

Black Youths' Challenges in the "New" South Africa: Education, Language and Identity in Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007)

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Abstract

Those who were born after the demise of apartheid in South Africa are generally referred to as the "born frees" because 1994 is regarded as a nodal point in the emancipation of the oppressed, especially black people. South Africa was finally a unitary state that observed fundamental human rights such as the right to basic education. Interestingly, when *Coconut* was published in 2007, the "born-frees" would have been thirteen years old and a lucky few black youths would have been in grade seven at the so-called "former white schools"¹. The lucky ones would have been ready to embark on their high school journeys which would determine a life trajectory to the promised land, while the majority black youths' dreams would have been deferred or even destroyed. It is important to note that, as it was the case with the likes of Bloke Modisane, Peter Abrahams and Can Themba in apartheid South Africa, "whiteness" still plays a critical role in black youth's aspirations and identity formation. For the lucky few, "whiteness" is still a tool to access white privilege, while for the less fortunate it is seen as a means to escape grinding poverty. However, as demonstrated in this paper, the black youths' attempt to pass as white only succeeds in undermining and in some instances destroying their languages and identities. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the root causes of the failure of social cohesion. In this regard the paper encourages honest dialogue around sensitive issues such as racism and discrimination in schools. This paper focuses on how institutionalised racism and discrimination affect black youth in the current dispensation. In this regard, the paper will analyse the experiences of the main characters, Ofilwe, Tshepo, Fikile and Silas Nyoni. Following Derrick Bell's critical race theory,

¹"White schools" refer to schools which were exclusively for white pupils before independence in 1994. Post 1994, these schools were opened up for all races but some believe the fees are still too steep and exclude a majority of black pupils. See Nazir, C. Anti-racism and the "New" South Africa Educational Order. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 28, 301-320.

the paper interrogates the entrenched institutional racism and discrimination and the impact they have on the black youths' internal constitution, identity and social inclusivity. Finally, it discusses the black youth's rejection from the white world and their equal alienation from the black world. Clearly, while access to better education extended to all post 1994, the unintended consequences to black youth a far-reaching and devastating.

Keywords

Blackness, Whiteness, Black Youth, Institutional Racism

1. Introduction

The refrain “get on with it” is often used to avoid discussions around race issues in South Africa even though racism is still the cause of inequality and discrimination. Race aversion is central to the failure of honest and open discussion on racism in the country. Writing about the American experience regarding race aversion, DiAngelo notes that white people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even the minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions, silence, and leaving the stress-induced situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium [1].

In South Africa, the proponents of this race aversion want everybody to believe that apartheid is dead and buried and we should move on, while black youth still experience the full impact of racism in schools. To the latter, racial discrimination and inequality are real and the effects thereof are a daily occurrence. Bucholtz's views on race issues in America are equally appropriate in this regard when she remarks that race is simply a dimension of social classification but more importantly an ideological and institutional system for legitimating social inequality [2]. In the context of South Africa, inequality reflects the repercussions of apartheid which manifested in a nation that is impoverished economically, educationally, spiritually and psychologically [3]. As reports suggest, South Africa is the most unequal country in the world—with white people dominating in all spheres. This is the basis for our understanding of black youth's aspirations for whiteness because, as Frankenberg avers, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “Whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed [4]. In a word, “Whiteness” is synonymous with progress, opportunities and privilege. Phiri makes a similar point when he argues that while the

post-apartheid era removed the systematic official privileging of white people through government policy, white people not only continue to benefit as a result of past privileges, but also continue to benefit as a result of the persistent, but subtle kinds of white privilege [5]. There is, perhaps, nowhere that white privilege is most devastating than it is in schools which were supposedly meant to bridge the gap between blacks and whites in the post-independence dispensation.

1.1. *Coconut*—The Soft under Belly of the Nation

Published in 1997, *Coconut* dissects the intricacies of life in the “new” South Africa by focusing on two major characters, Ofilwe and Fikile. Ofilwe and Fikile live a totally different life; the former a privileged life while the latter is mired in poverty. Their stories challenge the myth of “born-frees” in South Africa because of they still feel the effects of discrimination and racism. Ofilwe’s privileged life in the suburb turns to a nightmare when she realises that her blackness is a stumbling block to her fitting in the white world. Fikile on the other hand hates being black because she associates it with poverty; and strives to pass as white. She too discovers that, despite her concerted efforts to be white, she is rejected by the white world. So the novel deals with the fault-lines in the rainbow nation which leave psychological scars on the black youth. Through the lives of the two main characters, *Coconut* exposes the social and political realities of the “new” South Africa.

1.2. The Dilemma of Equal Education in the “New” South Africa

The equality of education as enshrined in the constitution envisaged both equal access to and quality of education throughout the country. However, the status quo of inequality and discrimination persist in the schooling system, with “white schools” still enclaves of excellence while schools in locations and rural areas wallow in the doldrums of inferior education. In short, the experience of being “white” is still largely that of privilege. Black youths are caught between the two disparate worlds of affluence and poverty. Ironically, in both spaces black youth are subjected to untold stress because a majority of them are predominantly recipients of inferior education, while a handful who attend the “white schools” have to contend with entrenched institutional racism. In fact, the criteria used to allow black students into “white schools” are discordant with the ideals of multiculturalism envisaged by the 1996 Constitution because the criteria ... included parents’ ability to pay the school fees and whether students lived in areas close to the school. The ... criteria ... had the effect of keeping “black” entrants to a minimum, since they favoured middle class black parents who could pay the fees ... and, given residential segregation in “group areas” it was unlikely that there would be many “black” people living in or close to the areas within which “white” schools ... were located.

Owing to this disjuncture Nazir alludes to, black youth’s aspirations for “whiteness” are frustrated either way, as is the case with the main protagonists, Ofilwe,

who is born with a silver spoon in her mouth and Fikile who is a school dropout in *Coconut*. Both, although in different ways, cannot enjoy the benefits of whiteness. Harris correctly views whiteness as property because whiteness is synonymous with excellence and privileges [6]. Bell adds that there is ... a depressingly strong and invariant correlation between resources and race and ... resources and success [7]. Being white in South Africa offers a ticket to better education, economic freedom and other privileges; hence some black youths go as far as lightening their skins and straightening their hair to pass as whites; as is the case with Fikile who dreams of being white, rich and happy as opposed to being black, dirty and poor [8]. Just like many other black youth, she knows that “the experience of being ‘white’ is still largely that of privilege”. Arguing the same point Bell points that the persistence of passing is related to the historical and continuing pattern of white racial domination and economic exploitation that has given passing a certain economic logic... becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic needs and therefore, survival. Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one’s life rather than being the object of others’ domination [9].

“White schools” then have become the only viable vehicle that would ensure access to white privilege in the eyes of black youth. In South Africa “better education” connotes “white education”—an education into which only a middle class black youth are accommodated because these types of schools are largely unaffordable for most black South Africans and also many whites in South Africa would like to keep the old divisions. Put differently, “better education” means exclusion and if that fails then assimilation. Once assimilated, identifying with other black people becomes almost impossible. As pointed out earlier, whiteness is interchangeable with privilege, as such, one of the drivers of the movement from public to “white schools” is the hope of social upward movement. In this respect, Phiri warns that there is a danger that whiteness be socially acceptable if those who are perceived to have moved up the racial ladder are perceived to have achieved solely due to white education. In *Coconut*, this is attested in the manner in which ordinary village people worship Ofilwe. She is barred from touching the dishes, instead her cousins are instructed to serve her because she speaks better English. In turn, she is amused by her cousins who think a brick is a toy. In her mind she envisions her expensive toys and compares them to the rudimentary toys her cousins play with and her sense of superiority is affirmed. What she is not cognisant of is that the white world simply sees her for who she is, black. On more than one occasion she is reminded of this skewed self-understanding. To appropriate Phiri’s words, she does not have the appreciation of the angry and negrophobic white South Africans who have lost their former comfort zones—an anger at the status quo clearly evident in *Coconut*, specifically with regard to the exclusive and predominantly white schools where minority black students are treated as aliens.

Inevitably, the black youth who cross the colour line are shocked when the

white world rejects them. In *Coconut*, for instance, after realizing that she has been living a lie, Ofilwe becomes suicidal while Fikile is so devastated that she sheepishly returns to the location where she belongs. She has no alternative but to go back to the location she despised and the black people she hated and mistrusted. Their rude awakening though seems to be too late to revert to their true blackness. For instance, when Ofilwe's friends pride themselves in knowing their clan names, she is so embarrassed that she tries to hide behind her brother who is annoyed by her antics. Hence her only way out of her dilemma is to consider suicide; an infinite invisibility. In her confusion as to who she has become she laments, "I do not know how to fix you, little black girl, so I will shut my eyes as tight as I can". She feels betrayed by those who reassured her when she discarded her blackness for whiteness. She, like many similar to her, does not appreciate that her economic status does not endear or alter her black skin. She is oblivious that race is not imposed by some invisible power but rather is built moment by moment through social—and particularly linguistic—interaction. Face-to-face social interaction is the most immediate site for the construction of social identities of all kinds, for it is there that identity projects are assembled and launched, often through explicit talk about social categories and their associated practices, meanings, and perceived social value. It is clear from the discussion above that despite the injunctions of the constitution; discrimination is still prevalent in "white schools" because of entrenched racism.

1.3. Institutional Racism—A Stubborn Remnant of the Past

Both in *Coconut* and in real life institutional racism manifests itself in different forms but with similar devastating results. While overt racism is often condemned in schools, for instance, subtle racism continues unabated and is sometimes intentionally overlooked by those who benefit from it. Sometimes, glaringly racist incidents are glibly explained as school policy or just an initiation ritual but in many instances the intentions of the perpetrators are well planned, orchestrated and executed. For instance, Pather reports that girls at Pretoria Girls High School were forced to straighten their hair. One student, informing the MEC for education in Gauteng, relates what her teacher said thus: She instructed me to fix myself as if I was broken... My hair is natural and connected to my roots [10]. The politics of hair has been a bone of contention for some time in the country where black girls in particular are asked to "flatten" their Afros or just straighten it. Yet in another case at Northern Cape Agricultural School, a coloured boy was raped with a broom by students he considered his friends [11]. The incident was explained as initiation, and as such the perpetrators couldn't be sanctioned. The normalisation of such incidents only succeeds in entrenching and perpetuating racism in these institutions. These incidents strip black youth of their pride and dignity because the social structure that obtains in these institutions is such that it makes them feel inferior and unwelcome. The call for non-racialism, which is the bedrock of the country's constitu-

tion, only succeeds in papering over the cracks since realities occasioned by race cannot be downplayed. Race still plays a central role in the entrenchment of discrimination and the alienation of the black youth in schools and elsewhere. While racism can correctly be attributed to individual actions, the net should be cast a little wider in order to understand its genesis. As is the case in *Coconut*, it is easy to lay blame on individual for behaviours that discriminate along racial lines, but it is important to appreciate that they do so in institutionalized spaces such as the schools. By individualising racism, we run the risk of overlooking the central cog of institutional racism. It is within this understanding that Ofilwe's frustration in the hands of her peers should be looked into. Two incidents demonstrate what Bucholtz refers to as race aversion, where those who perpetrate acts of racism deliberately avoid the role of race in multicultural interactions.

The first incident takes place after school as Ofilwe tries, just like any teenager, to show-off her father's new acquisition, a Mercedes Benz. She is proud that she is at the same economic level with her school peers but her elation is cut short. A wealthy white boy, Stuart Simons, condescendingly suggests that her father must have hijacked the car. On the one hand, the undertones of such utterances are that in his mind no black man should or can possess such an expensive car except through unscrupulous means or even violence. In simpler terms, any and every black success is suspect that must be condemned, undermined and questioned. On the other, such narratives feed into the entrenched white fear which was instilled by the apartheid regime—*die swart gevaar* (black fear). While Stuart Simons may not have appreciated the devastation of his utterances, they, nonetheless, feed into and are anchored in the racial ideology of whites (assumed) vulnerability to black violence [12]. The idea behind this ideology though is not only to present blacks in a bad light, but to also establish a white bulwark against black takeover, thus furthering discrimination. Such machinations result in blacks' inferior complex, hence Ofilwe's dented pride causes her to blame her father for the humiliation, instead of confronting Stuart Simons.

The second incident is perpetrated by her white friend, Belinda, who assumes what DiAngelo refers to as an internalized dominance over Ofilwe. This is in spite of the fact that Belinda comes from a background with what Angelo calls reduced circumstances [13]. When Belinda "teaches" her how to properly pronounce English words, it does not escape Ofilwe that the main message is that, irrespective of their economic standing, just by virtue of being white she is linguistically superior. Although Ofilwe is hurt, she suppresses her hate for Belinda and allows it to devour her from the inside. She is aware of the discrimination she is subjected to because she knows she doesn't lack any capacity that Belinda has. Bell concurs with this when he says that black people's "inferior" status is the result of discrimination rather than the old racial rationales of inferior skills, lack of drive, or the unwillingness to compete [14].

In this regard, Bell's critical race theory is a useful tool to critique questions of racism, subordination, assimilation and discrimination. In the context of South

Africa, critical race theory can be regarded as a social construct that is concerned with forging racial equality by challenging and dismantling racism, discrimination and white privilege. One of its important tenets is the promotion of racial equality especially in institutions such as the schools. The unequal quality of education still offered to black people and white people in the country's public and private schools perpetuates the intentional discrimination of the apartheid years and demonstrates that racism is still pervasive in South African schools. Put differently, while the system of apartheid was officially declared illegal and has been outlawed in the country, its stubborn stains are still intact in spheres such as education. Even then, a growing number of parents still prefer sending their children to "white schools" which are better equipped and as such offer better education, irrespective of the unintended consequences.

1.4. The Curse of Blackness in the "New" South Africa

Twenty-five years into democracy, blackness is still associated with backwardness and everything negative, as such, it is undesirable and a shame. So black youth should shun it at all costs, often leading to identity crisis, self-denial and hopelessness. The saving grace is assimilation which is equally dangerous because it leads to invisibility. By "invisibility" here I refer to the state where the assimilated black youth find themselves in no-man's-land—where they disappear in the dark schism between blackness and whiteness. For instance, Ofilwe is made "invisible" by the behaviour and the attitude of her white friends who subtly nudge her to the periphery of whiteness. When she realises that she is not one of them her life crumbles around her to the extent that she is afraid to venture outside doors. Fikile, on the other hand, is active in her own invisibility through wearing green contact lenses, soft-blow-in-the-wind, caramel-blond hair, and using Lemon Light Skin Lightener cream to rid herself of melanin. To borrow from Bell, she made herself invisible ... for a price too inconsequential to do more than barely sustain [herself] and at a cost too precious to conceive. Unbeknown to her, her self-annihilation and self-denial in her quest for whiteness are complicit to her own discrimination because she is rendered permanently invisible in both worlds. Passing for white undermines black pride. Before the black youths' dreams, hopes and aspirations are realized, the very institutions they utilize to access white privilege often unceremoniously reject them. This impacts their self-love and pride. Pyke refers to this situation when she points out that internalized racism and internalized oppression lead black youths to believe that they are inferior to whites [15]. This is clearly demonstrated in *Coconut* where the two main characters, Ofilwe and Fikile, get a rude awakening for passing as white.

In Part One of the novel, Ofilwe, is raised in an affluent estate and attends a white school with white children and cannot relate to black life mainly due to her proximity with white life. From a young age she has been conditioned to believe that she is different from other black children because she speaks perfect

English and has white friends. Even when she visits her rural home in Mabopane, everyone treats her with exaggerated respect because of her assumed “whiteness”. On her part, she secretly believes she is the “messiah” to her cousins and would come back one day and rescue them from poverty and want in rural home. Most critically and disheartening though, she believes that knowing her Sepedi language would hinder her upward mobility because, she argues, Sepedi would not take me too far. She completes her false sense of self by adorning her room walls with photos of white people; to her brother’s, Tshepo, chagrin, who angrily says to her: You will find, Ofilwe, that the people you strive so hard to be like will one-day reject you because as much as you may pretend, you are not one of their own. But, she ignores his warning against assimilating into the white world at the expense of her blackness. She seems oblivious to her blackness and her Sepedi roots. She feels so comfortable in the company of whites to the extent that she even avoids bringing her mother to parents’ evenings because, she argues: “Mama would not understand any of that English. I care about her, that is why I didn’t want to put her through all of that. Besides, Mama’s English is ghastly”.

In Part Two, Fikile, who is a poor high school dropout, covets “whiteness” and is prepared to sacrifice everything to realize her dream. This because a majority of black teenagers lacked the economic and educational opportunities that most white teenagers took for granted. Hlongwane puts this point succinctly when he says the likes of Fikile are not only suffer[ing] from a debilitating sickness of whiteache, in which they do not wish to “pass” as white but to “be white”. Her endeavours to realize her dream transformation range from lightening her skin to wearing blue eye-lenses, from speaking in an accent to straitening her hair, from distancing herself from black people to seeking acceptance of white people. She dissociates herself from black people even as she lives in the township. She even wishes that conditions in her township do not improve so as to be able to see where she once was before she became white.

Black people such as Fikile, Hlongwane notes, are culturally lost and painfully ashamed of their blackness. He continues, such people are uncomfortable in their black skins, they desire the very whiteness that is the cause of their agonizing identity complexes. What Fikile and Ofilwe seem to share is a deep-seated hatred for their blackness. This proves that the plague of whiteness is not limited to formal setting like schools only but it is universal phenomenon. Whiteness, in this instance, is elevated to a point that it overshadows black youth’s understanding of themselves and as such they end up suffering from what Hlongwana refers to as psychological nervousness. By extension, they despise other black people because they are a symbol and reminder of what they try to turn their backs to.

However, it would be fallacious to even suggest that it is only the white world that rejects the likes of Ofilwe and Fikile, the black world too doesn’t recognise them. In *Coconut*, for instance, Tshepo, after realising the lie they were living in the suburb, attempts to align himself with other black people, if only to regain

his lost identity. He is acutely aware of his sister's, Ofilwe, wrong turn into whiteness and tries to salvage her to no avail. He actively attempts to avoid the whiteness trap through applying and getting a job at a restaurant, where many less educated young black youth often find employment. He naively believes that inter-mingling with other black people would rub-on to him. His painful attempt to regain his blackness is both superficial and condescending as he soon realises. Long before he meets with fellow workers on his resumption of his duties, he is conscious of his "difference" and tries to camouflage it.

First he decides not to park his car at the restaurant's parking lot, ostensibly to avoid parking in his boss's space but inwardly not to advertise his somewhat elevated status to the poor black staff; because his mode of transport alone sets him apart from the other workers who can barely afford public transport to work. Second, he discards expensive labels and wears clothes that he wouldn't normally wear in the suburb so that he can look like a "normal" black youth—Allstar sneakers and a free T-shirt. However, he soon learns that his rather cosmetic transformation fails to hide his "whiteness". His borrowed gowns fail to cover his nakedness and he is left with what Hlongwane calls a tortured identity. In his case, he tries to escape whiteness, hence he doesn't understand why he is not black enough to be accepted in the black world. His diary is the only outlet he has to vent his frustrations. One of his entries in his futile journey to find his true self leaves Ofilwe uncertain about what she had been made to believe over many years. She now realises that she had been living a lie, she had been lied about her blackness. Hlongwane sums this well when he argues that, to "act black" (or to practice aspects of your culture) in contemporary South Africa is a great mistake; it is to make nonsense of the mirage underscoring the national motto, unity in diversity'. Black must be real black, something that the likes of Tshepo cannot achieve—hence their "psychological nervousness".

However, as long as the colour of unemployment is black, the black tide to "white schools" will continue unabated. According to Stats SA's second quarter survey 2019, for instance, the country's unemployment stands at 29%, and more than 49% of that is the youth. Black youth, including those who are degreed form a bulk of these frustrated youth. Many believe that they may not be absorbed into the workforce simply because of where they studied, something that makes Fikile, for instance, believe that if she speaks English with an accent she would be more acceptable in the white world. The belief that white is better feeds into the aspirations of many black youths to be white. *Coconut* takes a fresh approach to whiteness studies that, through its invocation of apartheid, "postmodern" black society, it reveals the impossibility of imaging and imagining blackness without imaging and imagining whiteness [16]. For not only must the black be black: he must be black in relation to the white man, hence assimilation and discrimination are perpetually intertwined [17].

1.5. South Africa's Twin-Demons—Assimilation and Discrimination

It is clear that the curse of "Whiteness" often blinds the black youths who as-

similate to Englishness, to appropriate Dangarembga's term in *Nervous Conditions*, to the reality of their fractured identities. Fikile's insatiable desire to be white, for instance, makes her embark on "Project Infinity" which was a plan designed to ensure that she achieves whiteness at whatever cost. This determination, though, makes her blind and immune to her uncle's disgraceful and uncouth behaviour when he sexually abuses her. As a result, her revulsion for her uncle is driven not by the abuse itself but by his failure to use his superior education to "advance" in life. In her blind obsession with whiteness she overlooks the tragedy that is her uncle who is a perpetual social misfit. She even imagines what she would have done with such privilege—a privilege to undo her blackness, hence escape dirt and poverty. Her determination to be white makes her abhor anything black because she is "brown", and so not associated with any blackness.

The title of the novel, *Coconut*, connotes this sense of loss of identity and self-worth, where her likes are black on the outside but pass and act like whites. The issue of "coconuts" has gained currency in recent years when it comes to black youth who attend "white schools" and pretend to be white. Some ground work has been done in this regard by people such as Hlongwane, Phiri and Radtshalo who are referenced in this paper. The term "coconut" derives from the coconut fruit which is brown on the outside and white inside. In post 1994 South Africa, the term has been used to refer to black youth who went to former "Model C schools" and in most cases who can neither speak their own languages or identify with and practice black cultures. The term marks them out as cultural deviants and questions their bona fide. It is not only used to isolate them, but also to ridicule them for acting white while their skins are black. The story of the apples and pears Tshepo tells Ofilwe highlights this disjuncture between the individual and those in whose race groups they belong [18]. Bucholtz's assertion is instructive in this regard when she argues that the relationality of identity means that identities are not the project of individuals alone but are constantly co-constructed, supported, negotiated, and challenged by others. Because social categories are protected against induction ... people who act outside their expected or assigned category may be seen as failed members of that category, as "wannabes" of some other category, or even as "culturally unintelligible" [19].

Clearly, assimilation is not an antidote to discrimination and racism instead it reinforces them in more nuanced forms. Since one's racial category cannot simply be erased through crossing the colour divide, discrimination and racism are often disguised as jokes, mistakes or a slip of a tongue. Throughout Part One, Ofilwe lurches from one form of discrimination to the other and each incident is like poker down her throat. Such incidents begin to thaw at her self-belief and rattle her comfort zone. The naked and subtle "reminders" of who she really is repulse her and she begins to see through her white friends' behaviour and attitude. Tshepo's insistent warnings crystallize in her mind as her white world becomes a nightmare. Unfortunately, her disappointment in and anger against her white friends cannot and do not restore her lost blackness. She is filled with

dread to think that the same white people the black youth want to emulate castigate them for trying to pass as white by reminding them of their blackness—hence backwardness—because, as Fanon said decades earlier, as color is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments [20]. He continued that it is no exaggeration to say that the majority of (white) South Africans feel an almost physical revulsion against anything that puts a native or a person of color on their level. Ofilwe’s realisation of the futility of trying to fit-in in the white world makes her resort to prayer; a prayer whose effectiveness Fikile’s grandmother questions later on; as she laments: We dare not eat with our naked fingertips, walk in generous groups, speak merrily in booming voices and laugh our *mqombothi* laughs. They will scold us as if we dare, not with their lips, Lord, because the laws prevent them from doing so, but with their eyes. They will shout, “Stop acting black! Stop acting black!” is what they will shout. And we will pause, perplexed, unsure of what that means, for are we not black, Father? No, not in the malls, Lord. We may not be black in restaurants, in suburbs and in schools. Oh, how it nauseates them if we even fantasize about being black, truly black. The old rules remain and the old sentiments are unchanged.

Since the assimilated black youths see themselves through the prism of whiteness, the treatment they receive from whites deflates their self-esteem. The racist attitudes and discrimination they have to contend with instil in them a perpetual inferiority complex, irrespective of their economic or education status. It is interesting that their inferiority complex is not as a result of a lack of “good education” but it is in spite of that same privileged education. It is no wonder then that when they are rejected by those they fashioned their lives around, their self-esteem plunges. These youths, the exceptional cases according to Fanon, are instances in which the educated [youth] suddenly discovers that he is rejected by the civilization which he has nonetheless assimilated. Such instances, for example, are well documented in Bloke Modisane’s *Blame Me on History* (1963) which critiques the plight of the black man at the height of apartheid in South Africa. Modisane’s sentiments are as true in present day South Africa as they were in the 1960s, except that now the black youth can sit side by side their white counterparts, but as Silas Nyoni demonstrates in *Coconut*, that success comes at a heavy price. And, as Bell suggests, that success has to be punished for and stopped to avoid competition with the white man [21].

1.6. The Silent Erosion of Black Identity

As demonstrated in Tshepo’s attempt to reclaim his blackness, getting assimilated into whiteness has devastating implications for black youth who end up with what Pyke refers to as “hidden injuries” in his article on the same subject in America [22]. In a word, even those who may have acquired “whiteness” would have done so at a high cost to their identity. In some instances, the cost only re-

veals itself on children whose parents thought they were giving them a head start in life. In Ofilwe and Tshepo's case, that their father wins a lucrative tender is easily the best thing that can happen to any struggling family. And, when the "new money" comes, sending the children to white schools is almost a natural trajectory. As mentioned earlier though, these youths find themselves squashed between the black and white world—a no-man's-land that robs them of their self-knowledge which in turn leads to their fractured identities. Similar to Silas Nyoni, they are assimilated into whiteness only to realize that their prized education is a cultural trap that leaves them empty inside and isolates them from their own people. Tshepo sees through such lies and attempts to avoid such entrapment through renegotiating and recovering his blackness. However, since he had already lost his true self, it becomes impossible to retrace his steps back to his lost blackness. The damage done is irreversible. He even tries to distance himself from his "strange" family and in Ofilwe's view he "vaporises". In the end, the only world that makes sense to him is creative writing because it doesn't only give him an outlet for his frustrations but, importantly, it offers him a space to recreate his world and self on his terms. He writes to correct the falsehood that had been sold to them since he can now reconstruct, reimagine and reimage himself. More importantly, though, he can utilise his writing as a sounding board to forewarn any "wannabies" against blindly embracing whiteness.

Unlike Tshepo who somewhat puts up a fight against the onslaught on his identity, however futile or feeble the fight is, Silas Nyoni's damaged identity is permanent because of his total assimilation into whiteness, and with it, any veneer of black dignity is obliterated. For example, Silas Nyoni is a name he is given by the white men who use him as a black economic empowerment front. He neither objects nor resists being renamed. This is in contrast to Angelou's Marguerite who points out that every person I knew had a hellish horror of being "called out of his name." It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of centuries of their having been called names [23]. On his part, Silas Nyoni meekly accepts the rebranding, thus auctioning his identity for some pretentious relevance. Instead of resisting the insult, he is happy and readily accepts the "Sexwale suit" they offer him to wear to the meeting. He plays along even when he is not allowed to take part in the deal-making deliberations. Further, he does not object when he is stripped of the same suit and placed in the back seat of the car on their way back from the meeting. He sheepishly accepts the numerous radios he is offered instead of being given his share of the company he co-owns. By the time he realises that the white men use his "black skin" for fronting, there is no turning back, he is damaged goods or as Fikile puts it, he is a little twerp [24]. Just like Ofilwe who does not fight the wealthy white boy, Stewart Simons, who accuses her father of being a car highjacker and instead turns against her father, Silas Nyoni's frustration and anger is projected to another black person, the helpless Fikile. Their anger is misdirected as they turn against their own instead of confronting the real problem, inequality, racism and discrimination.

It is critical to point out that the destruction of Silas Nyoni's identity started quite early. From a young age Silas Nyoni's life takes a different trajectory compared to other black youth in similar circumstances of poverty. His mother is a domestic worker and sometimes takes him with her to work. As fate would have it, the white employers adopt him, giving him access to white upbringing and white education. So, throughout his life until he reaches university he is only exposed to a white lifestyle and privilege. Except for his black exterior, his entire internal make-up is white. Fikile is jealous when she sees his photo album and the manner in which his white friends seem to worship him as he grows up. Unbeknown to him, the whiteness cancer had started nibbling on his character and identity immediately he crossed the racial line. For a number of years, his proximity to his white benefactors masks his nakedness and vulnerability, giving him a false sense of self. But his life unravels when he drops out as a medical student at the University of Cape Town. At first it is not clear why he drops out, but on closer scrutiny it is clear that he cannot fit-in in the real world that sees him as someone who had lost the essence of his being. All his life he had been insulated from the harsh reality of being black in South Africa. His privileged upbringing and education, though, didn't prepare him for the harsh lived life in South Africa. As indicated though, he is devoid of any fight. Similar to Tshepo who is aghast at the attitude of the white people he serves in the restaurant he works at, Silas Nyoni's hollowness and uncertain existence prevent him from challenging the predicaments he comes across. Again, unlike Tshepo who confronts those who look down on him, Silas Nyoni is emotionally damaged and impotent. He returns home an empty man—in a sense he suffers the curse of a black man who attempts to compete with the white man.

His situation is exacerbated when his adoptive parents emigrate to Canada; he is exposed to the reality of being black in South Africa. He has no alternative but to relocate to the location and share a shack with Fikile. He soon realises that he is a misfit in the hostile worlds he straddles. As if to claim a façade of relevance and identity, he resorts to reciting Shakespeare in the streets. As fate would have it, his "superstandard" English usage attracts the attention of two white men in search of a black skin in order to win a lucrative tender from government. Familiarity with whiteness blinds him to their intentions, resulting in his being used for profit because he doesn't benefit from his co-ownership of Lentso Communications. Everything seems to expose his nakedness or what Fikile calls sorry existence. For starters, his fake name and false shareholdership perpetuate his effacement and emasculation. So he is not only betrayed by his white adoptive family, but his business partners also deal him a bad hand. While they rake in millions, he is only awarded radios—highlighting corporate discrimination against black people.

His abominable sexual abuse of Fikile is his way of assuaging his hurt and disappointment for the rejection. Looked differently though, his vile behaviour is an affront to and debasement of educated black men. Educated as they are, these men are similar to all the black men Fikile dreads at the intersection and on the

train—they are all perverted and must be avoided at all cost. In other words, his behaviour confirms the fears that black men are rapists—educated or not—as Marguerite’s sexual assault in the hands of Mr Freeman also demonstrates [25]. Just like Obi in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Silas Nyoni, and by extension other black men, is presented as “a beast of no nation”. He is the promise that failed the black nation and as such affirms the notion that black men are innately immoral and infinitely unscrupulous.

1.7. South African Black Youths’ Post-Independence Burden —Self-Hate

Silas Nyoni’s degeneration to a mere pervert demonstrates another critical dimension in the accommodation of the black youth into white culture—their alienation from their own roots. In fact, the culture of the white schools “vaporised” the black youth’s sense of self because their customs and resources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. In 1986 already, in *Decolonizing the Mind*, wa Thiong’o called this a cultural bomb [26]. He ominously observed that the effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves [27]. The only outlet for these youth’s disappointment is to despise themselves and their own, as Ofilwe’s reaction to Stuart Simons aptly demonstrates. Once they acquire the better education, they delude themselves in thinking that they are white, as Ofilwe demonstrates. This anomaly, though, places them in a precarious “situation”, to appropriate a term from Bloke Modisane’s novel *Blame Me on History*, where they are neither black enough nor white enough. So, in their quest to open the doors of privilege through superior education, they end up embracing a culture that alienates them from their communities and assimilate them into the white culture. Unfortunately, once they cross over, they look down upon and sometimes trample on the unfortunate, as demonstrated by Fikile’s utterances when she says, perhaps it is for the better that conditions in this dump never improve. They can be a constant reminder to me of what I do not want to be, black, dirty and poor. To a large extent, then, assimilation and integration turn black against black, in a twisted combat that only amplifies their self-hate. Biko’s view on integration is relevant when he observes that an integration that alienates blacks from blacks is an integration in which black will compete with black, using each other as rungs up a stepladder leading them to white values. It is an integration in which the black man will have to prove himself in terms of these values before meriting acceptance and ultimate assimilation, and in which the poor will grow poorer and rich richer in a country where the poor have always been black [28].

In *Coconut*, for instance, Ofilwe is made to feel bad about herself when she tries to be romantically involved with a rich, clever boy Junior P. Mokoena who rebuffs her love overtures outright. Her self-importance and confidence are hurt

when Mokoena informs her that he only dates white girls [29]. That Mokoena's rejection is done in full view of the class is important for two reasons. First it humiliates and undermines Ofilwe's bona fide as a black woman; second and most importantly, it shores up Mokoena's status with his peers. Her identity and pride in her blackness is further undermined when Clinton Mitchely, a rich white boy, refuses to kiss her during a "spin-the-bottle" game simply because her lips are too dark. This refutation would have been bearable if her white friends didn't find the rejection amusing; something that makes her blackness, hence her albatross, stand out. For discrimination to encroach into an innocent game baffles her, she couldn't even open her eyes after that. Having worked hard to be part of the white world, she feels she has been rendered invisible or an "absent presence" to appropriate Derrida's characterization [30]. Despite her attempts to prove that she fits in that world, her blackness makes her a conspicuous nonentity, an oddity to be laughed at. Her piteous posture is similar to that of the black man Ellis Cose interviewed for his book, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*. The frustrated man comments: I have done everything I was supposed to do. I have stayed out of trouble with the law, gone to the right schools, and worked myself nearly to death. What more do they want me to do? Why in God's name won't they accept me as a full human being? Why am I pigeonholed in a "Black job"? Why am I constantly treated as if I were a drug addict, a thief, or a thug? Why am I still not allowed to aspire to the same things every white person ... takes as a birthright? Why, when I most want to be seen, am I suddenly rendered invisible? [31].

As suggested before, Clinton Mitchely's behavior shouldn't be reduced to a bad behavior of an individual, but be understood as an entrenched institutional racism. For instance, Ofilwe suffers another crashing blow when her pride, self-realization and identity are challenged at school. Students are asked what language they speak at home and she responds "English" but the three white unidentical men simply said just tick her under Zulu, it's all the same because to some white people all blacks look the same and should be treated similarly [32]. According to Nazir, such narrative hinders multiculturalism because in these institutions people who are perceived to be culturally different are fixed and stereotyped within their assumed identities [33]. So Ofilwe finds herself stuck between two worlds, shunned by both. At this stage she is awake to the ingrained race prejudice which renders black people inferior to whites, regardless of how competent they are. In fact, she is becoming aware that any black person who excels in the white world is a threat to whites and should be discouraged, character-assassinated and stripped of any dignity. She, then, learns the hard way that her accommodation into the white world doesn't guarantee equality, instead hostility. As Bell correctly asserts, blacks have suffered greatly as a result of discrimination undergirded and often justified by the general belief in black inferiority. But history shows with equal clarity, though it is less frequently acknowledged, that indications of black success and thus possible black superiority result in racist outrage [34].

As suggested, Tshepo attempts to sidestep the humiliating situation Ofilwe finds herself in through deliberate restoration of his blackness. He tries to re-integrate into blackness but he is circumspect and afraid of black people due to his acquired difference. He uses the pronoun “them” to refer to his fellow workers to demonstrate the distance he feels between himself and the Instant Fried Chicken staff both socially, culturally and economically. His difference makes him uncomfortable. His anxiety that his “whiteness” will show, forces him to camouflage his “whiteness”. In his limited contact with black people, he seems to believe that the outward adornment would alter his internal composition and thus make him acceptable in the black world. However, this outward, superficial change is not lost to his black coworkers who, when Tshepo laments the attitude of white people towards him, point out that: these Model C children know nothing of the real world. They are shocked by the way of Umlungu. What the coworkers reveal about Tshepo’s predicament is that once the damage is done it is not easy to re-adjust to the former self. To reverse it, a deeper, longer and perhaps uncomfortable intervention is required, and not just the superficial outside tinkering Tshepo attempts. Just like Ofilwe earlier, he is surprised when the whites treat him as if he is a nonentity, as if he doesn’t exist. It angers him that they do not see that he is on par with them educationally. He would like them to engage him so that they get to hear him speaking with an accent. The white customers, though, perceive his blackness, which is not different from that of the general workers because the burden of blackness pervades any and all social spaces.

Bucholtz puts it well when he points out that to ignore, deny, or misattribute the causes of real racial differences in such areas as income, education, housing and health does little to eliminate racism and in fact further reinforces racial disparities [35]. Central to that is the equitable distribution of resources that would allow blacks in particular to access education in their own terms. In that regard, a working democracy ensures social cohesion through leveling the playing field in areas such as education. Habib makes a similar point when he says that the distinct problem that should be addressed in South Africa if consolidation of democracy is to be realized is the racial character of the economic system [36]. As *Coconut* painfully illustrates, racism which feeds discrimination remains at the center of the identity crisis that black youths face in the new dispensation, because it is ingrained in the economic, social, educational and political structures of the country. Alluding to the same, Hlongwane avers that Matlwa’s novel unfolds in a supposedly free, post-apartheid country, but her characters are hardly free both at school and in the wider society [37]. While the outlook of South Africa is officially non-racial, institutionalized racism still permeates all spheres of life. The novel portrays a country in which institutions such as schools are not yet sufficiently sensitized and reformed to promote integration and equality. Marginalization still persists and negatively affects black youth. Some of them still believe that “whiteness” is the prerequisite to upward mobility. Fikile though finds that this is just a farce as her blackness determines how

she is treated by her white employer and the white patrons of Golden Spoon coffee shop. However, her fate is not dissimilar to that of the middle class youths like Ofilwe and Tshepo who “die in white environments where they are of the right class but the “wrong” skin color”. But, this psychological nervousness extends to all who assimilate to whiteness, irrespective of class status because in the end of the lived experience of being white is distinct from the concept of whiteness [38].

2. Conclusion

The South African constitution is regarded as the best in the world, mainly because it seeks to forge unity and harmony among race groups that were pitted against each other during apartheid. To achieve that, race-based discrimination and racism are elements the society should openly and consistently prevent. In Coconut it is clear the remnants of the past are still prevalent in institutions such as schools with dire consequences to social cohesion. More than two decades later, the country still finds itself divided along race lines. Instead of papering over the racial cracks, the paper suggests, an open dialogue on issues such as race, racism, identity, blackness, whiteness, discrimination should be the order of the day because evading them just prolong getting an answer.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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