This article explores the racial and gendered politics that shape contemporary understandings of beauty by considering how appearance features in the identity construction of Kopano Matlwa’s characters in the novel *Coconut*. Feminist scholars have long argued that “physical appearance” carries more importance for women than for men (Hunter 188). This can be traced back to the familiar gendered dualism that associates women with their bodies and nature and men with the mind and culture. As in any binary opposition, one term is marginalized while the other is valorized. Women, with their bodies and assumed association with nature, are regarded with suspicion in a Western epistemological tradition that continues to assign disproportionate value to the mind, at the expense of the body. For a woman to be properly feminine, she must thus manipulate her appearance to conform to very specific ideals of beauty that flow from distrust of the female body in its natural state. In her groundbreaking work on gender, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir shows that one is not born a woman but becomes one; in other words, that femininity is a social construction. She argues that “[i]n woman dressed and adorned, nature is present but under restraint, by human will remoulded nearer to man’s desire,” and the woman whose appearance renders her desirable or beautiful is one in whose body nature has been “rigorously confined” (de Beauvoir 191). As Wendy Chapkis puts it, “acceptable femininity shares a secret with all who attempt to pass [as acceptable, ‘proper’ women]: my undisguised self is unacceptable, I am not what I seem” (5). The “pain” mentioned in the phrase from *Coconut* that appears in the title of this article thus refers to more than physical hurt. It extends to the pain that women experience when
they are obliged to construct their identities in a social milieu that is fundamentally hostile towards them. The salience of race in the South African context demands that we read the experiences of Matlwa’s characters through lenses of racial as well as gendered politics. The female body is, of course, always simultaneously inscribed by gender, race, class, geographical location and sexual orientation. While any comprehensive reading of women’s experiences must take cognizance of all these markers of difference, the categories of race, class and gender will be prioritized in this article. I shall make use of both established and contemporary feminist research to shed light on the ways in which Matlwa’s female characters construct their identities in contemporary South African society. I shall show that it is an oversimplification to argue that these women merely internalize racist and patriarchal understandings of female beauty. Rather, they should be read as exercising a certain amount of agency, albeit within the confines of gendered and racial structures. At different stages in their identity formation, they appropriate, subvert and internalize dominant expectations of women’s appearance. Their negotiations with standards of female beauty result in both pain and power.

*Coconut* is divided into two parts, with Ofilwe narrating the first and Fikile the second. They are young black women who recount their struggles with identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Matlwa signals her concern with issues of women’s appearance by starting the novel with Ofilwe’s reflections as she sees a little black girl during a Sunday church service. The author emphasizes that this is a very young child: Ofilwe notices the “tiny chocolate girl” (1), her gaze focusing specifically on the child’s “underaged head” that is covered with braids of “plastic, shiny, cheap synthetic strands of dreams-come-true” (1). This succinct description of the child’s braids highlights both the artificiality of the hair and the aspirational value with which hair is invested. Zimitri Erasmus argues that the “racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty” (12), and that this legacy is keenly felt in women’s relationship with their hair. Anthony Synnott shows that hair is a particularly potent symbol of identity: “powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because, although personal, it is also public rather than private” (381). In hair we thus see a powerful example of the well-known feminist insistence that the personal is political and that a rigid separation between the public and private spheres is untenable.

Bertram Ashe contends that African-Americans “have always had an uneasy coexistence with the European (white) ideal of beauty” (579). In terms of hair, this ideal demands that hair be straight, long and shiny. Black
women are thus exhorted, as Lisa Jones puts it, to keep their “kinks in the closet” (305). Erasmus, who shows that “the silences and pain attached to [hair] are not unique to South Africa” (13), embeds Jones’s phrase in the South African context by explaining that South African women of colour must keep their “kroesies in the closet” (12). The importance of Matlwa’s contribution to shattering the silence surrounding hair should not be underestimated. The prevalence of this silence emerged strongly in the public reaction to Good Hair, a recent documentary by the American actor and comedian Chris Rock. Rock has said that he was prompted to make the film after his young daughter asked him why she did not have “good hair.” He was concerned that, even at such a young age, his little girl had somehow got the idea that her “undisguised self [was] unacceptable” (Chapkis 5). Although a wide range of reactions followed the documentary’s release, a large number of black women expressed anger and humiliation that Rock had revealed their hair secrets to the broader (white) American society (see Puente 2009). They were angry and ashamed that he had “outed” them as they would have preferred to keep their “kinks in the closet.”

If silence is a defining feature of many black women’s relationship with their hair, pain is another. While the rest of this article will focus primarily on pain in a psychological sense, it is undeniable that physical pain is also an aspect of keeping one’s “kroesies” in check. As Ofilwe watches the little girl in church, her thoughts drift to her own memories of hair. She remembers her experiences in Ous Beauty’s hair salon and the layered processes to which customers’ hair was subjected as she watched Ous Beauty “washing, blowing, dyeing, cutting, perming and styling” (Matlwa 3). Ous Beauty used a “comb with the finest of teeth” to tackle this girl “with the coarsest of hair” (3). Ofilwe could “never be convinced” that such a fine comb and such coarse hair “could work in harmony” (3) for the resultant combination was “[such pain” (3). She recalls how she gritted her teeth and held her breath in anticipation of the pain that she knew would come. Her fear was so intense that “the palms of [her] hands were an unbearable shade of red, from digging [her] nails in too deep” (4). Matlwa again emphasizes that these are the experiences of a very young child, as Ofilwe remembers how she could swing her little legs while sitting on a stool in the salon (3). She would hide her reddened hands “under a ten-year-old bottom” as she “shut [her] eyes tight, refusing to let out the tears that wrestled violently within” (4). The hair straightener caused a “painful exothermic chemical reaction” (4) and Matlwa leaves the reader in no doubt about the effect of this chemical on Ofilwe’s head by describing it in three tenses of the verb: “Burn. Burning. Burnt” (4). Erasmus confirms that the “process of ‘doing’ [her] hair was a long one:”
she regards it as “sheer luck” that she did not find this convoluted process physically painful as she knows that “[m]any black women have ended up either balded, patched or burnt by chemical straighteners” (13).

Naomi Wolf observes that, “[f]or as far back as women could remember, something had hurt about being female” (219). Before the invention of anesthesia and antisepsis in the nineteenth century, childbirth was routinely characterized by pain and, before the legalization of abortion, sex carried similar risks of pain as there was always the chance of unwanted pregnancy where women would have little recourse other than backstreet abortionists. Wolf is writing from a North American context and she glosses over the extent to which anesthesia and legal abortion continue to remain inaccessible to many women on the African continent. However, her point that, in contemporary societies, “what hurts is beauty” (219) is also relevant to women in Africa. Ofilwe’s narrative reveals that she considered attaining beauty to be more important than avoiding physical pain. Despite the horrific burning on her ten-year-old scalp, Ofilwe tells Ous Beauty to keep the cream in longer because she “wanted every last tiny weenie curl straight” (Matlwa 4). She was “not bothered by the tenderness of [her] scalp” nor was she “alarmed at the white of [her] roots that had come to the surface” as she was just so “delighted to be beautiful again” (4). This beauty is dependent on having hair that is so “straight” and “silky soft” that Ous Beauty’s fine-toothed comb could “slip effortlessly” though it (4). The effortlessness with which the comb could slide through her hair contrasts strongly with the great deal of painful effort that Ofilwe has just gone through to get her hair “beautiful.” The extensive effort that women of colour invest in their hair is not a new concern in South African literature. In Zoë Wicomb’s You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town (1987), the narrator, Frieda Shenton, explains that her hair “preparations” (26) entailed that it was “wrapped over large rollers to separate the strands, dried then swirled around [her] head, secured overnight with a nylon stocking [and] dressed with vaseline.” All this is done in an attempt to “keep the strands smooth and straight.” Like Ofilwe who wants the “last teeny weeny curl straight,” Frieda’s hair is “pulled back tightly to stem any remaining tendency to curl” (26). While many things have changed in South Africa during the two decades that separate these two narrators, it seems that a great deal has also stayed the same, including the determination of women to attain the smooth, straight hair that is associated with the Eurocentric model of beauty.

Even before the description of Ofilwe’s experiences in Ous Beauty’s salon, Matlwa shows how she has been exposed both to Eurocentric ideals of beautiful hair and to the power that accrues to women who conform to these
ideals. Ofilwe remembers a school friend called Kate Jones who had “the most beautiful hair” that she had seen in “all [her] eight years of life” (1). Kate’s hair is described as long, shiny and soft. Although Kate was “spoilt,” “haughty,” “rude” and “foul-mouthed,” her hair rendered her “glorious” (1). It seems that Kate’s hair enthralled everyone at the school, as class teachers, the “popular kids” and the bullies were all “[d]azzled by its radiance” and accorded her special privileges as a result. While the teachers “overlooked the red crosses in Kate’s school workbooks,” the bullies “exempted [her] from the pushing and prodding that all the júniors endured” (1). Rose Weitz argues that “women’s hair is central to their social position” and that women can use hair to attempt to access power, however limited such power might be (667). She reminds us that “power is not absolute but is relative to a given relationship and situation” (Weitz 668). Kate, for example, is a girl child, which places her in what is widely considered to be one of the most vulnerable and powerless groups in most societies. Yet she is able to exercise power in her relationships with her teachers and classmates. While this power is obviously linked to her whiteness, Matlwa uses her hair to encapsulate her conformity to the white standard of beauty. By the time she is eight years old, Ofilwe has thus learnt that Kate has “good hair” and that this matters a great deal. These experiences help the reader to understand why she is willing, and even eager, to endure such pain in Ous Beauty’s salon in order to approximate the ideal of beauty set by “white” hair.

Through the character of Fikile, who narrates the second part of Coconut, Matlwa demonstrates how “individuals both internalize and act on the ideologies that underlie their own subordination” (Weitz 668). Different class positions mean that Fikile and Ofilwe differ a great deal in terms of their daily lives and the power they are able to access. While Ofilwe’s family has reaped the benefits of her father’s successful Black Economic Empowerment business dealings, Fikile and her family remain mired in the black poverty that continues to be a legacy of apartheid. Unlike Ofilwe, who attends an elite high school, Fikile has dropped out of school and works as a waitress at the Silver Spoon restaurant. Fikile is desperate to escape from the one-bedroom house she shares with her sexually abusive uncle in a “decrepit township” (117). She repeatedly refers to their home as “this hole” (109, 116) and she dreams of trading her bed of “hard cement” (116) for a “kingsized bed with a solid-wood headboard dressed in decorative ironwork and red leather” (116). Although she acknowledges that she has “not a cent in the bank nor very much of an education” (109), Fikile’s heart is “heavy with ambition” (110). She pays extensive attention to her physical appearance before she leaves for work every morning because she has “come to know
the great importance of presentation" (117). She aspires to be a “charming young waitress” with “soft, blow-in-the-wind caramel-blond hair (pinned in perfectly to make it look real)” (117). Matlwa thus explicitly indicates that Fikile has racialized her dreams of socio-economic advancement: she is motivated by a desire to be “white, rich and happy” rather than “black, dirty and poor” (118). Imani Perry argues that both “blackness and femaleness” have historically been “marked for inferiority” (582). Fikile clearly has a great deal of contempt for blackness, which she associates with filth and poverty. She strives to attain the “aesthetic standard” (Perry 582) of beauty associated with the idealized white woman by wearing “emerald-green coloured lenses” (117) and “caramel-blond hair,” and using “Lemon Light skin-lightener cream.”

Perry demonstrates that the “racialized and gendered beauty ideal is so sanitized and distant that even white women suffer from it” (588). The mostly peripheral white female characters in Coconut are also shown to engage in certain “preparations” to alter their appearance. For example, the owner of the Silver Spoon, Miss Becky, “clicks her gel-tipped French painted nails” (149) as she orders her black staff members around. The major skincare house, Clinique, recently launched a new range called Visibly Even, which claims to lighten dark spots on all complexions. The range has been marketed as containing as much active whitening ingredients as prescription lotions. It seems that even white women are required to be the whitest possible shade of pale in order to be considered beautiful. Yet the pressure to conform to a beauty standard weighs more heavily on black women since, as Perry argues, “it is undeniable that the more alteration that is required, the more difficult it is to reach the so-called ideal” (588).

Wolf notes that many women “are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns – to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes – matter so much” (9). Showalter similarly contends that, when women admit concern about how they look, they are judged as “frivolous and narcissistic” (322). These perspectives place women in a difficult double bind: if they spend time and effort on altering their appearance, they are seen as perpetuating the image of women as vain sex-objects who are complicit in their own subjugation. If, on the other hand, they refuse to adhere to beauty norms, they risk paying a very real price in a society where beauty, and particularly the Eurocentric ideal of beauty, carries a great deal of symbolic and social capital. Margaret Hunter, for example, explains that racial constructions continue to hold sway and, as a result, light skin and straight hair are associated with whiteness which, in turn, is linked to competence and intelligence (188). In Wicomb’s short story “Friends and Goffels” from
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her collection *The One That Got Away*, the narrator notes that she and her best friend were the only ones in their class of “posh coloureds” who were “very dark, had short frizzy hair and flat noses with prominent cheekbones” (103). Their facial features set them apart and make them the target of classroom bullies. Wicomb suggests the prevalence of Eurocentric beauty norms when the narrator remarks that “[e]veryone knew the indexes of worth amongst coloureds, knew the acceptable combinations of facial features, and that good hair would always override the other disabilities” (103). Features that mark a woman as black are thus seen as disabilities, although “good hair” can be a way of camouflaging them.

Feminist researchers have long argued that women’s “physical appearance is an important commodity for them in the labor force” (Hunter 188, see also Lakoff and Scherr, and Wolf). Fikile has firsthand experience of how important the “right” appearance is in the work place. For her, securing a waitressing position at the Silver Spoon is the only route out of her dire living conditions. Miss Becky praises her for being “gorgeous” (Matlwa 119) and she strongly suggests that this is what got her hired. However, she risks losing her work because Miss Becky chastises her for being “incorrectly attired” (119, 121). She also tells Fikile that her hair is unacceptable and that she should “do something about it, anything, just don’t come to work looking like that again” (122). In her study of the relationship between women’s hair and power, Weitz finds that many women “simply cannot afford to consider hair a trivial issue” (682). This is especially true for Black women whose features mark them as always already different from the standard set by white beauty. Fikile’s experiences at the Silver Spoon illustrate that Weitz’s point about hair also extends to the rest of a woman’s appearance. Fikile has a box in which she keeps her coloured contact lenses, blond hair extensions, skin bleach and various make up items and she calls these things her “life’s treasures” (117). She mentions that these beauty products are the “most expensive things” she owns and that she acquired them through “many months spent scrubbing grease and sweeping storerooms after hours” (117). Fikile regards the contents of the box as “little testimonies to the progress [she has] made despite the odds” as they constitute “hard evidence of how much closer [she is] to Project Infinity,” which is the term she uses for the process of advancement that will eventually culminate in being “white, rich and happy” (118). For her, future success and happiness are inseparable from her physical appearance and, more specifically, her ability to alter her appearance.

Perry asserts that women can “fit into a silhouette of beauty that possesses the shape and form of the physical ideal even if [they] are ‘other’
as long as common ethnic features are muted for the sake of that ideal" (584). Ofilwe gains some acceptance and access to the popular social circles at school. However, this is explicitly linked to the fact that she is regarded as less black because of her ability to mute her ethnicity in service of the Eurocentric ideal. She is ecstatic when she receives an invitation to Tim Browning’s party and she mentions that “Tim told [her] once that [she] was different” (Matlwa 8). It soon becomes clear that this difference refers to her divergence from blackness. Tim tells her that she “was not like the other black girls in [their] class” because she was “calmer, cuter and […] looked a little like Scary Spice” (8). Tim’s reference to Ofilwe’s calmness draws on familiar colonial constructions of black people as savage and primitive, which Anthea Kraut refers to as “entrenched notions of black bodies as wild, uncivilized Others” (444). It sounds as if Tim is using calmness as a euphemism for civilization. He is, in fact, suggesting that Ofilwe is acceptable because she is more civilized than the other black girls in their class. His comparison between Ofilwe and the one black member of the pop group the Spice Girls, does nothing to challenge prevailing white standards of beauty since this celebrity conforms to Eurocentric ideals in terms of her facial features, slim body, light skin and processed hair. The political implications of Tim’s seemingly innocuous classroom comment extend beyond merely prescribing how a black woman should look and behave. By making Ofilwe’s acceptability dependent on her difference from other black girls, he is subtly undermining the solidarity between black women which could potentially be a site of resistance to racial oppression.

Ashe finds that, for black women, alterations to their hair continue to be the most widely used means to emulate the model of white female beauty, simply because it is more malleable than, for example, cheekbones (579–92). When Fikile manipulates her appearance to approximate the “right” (read white) look that will enable her to keep her waitressing job, one cannot dismiss her actions as mere frivolity or narcissism. To do so would be to deny the structural constraints that limit her already restricted life choices. Wendy McKeen explains that agency, or the choices that people are able to make, must always be seen in relation to existing power structures, which shape the extent to which subjects can exercise their agency (39). Fikile lives in a society that is structured according to racial, gender and class relations which all conspire to marginalize and disempower her. Power that flows from physical appearance “is power nonetheless” (Weitz 673).

If hair is one aspect of appearance that is relatively easy to control, new technology has made the exact shade of one’s complexion another. Wicomb’s narrator in “There’s the Bird That Never Flew” echoes the
marketing hype of numerous cosmetics houses when she insists that “these modern chemicals [are] skin friendly” (*The One That Got Away* 69). Hunter maintains that “[h]ierarchies of skin color that systematically privilege whiteness persist in their effects on women of color” (175). Ofilwe has repeatedly received the message that her blackness renders her ugly and somehow unacceptable. She remembers playing the “kissing game spin-the-bottle” at the age of twelve (44). The game determines that she should kiss Clinton Mitchley and, when Ofilwe “closed [her] eyes and pouted out” in anticipation of the kiss, the boy protests, saying “No ways! Her lips are too dark!” (45). His words reverberate through Ofilwe’s mind while she is “unsure of what to do next” in the “explosion of general laughter” that follows the boy’s remark. Matlwa illustrates how black men also perpetuate the denigration of the black female body in her description of another humiliating memory that Ofilwe recalls. She had a crush on Junior P. Mokoena but the boy tells his friends to give her a message: “Tell her I only date white girls” (24). When one considers these experiences, it is little wonder that, when Ofilwe dreams about her “future children,” she finds that “they are painted in shades of pink” (19). These racial constructions that structure Ofilwe’s life and infiltrate her dreams emanate from a variety of sources and cannot simply be ascribed to schoolyard taunts. When her mother tries to “shield her face from the glaring sun” she does not do so to protect her skin from the harmful effects of exposure to the sun. Rather, she is afraid of “losing complexion” (51). She implies that a light complexion is the only kind worth having and she thus associates darkening by the sun with a total loss of complexion. Ofilwe is aware of the “controversy” (52) her father caused when he married her mother because she is “metallic blue-black in colour” (52), and she has learnt that it is “a life of nothingness when you are a nothing girl with a metallic blue-black skin.” Products to protect the complexion from darkening also have pride of place in Fikile’s box of “treasures.” She uses sunscreen to maintain the whitening effects of her “Lemon Light skin-lightener cream” (117). Even as a little girl, she dismisses her Gogo’s encouragement to “play outside with the other girls” (130) on sunny days because of her fear that her “skin will get dark” (131).

The input about the value of a light complexion that Ofilwe receives from her classmates and her mother forms part of the larger “barrage of societal messages devaluing Blackness and belittling black women” (Yosso and Solórzano 131). Both Ofilwe and Fikile look to magazines for advice about approximating the appearance and, by extension, the lifestyle they aspire to attain. Fikile reads magazines with titles like *Body, Catalogue Girl, Gloss,*
Fly Girl, Allure, Panache, Spoilt!, Chic and Live Life (Matlwa 166). The more Fikile reads these magazines, the “more assured [she] was that the life in those pages was the one [she] was born to live” (167). Feminist scholars assert that women’s magazines “promote an unrealistic, unattainable beauty ideal that is contingent upon personal dissatisfaction in order to ensure a constant market” (Sengupta 806; see also Collins; Ferguson; Onwurah; Wolf). For Fikile, the beauty ideal has come to symbolize a lifestyle that is equally unrealistic and unattainable. By the time she is fifteen years old, she knows “what perfume Gabrielle was wearing to the Grammys” and can offer advice on “what to pack when spending a weekend away in the Bahamas” (167). Red carpet events and island getaways are far removed from Fikile’s life in the township, yet the images in the magazines suggest that she can attain this lifestyle by altering her appearance.

Ofilwe cuts pictures out from magazines and uses them to cover her bedroom walls with the “people [she] thought were the greatest breathing beings of our time” (92). It is only after her brother Tshepo questions her wall montage that Ofilwe notices that there was “not a single face of colour on the wall” (92). She cannot imagine that she would have excluded black people “intentionally” and wonders whether it was “purely a coincidence” that “there were no black faces [she] liked in the magazines” (92). The possibility that Ofilwe’s exclusion of black faces was unintentional reveals the insidious nature of the media’s construction of feminine role models that are worthy of emulation. In her analysis of the need for South African women to have positive role models, Gail Smith identifies “westernized standards of beauty” as one of “the very things that underpin women’s fashion and beauty magazines” (36). She argues that the role models who have become the “yardstick of ‘new’ South African femininity” tend to be women who are praised for overcoming “their roots” and whose “success’ [is] determined solely by looks, decorum, and the fact that they remained unthreatening to the status quo” (Smith 36).

This is a “passive and stereotyped femininity” that has become so widely valorized that women have come to believe in the “idea that inclusion was enough” (Smith 36). When Tim Browning praises Ofilwe for being “calmer” (8) than other black girls, he is applauding her conformity to the ideal of the “passive” woman whose docile black body does not threaten existing power structures. The fact that he links her “calmness” to being “cute” suggests that female beauty is dependent on passivity. Simone de Beauvoir argues that, although the “ideal of feminine beauty is variable,” some “demands remain constant” (189). One of these is that a woman’s body “must present the inert and passive qualities of an object” (de Beauvoir
The racialized construction of black people in general and black women in particular as "wild" and "uncivilized" thus requires that black women mute their blackness in order to meet this prerequisite of female beauty. Rhea Sengupta contends that magazines which target teenage girls are an "important ideological ground girls draw upon to valorize stereotypical images of femininity, treating them as representations of societal 'truths'" and that "racial homogeneity" tends to become an "implicit assumption" (800). As Ofilwe grows in self-awareness, she starts recognizing the overwhelming social pressure to downplay blackness in order to fit in with the racially homogenous ideal that is based on an unspoken template of whiteness. She hears a constant refrain of society shouting "Stop acting black!" (Matlwa 31). Although people will not shout these words "with their lips [. . .] because the laws prevent them from doing so" in post-apartheid South Africa, they will nevertheless continue issuing this injunction "with their eyes" (31). She feels that the "old rules remain and the old sentiments are unchanged" (32). Although Ofilwe is referring to how black people are pressured to ensure that their general behavior conforms to white expectations, her comments are equally relevant to expectations surrounding women’s appearance. In order to be considered beautiful, like the women in the magazine pictures that cover Ofilwe’s walls, black women must stop looking black.

Sam Raditlhalo ascribes Ofilwe and Fikile’s struggles with their physical appearance to "alienation and an ingrained self-hatred" (26) which he traces back to "a situation where young South Africans suffer from a debilitating sickness of whiteache, in which they do not wish to ‘pass for white’ but to ‘be white’" (11). While Matlwa’s characters certainly display all the symptoms that Raditlhalo diagnoses, I argue that a more nuanced reading of their experiences also reveals agency and resilience that elevate them beyond the status of mere victims of racist and patriarchal power structures. Fikile’s aspiration to be white is undeniable and is illustrated with particular poignancy when a teacher asks her what she wants to be when she grows up. Her answer is unequivocal: “White, Teacher-Zola, I want to be white” (135). When her teacher asks her why she wants this, she responds that being white is “better” and that everything she has experienced in her life has shaped this opinion. A classmate’s reaction reveals how enduring denigratory assumptions about blackness continue to be in contemporary societies, when the child tells Fikile that she will be as “black as dirt forever” (135). This comparison associates blackness with filth and worthlessness and implies the impossibility of change. Fikile, however, refuses to accept the finality with which her classmate limits her life choices and asserts that “I will be white if
I want to be white” (135). While I agree with Raditlhalo that this aspiration is extremely problematic, I argue for a closer analysis of the ways in which Fikile works within overwhelmingly powerful structures to access at least some power.

Fikile’s capacity to resist racism is further limited by her lower socioeconomic class position. When a colleague at the Silver Spoon restaurant insults a customer who has treated him in a racist manner, Fikile knows that he is only able to do so because he “comes from a wealthy family and does not need” the work (151). For Fikile, the loss of the job would doom her to a future of sleeping on her abusive uncle’s cement floor. Her appearance, and the extent to which that appearance fits into the mould of white beauty, is the only currency she has and she uses it to access better opportunities than “packing plastics at Checkers or cleaning toilets” (141). She acknowledges that “[w]orking as a waitress is not very glamorous,” but insists that she has “to start somewhere” (141). In the meantime, she lives by the maxim of “Fake it ’til you make it” (147). In her groundbreaking feminist text *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer shows that the “business” of attaining the stereotypical image of beauty “is so complex that it must be handled by an expert” (Greer 66). As in the case of Fikile, “[p]oorer women fake it, ape it, pick up on the fashions a season too late [and] use crude effects” (Greer 66). Ofilwe remembers that “Month End was always a frantic time at Ous Beauty’s, because at Month End everybody felt rich” (Matlwa 3). Women fake it or expend the few financial resources they have in pursuit of beauty because society encourages a woman to “cherish the dream that she may leap up the social ladder and dim the sheen of luxury by sheer natural loveliness” (Greer 66). The amount of effort that goes into attaining the “proper” kind of beauty does, of course, mean that there is very little that is “natural” about the resultant “loveliness.”

Perry makes a point about skin bleaching that can also be extended to other ways in which women alter their appearance to resemble the white beauty ideal. She argues that one should not dismiss such actions as “the result of some colonial psychic injury” (589). Instead, we should allow for the possibility that “rational individuals will reasonably make attempts to lighten their skin to achieve social benefits in a society and world where a darker complexion makes one less valuable – as a mate, as an employee, etc.” (589). Ofilwe was certainly regarded as an unsuitable mate because of the darkness of her lips and Fikile simply cannot afford to be written off as a less valuable employee.

Dia Sekayi argues that black women are aware of the Eurocentric ideal of beauty, and many of them accept this “standard as reality and understand
that whether or not they embrace it as their own, they will be judged according to it" (474). According to Sekayi, "[a]esthetic hegemony" is a process that is in a constant state of flux with invariable "struggles against the grain" (475). In this heavily contested terrain, individuals do exercise agency that can result in their winning some battles and losing others (Sekayi 475). When battles are lost, the result can be racially shaped self-hatred. Fikile, for example, often reveals a deep-seated hatred for black people as a group and insists that "perhaps God made some races superior, as an example for other races to follow" (Matlwa 157).

Despite these very problematic notions about the superiority of whiteness, Fikile does exhibit many strong and laudable qualities. To dismiss her as a mere victim who has internalized racist assumptions would be an oversimplification that does a disservice to the rich totality of her character. Her determination is clear when she asserts that she knows what she wants and that she is "prepared to do anything in [her] power to get it" (118). When she steals clothing because she risks losing her waitressing job "for showing up at work twice 'incorrectly attired,'" she reflects that "[s]ometimes in life you have to push the boundaries, be creative, stretch your resources and take the road less travelled to get what you want" (119). Fikile's daily preparations to attain an acceptable appearance are further complicated by the fact that she "do not have a bath or an inside toilet" and she thus has to "collect water from the taps outside, boil it and clean [herself] in a bucket in the kitchen" (118). In order to make time for her beauty routine before making the long trip on public transport to the Silver Spoon restaurant, she has to get up very early in the mornings. When her alarm clock goes off, her eyes hurt and she has to "squint hard to stop them from closing" (99). However, she embraces this because the "pain will harden them and make them stronger" (99). Similarly, she uses the bucket in which she boils her water as a "daily motivator" that will keep her working to attain her goals. She encapsulates this goal with the phrase "white, rich and happy" (118). While this aspiration is shaped by contempt for blackness, it is also informed by her life experience, which has shown her that power and privilege are associated with whiteness. Resistance to the denigration of blackness and the valorization of white ideals of beauty carry a price, and this is a price that Fikile simply cannot afford to pay. Ginetta Candelario argues that "beauty is a form of cultural capital that can be exchanged for social and economic capital," and that individual women "do empower themselves through beauty" (152). Her appearance is the only form of capital that Fikile has to gain some access to the group and life she describes as "white, rich and happy." When women in general and black women in
particular use their appearance as a mode of social mobility, the obvious problem is that the “citadel into which they have been assimilated will remain unchallenged, even in the face of obvious provocation and the presence of gross inequalities” (Smith 37).

Despite the overwhelming pressure to conform to Eurocentric expectations of female beauty, both Ofilwe and Fikile’s narratives end with a sense of hope that the “citadel” of racialized gender inequality can indeed be challenged. By the end of her section of the novel, Ofilwe has clearly come a long way since being the little girl who begs Ous Beauty to keep the pain-inducing hair straightener on her scalp longer. After being confronted by her brother about the lack of black celebrities on her wall, Ofilwe reflects on the insidious way in which the pressures to conform to racialized ideals operate. Her thoughts reveal that she is starting to understand how racism and patriarchy work to become self-perpetuating. Once people have internalized the ideals of this “parasitic disease,” the “disease” is able to use “the mind for its own survival” so “that it might grow, divide, multiply and infect others” (Matlwa 93). Her comments also illustrate the intricate and sophisticated connections she is making about the ways in which race, gender and class are intertwined. She has come full circle from starting her narrative “[d]azzled” by the “radiance” (1) of Kate’s “[b]urnt amber” hair, to imagining “[b]urnt sienna washing out” (93). From her unquestioning idealization of Kate’s hair, she has come to link the temporary manipulation of hair colour with the “parasitic disease” of conforming to white ideals. She suggests that these pressures are driven by market forces, and she recognizes them as sinister and menacing by describing the “DNA coding for white greed, blond vanity and blue-eyed malevolence” (93).

Although Fikile’s narrative ends without Ofilwe’s clear-cut understanding and resolute rejection of the pressures to look white, the novel does indicate that she is starting to think about these issues rather than unquestioningly associating whiteness with beauty and success while relegating blackness to deprivation and ugliness. While Ofilwe is confronted by her brother about her idealization of white role models, it is a stranger who exposes Fikile to the problematic consequences of Eurocentric expectations and norms. When Fikile first encounters this man on her commute to work, she dismisses him with the same contempt she has for black people in general, stereotyping him as someone who is “a thief like all the other men in this train, and probably an alcoholic and a rapist too” (133). In order to avoid being drawn into conversation with him, she turns to her “precious Girlfriend” magazine. In response, the man “chuckles” that she is “one of those” people “who are always wishing to be something that they ain’t never gonna be” (133). When they have another chance meeting at the
end of the novel, Fikile comes to realize that she has grossly misjudged this man, while the reader is aware that his initial opinion of her was accurate. He introduces her to his young daughter Palesa and explains that he is considering home-schooling the child because he is concerned that her school consists mostly of “milky white” children with only some “spots of colour” here and there (187). He seems worried about her going to school in an environment where whiteness is the norm and blackness is a deviation from that norm. He is already seeing the consequences of her exposure to this mostly white setting: she “refuses to speak a word of Xhosa,” which he knows is “the influence of that school” (188). His articulation of these concerns exposes Fikile to a new perspective, as she has lived her life wishing she could be surrounded by white people (125) and pretending that she grew up in England where she fantasizes that “Mummy and Daddy still lecture” (146).

The man explains that, when he went to fetch Palesa from school, he “watched little spots of amber and auburn become less of what Africa dreamed of and more of what Europe thought we ought to be” (189). He recognizes the impact of social and media messages, such as those contained in Fikile’s “precious” magazines, and he sees the children as becoming “tiny pieces of America, born on African soil.” Perry notes that “[g]lobalization theory holds that the flow of capital across borders creates a globalized commodity culture” (591). This globalized culture is, however, not a multicultural society in which “hybrid beauty norms” are celebrated. Instead, Perry argues, “the presence of patriarchy, classism, and racial inequality in different nations that have historically had dramatically different iterations of these ‘isms’ is becoming unified via global intersections and the legacy of nineteenth and twentieth century world orders of colonialism and empire” (591). It is in ideals of beauty, as epitomized by women’s magazines and the beauty industry, that the “unification of ideas of gender, class, and race is most apparent” (Perry 591). The man on the train recognizes the few black children in Palesa’s mostly white school as “dark-skinned people refusing to be associated with the red soil, the mud huts and the glistening stone beads that they once loved” (Matlwa 190). This is, of course, also an accurate description of Fikile, as the African soil, huts and beads are all things she has rejected comprehensively in favour of her magazine-shaped fantasy of “holidays abroad,” “cashmere” (168) and “retail therapy” (169). The novel ends with Fikile feeling confused after her conversation with this man; yet, seemingly for the first time, she associates beauty with blackness, recognizing that the “little chocolate girl” (188) is “pretty” (185).
The confusion with which both Ofilwe and Fikile are left seems to be an understandable reaction when one considers the social messages that shape their identities. They are constantly exposed to the notion that their black skin should be lighter and their curly hair should be straighter. Their models of success and happiness are found in magazines that espouse both Eurocentric ideals of beauty and westernized lifestyles to which to aspire. These young women are intelligent enough to realize that the way they look informs people’s opinions of them. Looking less black enables them to pass as “calmer” (read more civilized), more competent as employees and more suitable as romantic partners. The extensive, and often costly and painful, processes they go through to manipulate their physical appearance, flow from the message that their “undisguised” selves are “unacceptable” (Chapkis 5). Being “unacceptable” in terms of the prevailing gendered and racialized ideals of beauty would render them even more marginal in a society where whiteness and masculinity continue to carry both real and symbolic power.

WORKS CITED


