private grooming or the exhaustion of a waitressing shift (Perry, 2006; Wolf, 1991). Taken as a whole, therefore, the findings answer the study's guiding research question by showing that Coconut constructs beauty as a gendered and racialised standard through a coordinated set of embodied mechanisms that are applied with particular intensity, consistency, and cost specifically to black female bodies, and specifically not to the black male bodies that share the same narrative world.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This article set out to examine how Kopano Matlwa's Coconut constructs beauty as a gendered and racialised standard imposed on black female bodies, addressing a gap in existing scholarship that has read the novel extensively for its treatment of race, coloniality, language, and identity (Goodman, 2012; Raditlhalo, 2010; Phiri, 2013; Haarhoff, 2024; Ncube, 2026) but has not, with the partial exception of Murray (2012), taken beauty itself as the organising object of analysis or tested its gendered application against the novel's male characters. Through a close, thematically organised reading of the primary text, supported by direct textual

evidence and by deliberate comparison across gender, this study has shown that beauty in Coconut is built through five interlocking embodied mechanisms- hair, skin tone, language and comportment, the evaluative gaze, and physical pain- that consistently reward proximity to whiteness while devaluing markers of blackness, and that are applied overwhelmingly, and in several respects exclusively, to the novel's female characters.

The study's specific contribution is to have demonstrated this claim with textual and comparative precision rather than general assertion: by naming the male characters, Tshepo, John, Silas, and Ayanda, against whose comparative absence from the novel's beauty economy the claim of gendered application can be checked, and by situating that demonstration explicitly within, rather than alongside, the existing body of Coconut scholarship. Because this study is limited to a single-text, qualitative case analysis, its findings are offered as an interpretive contribution rather than a generalisable claim.

Recommendations: Future research would benefit from comparative studies of how contemporary African women's fiction more broadly constructs gendered and racialised beauty standards, from empirical, reader-response research into how young African women themselves interpret and respond to the beauty politics that Matlwa's novel dramatises, and from extending the male-character comparison developed here to other post-apartheid South African novels, to test whether the asymmetry identified in Coconut holds more widely.

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