

Book Suggestion 17: *Coconut* by Kopano Matlwa

Stephanie Schaidt, Augsburg

Title: Coconut

Author: Kopano Matlwa

Setting: post-apartheid Johannesburg

Year of Publication: 2007

Awards: European Union Literary Award 2006/7;

Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa 2008

Publisher: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd

Pages: 190

Price: 10,99 €

ISBN-13: 978-1-77009-336-2

Target Group: Grades 10–13

Availability: www.amazon.de



1. Topics

- Identity
- Race, class, gender
- Colonialism
- Language
- Beauty

2. Summary

The novel recounts a single day in the lives of two black teenage girls, Ofilwe (Fifi) and Fikile (Fiks), who live in post-apartheid Johannesburg. Their lives cross at a coffee shop in the suburbs where Fikile works as a waitress and Ofilwe is a regular customer with her family.

The two protagonists with different social backgrounds both grow up as black girls in a white world and struggle with questions of identity. They are caught in the tension between "African" and "Western" values. Ofilwe and her family benefited from the post-apartheid Black Economic Empowerment policies. They are part of a black middle class and live in a predominantly white neighbourhood in the exclusive suburb of Sandton. Ofilwe attends a private school which was formerly reserved for whites only. She, however, becomes increasingly aware of being marginalised by her classmates, friends, and teachers because of her skin colour and develops growing discomfort with it. She wants to recover her "African" roots. Fikile lives in poverty in a township. She had a traumatic childhood, grew up as an orphan after her mother had committed suicide. She lives with her uncle who sexually abused her as a child. Fikile dropped out of high school and now works as a waitress in a café that is frequented by mainly white people. She strives to escape her blackness by embracing whiteness, which she shows for example by treating black customers with disdain.

The novel is divided into two parts. The first part is told from Ofilwe's and the second from Fikile's perspective. The narrative, however, is not chronological. It swings back and forth between the present and the past, which is indicated by a constant change between paragraphs in standard scripts (present) and italics (past). The two narrators from different backgrounds so give diversified insights into life in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

3. About the author

Kopano Matlwa is a young South African writer who focuses on issues of young black femininity in post-apartheid South Africa. She was born in 1986 and studied medicine at the University of Cape Town. While studying for her degree, she simultaneously wrote her debut novel *Coconut*, which was first published in 2007. In the same year, she was awarded the *European Union Literary Award* and in 2008 the *Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa* for this novel. Matlwa published another novel *Spilt Milk*, in 2010.

4. Pre-reading activities

a. Predicting from the book title: "Coconut"

First, start with a brainstorming activity. Show students a picture of a coconut and ask them to describe it. What do they associate with this fruit? Collect their ideas in form of a mind map. Then, show them the book cover and let them predict what the book might be about. Additionally, ask students to read the definitions of the word "coconut" in the dictionary and reflect upon the different meanings.



© Thinkstock/iStock

coconut or copanut ('kəʊkəˌnʌt)

Definition

noun

- the fruit of the coconut palm, consisting of a thick fibrous oval husk inside which is a thin hard shell enclosing edible white meat. The hollow centre is filled with a milky fluid (coconut milk)
- **2. a.** the meat of the coconut, often shredded and used in cakes, curries, etc
- **b.** (as modifier) ⇒ *coconut cake*

(*colloquial, slang*) a black or Asian person who conforms to white culture at the expense of his or her ancestral culture, the idea being that, like a coconut, he or she is dark on the outside and white on the inside

Collins English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers
(found at: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/coconut>)

Racism (p. 45)

At a party, a boy refused to kiss Ofilwe in a spin-the-bottle game because of the colour of her lips. Ask the students to reflect upon this part of the novel and to do further research on the topic of racism.

“No ways! Her lips are too dark!” (p. 45)

Tasks:

1. Take a look at the quotation above. What effects might the boy's reaction in the spin-the-bottle game have on Ofilwe?
2. Find other parts in the text where racism is expressed in a direct or indirect way.
3. Do research about racism in South Africa today. Find out more about the recent protest movements #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and #RacismMustFall. You can have a look at different South African newspapers

(Mail and Guardian: <http://mg.co.za/>;

The Times: <http://www.timeslive.co.za/>).

Also consult social networks such as facebook and twitter. Report your findings in class.

(other parts of the novel: p. 14, p. 27, p. 133/134, p. 176)



© Thinkstock/iStock

Language issue (p. 49)

Eleven languages are designated as official in South Africa, but English remains the dominant language of power in the country. Even one's accent, the way in which one pronounces the English words, matters and can lead to exclusion.

Ask the students to reflect upon this issue in a classroom discussion. You may address some of the following questions: Which language(s) does Ofilwe speak? Why? Which language is the most important one for her? How do others look at that? What about you? Which language(s) do you speak? Has the language or the accent you speak ever had an effect on how you were seen or treated by others?

The following short excerpt may serve to illustrate the issue:

“Say ‘uh-vin’ Fifi. You make a cake in an ‘uh-vin’, not ‘oh-vin’, ‘uh-vin’.”
 “This is boring. Belinda, let's see who can climb the highest up that tree.”
 “No, Fifi! You have to learn how to speak properly.”
 “I can speak properly.”
 “No, you can't, Fifi. Do you want to be laughed at again? Come now. Say ‘uh-vin.’”
 “Uuh-vin.”
 “Good. Now say ‘b-ird.’ Not ‘b-erd’, but ‘b-ird.’” (p. 49)

Get together in groups. Think of a situation in which the language or the accent one speaks affects the way someone is treated by others. Act the scene out in front of the class. Reflect: How did you feel?

(other parts of the novel: p. 54, pp. 56/57, p. 59, p. 70, p. 137, p. 154, p. 189)

Sie wollen mehr für Ihr Fach?

Bekommen Sie: Ganz einfach zum Download im RAABE Webshop.



Über 4.000 Unterrichtseinheiten
sofort zum Download verfügbar



Sichere Zahlung per Rechnung,
PayPal & Kreditkarte



Exklusive Vorteile für Abonnent*innen

- 20% Rabatt auf alle Materialien für Ihr bereits abonniertes Fach
- 10% Rabatt auf weitere Grundwerke



Käuferschutz mit Trusted Shops



Jetzt entdecken:
www.raabe.de