

Kopano Matlwa's "Coconut" and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"

Identity and Belonging- A Comparative Analysis

Manju George

Lecturer – Department of English

Bayan College, Affiliated to Purdue University Calumette, USA

Sultanate of Oman

email: manju@bayancollege.edu.om

Abstract

The research paper explores the themes of identity and belonging in two critically acclaimed literary works: Kopano Matlwa's "Coconut" and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye." A comparative analysis is done to investigate how the characters' experiences shape their sense of self and their relationships with the communities in which they live taking into consideration the recurring motifs, character development, and societal influences. The results reveal the striking contrasts and similarities in the protagonists' journeys toward self-identity and their yearnings for acceptance within their respective environments. By delving deep into these narratives, this research seeks to highlight the universality of these themes and the unique insights provided by each author's perspective.

Keywords: Comparative analysis; recurring motifs; character development; societal influences; self-identity; belonging

1. Introduction

Identity and belonging are essential aspects of human existence, shaping our experiences and perceptions of the world. In the realm of literature, these themes are often explored through the eyes of characters whose journeys of self-discovery unfold in intricate narratives. This research paper embarks on a comparative analysis of identity and belonging in two seminal works of literature: Kopano Matlwa's "Coconut" and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye."

Kopano Matlwa's "Coconut" is a striking debut novel that delves into the life of Ofilwe, a young medical student in South Africa. Through Matlwa's evocative prose, we witness Ofilwe's complex journey of self-identity as she grapples with societal expectations, gender roles, and the legacy of apartheid. Matlwa's novel is a powerful exploration of identity, cultural dislocation, and the quest for belonging in a rapidly changing South African landscape. "I was forever banished from paradise, the village, the motherland, my homeland." - "Coconut" Matlwa, K. (2007).

Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" is a classic in American literature, presenting the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl yearning for acceptance in a world that reveres conventional standards of beauty. Morrison's poignant narrative unveils the struggles Pecola faces as she grapples with issues of race, identity, and self-worth in a racially divided society.

"Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured." - "The Bluest Eye" Morrison, T. (1970).

A comparative analysis of Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" and Kopano Matlwa's "Coconut" provide insights into various themes and stylistic elements in both novels, despite the fact that these works come from different cultural contexts and time periods. An exploration of the rationale for such a comparative analysis can highlight the following details. We find the concepts of racial identity and self – perception in the Bluest eye. The novelist explores the devastating effects of racial prejudice and internalization of beauty standards within the African American community. The protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, longs for blue eyes and blonde hair, epitomizing the societal emphasis based on Eurocentric features. Whereas Matlwa's novel, set in post-apartheid South Africa, delves deep into the complexities of identity in a society grappling with its own history of racial divisions. The term "coconut" refers to someone who is black on the outside but perceived as 'white' or 'Westernized' in their values and behavior.

2. Review of Literature

Comparative literature studies on identity and belonging explore how individuals negotiate their sense of self within the context of different cultures, societies, or historical periods. We can trace such instances from Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" (Indian-British identity) and also Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Americanah" (Nigerian diaspora in the U.S.) Historical Trauma and Identity can be seen in Toni Morrison's "Beloved" (African American identity post-slavery) and also in Art Spiegelman's "Maus" (Jewish identity after the Holocaust). Post-Colonial Identity and Belonging can be witnessed in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" (African identity pre-colonialism) and Derek Walcott's "Omeros" (Caribbean post-colonial identity). Post-colonial feminist theory is chosen due to its relevance in examining the impact of historical and colonial legacies on the construction of identity, particularly for women. Both novels deal with the intersectionality of race, gender, and societal expectations, making this theoretical framework appropriate for analysis.

3. Methodology

The Du Bois' Double Consciousness is used as a literary theory to support the study. Du Bois wrote about the **Post-Reconstruction** experience of being part of society, while still feeling excluded from it. Black Americans bore the same duties as other citizens but enjoyed fewer civil rights. The conflict that occurred in an individual trying to reconcile their [social role](#), personal identity, and internal "strivings," contributed to the feeling of "two-ness," or **double consciousness**. In "Strivings of the Negro People," published in The Atlantic in 1897, Du Bois wrote, "To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships."

This study reveals that most of Toni Morrison's and Kopano Matlwa's black characters aspire to change circumstances by either accepting and adopting the white culture that surrounds them or by outrightly rejecting it as unacceptable. The findings of this study point to several factors as responsible for the loss of identity and belonging and these include various forms of racial segregation, cultural and linguistic differences. This is more pronounced and evident in racially divided communities where people tend to judge one another based on skin color and language differences.

This paper aims to explore how these characters' experiences influence their sense of self and their relationships with their respective communities. The comparative analysis will provide unique insights into the universal themes of identity and belonging, while also highlighting the distinctive perspectives offered by each author.

Morrison's exploration of Pecola's experiences highlights the impact of societal expectations on young black girls and the damaging effects of a narrow definition of beauty on their self-esteem. In a similar way Matlwa's novel examines societal expectations, but in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The protagonist, Ofilwe, faces challenges in reconciling her identity with societal expectations, which adds a layer of complexity to the exploration of gender and race. In matters of narrative style and symbolism, Morrison employs a rich, poetic narrative style and uses symbolism, such as the blue eyes, to convey deeper meanings about racial identity, societal expectations, and self-worth. In *Coconut*, Matlwa employs a unique narrative style and symbolism that reflect the socio-cultural context of post-apartheid South Africa. In delineating the historical Context and Socio-Political Themes, one can identify that Morrison's novel is situated in the 1940's Ohio, reflecting the racial dynamics and societal norms of the contemporary period. However, Matlwa's work is set in the post-apartheid, South Africa conspicuously allows for the exploration of the lingering facts of apartheid, the complexities of the new societal order, and the challenges faced by individuals navigating this transformed landscape. On a cultural level Morrison's, *Bluest Eye* critically examines the prevailing standards of beauty in African American society and how they intersect with its broader societal norms. On the other hand, Matlwa's novel offers insights into how beauty standards and perceptions of race are evolving in the context of a post-apartheid, globalized South Africa.

By conducting a comparative analysis of the twin novels, readers can gain a nuanced understanding of how different authors, separated by time and cultural context, address common themes such as racial identity, societal expectations, and the quest for self-worth. This approach allows for a more comprehensive exploration of these complex issues and facilitates a dialogue about their universality and cultural specificity. Hence the significance of this study (the comparative analysis) lies in the rich exploration of common themes related to identity, race, and societal expectations across different cultural and temporal contexts. It fosters cross-cultural

understanding and promotes empathy by showcasing the commonalities and differences in the human experience. As the novels span different historical periods, (*Bluest eye* in the 1940's and *Coconut* in post-apartheid, South Africa), This temporal difference enables an exploration of how societal norms, expectations, and challenges related to identity have evolved over time, reflecting the changing socio-political landscapes. As matters of gender and racial dynamics, both novels feature female protagonists navigating societal expectations, but in different cultural and historical contexts. This allows for an examination of how gender and racial dynamics intersect and how women, specifically, negotiate their identities within these frameworks.

The narrative styles, symbolism, and literary techniques used by Morrison and Matlwa provide insights into the evolution of literature addressing similar themes. A literary evolution can be seen in the manner in which how the twin authors have dealt with their themes from different generations and cultural backgrounds by employing unique storytelling methods to convey universal truths. Herein lies the global relevance of these novels and the study's significance lies in its potential to contribute to a broader conversation on these issues, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. As for the purpose of education, this comparative analysis provides a platform for discussions on identity, race, and beauty standards, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in these concepts. As for the society, both novels serve as powerful social commentaries, addressing systemic issues and societal expectations.

A comparative study allows for a nuanced exploration of how literature serves as a mirror to society, reflecting and challenging prevailing norms. In fact, studying works from diverse authors and cultural backgrounds contributes to the broader goal of promoting diversity in literature. It highlights the importance of including voices from various perspectives in the literary canon, fostering a more inclusive understanding of the human experience. In essence, the significance of this study lies in its potential to enrich our understanding of common human experiences, foster cross-cultural dialogue, and contribute to a broader conversation on identity, race, and societal expectations through the lens of literature. As for a literary critic, it promotes diversity of literature.

The protagonists of "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison and "Coconut" by Kopano Matlwa, Pecola Breedlove and Ofilwe, respectively, respond to the societal and cultural challenges of their time periods in distinct ways, shaped by the specific contexts in which they find themselves. Pecola internalizes the prevailing beauty standards of her time, which prioritize the western concept of beauty. (*Du Bois, Double Consciousness*) She believes that possessing blue eyes and lighter skin would elevate her status and make her beautiful. This reflects the deeply ingrained racial prejudices of 1940s America. Pecola experiences intense social alienation due to her appearance and economic status. She is marginalized within both the African American and white communities, highlighting the systemic racism and social stratification of the time.

Pecola's response to the challenges of her time is marked by the devastating impact of societal expectations on her psyche. Her desire for blue eyes is not just a superficial wish but a desperate attempt to find acceptance in a world that systematically devalues her racial identity. Ofilwe navigates the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa, a period of transition and societal reconstruction. Her experiences reflect the challenges of building a new identity in the aftermath of a racially divided past. Ofilwe grapples with the expectations placed on her as a black woman in a society undergoing rapid change. The term "coconut" is used to describe her, reflecting the tension between her outward appearance and the perceived 'whiteness' of her values and behavior. (*Du Bois, Double Consciousness*)

Ofilwe's challenges are not solely based on race but also encompass gender and class dynamics. Her response is shaped by the intersectionality of these challenges, offering a nuanced portrayal of identity in a complex societal landscape. Pecola's response is embedded in the racial tensions and prejudices of 1940s America, while Ofilwe's response is situated in the transformative period of post-apartheid South Africa. Both characters grapple with societal expectations but in distinct cultural contexts. Pecola's response is marked by the severe psychological toll of racism and beauty standards, leading to her tragic descent into madness. Ofilwe's response may involve a different set of mental health challenges arising from the complexities of post-apartheid societal expectations.

Ofilwe's narrative reflects a society in flux, attempting to redefine itself after apartheid. Pecola's story, on the other hand, exposes the entrenched racism of her time, contributing to a critique of the societal structures that perpetuate inequality. In essence, the protagonists respond to the challenges of their time periods by internalizing societal expectations, but their reactions are shaped by the specific cultural, racial, and historical contexts in which they find themselves. Pecola's tragedy is deeply rooted in the racial dynamics of 1940s America, while Ofilwe's struggles reflect the intricate tapestry of post-apartheid South Africa.

Pecola's response to societal challenges is deeply influenced by the prevailing beauty standards of 1940s America, which prioritize Eurocentric features. The racial hierarchy of the time, with its systemic racism and colorism, shapes her perception of self-worth. Her desire for blue eyes and lighter skin reflects the internalization of these oppressive norms.

4. Findings

Pecola experiences profound social alienation due to her appearance and economic status. The racial prejudices of the time contribute to her marginalization within both the African American and white communities. This alienation intensifies her desire for acceptance and fuels her tragic pursuit of an idealized beauty that stands in stark contrast to her own racial identity.

The impact of societal expectations on Pecola is severe and psychologically debilitating. Her response is marked by a tragic descent into madness as she grapples with the impossibility of attaining the beauty standards set by a society that systematically devalues her racial identity. This tragic outcome serves as a commentary on the devastating effects of racism on an individual's psyche.

Ofilwe's response is shaped by the post-apartheid South African context, a period characterized by societal reconstruction and transformation. Her experiences reflect the challenges of navigating a society in transition, where racial divisions persist, but the dynamics are evolving. The term "coconut" captures the tension she faces as a black woman navigating a changing cultural landscape.

Ofilwe grapples with societal expectations and stereotypes associated with her racial identity. The term "coconut" suggests a struggle to reconcile her outward appearance with the perceived 'whiteness' of her values and behavior. This reflects the complexity of identity in a society attempting to redefine itself after years of racial segregation.

Pecola's response is rooted in the racial dynamics and prejudices of 1940s America, highlighting the deeply entrenched racism of the time. Ofilwe's response is situated in post-apartheid South Africa, emphasizing the complexities of identity in a society attempting to move beyond a history of racial divisions. Pecola's response leads to a tragic descent into madness, emphasizing the severe psychological toll of racism and beauty standards of her time. Ofilwe's response may involve different mental health challenges arising from the complexities of post-apartheid societal expectations, reflecting the broader impact of historical trauma. Pecola's story contributes to a critique of the societal structures that perpetuate racial inequality in 1940s America. Ofilwe's narrative reflects a society in flux, attempting to redefine itself after apartheid, showcasing the challenges and opportunities presented by societal transformation.

In analyzing the responses of Pecola and Ofilwe, it becomes evident that while their struggles share common themes of identity and societal expectations, the nuances of their responses are shaped by the unique cultural and historical contexts in which they exist.

Ofilwe's response is shaped by the intersectionality of challenges related to race, gender, and class. Her narrative highlights the nuanced layers of identity, as she confronts not only racial expectations but also the complexities of being a woman in a society undergoing rapid change. This intersectional perspective adds depth to the exploration of identity in the post-apartheid era.

5. Discussion

The "Bluest Eye" was extensively analyzed through various lenses, including race theory, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic approaches. The depiction of internalized racism, the impact of beauty standards on self-worth, and the use of symbolism are recurrent themes dealt with in the novel.

The recurring motif of blue eyes symbolizes societal beauty standards and the internalized racism faced by the African American characters. Pecola's desire for blue eyes reflects the

destructive impact of Eurocentric ideals on self-esteem. Morrison employs excerpts from a Dick and Jane primer to contrast with the harsh realities of Pecola's life. This symbolizes the stark divide between societal expectations and the actual experiences of the characters.

The marigold flower symbolizes hope and dreams in the face of adversity. Pecola plants marigolds as a desperate attempt to cultivate beauty in her life, highlighting the fragility of hope in a harsh environment. Morrison uses multiple narrative voices to provide diverse perspectives, allowing readers to understand the experiences of various characters. This technique emphasizes the communal impact of societal expectations on individuals.

In "Coconut," the theoretical framework can illuminate the post-apartheid context through a feminist lens, emphasizing the ways in which societal expectations impact Ofilwe's identity. He employs stream-of-consciousness to delve into the characters' inner thoughts and emotions, offering a raw and intimate portrayal of their struggles with identity and self-worth. Matlwa employs first-person narration, providing readers with direct access to Ofilwe's thoughts and experiences. This choice creates an intimate connection between the reader and the protagonist, emphasizing the personal nature of her journey. Matlwa alternates between Ofilwe's narrative and the perspective of her psychologist. This dual narrative structure allows for a layered exploration of identity and mental health, providing insights into both internal and external perspectives. Matlwa uses language as a tool to explore identity, particularly in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The term "coconut" itself is a linguistic exploration, reflecting the tensions between different cultural and linguistic influences. Matlwa's narrative choices serve as a vehicle for socio-political commentary.

Through Ofilwe's story, she addresses the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa, critiquing societal expectations and exploring the impact of historical traumas on individual. Matlwa's prose is often characterized by its clarity and conciseness. This stylistic choice contributes to the accessibility of the narrative while allowing for a focused exploration of complex themes. She incorporates symbolic imagery, such as the recurring presence of the coconut, to convey deeper meanings. The coconut becomes a metaphor for the protagonist's internal conflicts and the external pressures she faces. (*Du Bois, Double Consciousness*)

In both novels, the authors employ distinctive styles and narrative techniques to convey their thematic explorations. Morrison's rich symbolism and intertextuality in "The Bluest Eye" contribute to a profound exploration of racial identity, while Matlwa's narrative choices and thematic exploration in "Coconut" offer a poignant reflection on identity in post-apartheid South Africa. In fact, it highlights the authors' stylistic choices and thematic intentions.

Both novels explore the intersectionality of race and gender. Pecola and Ofilwe navigate societal expectations that are shaped by historical and colonial legacies, contributing to their struggles with identity. The characters internalize societal expectations, resulting in internal conflicts and self-loathing. Pecola's desire for blue eyes and Ofilwe's self-perception as a "coconut" exemplify the internalized oppression resulting from colonial and gendered expectations. Beauty standards influenced by colonial history play a significant role in both novels. The characters' grapple with these standards, highlighting the pervasive impact of historical and gendered expectations on self-worth.

Comparative analysis of belonging in "coconut" and the "The bluest Eye" reveals the significance of community and societal influences on characters' identities. In Coconut the post-apartheid South African Community setting presents a fractured sense of belonging. Ofilwe grapples with the cultural expectations and the legacy of apartheid, which complicate her quest for self-identity. The dissonance between her aspirations and societal norms leads to a profound exploration of belonging. Similarly, in the "Bluest eye" the racially segregated society of the 1940's America defines Pecola's sense of belonging. The racial dynamics in her community shape her identity and the desire for blue eyes becomes emblematic of her longing for acceptance. Both novels underline how community norms and historical contexts can profoundly affect the character's journeys. Gender and race dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping the characters' experiences in both novels. In "Coconut," Ofilwe's challenges are amplified by her gender, as she navigates the expectations and stereotypes associated with being a woman in the medical field. Matlwa's narrative exposes the gendered aspects of identity and belonging, illustrating the struggles faced by a female protagonist in a patriarchal environment.

Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" vividly portrays the racial dynamics of the 1940s. Pecola's longing for blue eyes is not only a quest for beauty but also an attempt to transcend the limitations of her Black identity in a society that idolizes whiteness. The novel critiques how race and beauty standards intersect in shaping identity and belonging, reflecting the racial struggles of the era.

"Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty." captures Pecola's yearning for societal acceptance and beauty. The use of the term "ugly" and the juxtaposition with "beauty" reveals the harsh beauty standards that Pecola feels compelled to meet. "She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear." The vivid imagery and use of color ("sap-green days") illustrate Pecola's internal struggles. The rhythmic pacing mirrors the societal expectations that dictate her sense of self. "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. This passage delves into the central theme of racial identity and beauty. Pecola's belief that changing her physical appearance will alter her entire identity is a poignant reflection of the impact of societal expectations.

‘Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike.’

Both novels emphasize the role of family, community, and societal expectations in molding the characters' identities. In "Coconut," Ofilwe's strained relationship with her family underscores the impact of familial expectations on her sense of self. Matlwa explores how family dynamics can either hinder or foster an individual's quest for self-identity.

"The Bluest Eye" delves into Pecola's family life, revealing the toxic dynamics that exacerbate her longing for blue eyes. The Breedlove family's story exemplifies how family can be both a source of solace and a catalyst for identity struggles. The novels highlight the complex interplay between familial influences and the characters' identity formation.

The characters' quests for self-acceptance are central to both narratives. In "Coconut," Ofilwe's journey is marked by her struggle to reconcile her personal aspirations with societal pressures. Her ultimate acceptance of her true self, despite societal norms, underscores the strength

of her character. "The Bluest Eye" follows Pecola's tragic quest for self-acceptance through blue eyes. Her heartbreaking narrative exposes the devastating consequences of internalizing societal beauty standards and the longing for acceptance.

Authorial voice and narrative style contribute to the portrayal of identity and belonging in both novels. Matlwa's writing style in "Coconut" is introspective allowing readers to delve deep into Ofilwe's inner world. The first-person narrative immerses readers in Ofilwe's experiences, creating a strong connection between the protagonist and the audience.

"I was a coconut. Brown on the outside, white on the inside".

"I want to be home, and yet I want to be anywhere but here. I want to be visible, but I want to be invisible. I want to be me, but I want to be whoever they want me to be".

Morrison's narrative style in "The Bluest Eye" is rich and poetic, reflecting the emotional depth of the characters' experiences. The shifting perspectives and lyrical prose enhance the reader's engagement with the characters' journeys. Ultimately, while these novels explore universal themes of identity and belonging, they offer unique insights based on the authors' distinct backgrounds and perspectives. "Coconut" provides a glimpse into post-apartheid South Africa, where the struggle for identity is deeply intertwined with the legacy of apartheid. "The Bluest Eye," on the other hand, delves into the complexities of race and beauty in 1940s America, revealing the profound impact of societal norms on individuals' identities.

6. Conclusion

To summarize, the comparative analysis of "Coconut" and "The Bluest Eye" sheds light on the profound themes of identity and belonging. The journeys of Ofilwe and Pecola, set in different cultural and historical contexts, highlight the enduring relevance of these themes. Both novels exemplify the transformative power of personal experiences, the influence of community and societal expectations, and the role of gender and race dynamics in shaping characters' identities.

In "The Bluest Eye," the beauty standards of 1940s America contribute to a sense of alienation. In "Coconut," societal expectations in post-apartheid South Africa, coupled with globalization, shape characters' identities and their feelings of belonging.

The familial unit serves as a critical lens for examining belonging. In "The Bluest Eye," the fractured Breedlove family contributes to a lack of belonging. In "Coconut," the complexities of familial relationships intersect with broader societal changes, influencing characters' perceptions of where they belong. Both novels grapple with questions of cultural identity. In "The Bluest Eye," the characters negotiate their African American identity within a racially divided America. In "Coconut," the multicultural context of post-apartheid South Africa and the influence of globalization amplify the complexities of cultural belonging.

These novels explore how gender intersects with the characters' sense of belonging. In "The Bluest Eye," the societal expectations placed on women shape their identities. In "Coconut," gender dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa contribute to the characters' experiences of belonging or exclusion. The novels navigate the tension between individual and collective belonging. In "The Bluest Eye," characters grapple with individual struggles within a racially charged society. In "Coconut," the characters' journeys intersect with the broader societal changes, highlighting the collective aspects of belonging.

In Conclusion, both "The Bluest Eye" and "Coconut" delve into the complex and nuanced theme of belonging. The characters' struggles are shaped by the cultural, racial, and socioeconomic contexts of their respective narratives. Through a comparative analysis, one can gain insights into the universal aspects of the human experience of belonging while appreciating the unique challenges posed by the specific historical and cultural contexts in each novel.

REFERENCES:

1. Matlwa, K. (2007). *Coconut*. Sceptre.
2. M.H. Abrams, Geoffrey Harpham (2015) *A glossary of literary terms*
3. Gale, Cengage Learning. (2017.). *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye: A Study Guide*.

4. Lister, R., 2009. Reading Toni Morrison. California: Greenwood Publishing Group.
5. Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender by Florence Stratton.
6. "Racialised Beauty: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Kopano Matlwa's Coconut" by Catarina M. Oliveira in Identity Papers: A Journal of British and Irish Studies
7. Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Earl E. Fitz (Book)
8. "Postcolonial Echoes in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Kopano Matlwa's Coconut" by Deborah Shaw in Research in African Literatures.
9. Morrison, T., 1970. The bluest eye. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston
10. MIDZI, P (2021). A Comparative Analysis of Identity And Belonging In Kopano Matlwa's Coconut And Tony Morrison's The Bluest Eye.