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Rediscovering Roots: the South Africa of literature post-colonization

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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For my parents, who have extreme patience through processes like this one, and my nephew, Kellen, whose birth was a great motivator to finish.

With great thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Kit Andrews, without whom this thesis may not have been finished, and would definitely not have been anywhere near as well written.

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I. Introduction

The focus of this thesis is to examine the effects of colonization on the development of cultural identity within South Africa. My approach is to look at prominent authors who are widely recognized as writers who illustrate the ongoing quest in South African for identity through literary work. The novels contain common themes and portrayals of the interactions between the races as well as the overall growth of the characters and their communities.

The events occurring between the time of colonization and the time of freedom have created a unique development of cultural identity among the citizens of South Africa, as even now, sixty years later, they continue attempting to form identities--as a country and individuals. A quest for identity is seen quite prominently in the literature that has developed in the emergence of the new country. Three novels pertinent to this analysis come from two different writers, Dalene Matthee and Kopano Matlwa.

Dalene Matthee's novels emphasize the tie between racial integration issues and cultural identity. *Fiela's Child* addresses the racial tension that remains due to the colonization of South Africa: It is the story of a white child who was found and raised by a black family, but upon discovery was removed from his adoptive family and placed with a white family. Kopano Matlwa addresses the role money and status play in her novel *Coconut* which is the story of two girls, one rich and one poor, trying to find their way in South African society. In this day and age we are all struggling to get the best thing, and usually the materials to make that best thing are found in a country just emerging from years of being under someone else's rule.

South Africa has faced great turmoil after decolonization; there have been race wars and general conflict throughout the country since it became a separate nation—free from European rule. The three novels show the conflict that people in South Africa face: issues of race between the natives and the former citizens of the European nations, wars among the nation itself, and numerous problems that still exist today all occurred after colonization.

Literature is a good way to examine the effects colonization has on a country. Writers tell their stories from multiple perspectives and at the same time can provide a fairly reliable narrative--both sides of the issue can be presented and argued for by the writer objectively. Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* is a more recent novel written by an up-and-coming writer, whereas Dalene Matthee is a tried-and-proven writer whose novels are taught in the schools of South Africa. Each writer provides a look back at the past, as well as an insight into the future.

II. South Africa: A History Abridged

South Africa began as a hunter-gatherer society, as most countries have. But in the seventeenth century, everything changed. The Dutch arrived in 1652, and soon began colonizing South Africa (Chokshi). This group called themselves 'Boers,' and eventually this term evolved into 'Afrikaner.' They settled mainly in the town they named Cape Town, and for a time conflicts between the natives of the area and the Dutch remained restricted to this area. In 1795 Napoleon I and the French changed this by taking over Holland (Crompton). The British, who were engaged in the Napoleonic Wars decided that anyone had a right to the Dutch colonies, and quickly conquered the Cape Colony. After the war Britain claimed the area that would become South Africa. The Dutch were not inclined to give up their claim, and conflict continued in the area between the British, the Dutch, and the native tribes. Eventually the Dutch moved mainly to the north-eastern area, and the British moved east. They existed peacefully for a time, until diamonds and gold were found in large amounts in 1886.

Miners swamped the area and overwhelmed the native population even more. However, no one nation had control over the gold or diamonds, and in an effort to gain control, Britain tried to encourage a revolution among the white population of the area, which was now known as South Africa. They failed. This failure soon erupted into the very real Anglo-BoerWar, from 1899-1903 (Crompton). Great Britain proved the victor, but the tensions that remained caused them to create the Union of South Africa. The governing power was made up of both British and Afrikaners, while ignoring the black population. Due to the unfairness, a middle class group of black South Africans created the African National Congress in 1912. This group was at the core of the civil rights

movement in South Africa. After World War II, a concern rose among the white population that they called the 'Black Peril' (Crompton). They worried that the black population would strike back against them, and the desire to keep the two populations separate grew. In 1961, South Africa officially separated from Britain, and became a country. Due to the rapid growth of the black population, segregation was difficult to maintain. In the 1960's a dark cloud covered the country, as an apartheid, known as the "Great Apartheid," began. The main purpose of the apartheid was to encourage the belief that whites were superior. Before this point, non-white races had been faced with discrimination, but now they were faced with blatantly discriminatory laws. Every South African was categorized by race, and there was very little wiggle room. If someone had a white parent and a black parent, they were considered non-white, no matter what they looked like.

Beyond the classification system, non-white citizens faced harsh discrimination, "All blacks were required to carry 'pass books' containing fingerprints, photo and information on access to non-black areas" (Chokshi). There was a belief that because of the color of their skin they were lesser, and that was what mattered.

Soon the black population was no longer considered citizens of South Africa. The government broke the country up into states or "homelands:" "The idea was that they would be citizens of the homeland, losing their citizenship in South Africa and any right of involvement with the South African Parliament which held complete hegemony over the homelands" (Chokshi). They had no rights, no voting privileges, nothing. Protesting was soon banned when the country declared a "state of emergency" which it could do at

will. There was no way for people to disagree with the racial discrimination and laws that were being passed unless they wanted to be arrested.

Nelson Mandela was a huge player in the quest to end the apartheid, which took thirty years. The first recognition he gained was when he was arrested in 1956, beginning the Freedom Trials. This was his shorter experience in jail, and he created a new section of the African National Congress. When the white population turned violent against the black protesters, Mandela turned to guerilla warfare for answers. In 1963 he was again arrested. He ended up imprisoned for twenty-seven years before he was released with the end of the apartheid. He was not alone in his imprisonment, “Detention without trial for interrogation or 'preventive' purposes, barring access to the courts, lawyers, family or friends has been practised on a wide scale for 30 years. Over 75 000 victims have experienced the detention cells in that time, some for as long as 3 years” (“South African”). Due to his role in the African National Convention, Mandela was one of those blamed when the Prime Minister was shot and killed in 1966, despite being imprisoned. During his time in prison Mandela engaged his fellow prisoners in debates, and became a spokesperson for them. He remained a hero in the eyes of the black protestors, and during this time violence rose due to a lack of leadership. President Botha offered up the opportunity for Mandela to go free, if he renounced the violence (Crompton). Although he was against the violence by this point, Mandela refused to go against his fellow freedom fighters, and in a speech his daughter read for him, declared this to the public. This led to meetings between Mandela and white officials, and the eventual release of Mandela on February 11, 1990. His release signaled the start of a new government that promised more equal treatment among the population, no matter one’s skin color. The

three novels discussed travel this country's journey, beginning in the 1850's with the blatant racism in *Fiela's Child* to the 1930's and government involvement in *Dreamforest* before concluding in the present day issues of the first decade of the twenty-first century in *Cocunut*.

An uphill battle was fought to bring equality to the people of South Africa, and in the end it left a huge number of people questioning their own identities. They were afraid to be identified with any particular group, because that defined them in a permanent and irrevocable way that left scars behind. This problem was compounded by the lack of understanding of what makes up an identity.

III. Theories Behind Culture, History, and Colonization

The question of identity is grounded in theory, and many people have come to the conclusion that the past represents someone's identity. It is important to look not only at the past of the person, but the past of their country and culture. To know who someone is, one has to look at where they came from. The question of a story is one that is addressed throughout history, with no regard to who a person is, or who they were. Story and identity are tied together with a knot so strong it cannot be separated. A person's identity is shaped by their story.

The beginning stage of this analysis is the fact that the past is not removable from someone's present. Edward Said explains in his book *Culture and Imperialism* that, "The main idea is that even as we must fully comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present" (Said 4). Different parts of a person's life cannot be isolated out. It matters what happened to someone twenty years ago just as much as twenty seconds ago. Past actions and events have a tendency to manifest and consume someone as they dwell on it, eventually incorporating the event into the identity. One must take into account where someone comes from as well as where they are now to form a coherent picture. Who someone was, how they were raised, what informed their parents' behavior, all play a role in their identity today. They cannot completely remove themselves from the past; they are bound to the past in a way that cannot be severed. Mannerisms, speech patterns, beliefs, all come from the way their past experiences have informed their behavior. The same is true of a culture--all the bits and pieces of its members and past make it up, and there are many scaled down versions of the culture within the culture itself.

Cultures are made up of many different entities, not just one over-arching identity. According to Said, “Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more ‘foreign’ elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude” (15). Culture is not one thing, it is not informed by one element. This is abundantly clear in countries that were colonized, even after the deconstruction of the colonizing entity. Everywhere one looks, remnants of the country’s ties to their colonizer remain; it cannot be separated because there is no way to remove the roots of the country’s influence on them.

In South Africa the culture has been clouded and covered by imperialism and racial discrimination. Said claims imperialism and colonialism are “supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like ‘inferior’ or ‘subject races,’ ‘subordinate peoples,’ ‘dependency,’ ‘expansion,’ and ‘authority’” (9). This language impacts the way people perceive their identities, they become negative and cause people to distance themselves from their heritage. In South Africa there is an inherent culture of discrimination based on the belief that white is superior, and the richer the better.

Some people attempt to remove the influence of their country by creating a new history. At the base of the search for identity is “The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths, and religions—these too are made possible by a sense of the land reappropriated by its people” (Said 226). Beyond the question of

identity is the question of reality. People try to deny the history that is a part of them and search for something more pleasant, that makes sense to them and fits with their beliefs of who they are. The origin that they want to identify with is the one that came before colonization, which means that they try to move beyond the history that they come from and ignore an entire section of the past. Others try to recreate their identity completely, as if they had no past. Either way, colonization has completely revolutionized the way they see themselves and they try to create a new national identity.

The base of most identities is the national identity. Said explains this by saying, “All nationalist cultures depend heavily on the concept of national identity, and nationalist politics is a politics of identity: Egypt for the Egyptians, Africa for the Africans, India for the Indians, and so on” (267). If one were to ask someone about their national identity they would get a myriad of answers. Identity itself is a muddy area, and the national identity is made up of an immense number of quirks and personal connections for an individual.

This national identity is made clearer by Hamilton who wrote *A Brief History of Biography* which is the first to attempt to identify human identity and the question of the inner life in relation to biography. Hamilton explains the source of identity by stating: “...the importance of identity: the fact that people in social groups derive their sense of belonging, and thus cohesion and confidence, from their sense of personal connection, kinship, and inheritance” (9). The identity of a person is tied up in who they identify with. Everything they are comes from an identity they form off of the backs of someone or something else according to Hamilton. Identity is from the people one surrounds himself with, they cannot simply create one for themselves--it is one that is formed for

them, even when they do not know it themselves. Virginia Woolf believed “...she saw fiction, not nonfiction, as the proper vehicle for intimate life depiction; intimacy, in public hands, could breed contempt” (Hamilton 123). Biographies of real people cannot tell the inner life. There is too much that cannot be known from what other people tell someone. A writer can create a character and give them a back-story and explain their identity in a way a real person could never explain who another person was. There are too many layers that must be dealt with that matter too much.

There are also many conflicts surrounding even the sharing of an inner life that fiction is not hindered by. When writing a biography Virginia Woolf became too

Concerned not to upset Fry’s widow, or scandalize society, or run into legal difficulties, she found herself unable to portray the real Fry—a problem she did not face in her fiction, her private correspondence, or her diary, where she positively reveled in the skewing of personalities and their reputations. (Hamilton 162-163)

She cannot tell a true inner life because the views of other people are so important that she has to hide the truth. In her novels she can tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth about a person because they are just a character, not a real person. Hamilton explains that “Woolf and Strachey correctly perceived the challenges facing print biography: namely, the problem of revealing, in the 1920s and 1930s, the real and private lives of biographical subjects” (164). Private lives cannot be touched because families don’t want their dirty laundry aired. This means the inner life is under-represented in biography because the truth of someone is not allowed to be told. It is much easier for

novels to present the inner life because they are not held back by questions of what the family might want.

The inner life revealed in the novels allows a reader to see Moretti's Bildungsroman journey in *Coconut*. Moretti addresses the differences between the French and English Bildungsroman in his book *The Way of the World*. Moretti introduces the idea of time and identity with a message about youth: "Youth is, so to speak, modernity's 'essence', the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past" (5). A world cannot rely on those who have lived long lives, because long lives mean short futures. Rather, the future lies in youth because they have more time to give, more room for mistakes, and more lessons to learn that can change the path of history. In *Coconut* both characters are on the verge of adulthood—not there yet.

Youth is very important to a Bildungsroman because it is the story of a journey from youth to perceived maturity. Moretti first discusses the typical English Bildungsroman: "...narrative transformations have meaning in so far as they lead to a particularly marked ending: one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless perfectly clear and stable—definitive, in both senses this term has in English" (7). There is a beginning and an ending in the English version. Everything is stable and shows signs of there being certain undeniable points. The person works towards a goal, and what matters in the story is that goal. This is seen in novels like *Pride and Prejudice* where the end goal is marriage and the entire point of the novel is to get the character to the point where they are married. The French Bildungsroman is markedly different: "...what makes a story meaningful is its narrativity, its being an open-ended process" (Moretti 7). The ending does not matter in the French version. All that matters is

the journey the person makes. The process needs to be open-ended because without the opportunity for continuance there is not a real growth shown.

The growth is in the character and the journey. The differences between the two Bildungsromans are further explained from the eyes of the youth: in the English version youth must reach a natural finish in which the journey allows the youth to become an adult with a true sense of who they are. In the French novel, the arrival at maturity is seen as a betrayal to the journey and is undesirable (Moretti 8). The differences in the Bildungsroman are important, because in the English version there is the expectation of a final identity, a belief that experiences will give you an idea of who someone is. But the typical French novel from the eighteenth and nineteenth century does not follow this belief; a conclusion in their minds equals a lack of meaning, and there is no true identity discovered at the end of the journey because an identity is an ongoing process. The identity does not simply come into being because one has had a meaningful experience, but it is the process of many experiences and evolutionary and continuously changing and being redefined that makes up one's identity. Many writers try to capture the journey the youth go through, but writers like Dalene Matthee try to capture the identity and struggle that real people face and bring it to life in their books.

Dalene Matthee was an idealist, and her desire is to tell the story that has to be told. In an essay on Matthee's journey as a novelist, Cathy Knox states "she thinks that she started [writing] as a means of voicing an inner life that no one comprehended" (Knox). She deals with the problems people are facing, and problems that people do not want to face. Matthee researched and contacted people from the area she was writing about. The novels she created were a reality, not just an observation. On *Fiela's Child*,

Francis Levy says “As the drama of his search for identity unfolds—a coming of age that takes him back and forth over the breadth of his country and raises the specter of incestuous passion—the author continually relates that search to fundamental changes affecting the white and black families who claim him” (Levy). At the core of this story is more than just the quest for identity, there is also the effect this quest has on everything and everyone it surrounds. When one questions, everyone questions. Levy goes on to say “At its best *‘Fie!’s Child*’ is a parable that broadens and humanizes our understanding of the conflicts still affecting South Africa today” (Levy). Benjamin represents all of South Africa, and the lack of fairness that began hundreds of years ago, and that still permeates the society. By presenting the conflict as a character, the reader can see it in a way they can relate to, and one nation’s story can be understood.

In much the same way, writers have discussed *Coconut* and its attack on racism and the history that has begun to be forgotten. In a novel on the affect of whiteness and Shakespeare on South Africa, Natasha Distiller specifically references *Coconut*. Distiller begins her discussion by proclaiming what *Coconut* was: “an attack on ongoing systemic racism and its links to what the book sees as the power block that is whiteness and Englishness: the two are inseparable” (20). The colonization of South Africa has essentially created a line in the sand for citizens of South Africa, and what it means to have power. By taking the power and influencing the culture by enforcing their ideals on the natives, white settlers have created a loss of identity. To gain recognition and power the black citizens have to give up where they came from and what that might mean for who they are. She concludes “the argument that to be black means one cannot also own English or modernity is reductive of current identifications and ignorant of an extremely

rich and important local history” (23). Society does not understand that history does not stay in the past, but moves into the future and becomes modern on its own. Cultures are ever changing, and the colonization of South Africa and later racial discrimination cut the legs off of the culture, keeping it from evolving with the new population of South Africa.

Fikile is an extreme example of the disregard for the history of South Africa and the desire to become ‘white’ in some way. Distiller describes Fikile as “striving to differentiate herself from most South Africans and enter a caste whose markers of belonging include various aspects of what Fikile identifies as whiteness” (153). She models herself after the white people she sees in magazines and in person at her job. Fikile sees the black people around her as less than human almost; she loses respect in how they act and sees no value in what they hold dear. Distiller paints *Coconut* as the epitome of what colonization has done to South Africa’s rich culture. It has lost some of its uniqueness, and its citizens are ashamed of who they were born to be.

IV. *Fiela's Child*: A Question of Nature or Nurture

Fiela's Child is the ideal place to start, the examination of a country's culture before it was even a country. The racial tensions that emerge among the characters in this novel only grow more pronounced as history moves on and the journey through the novels continues. Set during the time when diamonds and gold were discovered in South Africa, the continuous changing of hands between white settlers allows the beginnings of racial issues to shine through. The settlers have been in the area long enough to introduce European ideals to the area, and to develop a distaste for the original occupants of the area. Even in the 'boondocks' of the country, like Long Kloof, these tensions are evident. *Fiela's Child* allows the reader to begin the journey for identity. There is no exploration into the reality of someone who has a knowledge of their identity. Instead, the novel focuses on the path one needs to take to get that knowledge.

At the core of this novel is the question of what creates the identity, is it who one is born as, or who they become through circumstances. Benjamin is the child who faces these difficult questions. He is a child of two worlds. When he was only three he was found by a black family wandering around by their home with no idea where he came from. They only knew that a white child must have family looking for him, but they found no one. Unconcerned, Fiela took it upon herself to raise the child, but was discovered after six years by a census taker. He was taken from their family, and delivered to a court where they held his suspected biological mother. When she identified him as her child they returned him to her to be raised. Benjamin spends the rest of his childhood and early adulthood trying to make sense of the warring identities his two families gifted him with.

Fiela's Child is set during a time when the separation of races was extremely important to the community. Fiela is raising a white child, although she and her family are black--a dynamic outsiders are uncomfortable with. Government officials, after finding out why Fiela took Benjamin in, tell her: "You have a white child on your land and in your house among your own children and you know as well as I do that that is not right" (Fiela's 22). There is a distinct separation between the different races that inhabit South Africa due to colonization, and it is clear that there is a hesitance to allow intermingling of these races at a familial level. Because Benjamin is white they do not feel comfortable allowing a black family to raise him, even if they are a reasonably well off black family. When Fiela mentions her plans to buy land she is told by her husband "He'll never let you have another eight; they don't want to see bits of land in Coloured hands any more" (Fiela's 32). This desire for separation continues when the issue of ownership comes up. There is a distinct idea to keep the black population where they are under the European nations, rather than allow any sort of progression forward toward equality.

After Benjamin is taken from his home and first exposed to other white people he experiences the race issues on a new level. The responses of white people he encounters are all extremely alike. A woman he stays with on his way to the courthouse tells one of the men accompanying Benjamin "He called me missus, Ebenezer, it's too terrible. Like a Coloured" (Fiela's 76). The race issue takes on a whole new level when Benjamin interacts with more white people. His speaking patterns and phrases, picked up because he was raised among black children, are now seen as below him. There is an expectation that even though Benjamin is only twelve, and has only known his black family, he

should inherently be able to behave like a white person who was raised by white people. This is almost an argument for nature versus nurture, because he is white he should know that he is “better” than the black family he was raised by. His use of titles when speaking to white people quickly bothers them, and the magistrate who places Benjamin with the van Rooyens tells him: “I never want to hear you use the word master again! You’re a white child and you will learn to speak like a white child” (Fiela’s 94). Knowing how to speak and behave in a ‘white’ manner is supposed to be inherent, because that is what makes them better. Benjamin behaving like a black person goes against everything they believe. It is not something they will accept, ever. Benjamin responds the only way he knows how: ““Please, your worshipful lord, I’m Fiela Komoetie’s child and Selling Komoetie is my father”” (Fiela’s 94). Despite knowing he was raised by a black family, the white community believes he should behave and speak like their children. Benjamin is extremely confused by this, he has been raised to believe that he was no different from his brothers and sisters, so of course he would talk like them. He doesn’t understand how what he is saying is wrong. Benjamin recognizes that he is different from his black family, but he also has an explanation for it, “He knew he was white and his mother and father and Dawid and Tollie and Kittie and Emma, brown, He was white because he was the hand-child” (Fiela’s 102). There is never an attempt to deny Benjamin an identity by the Komoeties, instead they do their best to incorporate themselves into his identity. They allow him to recognize his differences, but they also want him to see how he is similar. Until he is brought into the outside world he knows who he is, but the moment he is without his family the white people try to force him to redefine himself.

There is little respect among the different races, and a definite feeling of superiority is felt by the white population. After interacting with Benjamin for one day Elias van Rooyen, his father, cannot accept his black characteristics: “The little brat would realize that it would not pay him to play tricks, that he would be made white again and learn to be obedient. He was no longer in Long Kloof” (Fiela’s 156). There is a distinct lack of respect here among the different regions, being someone who works in the forest Elias van Rooyen does not believe that the Long Kloof area is worth anything. He is proud of what he does, what he has done, and where he came from. He can’t reconcile the idea that the child he sees as his might think otherwise, so clearly he is playing tricks, like a black person would. Even when Fiela tries to appeal the decision, like an educated person, she faces difficulties because of her race. Rather than thank her for taking Benjamin in the magistrate is frustrated and angry with Fiela’s actions: “The mother of the child immediately identified him amongst four others!’ His temper was roused now. ‘The fact that the child had been in your home for nine years, unlawfully, is a serious offence; we shall have to consider bringing a case against you”” (Fiela’s 170). The logic of a white person is clearly seen as superior here: after not seeing her son for nine years Barta was able to recognize Benjamin as her own, so no arguments Fiela, a reasonably educated black woman, could make would be accepted. Instead her actions are an affront to the law and they threaten her for acting in the preservation of Benjamin’s life. Fiela is quick to respond to people who tell her removing Benjamin was for the best “Say what you mean—say, because Benjamin is a white foundling. If he had been like us, no one would have said a word about it!” (Fiela’s 174). Fiela clearly knows she is under this persecution because of her race, not because she acted incorrectly or maliciously. Her

comments bring up good questions. Her motives are doubted when she took in a child, but the van Rooyens' motives are never questioned after they lose, and then claim to find their child. There is no proof asked for other than Barta's word that the child is indeed hers.

The separation goes beyond just skin color. When her husband asks if she would support one of their poorer neighbors raising a white child Fiela reminds him "There are Coloureds and Coloureds, just as there are whites and whites" (Fiela's 174). The distinctions here are interesting, even if they are not further explained. The quest for identity involves separating one's self from others who might be identified as like you. There are distinctions even between races, and this is true wherever one might go. The idea is that the Komoeties have done something to set themselves above the other black families. They are not content with the status quo, but push to move beyond it and be recognized for what they have achieved. After Benjamin is taken to the van Rooyens he is bothered by the fact that his mother has not come for him, "Was that why his mother did not come? Because he was white? No, he could not believe that" (Fiela's 190). Even now his identity has become a question mark; he has been with the van Rooyens for a few months, and he has been told because he is white he cannot have a black family. Benjamin is slowly beginning to distance himself from the Komoeties, because even though they were his family, they have not come for him, and he does not understand why. He begins to question if it is because of him that they do not come--something he did that causes them not to want him--if there is something wrong with him as a person.

Benjamin is not the only one whose identity undergoes change. Nina, his sister, has always been a free spirit, and she runs away from home when her father tries to rein

her in. When she later encounters Benjamin and explains why she can't go back Benjamin sees Nina in a new light: "She suddenly became still and there was sadness in her. For the first time he realized that somewhere inside her there was pain that no one had ever known or cared about. The naughtiest child of Barnard's Island—but she was no longer a child and she could no longer go and find comfort in her strange love for the Forest or her mouth-organ and bottles" (Fiela's 281). The search for one's identity creates a blind man: if you do not know who you are, you cannot see who others have become. Until this moment Benjamin sees Nina as a child without a care in the world, but suddenly there is a burden on her shoulders, much like his own, that he never saw before. They are suddenly similar, and this realization is shocking for Benjamin. His questions of identity have led to her questioning her own identity, and while they have been growing they have been reshaping who they are, even if they aren't seeing it until this moment.

After a disconcerting encounter with Nina Benjamin starts to question how to find the truth of his identity. He finds himself attracted to Nina, and because he does not believe he could feel this way about his sister Benjamin realizes "If Nina was not his sister, he wanted to know the truth. How? Where did you find the truth if it had been buried for so long that it might be lost altogether?" (Fiela's 284). This question is what sits at the heart of the identity of South Africa, and any other country that has been colonized. How can they discover the truth of who they are when the past has been covered up by what other people want them to believe? Benjamin has been told so many conflicting stories about who he is that he cannot tell what is true and what is false anymore. He is stuck with a pile of information to sift through and hope that he will be

able to discover the truth. All that is left to him is to go back to the beginning and hope to uncover what really happened.

When Benjamin decides to go to Long Kloof and speak with Fiela, Nina cannot understand. She doesn't see how Benjamin can feel like black people are his family when he is white, and Benjamin tells her "I did not determine my fate, Nina. It's a mystery that's destroying me" (Fiela's 296). For Benjamin, his identity and his fate are tied together; he cannot become anything without knowing who he is. He desires to know where he came from. He is stuck in the past because that is all there is of him; he was torn from a family he loved because of who he supposedly is, and now he questions who they told him he was. Benjamin can't continue without knowing. Creating his own identity is his way of coping with this issue, but his life has been steered by so many different people that until he knows if they were steering him correctly he cannot move on. It's a question that causes distance between characters, because Nina has always known who she is and where she came from, and while she has taken time to mature into her identity, she does not know what it is like to not have one at all.

When Fiela first sees Benjamin she is struck by how he has changed, "He was no longer Benjamin, her hand-child—he was a man. A white man. Her hands wanted to reach out to him but kept hanging at her sides. Never had she thought of him as white—grown up, yes, but never as white" (Fiela's 302). Despite everything that has happened, the identity that remained with Fiela is that of a child. She did not define Benjamin by his race, but by the fact that she raised him, and for a shocking moment that fact is called into question. She has always seen him as her child, and for a split second he belongs to another mother. He is someone she does not recognize at all. This all changes when

Benjamin acknowledges the relationship they have: “Ma. He called her ma” (Fiela’s 302). The moment Benjamin chooses to greet her as his mother he is reaffirming his identity through the eyes of Fiela, and even in himself. This was the one spot where he did not have to fight and struggle to find and claim an identity; he knew who he was. Before he leaves Long Kloof Benjamin admits, “The day I came back, when I stood down there in the road, I knew I had come home again. At last” (Fiela’s 306). Home is another abstract concept, like identity, but by choosing to identify Long Kloof and Fiela as home he is carving out who he sees himself as, and it is very contrary to what the world has told him. He is not just a white man. Instead, he is everything that was taught to him by Fiela and his siblings--the pieces that were torn away from him that he is now choosing to seize back.

After leaving Long Kloof to go see Barta van Rooyen, Benjamin feels the clashing of his two identities, “Somewhere in the night he had the most peculiar feeling that he was slowly walking out of Benjamin Komoetie and catching up with Lukas van Rooyen” (Fiela’s 310). This is a chilling image, because of the battle that happens between two parts of the identity. Benjamin cannot be both Lukas and Benjamin in his mind: he is in one situation Benjamin, and in a new situation Lukas. He fights to know who he really is, and he is fighting with himself. If he accepts one identity he gets what he wants, but might lose who he really is. On the other hand, if he accepts the other identity he loses what he wants, but knows who he is. In his mind there is no hybrid-identity. There is no way to combine the two identities into one for him; it never even enters his mind. When it comes to making a decision and finding his identity he will have to choose who he will be. If one identity survives, the other must die. After learning that

he is not Lukas van Rooyen Benjamin tells someone he works with: “And from now on I will be known as Benjamin Komoetie. It’s not a new name, it’s my old name. I will help out until Kaliel is well enough to take over again, and then I’ll be going back to the Long Kloof. To my people” (Fiela’s 349). Identity is as much a product of choice as it is a product of circumstance, and sometimes it is the circumstances one finds himself in that leads to a true understanding of who he is. When it comes to identity there is an ownership that must happen. Benjamin attempts this when he claims it is not a new name but an old name he will be known by. People are not small pieces, but the sum of their parts. By claiming the name his black family gave him, he claims his parts to make a whole identity. He decides what is important to him.

For Benjamin the question of identity is a real question: he does not know who he is or where he came from because he appeared on Fiela Komoetie’s doorstep when he was three. For South Africa the question is not as literal, instead it’s about reconciling who they were before colonization with who they are afterwards. Once that has been accomplished they have to find a balance between the past and the future.

V. *Dreamforest*: Who Our Parents Made Us

Where *Fiela's Child* showed the journey to knowing one's self, *Dreamforest* confronts the problem of how to become comfortable with this knowledge, when everyone else wants to change you. Set eight decades after *Fiela's Child*, *Dreamforest* shows the development of the woodcutter society, as well as the attempt to dismantle it. Historically, the government wanted people where they put them, and they wanted control over resources that were growing scarce. They removed people from the place they knew, and put them in an environment they did not know how to survive in.

In this novel, the main character has a general idea of where she came from; it is the future she has trouble coming to terms with. *Dreamforest* is the story of a girl, Karoliena who was raised by her mother in the forest society of woodcutters after her father died. Her mother wants her to do better in life than the opportunities available in their village and sends her to a nearby village to further her education. Because of this, she becomes engaged to a man who lives in the village, and eventually marries him. The entire time Karoliena questions what is happening in her life, leading her to leave her husband soon after their marriage. She returns to the forest and tries to help the people who live there as the government tries to remove them from the forest and resituate them in villages. Her identity bounces back and forth between two group identities, the forest and the village, as she struggles to create a whole identity of her own.

The insight into the search for identity in *Dreamforest* comes at the beginning of the novel. Karoliena Kapp begins by really looking at herself and trying to discover who she is. Karoliena's identity issues stem from the lack of a father figure. After her father dies she cannot deal with the pain and "...she decided she should find herself another

father” (*Dreamforest* 7). Her identity is tied to where she came from, and who she came from. She doesn’t believe that she has a self until she has a father-figure. A huge part of identity comes from a person’s family tree and the knowledge passed down by parents about their family history. This is especially true in a country that has questions about where they came from because of all the gaps that stand in the country’s history. Many of Karoliena’s problems come from not knowing who her father is and developing a lack of identity and awareness because of it. She quickly begins trying to find another father to attempt to fill the void in her caused by his absence, “Six months after her father’s death, her mother married Freek van Rooyen. For a while she thought she had a new father. But then she discovered that he was stupid, he could not even read. Her father had been a clever man, he could read” (*Dreamforest* 10). People cling to what they know and they self-identify with that. Karoliena does not want to even consider Freek van Rooyen as a father figure because she sees him as less and different from what she previously had in her biological father. Until she meets his equal she is stuck in a place where she cannot claim an identity because she ties her identity completely in where she comes from. And eventually she loses that as well.

Karoliena adopts a father outside of her family when she comes to the conclusion that she will never find one through her mother. After cycling through the relationships her mother has had with multiple men, Karoliena looks closer at all the men in her life for a father figure: “She hadn’t realised until then that she had found herself another father. Mister Fourcade was her father. The truth hit so suddenly and so strongly that she had to say something to get away from it” (*Dreamforest* 57). When Karoliena cannot create a history of her own, she adopts a new one; she finds a father figure, which is what she

needed. At the base of identity is where someone comes from. They have to find that, and when they can't, they adopt one. A history can be created, and sometimes it's alarming to come to that realization. While struggling to reconcile and create an identity learning you can manufacture an identity and assimilate the new information into your identity can be explosively destructive. It can cause a fracture in the true identity that causes instability in the rest of your life. Karoliena wants a father, but finding out she has one takes effort to process and incorporate into her knowledge of who she is.

Karoliena's mother tried to influence her identity by giving her the opportunities she never had. Even though Karoliena does not get along with her mother, her actions force Karoliena to realize "Her mother was sometimes quite knowledgeable. If she had been educated she might have had a different life" (*Dreamforest* 258). Karoliena's problems stem from her mother as well: a mother who is trying to live a life through her daughter. Opportunities are very limited for Karoliena and her mother, but her mother is determined that Karoliena has a better life than she did. Sometimes parents do what they can to improve the life of their child, but sometimes it doesn't really help.

With even her mother against her, Karoliena's journey through identity and culture is complicated. Others identify her as a specific kind of person as a child, "Poor white. She hated the term. She had been in primary school when she first heard the words. They were like a blow that knocked you into the gutter and turned you into an inferior being" (*Dreamforest* 3-4). Culture comes down to more than just where you are from, region and country. It is more than just race. People begin to segregate themselves from each other to differentiate, to claim something for themselves. Sometimes it seems to go beyond the norm. This is seen everywhere, whether it is South Africa and "poor

whites” or the United States and “trailer trash.” Part of culture is choosing what does not belong with you, and that usually means that something is beneath you. A closer look at each subgroup would most-likely reveal there is a separate subgroup they also see as lower than themselves. This ends up in an ever cycling loop; there is no true bottom of the pack, because every group wants to differentiate themselves from each other. It’s clear in Karoliena’s society finds it easy to make judgments about people, and there is little wiggle room, “There are two kinds of poor people: the good poor and the bad poor” (*Dreamforest* 22). This further break down of the subgroup shows that people like the distinctions they can make from each other. If they have to be poor white, they are going to be the good poor, not the bad poor. Karoliena is trying to make sense of a world that tries to be as black and white as possible when there is an avalanche of gray covering everything. Identity is not as simple as she wants it to be, so she struggles.

The subgroup identities can often be spotlighted by other subgroups that come across as better than them, which is not always seen as positive. Karoliena has been told her entire life to hide from people who were different than her family, “Important people. Then her mother used to say: sit tight, hide yourself, don’t let them stare at us. Later she learned to make them gape at her, deliberately...” (*Dreamforest* 5). Part of developing a culture of your own is hiding it away from everyone else while it is in the beginning phases. We tend to not believe that who we are is safe in someone else’s hands while the identity is still in its blossom phase. Once we become used to the people around us, and the staring that accompanies it, we find it easier to push our identity and culture at them, leaving no room for interpretation. We become a spectacle, trying to show them that who we are is perfectly acceptable, which is what Karoliena is trying to do. She finds her

identity as a forest person important, even though she struggles to balance this identity with her emerging one. Her own experiences with the village people help cloud her search for identity, “‘One of the forest children,’ the village woman said loudly, nose in the air. Then she added: ‘Poor whites. An enormous problem’” (*Dreamforest* 7). The tendency to put labels on people is a human one, but this same labeling impulse causes people to try to fit themselves under one label. When Karoliena asks her teacher why a woman in the village called poor whites a “poison,” he tells her, “White people who are very poor, he replied. Like most of the woodcutters. It was not that she could not understand the English words; she just wanted to make sure. The only thing she could not understand why the words had made her feel so bad, so crushed” (*Dreamforest* 8). The labeling process is a crippling one, people suffer from it, and it causes confusion. As identity is formed, people begin to try to associate themselves with the ‘better’ labels, because they don’t hurt. They disassociate themselves from their past and anything that can cause them to hurt, which is a dangerous path to walk.

People make it impossible for someone to change their circumstances, even without labeling them. Once you were in a category, you were in it for life-no changes. Karoliena is unique in that, “Forest people marry forest people. Only once in a while did it happen otherwise” (*Dreamforest* 36). What little identity the people have they cling to; the idea of venturing outside of their known status is foreign to them. It is also foreign to those who are not forest people; like stays to like. People tend to associate with those who are most familiar to them. This classification extends beyond just marital status, “Wood grows in the forest, it has to be cut and dragged out. It’s hard work. Who must do it? The woodcutters. Not the wood-buyers, they’re far too rich and important to do it

themselves. How do they keep the woodcutters cutting? By keeping them poor” (*Dreamforest* 14). There seems to be a cognizant attempt to keep people within their social status. The poor get poorer, the rich get richer. This happens all over the world—it is an attempt to keep the status quo. Those who are being failed in this situation tend not to be able to pull themselves out, or they do not possess the knowledge that would help them move above their current status.

Karoliena has managed to make it out of the cookie-cutter her society wanted her in, although it does not make her any more confident in who she is. Karoliena regrets her decision to marry Johannes and leave the forest,

No, it wasn't the old people's words that were mocking her. It was the words of the man from parliament—that the poor were stumbling to the cities in search of relief. She had stumbled after Johannes to get out of the forest, to get out of her poor white skin; she had followed him for seven weeks—long past the point where she should have turned around.

(*Dreamforest* 85)

She slowly begins to realize that the life she created outside of the forest, the life that was handed to her by her mother, is not the life that she wants either. In an attempt to find herself she struggles between two sides pulling her and the grass does not seem to be greener on the other side. Eventually, you realize that the crossing over does not help; there is no saving from a past, no escape. She realizes she cannot change who she was to fit who they want her to be. After Karoliena leaves her husband, one of the women who attended their wedding commented “The dear man didn't realize that the gap between the forest and civilisation was well nigh unbridgeable” (*Dreamforest* 89). People like to

believe that anyone can change where they came from, but it's an essential part of who we are, and part of growing into someone else is incorporating where we came from into something new.

Before she marries Johannes Karoliena can't help panicking, "Dream and reality had started to merge, faster and faster, till she could no longer separate them" (*Dreamforest* 87). She is beginning to get what she wants and what is reality mixed up in her head. She knows what she wants, but she is not strong enough to follow it, so she is stuck in the reality of marrying Johannes. Eventually Karoliena comes to realize she is lost in the world she inhabits, "The outside world [is] a confusing place. She no longer belonged here" (*Dreamforest* 10). She makes the decision to leave because she doesn't fit in, again. She continually finds fault with the life she is living because she cannot decide who she is and where she is going. Karoliena is firmly rooted in the idea that the here and the now are what matter, not the then. She doesn't understand that when we leave somewhere and come back there is only so much we can relate to anymore. Karoliena tries to explain to Johannes why she leaves, "Johannes, I found out too late that it was not me who was trying to live in the village. It was someone Miss Ann and Mrs Cuthbert put together" (*Dreamforest* 123-124). She has begun to realize that who she is when she is in the village is not really her. The identity created and presented to Johannes is one that was put together in an effort to give her a better life, but it's a false life, and Karoliena has endured that too much already. She sees her entire life as false, because she sees her identity as faulty; without an explanation for who she is now, she can't face life now.

Part of Karoliena's search for her identity is in the advice other people, those she trusts, give her. Karoliena identifies with the forest, and sees it as a living thing that it is

trying to help her, “Perhaps there was a spirit inside her, like the tree spirit she had seen that lightning-filled day, and it was telling her to go back to the forest” (*Dreamforest* 91). She has found so much comfort in the forest and it plays such a huge part in who she is that she cannot help trying to form a kinship with it through their spirit. She wants to adopt the identity it already has. People search for clues when it comes to discovering information, and Karoliena believes the forest is sending her these clues. She wants a guide to her identity because she’s lost.

The attachment Karoliena has to the forest is not enough, though, and she continues her search for a guide closer to her home. Her continual struggle for answers leads to Mister Fourcade telling her to slow down, “He told her that if she would only sit still in one place for long enough, the forest would come to her” (*Dreamforest* 115-116). She has always been moving too quickly to really take anything in. Her identity is hidden from her because she hasn’t slowed down and taken a look at it. She questions where she comes from and where she is going, but because she cannot bring together all of her identity she can’t make heads or tails of any of it. Identity cannot be dived into, it is a gradual understanding of a self that is constantly in motion: shifting and changing. Karoliena seeks advice from Oldman Botha about what makes a person who they are, “Nothing. That’s how life sorts us out: bad does not become good and good does not turn bad. You are what you are” (*Dreamforest* 124). She’s informed that you cannot change who you are, there is no one day where suddenly everything changes. It’s the answer she’s looking for, but can’t accept. Karoliena doesn’t know who she is, so this answer doesn’t help her. She wants a less cut and dried answer that allows her some comfort, but that’s not the way life works. People are not able to fabricate identities for themselves.

They may be able to fake being someone else for a while, but the habits that are ingrained in them from years of repetition will come out.

Sometimes, the fabrication can be of who we might have been. Before Karoliena leaves her husband she cannot help but wonder about what she could have been, “As she was writing a question formed in her mind: was the greatest chance she had thrown away in her life the chance to become a teacher? How would she ever know?” (*Dreamforest* 128). We are constantly haunted by the might-have-beens, and these shape us as well; they become part of our identity: our regrets are us, and they inform our choices. Eventually the quest for identity moves beyond the question of past and future, and focuses in on who the person is. The search turns to might-have-been and what choices should have been changed. A person can lose himself by wondering how he might be different if he had lived a different life. It’s a cycle that is exasperated by the fact that Karoliena can’t accept where she comes from. She believes that her identity has to be found somewhere, and so she continues searching. Karoliena cannot settle on an identity, and has to continue the search. Until a person accepts who they are and that multiple facets inform an identity, they continue to struggle.

Karoliena finds peace when she finally accepts the multiple facets. The weight of the world had been on her shoulders, but with her acceptance it felt like “One by one her fears left her. She felt as if she had been cleansed and set free. She was good. She was a human being” (*Dreamforest* 266). Along the journey to find herself, Karoliena stumbled through multiple problems, and she tried to solve them by becoming someone else, something else. It isn’t until she goes back to where she truly begins, as a human being, that her identity starts to heal. She begins to build who she is from the ground up, trying

to understand that her life plays a part in her identity. When she starts to grasp this, it becomes easier. There are no other voices telling her who she has to be, there is only the knowledge in the deep of her. Karoliena's journey was about what was at the root of things, "It seemed that some mysteries lay too deep in one's heart, and they didn't want one to think about them too often. Only to know that they were there" (*Dreamforest* 280). She wasn't able to accept herself as a person because she denied the mysteries of who she was. Now that she has accepted that they are there, even though she doesn't know what they are, she can move forward.

Karoliena tries to reconcile her life with who she is now. Her time in the forest has changed her allowed her to find closure with a part of her life: "The first night that she spent alone in the little plank house it felt as if someone had died there. It was an ending. Of something. Of everything. Of the part of her life that started the day she left Johannes" (*Dreamforest* 286). Karoliena begins to separate who she is from everything in her life, she wants to re-identify who she is. There is an assumption that she can create neat little endings in her life, but every choice influences the next one. She takes into consideration the way a previous choice ended up when making another choice. She attempts to separate her identities, "Before that day she had been a different Karoliena Kapp. After that day she became yet another Karoliena – and now she was going to look for a place where she could once more become a new Karoliena" (*Dreamforest* 286). While she has separated who she is, she is still struggling to realize that she cannot just discard who she was to become someone else. It's a battle to figure out how to assimilate who you are, not remove one identity to create a new one. She wants to shed a cocoon

like a butterfly, but at the center of a butterfly is still a caterpillar. She can't shed everything she was before she left, and she can't just create a new identity now.

Karoliena eventually returns to Johannes, because she has a better grasp of who she is, even though she can't identify it yet. When she returns to him after living in the forest for years despite their marriage, Karoliena can't help but think, "Your wife does not quite know where she belongs. At night she longed for the forest. During the day Johannes taught her the skills of running" (*Dreamforest* 306-307). There are two sides to Karoliena, and they fought for so long over her. She couldn't admit that both parts were still her, because that meant that she would always be a person of two worlds. Sometimes that happens, every person lives with their feet in two different puddles. There is no shame in a rich cultural identity that has many faces, but she's still discovering that. While she accepts this, it's still hard for her to move beyond it, "She would have to step very carefully if she was to stay on the bridge" (*Dreamforest* 309). The bridge is her path between who she was and who she is becoming. She needs to stay on it to continue on her journey and not fall back into her past confusion. Her journey cannot end where she is, because that's not the way identity works. Being comfortable with who you are and where you came from is a constant battle that leads people through extreme terrain along the path to knowing who they are. She has to keep pushing forward, just like everyone else. There is no happy end to who you are; until the day you die you continue to add faces and pieces to your identity.

Karoliena's search for identity began with a lack of understanding into what made up her. She still doesn't have a full picture of who she is, but identity is not always about the end result; sometimes it's about the process that gets you there. Karoliena's journey is

a common one, made up of confusion and loss, because so many people in the world don't know where they came from. It's what makes her story worth telling: identity is what you make of it, not what someone else can make you see.

VI. *Coconut*: A Look at the Present

The final novel takes place in the present, and in a very different environment. Rather than being on the outskirts of the country, *Coconut* is set in the middle of society. The lines are blurred, but the division is still apparent. What is even more apparent is the desire to ignore where one came from. Even after Mandela began the move to create equality, there are still people who do not receive it. They have access to literature that tells them they should have more rights, and they know there are places out there where treatment is at least a little more equal. So they want, and they deny where they came from in order to get the recognition they deserve. *Coconut* takes the reader on the entire journey of identity, and the characters focus on their maturation and goals of acceptance and equality--embodying the French Bildungsroman.

In *Coconut*, the question of identity is about interpretation, and the question is the grass greener on the other side. Kopano Matlwa's novel *Coconut* deals heavily with the issues of identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Even though the majority of the "issues" have been settled in South Africa, there is still an overwhelming sense of confusion among the emerging group of young adults. The most important feature in this novel is the loss of identity due to the confusion of everything happening around them. The novel presents a juxtaposition of two black young females, set up to allow a direct comparison of their wants, desires, and identities. Matlwa's novel goes back and forth between two characters' points of view—Fikile and Ofilwe—who struggle with their identity in South Africa. Fikile is without immediate family, so she lives with her uncle. She has a job to allow her to support herself somewhat and provide money for her uncle--although she feels the job is beneath her. All she wants in the world is to move up and be

of a higher class. Ofilwe is her opposite. She has a family that has done very well in society, and they manage to move between the white and black societies relatively easily due to the money her parents make. However, she is still extremely unhappy with her lot in life. She is very aware that her skin color makes her stand out as an undesirable acquaintance in their social sphere.

Fikile, who prefers to be called Fiks, is determined to move up in the world and refuses to identify with her own race. After spending a summer looking at gossip and entertainment magazines from the United States featuring mainly white people, Fiks realizes something very important about herself “It was like I was a puzzle piece, pulled out of the puzzle and bent and now I could never fit back in. I’d seen pictures of another life, a better life, and I wanted it” (Matlwa 168). Fiks sees herself as no longer fitting in with who she used to be, and even who she was at one time supposed to be. Because of what she has experienced through her reading she feels like the basic core structure of who she is has been changed and that she won’t ever fit where she used to. She believes she belongs somewhere else, somewhere better now. All of the people she reads about are white upper class people, and it seems to her like they have what Fiks believes she deserves. What Fiks does not realize is that being wealthy, which is what Ofilwe already possesses, will not give her the identity and acceptance she craves.

Ofilwe separates herself from people who don’t fit her expectations of society. She is told when she was younger ““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. Then you will turn back, but there too will you find no acceptance, for those you once rejected will no longer recognize the thing you have become. So far, too

far to return. So much, too much you have changed. Stuck between two worlds, shunned by both” (Matlwa 93). It has been pointed out to Ofilwe by her aunt that she is attempting to do something that is not going to work. Her aunt cares about her and wants her to be happy, and she realizes the path Ofilwe is on will not lead to any happiness. She will never be able to be white because she is not white, but by the time she realizes this she will be so far gone on this path that even people of her own color will not accept her. Her struggle is deeper than Fiks’ struggle to simply ignore her race and be better because Ofilwe is black and she is rich, but she still isn’t happy. She keeps striving to be what society has told her is better and is unable to form an image of herself because she cannot separate who she is from who she is “suppose” to be. What Fiks’ and Ofilwe’s identity turmoil comes down to is their desire to be white.

Both Fiks and Ofilwe want to be “white” because they think this will raise their status in society. Ofilwe wants to be white because they are the people who she sees as the ones she can look up to. After being confronted by her brother, Tshepo, Ofilwe realizes

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

The role models she has at home are people she feels are missing something, clinging to something that does not exist. Because of this she is subconsciously searching for something more, something better than what she has. Because of her experiences Ofilwe

is of the opinion that white is what she needs. Her identity is being shaped by the images that she has seen around her—not of real people, but the people in magazines who she “should” look up to. Her identity is subconsciously influenced by the idea that being white is what makes someone successful and better.

Soon the idea ‘white is better’ moves from subconscious to conscious when Fiks is faced with decisions about her life and future. When asked by a teacher what she wants to be when she grows up Fiks replies: “‘I will be white if I want to be white. I don’t care what anybody thinks.’ ‘But why would you want to do that, dear?’ ‘Because it’s better.’ ‘What makes you think that Fikile?’ ‘Everything.’” (Matlwa136). Fiks believes that white is better. She acknowledges this, she isn’t hiding from it. But she is basing this off of experiences she has as a child, and not even real experiences, but what she reads in a magazine. The people she sees as being better off in life are white, and she wants to assume their identity. But by doing so she is losing her identity. She is becoming so captured by the image she has of white people that she completely disregards any identity she could have as a black woman. The loss of identity by Fiks and Ofilwe are of their own creation, they refuse to identify as black and are not actually white so they are caught in limbo, not truly fitting into either world.

Fiks and Ofilwe from Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* both have issues with their identity which is caused by their interpretation of what is around them. Fiks and Ofilwe are trying to adopt someone else’s identity as their own. Identity cannot simply happen, as Fiks and Ofilwe are struggling to find out; identity is something that is developed from the acceptance of what one is. A person cannot adapt an identity from someone else, they have to forge their own through the fires of their experiences.

Coconut's inner life and human identity are more easily represented because it is a work of fiction. Fikile, who prefers to be called Fiks, is determined to move up in the world and refuses to identify with her own black race and wants to be white. While going to work one day Fiks looks around her and thinks

I am not one of you, I want to tell them. Some day you will see me drive past here in a sleek air-conditioned car, and I will roll up my windows if you try to come near me, because I am not one of you. You are poor and black and I am rich and brown. (Matlwa 140)

Fiks refuses to identify with the people who are like her. She does treatments and buys things and is employed at a place where she can pretend she is something else. Even her identification of her skin color reflects her desire to be something else: she is not black, she is brown. She believes that if enough is done, if she distances herself from these people—these black people—enough she will no longer be black. Fiks believes that she can make herself white. While talking with the people who come to the café she works at Fiks thinks

The more time I spent with these people, listening to their stories, peeking in on their day-to-days, the more certain I was that the lives they lived were a reflection of the life I was born to live. I never did have the stomach for poverty. I am too sensitive. I could never deal with all that trash. (Matlwa 169)

This just seems very ridiculous. She is basing her judgments on the snapshots she gets of these people's lives when they come into a restaurant where she is a waitress. They only reveal what they want to reveal. Fiks is making her choices based on incomplete

information: she doesn't know what else is out there and anything about the challenges, because it is not all roses. Her lack of information causes her to deny who she is at this time because she is identifying with her ideal.

A large part of Fiks' identity is tied up in her denial of who she is. After making a mistake at work and being scolded in front of a customer Fiks thinks "I am tired of waiting, waiting for the day when it will all be different, when it will be my turn, my story, my rose" (Matlwa 181). Fiks believes that by denying everything that happens, by waiting for what she wants to happen, she will magically get everything. That it will magically change. Her embarrassment over what happened causes her to distance herself even further from her identity as a waitress and a black woman because that is not what is going to get her anywhere. If she is someone else maybe she will be successful. Fiks finds no problem with her lies about her past: "The pretend stories of my life serve the purpose they are required to fulfill, 'Fake it 'til you make it'. I feel no shame at my slight stretch of the truth" (Matlwa 147). Fiks does not even feel guilty for the lies she tells, she sees them as serving a purpose, and in this case the purpose they serve is creating an identity that fits her. She thinks by being someone she is not she will fit in. And she wants to fit in, because what white people, and people who have lived adventurous lives, have is better than what she has. During a math class when Fiks learns the concept of infinity she thinks "I would leave this life of blackness and embark on something larger than large and greater than great, something immeasurable and everlasting" (Matlwa 171). There is a journey that Fiks wants to go on, to find herself, or who she thinks she should be. She wants an identity that is not tied to who she was born as, because she does not like who she was born as. She does not like being black, she wants to be white. Fiks

wants to be so important, and great, that the color of her skin will not matter. She dreams of being in a place where her black skin is as good as someone else's white skin. She believes that infinity is whatever she makes of it, and that is everything she longs for—to be in control of herself and her destiny. She is not trying to fit in with what someone else thinks she should be—like Ofilwe, she is trying to fit her idea of her destiny.

Ofilwe has no sense of her own identity and attempts to fit herself to her parents' expectations. While sitting in church Ofilwe admits to herself "I come here because I feel I belong. That is all. The traditions of the church are my own. I do not have any others" (Matlwa 10). Ofilwe has issues thinking for herself, she knows the church, and because of that she goes to church. She believes that what she knows is her own, even though she only feels like she belongs, she doesn't know she belongs. She has no sense of identity, which gives the reader a true look at the inner life—one cannot always know their own inner life or identity. Ofilwe constantly doubts herself and admits she doesn't know what she is doing or where she is going. Her identity is in limbo, constantly changing as she tries to form and shape it into someone she could stand to be. It was not removed from her possession, but rather she simply does not understand who she is because the society she identifies with has not made it easy for her to form a solitary identity.

In Moretti's terms, *Coconut* is made up of two French Bildungsromans—the two girls never actually finish their journey of discovering their identity. They are caught in a limbo between the people they are and the people they want to be. It is possible to see the ongoing journey Fiks is on by looking back at the image of Fiks in her math class: "I would leave this life of blackness and embark on something larger than large and greater than great, something immeasurable and everlasting" (Matlwa 171). The blackness is the

unknown, everything Fiks is not and everything she wants to be. Her story is unfinished, and she wants to be something greater, something more than could have been expected of her. She has not reached the end of her journey yet, but is still trying to find herself and figure out who she is. Fiks is not mature, and may never be mature because she is so tied up with her idea of who is better and who she should be.

Ofilwe is lost as well, and nowhere near the end of her journey towards her identity. When she is tired of trying to please everyone Ofilwe thinks “Right there I would sit and not take another step. That would be OK, too: I do not know where I am going anyway” (Matlwa 62). Ofilwe is still on a journey to discover who she is; she hasn’t reached a point where she can stop and think, ‘this is it. I know who I am now.’ Her journey is still being shaped and she has not thrown off the youth that she used to know. She is caught up in her need to please everyone; she wants to fit into the mold they have of her and because of this she is lost. She never does find herself. *Coconut* closes with a final thought, not attributed to either of the characters, so perhaps it belongs to both:

I have come to realize that many things are seldom as they seem.

Sometimes what you think is your greatest obstacle turns out to be the least, and what you thought would be easy to conquer troubles you still. I do not know how to make it pretty. I do not know how to mask it. It is not a piece of literary genius. It is the story of our lives. It is our story, told in our own words as we feel it every day. It is boring. It is plain. It is overdone and definitely not newsworthy. But it is the story we have to tell.
(Matlwa 191)

The story is not about the end points, but all about the middle. It is about the fact that there is a story being put forward and a journey being made. *Coconut*, even though it seemingly occurs over the course of a day, is about the story of a life, and a journey that is in constant evolution. A journey where the little troubles, the everyday simple troubles, are the ones that make a person who they are and ends up defining them. The journey cannot end, because there is no end, there is no neat way to wrap it up because life is not neat, and someone's identity cannot be placed in a small box and tied up with a little bow. There isn't a real ending, because that is not how life is, there is only a sense of continuation.

The ongoing story reveals the journey to find the identity and the inner life of a person. The path is left unfinished in Matlwa's *Coconut* because the journey to find identity is not made up of a single experience, but is the sum of a lifetime, and even then one cannot truly know himself.

VII. The Big Picture

Literature has a tendency to document life as it happens. Identity is a hot issue, questions of being “born this way” are cropping up all over the place, and across all issues. How much of it really is “birth,” though, and how much of it is culture? The world is a place that pressures people to be someone and to fit a mold, and literature does reflect life.

This close study of three novels shows that cultural pressures impact the identity of the characters within. There are questions raised and answers searched for because sometimes the characters just don’t know. Ofilwe and Fiks were impacted by their desire to identify with something, anything, in a world that is trying to find its footing. Karoliena is trying to find an identity when she has no past. Benjamin is trying to balance two worlds that he doesn’t fit in. Identity is a struggle, and everyone hits stumbling blocks along the way, it’s an inevitability. Literature shows how to overcome that stumbling block and move forward. Acceptance is key, if you can’t accept who you are, even the bits and pieces that cause your stomach to tighten, you never accept yourself.

The struggle to identify yourself is a human one, and it requires opening yourself up to the possibility of more. There’s more out there than just you and the world you live in. There is a future and a past that inform every decision you ever make, so you can’t just ignore one piece of information. Even when we try to make ourselves a new identity, as Karoliena did, we find that we are bound to who we were. And if we try to ignore the past, like Benjamin, we are always thrown back into it until we begin to break. Or we could be like Ofilwe or Fiks, who close themselves off to the idea that they could be

more, that they are more already. The identity we have and how we choose to embrace it play a role in our lives. It's not just a game to play when we feel like it.

This began as a close look at how South Africa's identity has been affected post-apartheid, but really, this is a question of how any country's identity has been affected after a revolutionary event. The apartheid in South Africa was a government movement that declared white as the superior race, and passed numerous discriminatory laws. It took thirty years for the end to come to the apartheid, and the scars remain. Every country has a moment like this in their past, whether it's the United States actual Revolutionary War, or the series of wars that ripped through Europe in the 1900s. It's not a question of if identity has been affected, but of how. South Africa, after the apartheid, is full of people who question who they are, and who try to fill in the pieces to an incomplete puzzle.

Identity is not cut and dried, it cannot be picked and chosen from a hat. People form identities from experiences and from the people around them. Who they are creates the person, not who they want to be.

VIII. Works Cited

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