APARTHEID: THE LINE OF DIVISION IN THE WORKS OF KOPANO MATLWA

Olagbegi Mary Toyin

Abstract

Although apartheid officially ended in 1994, its lingering psychological and structural consequences remain deeply embedded in the fabric of post-apartheid South African society. This paper examines how the legacies of apartheid persist as a line of division in Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*, *Spilt Milk*, and *Period Pain*. Despite the post-apartheid setting of these novels, the paper is motivated by the need to interrogate how apartheid-era traumas and racial hierarchies continue to manifest in the lives, identities, and consciousness of black South Africans, particularly youth and women. Employing postcolonial theory and psychoanalytic theory as its dual theoretical lens, the paper critically analyses the internalised racism, fragmented identities, and emotional dissonance experienced by Matlwa's protagonists. Using a qualitative research methodology, the paper conducts a close textual analysis of the novels to examine the subtle and overt mechanisms through which apartheid's ghost haunts the present. The paper finds that Matlwa's characters are often caught in liminal spaces—alienated from their cultural roots while unable to fully assimilate into white society—thereby reflecting the psychosocial disorientation bred by apartheid's enduring legacy. The paper concludes that Matlwa's works do not merely reflect apartheid's historical facts but rather its psychological residues, demonstrating that apartheid remains a salient force in shaping postcolonial subjectivities and social relations in South Africa. Spotlighting this continuity, the paper contributes to ongoing discourses on race, identity, and healing in African literature.

Keywords: Kopano Matlwa, Apartheid, Postcolonial Theory, Psychoanalysis, Identity.

Introduction

Apartheid, the institutionalised system of racial segregation and oppression enforced in South Africa between 1948 and 1994, remains one of the most infamous political structures of the 20th century. Though legally dismantled with the election of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress in 1994, its material and psychological aftermath continues to influence the socio-political and cultural landscape of the nation. Designed to entrench white supremacy, apartheid divided South African society along rigid racial lines, dictating where people could live, work, and receive education, and severely restricting the rights of black South Africans (Thompson 189). The effects of this division penetrated deeply into the consciousness of individuals and communities, creating fractures that persist long after the system's formal abolition.

In the area of South African literature, apartheid has served as both a thematic concern and a historical backdrop for decades. Writers like Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, and Bessie Head have long examined the brutalities and contradictions of apartheid, often from varying racial and ideological positions. In recent years, however, a new generation of post-apartheid writers, including Kopano Matlwa, has emerged, producing literature that engages with apartheid's lingering presence rather than its immediate brutality. Matlwa's novels—*Coconut* (2007), *Spilt Milk* (2010), and *Period Pain* (2016)—are set in the democratic era, yet the shadows of apartheid remain palpable in the characters' psychological backgrounds and fractured identities. This continuity suggests that apartheid, while no longer a lived political reality, endures as a psychic and structural force in South Africa's postcolonial condition.

Matlwa's fiction demonstrates that the end of legal apartheid has not translated into an end of its social and emotional consequences. Her protagonists are often young, black South Africans grappling with

issues of race, language, gender, and belonging in spaces still shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies. In *Coconut*, the character of Fifi is emblematic of the post-apartheid black elite, alienated from her cultural heritage and entrapped in a world of white norms and standards that continue to define success and desirability (Matlwa 35). *Spilt Milk* extends this critique into the realm of institutional decay, where the promises of liberation clash with the disappointments of post-liberation governance. *Period Pain*, perhaps Matlwa's most emotionally intense novel, exposes the mental health crisis faced by young black women burdened by both personal trauma and systemic failure. Across these works, Matlwa captures the psychological residues of apartheid—trauma, alienation, inferiority complexes—that shape the post-apartheid self.

Combining postcolonial theory with psychoanalytic criticism, this paper examines how apartheid functions as a persistent "line of division" in Matlwa's narratives. Postcolonial theory allows for the exploration of cultural hybridity, mimicry, and the continuing effects of colonial domination in supposedly free societies (Bhabha 116), while psychoanalytic theory illuminates the unconscious effects of racial trauma and identity fragmentation. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand Matlwa's characters not just as individuals, but as symbolic representations of a nation still negotiating its past. Thus, although apartheid no longer enjoys contemporaneity in terms of legal structures, Matlwa's fiction asserts its enduring relevance, offering powerful commentary on the inner life of a society still shadowed by its brutal history.

Historical and Literary Interventions in Post-Apartheid South African Fiction and the Works of Kopano Matlwa

The critical conversation on apartheid and its lingering presence in post-apartheid South African literature has evolved

significantly over the past three decades. Scholars continue to interrogate the socio-political residues of apartheid and how they manifest in the lives of South Africans born into a democracy but haunted by a deeply fractured past. Foundational historical works such as Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa* offer detailed analyses of apartheid's structural and ideological foundations, arguing that apartheid was not merely a political system but a "social engineering project that permeated every aspect of life" (Thompson 190). This conceptualisation of apartheid as a deeply invasive force supports literary interpretations that focus on its lingering psychological and cultural impacts. Further historical insight is provided by Saul Dubow's *Apartheid, 1948–1994*, which explores how apartheid's legacy endured through bureaucratic rationality and institutional continuity even after the regime's collapse. Dubow notes that "many post-apartheid inequalities are not novel but inherited" (Dubow 224), thereby inviting critical reflection on contemporary narratives that deal with seemingly new social dilemmas rooted in historical injustices. Such perspectives create a necessary backdrop for reading post-apartheid fiction as a medium for interrogating the afterlife of apartheid rather than merely recounting its horrors.

On the literary front, post-apartheid fiction has increasingly shifted from overtly political protest narratives to more introspective explorations of identity, trauma, and internalised oppression. Critics like Meg Samuelson argue that "the burden of remembering apartheid is complicated by the desire to move on, creating a tension within post-apartheid literature" (Samuelson 97). This tension is particularly visible in the works of black female writers such as Kopano Matlwa, Nozizwe Cynthia Jele, and Zukiswa Wanner, whose writings explore post-apartheid realities not through nationalist triumph but through fractured personal and cultural identities. Kopano Matlwa has received growing scholarly attention for her literary exploration of post-

apartheid identity crises, mental health, gender, and the enduring legacy of racial division. In her analysis of *Coconut*, Pamela Nichols describes Matlwa's protagonist as caught in "an impossible negotiation between blackness and whiteness, self and other" (Nichols 82), a reflection of Homi Bhabha's theorisation of hybridity and mimicry in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Bhabha 122). Similarly, Mary West's reading of *Coconut* and *Spilt Milk* foregrounds the "psychological toll of racial aspiration" as a recurring theme in Matlwa's work, noting that her characters "embody the contradictions of post-apartheid modernity" (West 103).

Recent interventions have expanded the scope of Matlwa criticism, especially regarding *Period Pain*. In a 2022 article, Lungi Sosibo situates *Period Pain* within the framework of medical humanities, arguing that Matlwa "opens a space for examining the intersection of race, trauma, and healthcare inequity in contemporary South Africa" (Sosibo 15). This adds a new layer to the postcolonial discourse, positioning the body as a site of apartheid's continued inscription. Similarly, Ntombizodwa Msimang's work examines Matlwa's use of language and narrative fragmentation, asserting that "Matlwa's linguistic choices mirror the disintegration of the self in the face of historical trauma" (Msimang 59). In addition to Matlwa-specific studies, broader theoretical frameworks have also enriched the reading of her texts. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* remains central for analysing how identity in postcolonial societies is formed through ambivalence, contradiction, and mimicry (Bhabha 125). Freud's psychoanalytic theory of repression and trauma is equally pertinent, particularly in understanding the fractured consciousness and emotional instability of Matlwa's protagonists. Critics such as Derek Hook have drawn on Lacanian psychoanalysis to read South African subjectivities as "symbolically scarred by racialised discourse and historical memory"

(Hook 211), a view that resonates deeply with the affective landscapes of Matlwa's fiction.

A further examination of the literature on apartheid's spectral presence in post-apartheid fiction reveals how Matlwa's works navigate the spaces between collective memory and personal dislocation. Sarah Nuttall's theorisation of "entanglement" in *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* provides a valuable conceptual tool for understanding how the past remains interwoven with the present. Nuttall argues that post-apartheid South African literature is marked by "a simultaneity of temporalities," where narratives are structured by unresolved traumas and ongoing negotiations of belonging (Nuttall 25). This framing aptly applies to Matlwa's *Spilt Milk*, which dramatises the conflict between generations over political disillusionment and moral decay, highlighting how characters are trapped in cycles of blame, complicity, and unfulfilled expectations. This intergenerational crisis is further elaborated in the work of Rita Barnard, whose study *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* underscores how contemporary South African literature often "revisits apartheid not as historical documentary but as psychic architecture" (Barnard 142). Barnard's insights foreground the way spatiality and psychological displacement are configured in literature, a concern that Matlwa echoes in her depiction of urban spaces as alienating and morally ambivalent. The Johannesburg suburbs and hospitals in *Coconut* and *Period Pain* become more than settings; they are metaphoric terrains of self-erasure and identity fragmentation.

In the area of psychoanalytic criticism, recent scholarship has pushed the boundaries of reading postcolonial subjectivity through trauma and melancholia. Ashraf Jamal, in *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa*, argues that South African literature post-1994 is increasingly preoccupied with "affective impasses, self-destructive impulses, and the impossibility of healing" (Jamal 183). This perspective

is evident in *Period Pain*, where the protagonist, Masechaba, becomes a conduit for the collective anxiety, racial ambivalence, and self-annihilating guilt of the black South African middle class. Her deteriorating mental state reflects what Cathy Caruth describes as "the unclaimed experience" of trauma, where the return of the repressed disrupts narrative coherence and self-continuity (Caruth 4).

Such psychoanalytic readings intersect productively with postcolonial theory to show how Matlwa's characters experience apartheid not as a past regime, but as an internalised and ongoing condition. Bhabha's notion of "unhomeliness," where the boundaries between the public and the private, the inside and the outside collapse, offers a compelling framework for interpreting the persistent alienation and identity crisis in Matlwa's protagonists (Bhabha 13). In *Coconut*, Ofilwe's obsession with whiteness and her rejection of black cultural identity mirrors Bhabha's model of mimicry, which is always "at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 86). Likewise, in *Spilt Milk*, the erosion of values within the post-apartheid elite resonates with Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie, which he describes in *The Wretched of the Earth* as "incapable of thinking in terms of the future because their historical mission has come to a halt" (Fanon 152). Matlwa's characters embody this arrested development, disillusioned with democracy yet unable to extricate themselves from the ideological residues of apartheid.

Contemporary scholars have also taken interest in how Matlwa's work engages with gender within the racial and postcolonial matrix. In a 2023 article, Zanele Mthembu investigates Matlwa's representation of black womanhood, arguing that "the gendered subject in Matlwa's work is doubly burdened—by apartheid's enduring racial hierarchies and by patriarchal structures that remain intact in democratic South Africa" (Mthembu 44). This dual oppression is evident in Masechaba's experiences with sexual trauma, professional

dehumanization, and her internal battle with religious doctrine and state violence. The literature on intersectionality, particularly Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal arguments, becomes relevant here in understanding how Matlwa's protagonists are marked by layered identities that expose them to multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation (Crenshaw 1242).

To this end, these scholarly interventions draw attention to the centrality of Matlwa's oeuvre in post-apartheid literary discourse. Her novels do not nostalgically resurrect apartheid but rigorously question the so-called progress of the post-apartheid order. Through her engagement with trauma, mimicry, disillusionment, and black female subjectivity, Matlwa offers a complex literary response to the claim that apartheid is "over." Rather, her characters demonstrate that apartheid, though formally dismantled, continues to operate as a psychological condition, a cultural script, and an ideological residue that structures the self in postcolonial South Africa. In other words, the literature points to a consistent critical recognition of apartheid not as a concluded chapter in South African history, but as a haunting presence in post-apartheid life. Matlwa's fiction, therefore, is not an attempt to revive apartheid history for nostalgia or critique alone but an effort to lay bare the psychological sediment left behind. Her narratives present complex portrayals of black South Africans wrestling with internalised colonial values, broken social institutions, and an elusive sense of identity. The intersection of historical, literary, and psychoanalytic criticism provides a robust framework for reading her work as emblematic of a generation suspended between the promises of liberation and the burdens of its inheritance.

Post-Apartheid Fractures and Internalised Apartheid in Matlwa's *Coconut, Spilt Milk,* and *Period Pain*

Kopano Matlwa's trilogy of novels—*Coconut* (2007), *Spilt Milk* (2010), and *Period Pain* (2016)—form a complex literary cartography of post-apartheid disillusionment, particularly as experienced by black South Africans caught between inherited trauma and the failures of democratic freedom. Her protagonists, mostly young black women, wrestle with the internal residues of apartheid, the weight of historical injustice, and the contradictions of contemporary South African identity. The enduring lines of division—racial, psychological, moral—are not only explored as historical remnants but also as lived, bodily, and ideological fractures in Matlwa's characters.

In *Coconut*, the narrative centres on Ofilwe and Fikile, two black girls from opposite ends of the social spectrum, whose lives are consumed by the pursuit and rejection of whiteness. Ofilwe, raised in a wealthy suburban black family, embodies what Homi Bhabha identifies as the postcolonial subject who mimics the coloniser but never fully becomes them. Her "perfect diction" and preference for "English tea" (*Coconut* 15) are not acts of freedom but of erasure. She admits, "I love the way white people live, the way they do things. I want to be like them" (*Coconut* 24), a sentiment that reflects a deep-seated alienation and internalized apartheid. Fikile, on the other hand, represents an aspirational urban black subject, yet her self-loathing manifests in her abhorrence of her own roots: "I am not like those people. I don't do the kasi thing" (*Coconut* 113). Both girls suffer from a crisis of belonging, driven by a society still structured around the logic of racialised value.

Matlwa's *Spilt Milk* extends these thematic concerns into the realm of post-apartheid nation-building and moral degeneration. The novel tells the story of Mohumagadi, a former anti-apartheid activist turned school principal, and Father Bill, a white priest, whose

ideological collision speaks to the failure of the so-called "rainbow nation." Mohumagadi's bitterness about democracy's outcome is palpable: "They died for this? For black children who have no respect? For a government that does nothing?" (*Spilt Milk* 45). Her bitterness exposes how the dreams of liberation curdled into resentment. Her school, intended as a beacon of transformation, becomes a site of authoritarian control and disappointment. Father Bill, though complicit in apartheid by omission, offers a perspective of contrition: "I was afraid of what standing up would cost me" (*Spilt Milk* 63). These two voices reflect a larger moral crisis where neither the oppressor nor the oppressed emerges untainted, a thematic complexity that interrogates the binaries of apartheid discourse.

Period Pain intensifies Matlwa's psychological excavation by focusing on Masechaba (a.k.a. Chamda), a young medical doctor who suffers a mental breakdown while working in South Africa's public healthcare system. The trauma she experiences is multi-layered—personal, political, spiritual. Her breakdown is a response not just to overwork, but to the violent disillusionment with a country she once believed in: "I have been taught to forgive, but I am tired. I am tired of turning the other cheek" (*Period Pain* 101). Masechaba's voice—fragmented, confessional, desperate—serves as a vessel for the racial and gendered anxieties that continue to plague black South African women. Her interaction with a xenophobic patient echoes the apartheid script of exclusion, now repurposed against African immigrants: "They are the reason we don't have jobs. They take our everything" (*Period Pain* 85). Through Masechaba, Matlwa critiques the erosion of ubuntu, and the recurrence of violence as a mode of national self-definition.

All three novels dramatise the psychic damage left in the wake of apartheid's formal demise. Matlwa's style—ranging from Ofilwe's disjointed reflections to Masechaba's diary entries—mirrors the instability of identity in post-apartheid South Africa. The structural

dissonance in each narrative reflects the emotional and ideological chaos that apartheid has bequeathed. The narratives are not linear stories of progress, but rather circular returns to wounds that resist healing. Matlwa's characters are haunted by what is no longer visible yet still viscerally felt—a line of division that apartheid drew not only across the land but within the self.

This line of internal division is most pronounced in *Coconut*, where Matlwa uses the dual narrative structure of Ofilwe and Fikile not just to juxtapose two lifestyles, but to map out the psychological terrain of black identity in a white-dominated socio-economic landscape. Ofilwe's alienation from her mother tongue and cultural roots is emblematic of a broader trend in post-apartheid black elites who have embraced western culture at the expense of ancestral identity. In one scene, Ofilwe expresses confusion and shame over her inability to understand Setswana: "My tongue refuses to wrap itself around these words, my own words, my father's words" (*Coconut* 31). This linguistic alienation is not a neutral experience—it symbolizes a detachment from communal history and a loss of self-continuity. Fikile, meanwhile, adopts a hyper-assimilated persona, bleaching her skin and renaming herself "Fiks" to escape the stigmatisation of her blackness: "Black is ugly, poor, loud, and violent. I don't want to be any of those things" (*Coconut* 129). These choices do not bring liberation; rather, they manifest the enduring apartheid logic that equates whiteness with humanity and value.

In *Spilt Milk*, Matlwa turns from the microcosm of personal identity to the macrocosm of national disillusionment. The school, originally a symbol of hope and intellectual liberation, becomes a metaphor for the decaying moral fibre of the post-apartheid generation. Mohumagadi, herself once a student leader, is increasingly tyrannical in her leadership, convinced that "democracy has made our children weak" (*Spilt Milk* 53). Her pedagogy of control and harsh discipline

reflects an unresolved internalization of apartheid's authoritarian legacy. Meanwhile, Father Bill, despite his confessions, remains an ambivalent figure—he embodies a white liberal guilt that is self-aware but not transformational. The tension between them reflects a larger national impasse where old wounds are re-opened but not re-addressed, and where confession fails to translate into meaningful reparation or reconciliation.

By the time we encounter Masechaba in *Period Pain*, the focus shifts again—from institutional and historical critique to the fragmentation of the psyche under the pressure of post-apartheid contradictions. Masechaba's descent into mental illness is not merely a personal crisis but a symbolic enactment of collective trauma. Her repeated question, "Is this what freedom feels like?" (*Period Pain* 55), lingers as a damning indictment of South Africa's democratic promise. Even her name, which means "Mother of the Nation," evokes a collapsing myth of the nurturing, liberated black woman. Masechaba bleeds both literally and metaphorically—she is violated by a system that pretends to have healed while replicating new forms of violence, particularly gender-based and xenophobic violence. Her feelings of helplessness and spiritual estrangement culminate in a loss of faith: "I prayed, and prayed, and prayed. And God kept silent" (*Period Pain* 108). Here, Matlwa explores not just political or racial trauma, but the erosion of moral and spiritual certainties.

Stylistically, Matlwa's narratives are minimalist, interior, and elliptical echoing the psychological disarray of her protagonists. Her fragmented syntax, especially in *Period Pain*, mimics the fractured consciousness of a subject pushed to the edge. This stylistic decision reinforces the argument that apartheid's afterlife is not merely socio-political but somatic and existential. The trauma is inscribed in the body, in the language, in the pauses and silences that punctuate her prose. Across all three novels, Matlwa destabilises the neat dichotomies

often employed in apartheid and post-apartheid discourse—black/white, oppressor/victim, traditional/modern. Instead, she demonstrates that these binaries bleed into each other, and that identity in post-apartheid South Africa is shaped as much by inherited wounds as by present disillusionment. Her work reveals that apartheid, though officially dismantled, continues to structure desire, fear, morality, and belonging. The lines of division may no longer be painted across park benches and bathroom doors, but they persist in the mind, the home, the school, and the clinic. Matlwa's narratives do not offer resolution; rather, they expose the psychic sediments of apartheid and ask, unflinchingly, whether the nation has yet begun to heal.

Conclusion

Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*, *Spilt Milk*, and *Period Pain* collectively foreground the enduring psychological and socio-political fractures left by apartheid, despite the formal abolition of the regime. Through a postcolonial and psychoanalytic lens, the paper reveals how apartheid's ideologies persist in shaping identity, alienation, disillusionment, and trauma in post-apartheid South Africa. Matlwa's characters struggle with internalised racism, moral ambiguity, mental instability, and fractured belonging, all of which speak to the residual violence of apartheid's legacy. The qualitative analysis demonstrates that apartheid's line of division now manifests not through legislative segregation but through the internal backdrops of black South Africans negotiating whiteness, democracy, and dignity. Thus, Matlwa's narratives function as both personal and national diagnostics—laying bare the psychic injuries of a nation that has yet to fully reconcile its past. Her work compels contemporary South African literature to confront the uncomfortable truth that apartheid's end was not its erasure, and that the burden of its legacy continues to define the post-apartheid condition.

Works Cited

Barnard, Rita. *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Dubow, Saul. *Apartheid, 1948–1994*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.

Hook, Derek. "Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, 'Psychopolitics' and Critical Psychology." In *Critical Psychology*, edited by Derek Hook, et al., UCT Press, 2004, pp. 201–223.

Jamal, Ashraf. *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa*. Unisa Press, 2005.

Lesibana Rafapa. Post-Apartheid Transnationalism in Black South African Literature: A Reality or A Fallacy? *Tydskr. letterkd*. vol.51 n.1 Pretoria 2014.

Matlwa, Kopano. *Coconut*. Jacana Media, 2007.

_____. *Period Pain*. Jacana Media, 2016.

_____. *Spilt Milk*. Jacana Media, 2010.

Msimang, Ntombizodwa. "Language, Trauma, and Fragmentation in Matlwa's *Period Pain*." *Journal of Southern African Literature*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2021, pp. 55–70.

Mthembu, Zanele. "Black Female Trauma and Resistance in *Period Pain*." *Journal of African Feminist Critique*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 41–56.

Nichols, Pamela. "Between Coconut and the Hard Place: A Reading of Kopano Matlwa's First Novel." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 21, no. 1-2, 2009, pp. 78–89.

Nuttall, Sarah. *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid*. Wits University Press, 2009.

Samuelson, Meg. *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007.

Sosibo, Lungi. "Health, History, and Hurt in Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain*." *Medical Humanities South*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2022, pp. 12–20.

Thompson, Leonard. *A History of South Africa*. Yale University Press, 2001.

West, Mary. "Post-Apartheid Identity and the Crisis of Belonging in *Coconut* and *Spilt Milk*." *English in Africa*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2011, pp. 95–110.