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Beauty, Sexuality and Identity in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*

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1. *What's so beautiful about this tomato?:*
Introduction

The topic of identity has been enduring and widespread concept across centuries, genres, and literary movements. Since the identity of any individual is shaped by various factors, there is a constant need for further study into how, when and why it is formed. The topic of this thesis has been motivated by the observation that although the 21st century has seen increasing attempts to establish diversity and inclusivity, the remnants of past perceptions on beauty, sexuality, age, race and class, together with existing beauty standards, still influences one's identity or creates even more confusion around it. To take an example from popular culture on the topic of changing trends and diversifying body image, world renowned lingerie company "Victoria's Secret", which has been setting standards for women's beauty for more than twenty years, has faced a serious backlash since 2018 because of their alleged lack of diversity and comments by their executives on their unwillingness to work on the issue (Petter 2018). This has resulted in the cancellation of their annual fashion show (Mackelden and Gonzales 2019) and a drop in sales (Hanbury 2020), demonstrating that times are changing in terms of how beauty is perceived today. Since then, Victoria's Secret has visibly started to employ plus-size and transgender models in their campaigns in an effort to keep up with public opinion and current beauty trends (Mackelden and Gonzales 2019).

Thus, this thesis studies how an identity can be shaped by beauty, sexuality, race, age, marriage and/or patriarchal system, with the starting hypothesis that all of factors shape

an individual's identity, regardless of societal attempts to increase diversity. It offers a theoretical perspective on beauty, sexuality and identity within the context of feminism, race and postcolonialism in the Anglo-American setting by the means of an in-depth analysis of the novel *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith. English author well-known for her novels *White Teeth* and *NW*, Smith explores the topics of marriage, middle-age crisis, body image and identity, among others. As the story is set in 2005, it offers a contemporary insight into the issues mentioned above and invites further debate.

Divided into seven chapters that tackle different aspects of the same issue of one's identity this thesis also explores the connection between popular culture and the academic critical theory, as well as fiction and real life. Every chapter is named after a line from the novel *On Beauty* which refers to the topic explored in that particular chapter. Thus, the first chapter, "On Postcolonialism and Feminism" contextualises two literary movements which typically offer voices for marginalised characters, something which *On Beauty* strives to do. The second chapter "On Age" explores how age defines people's self-perception; through the characters of Kiki, Claire and Carlene, who all have very different personalities, lifestyles and background, it is possible to make a comparison between the ways each character responds to aging, both physically and mentally. The second chapter "On Body Image" examines the psychological influence of weight, youth and beauty standards imposed by mass and social media on one's body image; both middle-aged and young women are analysed within this context. "On Modern Jezebel" analyses the character of the young and beautiful Victoria, who is deemed a modern variation on the stereotype of Jezebel, based on how characters who come into contact with her respond to her physical

and personal characteristics. The chapter "On Breasts and Buttocks" explores the connotations that female intimate body parts carry and how they influence other people's perceptions of women. The sixth chapter "On Being Coloured" studies the identity of mixed-race people, how they perceive themselves in terms of race and how others perceive them. Finally, "On the Culture of Victimization" reflects mainly on the characters of Howard and Monty and the role of universities in racial discussions; the focal point of this chapter is the differences between liberal and conservative outlooks on racial inclusion at universities and the apparent failings of universities to actively join and/or produce the above-mentioned discussions.

Themes such as 'identity', 'beauty' and 'sexuality' which this thesis explores, are fluid and subjective. Therefore, it is impossible to find and offer true answers and solutions to the issues raised and phenomena encountered. Thus, this thesis strives to elaborate on particular observations made from the novel *On Beauty* and offer various arguments expressed in other sources that speak on the matter.

2. *The woman was a goddess of some kind, wasn't she?*: On postcolonialism and feminism

When it was first published in 1847, Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* was both hugely popular and criticised as any revolutionary book would be. Nonetheless, it has since gained reputation as being one of the first feminist novels ever written. Jane's passion for education and independence made her a feminist heroin of the nineteenth century. However, in light of empire dissolution and the emergence of postcolonialism, *Jane Eyre* has acquired a new layer of analysis. The novel is the perfect example of how a literary work can be studied through different lenses – in this case, postcolonial and feminist – and gain criticism and praise at the same time. Thus, when analysing contemporary novels such as *On Beauty*, it is essential to provide definitions of both postcolonialism and feminism so as to give context for the theories and movements that shape readers' perception. It is also important to understand these concepts in order to grasp the meaning behind some of Smith's literary choices and the motivation behind her characters' actions.

Defining postcolonialism is a strenuous mission even for scholars who specialise in it, with Terry Eagleton describing the difficulty of the endeavour in the following words: "there must surely be in existence somewhere a secret handbook for aspiring postcolonial theorists, whose second rule reads: 'Begin your essay by calling into question the whole notion of postcolonialism'. (The first rule reads: 'Be as obscurantist as you can decently get away with without your stuff going absolutely unread')" (1998:24). He states that "'postcolonialism', like postmodernism in general, is among other things a brand of culturalism, which inflates the significance of cultural factors in human affairs" (Eagleton

1998:26). Melissa Jackson writes that "postcolonial critique operates with a particular view towards the presence and influence of empire/colonization and its effect on both colonized and colonizer" (2015:242). Since postcolonialism is a complex concept, it cannot be given a unique definition. Summarising standard positions, Cheryl McEwan defines postcolonialism in temporal sense and as a condition. She writes that postcolonialism, in temporal sense, is a theory "describing the wide range of social, cultural and political events arising specifically from the decline and fall of European colonialism that took place after World War Two" (McEwan 2009:18). However, she also states that this definition of postcolonialism as being "after-colonialism" is not completely accurate since Britain and France, for example, still have control over some territories meaning that colonialism is still present, albeit in a different form (McEwan 2009:18). Thus, McEwan argues that postcolonialism should be defined as a study of the way colonialism affected societies: "Postcolonialism as a condition refers to the political, cultural and economic realities of societies living with the legacies and in the aftermath of colonialism" (2009:21). However, it is essential to take into account that not every country is postcolonial in the same way; some countries gained independence much sooner than others and their treatment during colonialism was not the same (McEwan 2009:21). Another important aspect to take into account is that it is not only colonised countries that are postcolonial; given that dissolution of empire left consequences and caused the need for reformation, the former colonisers are also postcolonial (McEwan 2009:22). As an approach of political theory, "postcolonialism addresses issues such as identity, race, ethnicity and gender, the challenges of developing post-colonial national identities, and relationships between power and knowledge" (McEwan 2009:22).

In terms of a literary theory, McEwan writes that postcolonialism explores literary works within the colonial context and how it might have shaped its content: "postcolonialism examines literature produced both by authors in colonial countries and by colonized peoples responding to colonial legacies by 'writing back', or challenging colonial cultural attitudes through literature. Postcolonial literary critics re-examine classic literature with a particular focus on the social discourse that shaped it" (2009:23). Therefore, the analysis of *Jane Eyre* in postcolonial sense shows that Charlotte Brontë was influenced by the Victorian perceptions of colonised societies. This is evident from her description of Bertha who comes from the West Indies; it is implied that Bertha is a mixed-race woman. She is described as insane, suffering from psychotic episodes, and prone to all sorts of vices. She is the complete opposite to the virtuous Victorian woman, represented by Jane; therefore, she is inadequate for an English gentleman such as Rochester. She is described as a character similar to the stereotype of 'Jezebel' – a young, beautiful, promiscuous mixed-race girl who speaks foul language, but strives to marry a white gentleman. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, postcolonial critiques focuses on the portrayal of Bertha's character, taking into account the general Victorian perceptions of colonised cultures in the time period and how they could have influenced Brontë to represent Bertha in such a way. Furthermore, given that *Jane Eyre* was a very popular novel, a postcolonial literary approach also analyses the consequences that such a portrayal has in real life, shaping "a societal fantasy of European racial superiority" (McEwan 2009:23).   On the other hand, from the point of view of postcolonial theory, *On Beauty,* as a contemporary novel, explores the remnants of colonialism's legacy; the characters struggle with their identities in present-day USA and England, influenced by the stereotyped perceptions of their ethnicity.

At first glance, postcolonialism and feminism are two different approaches, but on further inspection, it is obvious that their fundamental goals are quite similar. According to Jackson, who examines postcolonialism and feminism in their relation to Biblical texts, the terms share several similarities in the way they construct a narrative. Although Jackson concentrates her study on the Bible, it is noticeable that her findings can be applied to postcolonialism's and feminism's principles in general: "Both critique dominant power structures with a focus on voices marginalized and oppressed by that power, in the biblical text and in contemporary society" (Jackson 2015:241). Moreover, both theories approach the text with scepticism, with respect to possible biases and implicit meanings within the texts. Regarding the latter, they "both assert that reading the Bible is never an objective experience - that all readers emerge from and exist in a context that inevitably shapes the way in which they read the biblical text" (2015:241). Postcolonialism and feminism also turn their attention to giving voice to the marginalized, taking into account "that among those who have experienced marginalization, this experience is not uniform. Marginalisation is inflicted differently in differing communities and across differing groups; it is enabled by a web of factors that contribute differently to any given subject's experience of being on the periphery" (2015:241). For example, as postcolonialist analysis gives voice to Bertha and feminist analysis gives voice to Jane in *Jane Eyre,* in *On Beauty* the theories also give voice to marginalised people of colour and women. Those who are marginalised are the characters of Kiki, her children, Claire and the Kippses. However, *On Beauty* also addresses the differences in the concept of race in the USA and England. This topic is explored in the episodes surrounding Monty and his radical views about race and privilege.

In its endeavor of giving voice to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy "postcolonial literary theory uses a wide range of terms, like writing back, re-writing and re-reading, which describe the interpretation of well-known literature from the perspective of the formerly colonized" (McEwan 2009:24). With the introduction of postcolonial theory, there was a need to go back to classical novels and analyse them from the perspective of the colonised. Thus deconstruction of classical novels is fundamental, as "deconstructive reading explores the gaps and silences in a text" (McEwan 2009:24). In *Jane Eyre* re-reading refers to paying closer attention to the character of Bertha and later deconstructing her story in order to explore the aspects of her personality that are not originally mentioned by Brontë. As for *On Beauty*, it is a postcolonial novel in a sense that it 'writes back' by giving voice to the marginalised and allowing them to construct their own narrative. The main characters in the novel, apart from the Caucasian, English Howard, are his African-American wife Kiki and their mixed-race children. Similarly, "another important feminist-critical concept is that of 'gap-filling' - a narrative technique that constructs, re-constructs, and re-tells the narrative in order to highlight the role and the voice of marginalized women, allowing a submerged strain of the narrative to emerge" (Jackson 2015:241). Smith and Brontë, in accordance with their respective times, allow women to articulate their emotions. Brontë, by writing the novel in the first person, draws attention to the fact that women of nineteenth century also had the desire to learn, to see and to earn independently of men. On the other hand, Smith gives voice to women and a plethora of issues they have to face, whether it is unfaithful husbands, ethnicity or issues with appearance. She makes *On Beauty* essentially a feminist novel, establishing realistic depictions of women by representing them as real women, who are clever and highly intuitive, especially when compared to their male counterparts. However,

Smith also acknowledges the weaknesses women have, showing that they are complex and analytical human beings capable of an entire spectrum of emotions and possessing an equal spectrum of virtues and skills.

Women's intuition is an important quality that Smith emphasizes in the novel. This is demonstrated in the episode in which Kiki finds out about Howard and Claire's affair. Even though Howard and Claire do not do anything questionable in that moment except for talking, Kiki realises the truth as soon as she sees them together and notices their reaction to her: "Too quickly, Claire removed her hand from Howard's body. But Kiki wasn't looking at Claire; she was looking at Howard…It was so quick and yet so absolute – the deception was over" (Smith 121)[1]. Another important quality that Smith puts into perspective is women's strength. Every female character in the novel possesses some kind of strength. Kiki shows her strength in her forgiveness and tries to save her thirty-year-long marriage. She also shows strength when she finally decides to leave Howard and start her life over. Carlene secretly battles cancer by herself, keeping the information away from her family to spare them the pain, while Claire maintains her confidence and independence despite her unhappy childhood. Victoria loses her mother and feels misunderstood, but, it does not deter her ambition or stop her from paving her way to success.. Finally, Zora is not afraid to speak her mind and her greatest strength is her ability to confront and move on. She confronts the university faculty on their mistakes and advocates for the underprivileged; she confronts her crush Carl because of his relationship with Victoria. She also confronts her own father about his affair with Victoria when her older brother Jerome does not. Despite her family's

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[1] Since *On Beauty* is the primary source for this thesis, hereinafter quotations from the novel will be referred to as "OB". For example: (OB 121).

disappointments, Zora always seems to move on with her life; she continues to pursue her interests and aspirations. Therefore, Smith seems to write in favour of those who are usually underrepresented in fiction. In this case, she paints women in sympathetic light, giving them voices through which to express their opinions and emotions.

Since the emergence of social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook, as mainstream means of (self) expression and (self) promotion, there has been debate about the acceptable level of nudity which should be displayed online. This question instigated a movement called "Free the nipple", named after a 2014 American film which argues for the freedom of female sexuality. Since then, the campaign has garnered the attention of many celebrities: "Rihanna, Miley Cyrus and Chrissy Teigen, who have tens of millions of followers each, have tested the Instagram censors by exposing their nipples in posts that were swiftly taken down by Instagram" (Jacobs 2019). One of the main issues the campaign puts into perspective is the fact that men are allowed to display bare chests on social media, whereas women get blocked from social media channels if they post their breasts. This is one of the most recent campaigns in the continuous struggle for gender equality and female empowerment. It is also an example of a campaign endorsed by the united forces of women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Before the establishment of feminist movements, women expressed their rebellion through literary works. The nineteenth century produced the first female feminist fiction writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett in America and the Brontë sisters in England. Jewett's comic short story "Tom's Husband" "reflects widespread feminist interest in the marriage question during the 1880" (Maik 1990:24). The central role in the story belongs to a woman

called Mary Wilson, a very independent and capable woman who inherited her father's talent for business. She is married to Tom who, on the contrary, enjoys house work and is not interested in business at all. Therefore, Jewett was attentive enough to examine both sides of the story, both male and female, and she "clearly portrays society as restrictive in its perceptions of roles for men and women" (Maik 1990:25). With Jewett analysing the role reversal in business and marriage, Charlotte Brontë focusing on women's independence and education and Anne Brontë domestic violence and divorce, women of the Anglo-American world progressed into being more vocal about their rights, first through fiction and then by organising themselves into movements which intended to fight for and attain equal rights.

The feminist movements we know today began to take their shape in the second half of the twentieth century. Their development has been laborious and painstaking, often encountering conflicts within their own ranks. The first serious feminist movements began to emerge as a consequence of the Industrial revolution because women had to "alter their styles of life and inevitably [bring] them into conflict with customs and institutions based on obsolete economic factors" (O'Neill 1998:4). O'Neill contemplates that feminism is to be regarded as a "reaction to the great pressures that accompanied the emergence of the nuclear family" (1998:5). As he discusses it, they started to become aware of themselves and their sexuality and wanted to acquire some power, especially over their children (O'Neill 1998:4-5).

In her book *Writing Gender History,* which focuses on the development of feminist movements and women's place in historical publication, Laura Lee Downs writes that "women, too, have been agents in history" (2010:9). Ivy Pinchbeck from England, Mary

Beard from America and Leon Abensour from France, among others, decided to write books through which they would give credit to women and their role in history: "For despite the resounding silence of history books on the matter, these scholars knew that the world we have inherited was made not only by men but by women as well" (Downs 2010:9). In order for a movement to be successful it is, therefore, essential that the movement's subjects make their way into historical writing. Downs discusses the path of feminist movements in the last century and their struggle to re-write history by including women's role in the narrative.

The important period in feminist history is the time period from the 1890s until the mid-1970s, when scholars began to "bring the voices of common people, women included, into the history books" (Downs 2010:9). It was believed that the history of common people would promote a more democratic understanding of society; moreover, women's role in society would be acknowledged. One of the turning points in feminist-inspired history was the opening of the London School of Economics in 1895 – a place where men and women studied together: "The range and quality of the work produced by these women seems all the more impressive when one recalls that most of them were working outside or at the very margins of the academy" (Downs 2010:11).

Downs then goes on to describe the second wave feminism which began in 1968 and lasted until the mid-1970s. 1968 was a very important and eventful one in world history – anti-war protests were taking place in the US alongside strikes and student movements, civil rights movement and the revival of feminist activism (2010:20). In the US, women began meeting in 1967 "to discuss the problem of male supremacy" (Downs 2010:20), whereas in England and France by 1970 women started organizing female consciousness-raising groups; "Politically active women, newly awakened to the domestic bases of their own

second-class status, threw themselves heart and soul into a struggle whose goal was to reveal the hidden sources of male domination and to extirpate them at their root" (Downs 2010:21).

Downs draws attention to an issue that was a crucial turning point in the way feminist groups were formed; it was the difference in race, class, religion and sexual orientation among women (2010:23). For example, women of colour and poorer background felt that they had more in common with their fathers, brothers, sons or even men of their own ethnicity than with white, middle class women who dominated the movement in the late 60s and 70s and vice versa, even though the fundamental thought was the notion 'we are one, we are woman' (Downs 2010:23-24) There was a need for women to acknowledge the differences among themselves and embrace them, which meant dismissing the aforementioned notion *we are one, we are woman*. This idea insinuated a homogeneity which, in reality, did not exist; with many women of colour coming into power during the 80s, the feminists needed to rethink the category 'woman' (2010:23-24).

As for the feminist actions against patriarchal oppression in *On Beauty*, Smith describes the various ways female characters are defined by men. For example, Kiki, who has been married to Howard for many years, has never had any friends: "The friendship of other women hadn't mattered to her in a long time. She'd never needed to think about it, having married her best friend" (OB 168-169). Once her husband has an affair, she starts to realise just how deeply she has wanted to accommodate others without considering herself. She suddenly feels the need to live her life, socialise and have meaningful conversations with people outside of her family: "You *have* friends, Jerome. And Zora has friends, and Levi practically lives with his friends – and…well we sure as hell know now how close your *father* is to his friends – and what? I can't make friends? Y'all have your life and I have *no*

life?" (OB 165). Smith not only describes the patriarchal oppression of women in the novel, but also considers various ways they knowingly or unknowingly fight their oppression. Therefore, it takes her husband's betrayal for Kiki to reflect on her oppression and consider whether her sacrifice has all been for nothing: "Right now I'm trying to understand what my life's been *for* – I feel I'm at that point – and what it *will* be for" (OB 176). As a consequence of his actions, Kiki's image of Howard suddenly crumbles: "She saw differently now; that was one of the side-effects. Whether the new way of seeing was the truth, she couldn't say. But it was certainly stark, revelatory" (OB 203). Now that she does not regard him as a loving partner, she starts seeing clearly all of Howard's physical flaws: "She saw every fold and tremble of his fading prettiness. She found she could muster contempt for even his most neutral physical characteristics. The thin, papery, Caucasian nostril holes. The doughy ears sprouting hairs that he was careful to remove and yet whose ghostly existence she continued to catalogue" (OB 203). She cannot contain her contempt for Howard's selfishness, most importantly the way she indulged him throughout their marriage, so she makes the following remarks: "Sugar, you're the one who makes the decisions. We just roll with the punches as they come. Who knows what you'll do to this family next. You know? Nobody can know that" (OB 204). In the end, Kiki finally decides to take her life under control and leaves Howard; she moves out of their house and takes the first steps to officially separate from her husband and lead an independent life: "'I still don't see what the point of separating the bank account is' grumbled Howard" (OB 434). This move on Kiki's part shocks Howard because he was used to Kiki complying with his wishes and his lifestyle. He expresses feelings of jealousy and anger towards Kiki's independence: "Jerome, I am merely *interested* in how your mother manages to pay for the secret 'bachelor

pad' *and* go out with her girlfriends every night *and* fund a court case *and* provide Levi with twenty dollars every other day. Is that all the money she's siphoning off me? I'm simply interested in how that works" (OB 436).

Claire, on the other hand, has obviously experienced some trauma in her childhood which left consequences on her identity as an adult: "Twice a week at six thirty Claire drove into Boston, to Dr Byford's house in Chapel Hill and paid him eighty dollars an hour to help her seek out personal insight…Claire Malcolm was addicted to self sabotage. In a pattern so deeply embedded in her life that Byford suspected it of being rooted in her earliest babyhood" (OB 223). While Smith does not explicitly mention what happened in Claire's childhood, it can be assumed that it might have been some form of molestation: "…the more so because she couldn't defend it, even to herself; the more so because she was terrified and humbled by the long reach of her miserable, unloved childhood. Still clasping its fingers round her throat all these years later!" (OB 224). Nevertheless, Claire survives her trauma and manages to succeed in life, both professionally and romantically, albeit later in life and with an extramarital affair under her belt.

Zora is torn between her desires to find a boyfriend and succeed academically; she contradicts her feminist views with her clothing style, wearing excessive make-up and exhibit desperate, flirtatious behaviour towards Carl. However, she is a firm believer in women's independence and freedom of speech, which is one of the ways she copes with the patriarchal system that dictates women's self-perception. She falls victim to this system like most young women, but at the same time, she is able to recognise her victimhood and does not let it break her: "She's *awl* business. Whatever she gits in front of her she rips apart to see how it works. She's gonna go a long way" (OB 145).

On the other hand, the Kipps women are the ones who are the greatest victims of patriarchal society. While Victoria is constantly sexually objectified, Carlene completely obeys her husband and puts her needs last. Victoria rebels in her own way; her behaviour is sexually progressive, which could be understood in two different ways. Firstly, it could imply her independence and self-awareness; however, at the same time, her attitudes towards her sexuality and promiscuousness could be regarded as a form of patriarchal oppression, since she says that her beauty and appeal is the only reason people, especially men, pay attention to her: "Where social meanings are imposed on them, sexual objectification directly undermines women's ability to be self-presenters" (Jütten 2016:35). Thus, because of her beauty, Victoria is unable to express her other qualities; despite her attempts, she will always be seen through hypersexualised lens. Her mother, Carlene, is an example of a completely oppressed woman who does not have any desire to do things on her own; everything she does is for Monty and her family: "No doubt Monty wanted to prove he was a man of the people, as powerful men so often like to do – at his wife's expense" (OB:285). Monty went so far as to present Carlene as an ideal woman in his articles, predominantly because she was a religious, compliant housewife: "He writes a lot about – I mean, I've read his articles – about what a perfect mother you are, and he…you know, often uses you as an example of the ideal – I guess, the ideal 'stay-at-home' Christian Mom – which is amazing of course – but there must also be things you…maybe things *you* wanted to do that…maybe you wish" (OB 172). However, Carlene replies to Kiki's question that "[she] wanted to love and to be loved" (OB 172). Unfortunately, shortly after Carlene's death, the reader finds out that Monty was having an affair with his apprentice. The affair possibly occurred even during Carlene's battle with cancer.

To sum up, as Jackson claims: "In elevating subjectivity and in attending to the situation of the "other," feminist critique, postcolonialism, and comedy all have a revelatory capacity; they each work to reveal the past and present circumstances while envisioning a path into a new future" (2015:250). Therefore, postcolonial and feminist critiques are probably the most productive literary approaches, since they open up new perspectives with the ultimate goals of meliorating experiences for every human and working toward a more respectful and prosperous future. As for concrete feminist battles, Smith depicts them in her own fashion; by showing the reader how women can be oppressed by men in various ways, she also shows how women battle oppression in their everyday lives, not just through official feminist movements. Movements are established to raise awareness and to give courage to women on a real-life and everyday level, but the struggle to break free is fought locally and with different strategies, with fought locally meaning in their home, at work or in everyday social situations.

3. Between you and me, I was hot:
On Age

There is a substantial amount of study on the influence of menopause on weight gain, sexual functions and psychological problems, such as depression. For example, Davis et al. write that "increased central abdominal fat appears to be a direct consequence of the menopause" (2012:425). Wing et al. further confirm that there is an evident connection between menopause and weight gain, adding that their study showed, "black women gained more weight than white women" (1991:101). Emotional distress is another aspect that comes with menopause and almost every study acknowledges the turmoil that women experience. For example, Matthews states that "menopause occurs in midlife at a time when many women are experiencing changes in roles, responsibilities, and relationships that accompany aging generally and the maturation of children and their departure from home in particular" (1992:1). Furthermore, the above-mentioned changes women's "identity, self-esteem, and social and family relationships" (Matthews 1992:1). Matthews also suggests that because of losing reproductive ability, "middle-aged women may be exposed more often to interpersonal stress and may respond more emotionally to it" (1992:8). Apart from affecting weight and creating emotional disturbances, menopause can influence women's sexuality as well: "Given the evidence that mood disorders are one of the most important co-morbid conditions of sexual dysfunction in postmenopausal women, it is plausible that weight gain and obesity at menopause may be risk factors for poor sexual functioning" (Davis et al. 2012:423). However, there is little evidence on exactly how weight gain influences sexuality in menopause as a consequence of psychological symptoms (2012:423).

It is likely that a lack of sexual desire occurs due to a combination of all of the biological factors which impact women during menopause, leading to serious affects on women's self-esteem.

Establishing correlation between Kiki and women as a collective group is essential in the overall analysis of her character; this observation gives Smith's novel a new level of importance. By describing Kiki as a large, middle-aged, African-American woman living among white people in a university town, Smith opened a window of opportunities to analyse her, given that Kiki's persona has numerous relatable features. In order to understand Kiki's weight issues and consequent identity problems, it is necessary to observe the changes she experiences within the medical framework. Firstly, Smith suggests various times that Kiki has gained weight to the point of obesity, most notably in her abdomen: "Kiki became aware, suddenly, of her own belly and the way it hung over her leggings; she reorganized it under the elastic of her underwear, a move that made her feel more protected somehow, more solid." (OB 204). Kiki hides her fat from Howard, even in a heated argument, meaning that she is still sensitive to what he thinks of her. Smith proves the assumptions that Kiki's difficulties with her weight and identity is the consequence of menopause in the episode where Kiki and Howard make one last attempt at saving their marriage. After having intercourse, they start having their first honest conversation in a long time. Kiki reprimands Howard for his behaviour towards her and tells him "I haven't had my period in three months – did you even know that? I'm acting crazy and emotional all the time." She further states "My body's telling me the show's over. That's real. And I'm not going to be getting any thinner or any younger, my ass is gonna hit the ground" (OB 398).

It is at this moment that the reader sees that Kiki is at peace with her age. She realises that it is not her age or her partner that defines her and that it is time to embrace these changes. She then confesses to Howard that she wants a divorce, confessing to him that she wants "to be with somebody who can still see me in here. I'm still in here. And I don't want to be resented or despised for changing…I'd rather be alone. I don't want someone to have contempt for who I've become" (OB 398). The line "I'm still here" (OB 398) particularly resonates with the reader because it is a direct response to Howard insinuating in their heated argument that he was unfaithful to Kiki because of her weight gain.

A recurring theme in the novel is the struggle to accept the end of youth and and to enter into a new life of as middle-aged individual. Nearly all of the middle-aged main characters in the novel face this struggle. As one of the above-mentioned characters and the predominant protagonist in the novel, the reader has the most access to Kiki's mind. Smith dedicates the most time in the novel to demonstrating the wide array of themes associated with this character. Kiki has been Howard Belsey's wife for thirty long years; as a woman in her fifties, she is a formed and stable character, but Smith shows that in spite of her age, experience and maturity, Kiki faces many struggles with her husband, her children and within herself, as well as with the world that surrounds her. She is an African-American woman who used to be exceptionally beautiful in her youth. Over the years, she has gained a considerable amount of weight, resulting in problems in her marriage and with her self-image. Throughout the novel, Kiki views her age as an unfamiliar territory in which she is not yet proficient. It is evident by her figure, which is mentioned many times in the novel, that age has taken a toll on her and she begins to see that people regard her differently than

before which, in turn, makes her uncertain about how to interact with them. It is mentioned a couple of times in the novel that Kiki used to be a particularly good-looking young woman, which she acknowledges when she says to Carlene Kipps "between you and me, I was hot" (OB 172). Kiki is still beautiful and the first beautiful feature that people notice about her is her face. For example, when Kiki emphasizes that she is old at fifty-three, Carlene opposes her by saying "anybody can see it – you're a child in your face" (OB 95). Even Howard who partially blames Kiki's weight on his infidelity, "never really got over her face. It gave him so much pleasure" (OB 110). Due to her ethnicity, Kiki did not age much in terms of wrinkles, and the weight stretched her face, making it look even younger: "Her skin had that famous ethnic advantage of not wrinkling much, but in Kiki's case, the weight gain had stretched it even more impressively. At fifty-two, her face was still a girl's face. A beautiful tough-girl's face" (OB 15). The "tough – girl" phrase is evidently used here to describe how she has lost the girlish, gentle quality of her beauty, and has, instead, gained a new quality, which is the one of maturity, experience and 'toughness'.

Another observation is the way Kiki behaves around people as a consequence of her age. Her weight gain and, consequently, her bosom, led to the addition of a new aspect of her personality (OB 47). All of a sudden Kiki starts to represent a spectrum of symbols – "And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting – it was a mirror-world she had stepped into in her mid forties, a strange fabulation of the person she believed she was" (OB 47). When faced with a situation where she has to acknowledge the size of her bosom and her body, she wonders: "And she had been a tiny thing for years and years! How does it happen?" (OB 47)

Therefore, it is difficult for her to connect her present looks with how she feels inside. She was used to using her good looks to her advantage when interacting with men, such as in the episode when she buys jewelry from a market vendor and she showcases the remnants of the tendency to flirt her way to success. However, a sudden realisation that the vendor does not notice her and is not even "barely concerned with her, neither as a person nor as an idea" (OB 48) leaves Kiki disappointed and shocked. She realises that her looks do not have the same power anymore and that she must retort to other means of negotiation. Studies show that "as women age, they may become increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies which may be due to weight gain, changes in body composition from aging and/or pregnancy, or other developmental factors" (Wilfley et al. 1996:385). This dissatisfaction with one's body is not surprising given that "the major focus of body image has come to be on body shape and weight…current societal standards for beauty inordinately emphasize the desirability of thinness, an ideal accepted by most women but impossible for many to achieve" (Tiggemann and Lynch 2001:243). It is especially hard for older women whose metabolism changes due to various factors and it is nearly impossible to maintain the body ideal imposed by societal standards, so "there is good reason to expect that body image will become poorer as women age, as every year is likely to move women further from the thin and youthful ideal of beauty" (2001:243). This is because "they also change shape, lose skin elasticity, and their hair goes grey or thins" (2001:243).

Being a black fifty-three-year-old woman, Kiki also meets with opposite reactions from men, meaning that some men have negative reactions to her looks and some have positive. These opposite reactions must also be understood in the context of race. Kiki

reveals that white men have been educated to consider larger black women as non-sexual entities; therefore, they often find her funny and do not regard her as a sexual being. On the contrary, black men of all ages seem to appreciate her curves and do not hesitate to approach her since "although there is no clear evidence documenting a lack of stigma of obesity among Black Americans, there is some evidence that Black individuals might prefer larger body sizes than White Americans" (Hebl and Heatherton 1998:418). Moreover, the confusion grows with the fact that Kiki is married to a white man. What does he think of her? When encountering a family friend Warren Crane, Claire Malcolm's husband, Kiki is confronted the reality of this issue and her thoughts on it are the following:

> When you are no longer in the sexual universe – when you are supposedly too old, or too big, or simply no longer thought of in that way – apparently a whole new range of male reactions to you come into play. One of them is humour. They find you funny. But then, thought Kiki, they were brought up that way, these white American boys: I'm the Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes of their childhoods, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around. Of course they find me funny. And yet I could cross the river to Boston and barely be left alone for five minutes at a time. Only last week a young brother half her age trailed Kiki up and down Newbury for an hour and would not relent until she said he could take her out some time; she gave him a fake number (OB 51).

Men also become more relaxed around her, employing a degree of flirtation in their communication. However, this is not for the purpose of seducing her: "And this is another thing they do. They flirt with you violently because there is no possibility of it being taken seriously" (OB 51). The reason for this form of communication lies in Kiki's age, her size and, most importantly the race she belongs to. Taking the stereotype of the 'mammy' into

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consideration, Kiki no longer exudes sexuality, but is rather regarded as a nursing and motherly figure; therefore, flirting with her seems innocent and does not carry any sexual innuendos. This type of flirtatious communication is clearly understood by Kiki, as well as by Warren and there is no danger of misconstruction. Jütten discusses the problem of stereotyping and self-representation in the following passage, creating a parallel to what Kiki is going through:

> They can try to construct a public image of themselves that negates the image that others may have formed of them already on the basis of the stereotype. To be sure, on this account, victims of stereotyping still are harmed and wronged because their opportunities for self-presentation are restricted, even though they are not fully eradicated. They face additional burdens in realizing their autonomy and equal social standing, because they are singled out for social stereotyping (2016:36).

The main issue is that a certain stereotypical opinion spreads to others as well, limiting the victim's possibility of self-definition: "the manifestation of these attitudes and behaviors toward the person licenses others in seeing her in the same way and therefore reproduces the imposition of the social meaning" (Jütten 2016:36). Thus, Kiki is unable to present herself in a way she would like, since she has already been marked as a 'mammy'. However, the problem with unconscious racial stereotyping is that it is hard to eradicate because, when compared to sexual objectification, which "more often works through media that consciously appeal to men's attitudes and desires, such as men's magazines and pornography" (2016:37), the former does not work in that way. Once women begin to 'believe' that they fit the stereotype and start seeing themselves the same way, this "may lead to an increase in both

shame and anxiety about the body and appearance and to a decrease in awareness of internal bodily states and the ability for peak motivational states" (Tiggemann and Lynch 2001:244).

Smith has a writing quality that reveals deeper meanings behind the seemingly simple dialogue which takes place between her characters. Through unpretentious lines exchanged on a couple of occasions between Carlene Kipps and Kiki, the reader is able to discover intricate the characters' emotions regarding the topic of age. Both women say to each other that they feel and look old. However, in Kiki's case, she feels that this is not exactly true. She is moving towards the acceptance of her age, but still has challenges to face. Being fifty-three-years old, the feeling of being middle-aged is still new to her and she is still in the process of realising what it means for her and her life. On the other hand, Carlene is serene and accepting of the fact she is not young anymore. She neither looks young nor dresses in a youthful manner. However, it does not seem to bother her because she does not try to seem younger, she is simply acknowledging her age. On that note, studies show that women who maintain 'older age' identities experience less fear of aging and greater life satisfaction (Montepare and Lachman 1989:75); this deduction can be related to Carlene's resolution with her age. Logically then, "those older women with younger age identities had the lowest levels of satisfaction" (1989:75). In general, "the present data indicated that during the middle and older adult years, individuals' subjective age identities are several years younger than their actual ages. Moreover, "discrepancies between subjective and actual ages become more pronounced with advancing chronological age, especially for women" (1989:76).

However, there are two reasons for Carlene's attitude; the first one is the fact that she has organised her entire life around Monty; she says to Kiki in one of their conversations: "I wanted to love and to be loved" (OB 172). This lack of personal ambition prevented her from taking care of her appearance. Since she did not see herself as an individual separated from Monty, she dedicated her whole being to Monty's prosperity in his academic life, rather than taking care of her own beauty. When Howard first meets her on his trip to London, he is surprised by her age and the way she looks. Because of Monty's success and popularity, Howard expected her to be young and "a trophy" (OB 40). Instead, before him is a sixty-year-old woman with a long, "deeply creased" neck (OB 40). Carlene says to Kiki that how she feels is much more important to her than what she looks like. She is happy with Monty and the life they built together, and that was her only ambition. Later in the novel, when Carlene dies, it is discovered that she had been suffering from cancer, which could be another reason why she permitted herself to turn to spiritual fulfillment rather than physical. This is further supported by the fact that she did not reveal her illness to anyone, not even her family, who her sudden death took by surprise. Keeping her diagnosis a secret, she carried a burden that affected her not only emotionally, but physically as well. According to Sara Wilcox, another reason why Carlene put less importance on her looks could be because "as individuals age, it is possible that they become more realistic as to what they can or cannot obtain, and adjust their standards to match. For example, a woman who is 70 years of age may feel that she is attractive based on comparisons between herself and her 70-year-old peers" (1997:561). Additionally, "older women may not strive for unrealistic standards of beauty and may not experience body-attitude dissatisfaction with age, whereas today's younger women may experience more difficulty in this realm as they grow older" (Wilcox

1997:562); this is because when they were young, mass media did not promote beauty standards as much as it does know. With its expansion, mass media not only acquired new forms of presentation, but also established a much larger audience, since today it is easier to obtain information; in this way, beauty standards are easier to establish and are also much more influential than 40 or 50 years ago.

Kiki and Carlene represent two women with different personalities and interests: but, they both somehow end up living very similar lives. Carlene's life goals have always been finding a person to love and care for whereas Kiki had imagined greater things for herself. Carlene found a life partner and accomplished herself through him, and that is why she does not seem to battle inner struggles with her appearance and identity. On the other hand, Kiki admits that she was very ambitious and adventurous before marriage, wanting to become "Malcolm X's private assistant", "a writer" and to "sing at one point" (OB 172). Whenever her plan would fail, she did not despair. Instead, she would find another aspiration to strive to. For this reason, she cannot entirely accept her age, wondering what she could have accomplished. Looking back at her life, it is obvious that she had high hopes and high self-esteem as a young woman, which shattered once she married and settled into family life. Evidently, her missed chances are holding her back from accepting that she is a middle-aged woman who does not have much time left to accomplish her dreams, however, she employs her sense of humour to handle her feelings. For example, when Claire compares her to a sunset, "Keeks, you're *setting*" (OB 52), she responds with "I done *set already*" (OB 52). Humour is what Kiki uses to come to terms with her age and new identity more easily. She thinks that addressing and acknowledging her age helps her ignore the issue of aging.

Another character whose self-identity is compromised by her age is Claire Malcolm. The reader is first introduced to Claire at the market when Kiki runs into her and her new husband, Warren Crane. At this point in the novel, referring to the encounter at the market, it has not been revealed yet that Claire was Howard's mistress and available information on her can be acquired through Kiki's perspective. Claire is Kiki and Howard's age, more precisely fifty-four, but since Kiki says that she wears "a little green sundress" at the market, which is the opposite of what she normally wears, a "black leather jacket, black polo neck and black jeans" (OB 50), a conclusion can be drawn that she is quite a modern-thinking woman. Physically, she is petite and fair skinned, the complete opposite to Kiki. Claire is highly educated and blessed with a slim figure, which she maintains by regularly doing yoga. However, as Dean Jack French points out, "her small proportions bore no relation to the force of Claire Malcolm's personality" (OB 159). Claire epitomizes the concept of the privileged white woman - the lack of curves, petite build, and fair skin, sophisticated and educated. In order to point out just how 'white' Claire is, Smith goes so far as to describe what her skin looks like: "When she moved a finger, you could trace the motion through pulleys of veins that went all the way up her slender arms and shoulders to her neck, itself elegantly creased like the lungs of an accordion" (OB 51). Descriptions of her looks serve to emphasise how completely different Claire is compared to Kiki. Meanwhile, the same descriptions are used to point out another observation that the reader is to understand only further along in the novel. Namely, the conclusion the reader should draw, despite Claire and Kiki's contradicting appearances, is that the two women go through essentially the same issues regarding self-identity.

Just like Kiki, Claire feels the pressure that comes with getting older. When Kiki meets her at the street market, she reveals that she and Warren got married but did not tell anyone out of fear that they would be ridiculed by their acquaintances: "I didn't want anybody rolling their eyes about a couple of old birds like us getting hitched, so we didn't invite anybody and there was no goddamn eye-rolling" (OB 55). Obviously, she wants to experience marriage, but since she and Warren are not young anymore, she feels insecure about actually getting married because of what the people around her might say. Nevertheless, she is a youthful woman; every day, she is surrounded by young people and her students engage her into their modern lifestyles and liberal opinions. In fact, she actually enjoys the company of her students and regularly organises meetings with them in a Moroccan restaurant. On one of these occasions, she suddenly comes to a realisation that the ethnographic and age structures in the restaurant has changed and she finds herself to be within the minority as a white person, particularly one who is middle-aged. At that moment "she is thankful for yoga; yoga allowed her to sit cross-legged on a floor cushion like a much younger woman, camouflaged among her students" (OB 220). Claire thus, retorts to yoga not only for health purposes, but evidently, as a means of acquiring eternal youth: "Interestingly, among women exercisers increasing age was associated with greater body satisfaction, whereas among women nonexercisers the relationship was just the opposite" (Wilcox 1997:562). Since "exercise may also benefit older women's body attitudes" (1997:562), yoga helps Claire feel better about herself and also helps her deal with the physical consequences of getting older. The change of crowd in the Moroccan restaurant does make her feel a little bit uncomfortable and out of place in much younger surroundings. She is often described by Kiki as intimidating and impressive at the same time with Kiki

being "impressed by her but also slightly wearied – there was no subject she could not enthusiastically dissect or embroider" (OB 53). She also exudes self-confidence. In the Moroccan restaurant episode, Carl goes onto the stage to rap and after he finishes, Claire abruptly stands in front of him and asks him to join her class while her students are left astonished at her "absolute confidence" (OB 233), attributing it to her "age and power" (OB 233). However, it is obvious that self-confidence can mask internal issues. Claire, too, feels that she has come to a crossroads in life. After her recent marriage to Warren, which is effectively a happy marriage since she "had come to a place of personal joy" (OB 223), Claire suddenly realises that her days of personal freedom are over. Thus, she suddenly turns to Howard who is a perfect subject with whom she can have an affair and confirms to herself that her freedom still exists: "By contrast, she had felt all the classic masculine impulses and fantasies surge through her old friend back towards her – the late possibility of other people, of living other lives, of new flesh, of being young again" (OB 224). Given that Claire found her compatible partner at a later stage of her life, it is hard for her to make adjustments and change her lifestyle for another person. She has already spent more than half of her life catering only to herself, which is evident from her education, physique and reputation; therefore, letting someone into her life and making compromises becomes much harder, even though she is aware that Warren suits her personality and is not going anywhere: "Finally, finally, she had found this wonderful blessing, this angel, this gift, Warren Crane" (OB 223).

The topic of age centered around Smith's main female characters, firstly Kiki and Claire, and later Carlene, too, addresses the way the women handle their middle-age.

Although Kiki tries to accept it, she struggles with her lost dreams and ambitions, along with the physical consequences that middle-age has brought her. On the other hand, as far as the reader can deduce, Carlene is unbothered by how old she is. However, this is not surprising, since she says that her life has been centered around Monty and that she has not had any ambitions of her own. Claire pays plenty attention to her physique, which is another way of battling age. Smith insinuates that the more women are opinionated, educated and spirited, the more they suffer from risk of losing their identity, or have an inability to accept the new identity that comes with turning fifty. While Carlene seems content with her life, completely dependent on her husband, Kiki and Claire, who were more opinionated before, have issues with accepting and entering into the roles that nature has forced on them. It is clear that age "affects physical competence, appearance, self-esteem and social functioning. There are no clear differences between gender and ethnicity in these outcomes" (Davis et al. 2012:420)

4. Fat ladies need love, too:
On Body image

There is evidence that girls have much lower self-esteem than boys, as girls are taught to believe that they will be valued primarily based on their looks (Clay et al. 2005:452). However, boys are not entirely excluded as Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannah and Eisenberg suggest: "In Western societies, which tend to view characteristics such as body weight, muscularity, and leanness as under individual control, an adolescent who is dissatisfied with his or her body is likely to perceive this to be the result of personal inadequacy. Such negative beliefs are likely to have the long-term effect of increasing depressive mood and low self-esteem" (2006:546). In a comparison between middle-aged women and college girls, with regards to their self-esteem surrounding body image, it has been noted that "although middle-aged women may be more body dissatisfied than college-aged women, they may be less inclined to pursue thinness to the same degree or in the same manner as their younger counterparts…middle-aged women may not carry as much associated psychopathology as it does for younger women" (Wilfley et al. 1996:385).

Because of these pressures, women, especially young women and adolescent girls, tend to frequently experience a variety of psychological and eating disorders, regardless of their race; therefore, "although black women are less likely to have eating disorders compared with white women, this does not mean that they are protected from eating disorder symptoms or ideal body image pressures" (Perez and Joiner, Jr. 2003:343). Moreover, "black women may pressure themselves to achieve their cultural standards of ideal body size just like white women" (Perez and Joiner, Jr. 2003:349). Apart from eating disorders, one's

dissatisfaction with body image can also lead to depression: "As appearance is a critical evaluative dimension for girls in Western culture, body dissatisfaction directly contributes to increase in depressive mood" (Paxton et al. 2006:539).

It is important to identify the culprits for the unhealthy standards that women, regardless of race, are subjected to: "North Americans are bombarded by media and popular messages that say that 'thin is in' and that being fat is unattractive and unhealthy" (Hebl and Heatherton 1998:423). Moreover, magazines, music videos, advertisements, TV and films promote an ideal of female beauty which is both unrealistic and unattainable, given that it is shaped with the help of cosmetic surgery and digital modifications (qtd. in Clay et at. 2005:452); "Idealised media images are routinely subjected to computer manipulation techniques, such as airbrushing (e.g. slimming thighs and increasing muscle tone). The resulting images present an unobtainable 'aesthetic perfection' that has no basis in biological reality" (Paraskeva et al. 2017:2). Low self-esteem could be attributed to the fact that girls compare themselves to beautiful, thin women they see in the media. The more they become aware of their own bodies and the effect they produce "a decline with age in body satisfaction" (Clay et al. 2005:457) occurs; "the negative impact of media depictions of slenderness seems, then, to depend on the occurrence of social comparison" (Wilcox and Laird 2000:279). These social comparisons "occur when people compare their appearance to those they view as superior with regard to attractiveness, often models and celebrities" (Paraskeva 2017:3).

Seemingly, as adolescent girls get older, they become more aware of societal ideals

regarding appearance, yet pubertal development draws many away from these ideals. With

no educational intervention, adolescents will internalize these values and hence engage in

social comparisons, which result in an actual-ideal body discrepancy, entailing reduced body

satisfaction and self-esteem (Clay et at. 2005:471).

Magazines, TV and advertising once acted as the main distributors and promoters

of female beauty ideals, but now, they have partially been substituted by social media,

mainly Instagram and Facebook: "Facebook allows users to create public or semi-public

personal profiles, and to customize their pages with photos and information about

themselves" (Fardouly et al. 2015:39). Perloff states that "studies have overwhelmingly

focused on effects of conventional mass media—magazine depictions, television ads, TV

entertainment programs, even music videos. But these are not the media that primarily attract

adolescent and young adult women" (2014:364). The success of social media platforms lies

in the fact that they are "immensely more personal outlets than conventional impersonal

mass media" (Perloff 2014:366). Thus, social media channels are much more dangerous than

mass media outlets because on Instagram and Facebook one can find an infinite source of

visual content that defines beauty standards; what's more, it is available to the user at any

time of the day (Perloff 2014:366). In this way, social media ruthlessly endorses unrealistic

images of beauty ideals, especially since its content is plagued with digital alterations such

as filters and Photoshop. In a study conducted by Paraskeva, Lewis-Smith and Diedrichs,

adolescent girls that participated in it stated that airbrushed images make them feel

"disgusting, fat and embarrassed" (2017:6). Women with lower self-esteem seek validation

and gratification on social media and "in these ways, they will try to satisfy psychological

appearance-gratifying needs and convince themselves they measure up to idealized others. But because ultimate satisfaction of these needs typically cannot come externally, but internally, young women can end up feeling disappointed and hurt" (Perloff 2014:369). Moreover, both Instagram and "Facebook contains additional elements that could impact people's body image concerns, such as comments posted by other people" (Fardouly et al. 2015:39).

However, as much as social media can be detrimental, it is important to acknowledge its power in changing beauty standards for the better; with its enormous platform, social media can promote healthier body images for girls and women, thus changing future perceptions on body image and working towards a realistic and healthy outlook on beauty (Perloff 2014:373). For example, there is an assumption that "labelling airbrushed media images putatively improves body image by raising consumers' awareness that the appearance of the individuals presented is not natural, and therefore is not a realistic target with which they should compare their own appearance to" (Paraskeva et al. 2017:2). In the same way, "disclaimers on media images and packaging have been employed as a health promotion intervention for a variety of health issues, including alcohol and tobacco consumption" (Paraskeva et al. 2017:3). However, although studies have shown that disclaimer labeling does not actually help women feel better about their appearance, with some women feeling badly about their body image after seeing an airbrushed picture, even with a disclaimer, social media could still be used to raise awareness and could become a tool in a fight against airbrushed photographs (Paraskeva et al. 2017:3). The results of Paraskeva, Lewis-Smith and Diedrichs's study showed that participants thought that the most effective methods of meliorating body image and self-esteem would be the inclusion of

bodies of different shapes and sizes in mainstream media, along with focusing on the healthy food and lifestyle as opposed to quick ways of losing weight and achieving the 'ideal' body image (2017:8).

Mainstream media and popular culture have an immense influence on people and it is important to point out their positive aspects, such as their ability to reach a great number of people through campaigns, music, art or film. Thus, it is worth mentioning an example of a remarkable and successful campaign launched by Dove – "a brand of personal care products such as soaps, body washes, and body lotions" (Murray 2013:84) - called "Campaign for Real Beauty" in 2004, in which images of real women who did not look like professional models were promoted (Millard 2011:148). This campaign is exceptional not only because it garnered positive attention and spread positive messages about women's bodies, but because it instigated research into reactions from the audience. These reactions revealed the extent to which distorted and unrealistic body ideals are present in people's minds and thus, the urgency to react and start changing the people's perceptions about beauty. The importance of this campaign, as Millard writes, is changing the way women are represented in media: "By showing older faces and curvy shapes, Dove may contribute to a changing definition of beauty advertisements in the future. Changes could include new ways of thinking about female beauty (e.g., older women can be beautiful, too), societal beauty standards (e.g., women are not going to put up with this anymore), and advertising (e.g., not all big corporations are evil)" (2011:158).

As for popular culture, there are many songs worth mentioning that explore the topic of body image, most notably, Beyoncé's song "Pretty Hurts" shares powerful and positive messages on self-esteem and body image within the song's lyrics, as well as in the music

video; the video follows Beyonce as she prepares for a beauty pageant. Her preparation consists of cosmetic surgery and fake tanning – it is a hyperbolised presentation of what women are willing to put their bodies through so that they can attain the ideal beauty standard. Other popular songs which promote body positivity are "Beautiful" by Christina Aguilera or "Scars to Your Beautiful" by Alessia Cara.

Howard's observations at the Wellington ball are evidence of the extent to which women go in order to attain beauty:

> In January, at the first formal of the year, the tremendous will-power of Wellington's female students is revealed. Unfortunately for the young women, this demonstration of pure will is accredited to 'femininity' – that most passive of virtues – and, as a result, does not contribute to their Grade Point Average. It is unfair. Why are there are no awards for the girl who starves herself through the Christmas period – refusing all sweetmeats, roasts and liqueurs offered to her – so that she might appear at the January formal in a backless dress and toeless shoes, although the temperature is near to freezing and the snow is heavy upon the ground? (OB 341)

It is obviously very important to women, especially young women, to feel beautiful even at the expense of being uncomfortable. They are very self-conscious about what others think of them. Such is the case with Zora who dresses herself for the purpose of impressing her peers. For example, on her first day of school as a sophomore, "Zora woke up in the morning hopeful that a transformation of this kind might have visited her in the night, but, finding it hadn't, she did what girls generally do when they don't feel the part: she dressed it instead" (OB 129). She dresses in somewhat ridiculous clothing, such as a "long boho skirt", "*man's*

hat" and "clumpy shoes" just so that her peers will regard her as a "'bohemian intellectual; fearless; graceful; brave and bold'" (OB 129). These are the attributes that she probably already naturally possesses, but, because she is so worried about what other people will think of her, she acquires a persona with exaggerated 'qualities' that she considers 'cool'.

Kiki contemplates how girls tend to lack confidence and give too much relevance to their appearances. Her thoughts are an in-depth analysis of Howard's objective observations of the girls at the Wellington ball:

> This is why Kiki had dreaded having girls: she knew she wouldn't be able to protect them from self-disgust. To that end she had tried banning television in the early years, and never had a lipstick or a woman's magazine crossed the threshold of the Belsey home to Kiki's knowledge, but these and other precautionary measures had made no difference. It was in the air, or so it seemed to Kiki, this hatred of women and their bodies – it seeped in with every draught in the house; people brought it home on their shoes, they breathed it in off their newspapers. There was no way to control it (OB 197-198).

Kiki offers the reader an insight into the motivation behind girls' obsessive desire to look their best; it comes from a place of insecurity. Since beauty standards apply mainly to women, women are, therefore, more likely to suffer the consequences of unhealthy beauty ideals. Consequently, many women believe that their physical appearance is directly related to their ability to find a partner: "Male attention and/or sexual experience may also lead to increased self-perceptions of attractiveness, perhaps through feedback by sexual partners or the inference that one must be relatively attractive if she is sought after by men" (Wiederman and Hurst 1998:279). Therefore, there is a constant pressure to attain attractivness which

results in psychological disturbances and unhappiness with one's own appearance. It is not only Kiki who shares her thoughts on the topic, but Claire as well, giving the topic of body-image a deeper perspective by representing how body ideals change depending on race. Regardless of their racial background, smith shows us how both women suffer from an insecurity related to their looks:

> And were they still like that, she wondered – these new girls, this new generation? Did they still feel one thing and do another? Did they still only want to be wanted? Were they still objects of desire instead of – as Howard might put it – desiring subjects? Thinking of the girls sat cross-legged with her in this basement, of Zora in front of her, of the angry girls who shouted their poetry from the stage – no, she could see no serious change. Still starving themselves, still reading women's magazines that explicitly hate women… (OB 226)

The passage with Warren's comments and Kiki's consequent thoughts on the way men behave with her based on their race, brings to light how black and white women are perceived in terms of their appearance, especially once they enter their fifties. Although "in sum, all available evidence seems to suggest that people of all ages and sizes hold negative attitudes toward obese individuals" (Hebl and Heatherton 1998:418), "Black Americans may not stigmatize obesity to the same extent as do White Americans because the greater statistical frequency of obesity among Black women may make obesity less salient and therefore less deviant for Black women than for white women" (Hebl and Heatherton 1998:419). Similarly, black men appreciate curves and larger body parts, such as buttocks, much more frequently than white men, who seem to prefer more petite women. (Hebl and Heatherton 1998:418). This is apparent in Levi's preferences when it comes to women. Namely, he is disillusioned as to why his father would consider Claire sexually attractive:

"Where was the booty on that? Where was the rack? He felt the unfairness and illogic of this substitution. He made a decision to cut the conversation short as a sign of solidarity with his mother's more generous proportions" (OB 220). Similarly, Levi's room is decorated "with posters of black girls, mostly big black girls, mostly big black girls' butts…But big black girls in bikinis was the central decorating scheme" (OB 426) to which Kiki says "'At least they're not starving half to death'…'At least they've got some flesh on their bones'" (OB 426). As a consequence, if it were assumed that most women find partners within their own racial group, it could be deducted that "since African-American women believe that African-American males prefer larger women, they have less need to lose weight and therefore, feel more attractive. White women, however, believe that white men prefer ultra-thin women" (Molloy and Herzberger 1998:632). However, although appealing to men plays a large part in women's self-esteem, it is not the only reason that women of different ethnic backgrounds generally regard overweight bodies differently; this concept will be discussed in more detail further along in this chapter.

It can be concluded that the character of Claire Malcolm represents the stereotypical white, privileged woman. She is physically fit, educated, smart and affluent. It is mentioned numerous times that she is tiny, especially when compared to Kiki. The comparisons between the two often emphasise the difference between the perceptions of white women and women of colour. On that note, Claire practices yoga to maintain the image of an independent and powerful woman because "for women, being thin in North America is often taken as a sign of prosperity, and being really thin requires time, effort, and money that the lower and middle classes are unable to afford. Only those rare individuals who are 'lucky at

birth' or those who can afford costly health club membership or personal trainers can realize the emaciated ideal of most White women" (Hebl and Heatherton 1998:419). On the contrary, black women, being prone to obesity, often feel pressured by the above-mentioned standards because it is much harder for them to reach these standards. In general, it is believed that "to be part of the beauty elite requires a carefully managed set of semiotic resources, including long, shiny hair; clear, smooth skin; cosmetics; thin body; straight, white teeth; and trendy clothes" (Millard 2011:150). Since body mass and race are connected to a woman's socioeconomic standing, this creates a rift between white and black women. The former might believe that they are superior and the latter might feel enraged for being regarded as inferior, or might feel inferior themselves. Moreover, as Millard explains, "one's performance of beauty is limited by skills, financial resources, anatomical attributes, and many other components, but beauty is still not something one has but something one does" (2011:150); therefore, the fact that obese and/or black women have a physical 'disadvantage' to succeed financially from the start they enter a vicious circle. Thus, Hebl and Heatherton write that black women tend to reject white ideals on female body because they have long been undermined for their race, making obesity more acceptable within the black community; similarly, black mothers are less likely to expect their daughters to be thin (1998:419). Therefore, it is expected that girls who have black mothers are more likely to be confident about their appearance. It will be considered how Smith analyses this theme in *On Beauty* further along in this chapter. However, it should also be mentioned that another study had different results on the topic which showed that "Black and White women did not differ in their perceptions of the degree to which family members were dissatisfied with their weight, or in their reported amounts of being criticized about their weight. These findings

are contrary to what has been hypothesized in the literature about Black women feeling less pressure to be thin by family members" (Wilfley et al. 1996:385). But they do acknowledge that black women might receive more support from their family than white women since they do not consider obesity as negative (Wilfley 1996:385). In their study on the perceptions of overweight black and white women, Hebl and Heatherton found that it is not only white men who have negative perceptions of overweight women, but white women share these perceptions as well. Although both white and black women preferred thin targets, white women connected obesity to the lack of intelligence, unsuccessfulness and odd social behaviour (1998:423). Similarly, Wilfley, Schreiber, Pike, Striegel-Moore, Wright and Rodin confirm these findings in their own study stating that "white women were significantly more likely to perceive that they were heavier than their best friend…and to endorse negative attitudes about overweight…than Black women" (1996:383). However, Hebl and Heatherton's findings also show that black people might consider obesity as one of their racial characteristics since most black female role-models are larger individuals, whereas white female role models are usually thin; thus, black women are more accepting of heavier bodies and even celebrate them, while white women consider them a serious flaw that affects other aspects of an individual's life (1998:424). Thus, "white women experienced significantly greater rates of body dissatisfaction than Black women" (Wilfley et al. 1996:384).

Returning to the topics of obesity, race and socio-economic standing, it is important to reflect on these concepts, given that they might create a rift between white and black women. Historically, it already happened in the early feminist movements when "on issues

of racial and economic inequality, women of colour often felt they had more in common with their brothers, sons, husbands and fathers than with the white, middle-class 'sisters' who dominated the movement in the late 1960s and 1970s" (Downs 2010:23). As previously mentioned, race, gender (and obesity) can determine economic and social success, with black women experiencing "more coworker hostility, lack of support, increased stereotyping, insufficient instruction, and closer supervision than their white male or female counterparts" (Smith and Joseph 2010:756) in their workplace. Moreover, there are "strained relations between black women and every other group, in part based on the trade-off between first being accepted by Caucasian women and black men and second distancing themselves from black women" (2010:756). Smith and Joseph conducted research among Caucasian and African American individuals through which they sought to find out how each ethnic group observed their professional success and setbacks; that is, whether they attributed race and gender to the treatment they received at work. The white participants never considered race or gender to be the reason for their difficulties in the workplace, while on the contrary, African-Americans always regarded race and gender as obstacles (Smith and Joseph 2010:757). Thus, "this dichotomy of views in a context where the power usually rests with whites (and white males in particular) may increase the tension experienced by blacks who may not feel heard, understood or supported" (2010:758).

Thus, taking into consideration the socio-theoretical analysis above, the previously mentioned encounter with Warren Crane at the market is very important because it makes Kiki question who she really is and what she has become. Up until her forties, she had regarded herself as an attractive and charming young woman "whom Howard had once,

twenty eight years ago, thrown over his shoulder like a light roll of carpet, to be laid down and laid upon" (OB 14) and was used to other people seeing her that way as well. However, she is now facing an identity crisis. Her race combined with her weight gain means that suddenly she is no longer regarded as beautiful and sexual, but rather as a 'mammy'. She is faced with having to change the way she sees herself and conforming to the way the world now sees her. The relationship between physical beauty and identity is strong because women are often being defined by their beauty. However, the relationship one has with their own beauty is crucial. In Kiki's case, she struggles with the deterioration of her physical appearance because it has, to some extent, defined her womanhood for a long period of her life.

Smith makes numerous allusions to Kiki's weight, not only to vividly and accurately describe her size and to show the reader just how many kilograms she has gained, but also to make the reader realise how Kiki's weight gain has affected her life. It is not accidental that Smith says Kiki used to be "laid down, and laid upon" (OB 14), and then in the next paragraph states "now she crossed the room and pushed by him with such force that he was muscled into an adjacent rocking chair" (OB 15). By contrasting Kiki's recently acquired physical force in the second quotation with the sexual implications of the first quotation, Smith portrays how Kiki has lost her femininity. Suddenly, she is physically stronger and manlier than Howard, who once enjoyed exercising his own masculinity by "laying upon" her. In the description of the changes to her body, Smith writes that Kiki "could no longer be meek or shy" and that "her body had directed her to a new personality" (OB 47), suggesting the changes to Kiki's body had forced her to completely transform her personality. This

transformation has not been an easy endeavor for Kiki, which is obvious during her interaction with the street vendor. Having been "a tiny thing for years and years" (OB 47), Kiki was obviously used to receiving positive sexual reactions from men. The changes to her body shape have social implications, restricting the number of men that find her attractive and whose attention she can retain by her looks; thus, Kiki feels disappointed that the street vendor is not making much effort to accommodate her. Perhaps the vendor is simply concentrated on his job and his demeanor has nothing to do with Kiki's appearance, but since Kiki is self conscious about and aware of her weight, she interprets his lack of attention as her being unattractive: "The stall guy proffered a small oval mirror, raising it up to her face, but not quickly enough for her sensitivities" (OB 47). "Sensitivities" refers to what Kiki is used to receiving from men. Due to her undeniable beauty, her sensitivities were developed and formed according to how other people regarded her; and they had regarded her as exceptionally beautiful and attractive for a long time, as Claire says "at that time her beauty was awesome, almost unspeakable, but more than this she radiated an essential female nature Claire had already imagined in her poetry – natural, honest, powerful, unmediated, full of something like genuine desire" (OB 227). Howard's infidelity accompanied by sudden changes in the comfortable life and loving marriage she had until recently, along with the physical difficulties she has because of it, make Kiki wonder about her appearance and triggers her desire to change it: "She stood naked for a while before her closet, making some astute decisions regarding her weight as it might be placed on an axis against the heat and the distance she would be covering, making her way through Wellington's celebrations alone" (OB 42). Moreover, Kiki is uncomfortable with her weight because she secretly blames herself for Howard's infidelity and for the fact that she was not

able to keep her good looks: "Obese individuals recognize that the criticism or rejection is due to their obesity and lay the blame on themselves for being obese rather than on the critic or rejecter for being prejudiced" (Hebl and Heatherton 1998:418). Moreover, considering that Kiki is not a typical African-American woman since lives in an almost 'all-white' neighbourhood and has white friends and a white husband, her insecurities must also be observed in this particular context. Namely, as white people regard obesity negatively, her insecurities are probably influenced by the standards set by her surroundings.

As already mentioned, Kiki evokes the 'Mammy' stereotype which is "one of the most pervasive images of Black women" that "originated in the South during slavery" (West 1995:459). Mammies were portrayed as "bandanna clad, obese, dark complexioned" whose "primary role was domestic service, characterized by long hours of work with little or no financial compensation" (1995:459). Although Kiki was once very beautiful, she does not have the same figure anymore and now resembles a 'Mammy'; therefore, she has to change her perception about herself accordingly: "Among Black women with African features, physical characteristics, such as dark skin and kinky hair, which are typically associated with the Mammy image, may perpetuate shame and feelings of unattractiveness" (1995:460). In fact, she does feel embarrassed by her body parts, most often her stomach which she purposefully tries to hide. Moreover, the changes she makes to her hair are also mentioned numerous times. It is evident that she always keeps her hair in order and does not let it flow around her head in its natural form: "She wore it in two thick ropes of plait that reached to her backside, like a ram's unwound horns. Without looking up, she evened out each side of the material, threw her head back once more, spun the material twice round and retired it in

exactly the same manner but tighter" (OB 14). While Kiki may wear her hair tight and neat for practical reasons, her hairstyle could also have psychological connotations. 'Mammies' always had neat hair, so this image that Kiki now might indentifies herself with could influence her consciousness to embody the characteristics of the 'Mammy'.

Following on from the previously mentioned hypothesis that girls with black mothers are more confident about their looks, a parallel can be made with Kiki and Howard's daughter Zora, who is mixed-race. Zora is a twenty-year-old girl who is headstrong and persistent. Moreover, she is interested in academic life and social issues, but is also deeply insecure about her looks. Her stubbornness often annoys and almost frightens her professors, who find her so hard to reason with that she usually gets her way: "Zora Belsey's real talent was not for poetry but persistence…When the city of Wellington served Zora with (in her opinion) an undeserved parking ticket, it was not Zora but the city – five months and thirty phone calls later - which backed down" (OB 369). She is always prepared for the discussions with supporting evidence to back up her arguments; such was the case when she wanted to attend Claire's creative writing class (OB 147). In a meeting with Dean French, Zora brings the examples of her publications and wins their argument: "So now all the cards were laid out. Jack took a moment to examine them. Twenty years of playing this game left him in no doubt that Zora Belsey had a full hand" (OB 147). She emphasises the importance of intelligence and academic success as opposed to physical beauty, but also contradicts herself throughout the novel both by being self-conscious about her looks and disliking Victoria. She obviously inherited her mother's proneness to weight gain which other characters notice and sometimes contemplate: "In this pose, the daughter bent over the mother, they reminded

Howard of two of Picasso's chubby water carriers" (OB 12). Even Claire gives into the examination of Zora's looks: "How much of her father was here! The slight over-bite, the long face, the noble nose! She was getting fat, though: inevitably she would go the way of her mother" (OB 223). However, because Zora is self-conscious about her appearance, she often wears provocative and unflattering clothes that reveal plenty of skin; she wears this type of clothing to cover up her insecurities, but also as a means of seducing Carl. Once Carl gets a job at Wellington University's archives, Zora pays him a visit and wears an outfit displaying a considerable amount of cleavage, which produces a counter effect on Carl; he loses a little bit of respect for her, smacking "her playfully on her big butt" (OB 379), while not actually being romantically interested in her: "He was taken aback by the large amount of cleavage he was confronted with, pushed up and together in a tight white top that could not quite contain the goods it had been entrusted with" (OB 375). Zora desperately wants to make herself look more attractive in order to make Carl like her, choosing the wrong type of clothing once more at a party for the end of the school year: "Her dress was a bad colour and it had no back and it was the wrong material for her lumpy body and it was too short" (OB 408). Not only does she wear an unflattering dress, has very high heels rendering her incapable of walking normally, prompting Jerome to comment: "Aren't you meant to be a feminist? Why would you cripple yourself like this?" (OB 409). Zora responds by saying the heels "actually make [her] feel powerful" (OB 409). Zora is obviously a typical young woman who wants to be considered attractive by boys her age; she is not mature enough to be a true feminist.

Throughout the novel, Smith emphasises and describes the character's looks, but at the same time she suggests that physical beauty is deceiving. Most characters struggle to attain or enjoy physical beauty, but they also deeply suffer because of it – whether they already possess it or not. For example, Kiki struggles with her weight and is hurt by the possibility that her looks caused her husband to have an extramarital affair (OB 207). But, Kiki's insecurities about her looks are not entirely her own; they were partially imposed on her by other people, mainly her husband. She does not seem generally involved with her appearance and even says to Carlene in their discussion about beauty: "I see Zora worrying all the time about her looks, and I want to say to her, honey, any woman that counts on her face is a *fool*. She doesn't want to hear that from me. It's how it is, though. We all end up in the same place in the end. That's the *truth*." (OB 173). However, what Kiki does not realise is that she probably played some part in Zora's outlook on beauty. By watching her mother gain weight and consequently experience marital problems because of it, Zora decided not to meet the same destiny. This is evident from her conversation with Carl, when she unexpectedly reveals to him her family issues, including her father's affair: "Intellectual men are attracted to intellectual women – big fucking surprise. Plus my mom doesn't do herself any favours – she's like three hundred pounds or something…" (OB 139). She obviously shares this information with Carl because she is nervous to be talking to a boy she likes and her lack of self-confidence makes her look embarrassing. However, it is also important to note that it is evident how Zora blames Kiki's attitude towards her physical appearance for the affair Howard had with Claire. She does not seem to blame Howard and even justifies him by saying "what kind of a sophisticated guy in his fifties *doesn't* have an affair?" (OB 139). On the contrary, she believes that Kiki let herself gain too much weight and

consequently became sexually unattractive to Howard, who then started to become attracted to other people. Therefore, although she takes after her mother in terms of physique, taking care to put on make-up and look her best, Zora is still not satisfied with her looks. Kiki tries to build up her confidence by not giving so much relevance to her appearance, but Zora does not relent with being too hard on herself. One of their exchanges reveals a clear lack of confidence on Zora's part when she asks Kiki to go shopping with her: "I need some new shit to wear. I *hate* everything I own" (OB 197). Kiki responds "You look fine" (OB 197), but Zora does not really listen to her "Right. I look fine. Except I don't" (OB 197). She feels as if her mother does not understand her; however, her mother has more life experience and has already gone through phases of self-hatred only to realise that physical beauty is not the most important thing in life. Nevertheless, the knowledge that Howard has cheated on her because of her appearance, and with someone who looks completely different from her, renders Kiki unhappy and insecure. What hurts her the most is that Claire is a skinny and fit woman, whereas Kiki battles with excess weight: "'A little white woman,' yelled Kiki across the room, unable now to control herself. 'A tiny little white woman I could fit in my pocket'" (OB 206). "Could you have found anybody less like me if you *scoured the earth?*" (OB 206) "My leg weighs more than that woman. What have you made me *look like* in front of everybody in this town? You married a big black bitch and you run off with a fucking leprechaun?" (OB 206).

All in all, body image is a delicate thematic which most women are exposed to at some point in their lives, whether they are thin or large, young or old. Even some of the most famous supermodels in the world, such as Gisele Bundchen, opened up about going through

a breast augmentation procedure because she felt insecure about her breasts after breastfeeding her children (Bode 2018). The studies I have explored in this chapter demonstrate that a universal standard of beauty does not exist and that perceptions of beauty depend on culture, ethnic background and individual preference. It is evident that the only reason why beauty ideals exist is because the media is responsible for creating these standards and using them to alter people's perceptions about the body and about attractiveness. It has been mentioned that Caucasian women believe that in order to achieve a perfect beauty shape they must be thin, whereas African-American women are much more accepting of larger bodies, and in some cases even prefer being larger; therefore, beauty is highly subjective. This chapter has also reflected on the role of (social) media in the phenomenon of the ideal body and concluded that, although it is prone to producing negative feelings in its users, social media can also be efficiently used in spreading body positivity.

> But on a powerfully emotional level, being perceived as attractive means being welcomed into the cultural conversation. You are part of the audience for advertising and marketing. You are desired. You are seen and accepted. When questions arise about someone's looks, that's just another way of asking: How acceptable is she? How relevant is she? Does she matter?...We have come to equate beauty with humanity. If we don't see the beauty in another person, we are blind to that person's humanity. It's scary how important beauty has become. It goes to the very soulfulness of a person. Beauty has become so important today that denying that people possess it is akin to denying them oxygen (Givhan 2020).

5. *Their generation of girls know how to use their bodies:*
On the modern Jezebel

Jezebel is a villainous character from the Bible. Jezebel was the wife of the King of Israel, but came to be remembered as the symbol for sinful and immoral women due to her indifference towards her subjects and disrespect towards her religion. She was a resolute woman who did not hesitate to eliminate her opponents, particularly prophets and priests. As a result of her cruel actions, the people of Israel had to endure many hardships. In the end, she was eaten by dogs, a death which represents the symbolic end of her cruel rule and to her savage persona (Jackson 2015).

The myth surrounding Jezebel's wicked nature became so famous "that her infamy has travelled well beyond the pages of the books of Kings and into wider religious and cultural usage as a metaphor for any woman deemed dangerous, seductive, and/or evil" (Jackson 2015:240). This metaphor has been used most significantly in literary depictions of black women – "the sexually promiscuous black woman, also known as the 'oversexed-black-Jezebel,' is an extreme opposite of the 'mammy'" (Moody 2012:79). What the biblical Jezebel and the black Jezebel do have in common is their passivity in their respective narratives. The biblical Jezebel is introduced through her marriage to the Israeli King Ahab and is condemned for not being Israeli by origin. From a narrative point of view, her role in the marriage is quite passive and she is objectified, since "Ahab 'takes' her as his wife, and, in this 'taking,' their wedlock has commenced" (Jackson 2015:242). In a similar way, the black Jezebel is stereotyped and associated with being a "'slut,' 'hooker' and 'whore'" (Moody 2012:78).

The depiction of Victoria's character and her role within *On Beauty* is particularly significant. It is important to note that she is the only female protagonist whose mind is not accessible to the reader. There are quite a few parts of the novel dedicated to Kiki, Claire and Zora and their streams of consciousness; this is not the case with Victoria. The reader can only understand Victoria from other people's perspectives. These characters are Howard, Jerome, Zora and minor characters such as Carl and Katie. There is one striking conclusion the reader can draw from their perspectives: the male protagonists are sexually attracted to her, whereas the female protagonists do not like her. Was this treatment of Victoria intentional? It would appear so, especially in the episode in which Victoria and Howard have their last encounter in a hotel. This scene is the only part in the novel where Victoria explicitly articulates her feelings; this will be discussed in more detail further along in this chapter. Victoria is described as a beautiful, young, black girl whose looks and charms are impossible to resist. This is clear when Howard once calls her: "This girl was a dangerous commodity" (OB 157). However, Victoria's behaviour and relationships with the novel's other characters insinuate that she is promiscuous and flirty. Because of the above-mentioned lack of insight into Victoria's consciousness, it is very hard to relate or sympathise with her. For these reasons, Victoria irresistibly evokes similarities to the Jezebel stereotype. She represents modern beauty trends and the celebration of a black woman's voluptuous figure, while at the same type she is objectified, overly-sexualized and regarded within the 'Jezebel' image. She is also rendered passive by her creator, Smith, who does not give her a proper voice and single-handedly exaggerates her promiscuous qualities. However, it would not be quite accurate to use the word single-handedly in this context,

since Smith has the help of her characters, Zora in particular. This is shown in the heat of her argument with Carl, when Zora calls Victoria an "airhead" and a "slut" (OB 416).

The black Jezebel stereotype, which originates from the bibilcal character Jezebel, lies in the notions of 'identity' and 'foreignness'. A parallel can be drawn from Jackson's understanding of the imagery used to describe both Jezebels. Jackson states that in the Bible, Jezebel is a threat to Israel's identity because she is "continually accused of enticing Israel away from their God and to other gods" (2015:251). There is also the aspect of foreignness which is associated with Jezebel's character, since Jezebel is not Israeli by origin. Thus, Jezebel's interference with the ritual lifestyle and beliefs of the Israeli people "compromises Israelite identity" (2015:251). In the same way, black women were stereotyped as being Jezebels because they represented foreignness. Considering that the Jezebel archetype mainly carries sexual connotations, black women represented a threat to Christian chastity. Building on that, the black Jezebel motif endangered American identity because they represented something alien, immoral and sexually progressive. Thus, the black Jezebel character is the victim of dichotomies of the 'self' and the 'other', meaning that "she is never to be one of 'us,' but is one of 'them,' permanently and quintessentially the 'other'" (Jackson 2015:245). In this sense, Jezebel as 'the other' is never accepted by society; she remains a means to strengthen and justify the 'righteousness' of one's 'self' identity.

It is important to regard the term 'foreignness' from a metaphorical perspective rather than only considering it from a literal perspective. If Victoria represents the modern outlook on beauty and sexuality, then 'foreignness' takes on a different meaning. In this sense, everything that is new and emerging has not yet been explored and therefore provokes

discomfort and skepticism. Thus, Smith does not offer Victoria's perspective within the novel because she is still unexplored and mysterious, and therefore garners plenty of attention. It is up to the novel's protagonists to discover her layers and choose whether to reject Victoria or accept her. However, it is obvious that the characters who come into contact with Victoria have very divisive reactions within their respective encounters with her. It should be noted that the young male characters accept her; the older male characters are enticed by her but not quite ready or equipped to handle her, whereas the young female characters reject her. Considering this, Victoria symbolises the treatment of diversity today. While diversity is on the highest level in history, the underlying intricacies in society show that differences in appearance and sexual behaviour are still not embraced and accepted universally. Every character whose life Victoria affects has a different personality and it is interesting to observe how they all react differently to her, in accordance with their nature.

Jerome is the first protagonist who meets Victoria, and the first person whose life she affects. Jerome is a kind and intelligent young man who decides to do an internship in England with Monty Kipps, his father's sworn enemy. It is in England that Jerome meets and falls in love with Victoria, Monty's extremely beautiful eighteen-year old daughter. After a week in the same house, stolen kisses in "shaded corners of the house" (OB 45) and one instance of love making, Jerome is smitten and resolute in marrying her. In this episode Smith does let the reader in on Victoria's intentions with Jerome, albeit very quickly. Her intentions contrast Jerome's; she is not in love with him. As an eighteen-year old, who has just come home from her summer holidays, to put it simply – she just wants to have some fun. She wants to explore her self-confidence recently acquired by "the social and sexual successes of her first summer abroad without her family" (OB 45). Once her intentions are

made clear due to Jerome's unrealistic desire to marry her, he returns home heartbroken and disappointed. Jerome is described as extremely compassionate and good-hearted. In the episode of the Belseys' outing to listen to Mozart requiem, Kiki is proud of her son when she sees Jerome silently crying, having been moved by music: "A young black man of intelligence and sensibility, and I have raised him. After all, how many other young black men would even come to an event like this" (OB 70). Due to his intelligence and kindness, Jerome is able to forgive himself for the mistakes he made and Victoria for giving him false signals. This is evident from his conversation with Zora. While Zora does not have any nice things to say about Victoria, Jerome gently confronts her stating that "she's not really that vain. She just hasn't settled into her looks. She's still young. She hasn't decided what to do with it yet" (OB 241). Jerome is very insightful, and because of this perceptiveness, his intelligence, youth and generosity, he is able to understand Victoria's personality and her actions. Even though he thought he would "never get her face out of [his] system" (OB 241), he is able to move on.

Howard, Jerome's father, is also enchanted by Victoria's beauty. Although he is fifty-seven-years-old man, this does not stop him from pursuing a nineteen-year-old girl. Howard and Victoria's first encounter is in the Kipps' house in London, although their interaction there is virtually non-existent. The first time Howard and Victoria have a private moment is in the Belsey household in Wellington at Howard and Kiki's anniversary party. From their first interaction, it is evident that Victoria is a self-confident and flirtatious girl who is not afraid to wink at a man much older than her; the man who would later on become her professor. Howard is not immune to her charms, often at the expense of other students,

since he tends to give his undivided attention only to Victoria's arguments. Special attention has been given to the looks Victoria gives to Howard: "a glance somewhere between flirtation and expectancy" (OB 157). The accumulation of their coquettish interactions happens after Victoria's mother's funeral. Howard stumbles upon Victoria's bedroom where she seduces him. The entire encounter, along with their sexual intercourse, is quite awkward. Firstly, Howard is confused by Victoria's assertive attitude and the liberty with which she talks to him. It is Victoria who pushes and manipulates him to stay in her room; it is also Victoria who makes the first move; she jumps into his lap and starts kissing him. Secondly, as the situation progresses, he is surprised by her sexual expression; she is completely different from what he is used to, starting from her kisses: "he kept trying to regulate the kiss, to return it back to what he knew of kissing" (OB 315). She is the one who initiates and controls every moment of their sexual encounter. It is unlike anything Howard has ever experienced; in a way, Smith wants Victoria to show him what the new generation of girls is like – more sexually aggressive, more confident, and more kinky. What happens after the encounter is the most intriguing part. Although throughout the book Howard seems fascinated by Victoria, once his "dream of many weeks – to see this girl naked" (OB 318) materialises he instantly regrets his decision: "he'd do absolutely anything to see her with all her clothes on" (OB 318). The encounter actually enlightens him on "how very lucky and blessed he was to have his family" (OB 333). He acknowledges Victoria as a "concept" which "had put the blessings of his own life in perspective" (OB 334). However, "Victoria Kipps was not a concept. She was real" (OB 334). Once again, Victoria Kipps plays with Howard's sexual knowledge and challenges him to cross his own boundaries. At the Emerson Hall Christmas dinner, Victoria teases Howard by touching his knee under the

table. However, Howard is not the only middle-aged man who is fascinated by Victoria's beauty. In the bathroom of the Christmas ball, Howard encounters his colleague Erskine Jegede, who is "a veteran of marital infidelity" (OB 109), and with whom he has a brief conversation about Victoria. Erskine says that Victoria "makes [his] eyes sting" (OB 345). He also makes an interesting observation on contemporary girls:

> Boys these days – they're lucky. Do you know that? Their generation of girls know how to use their bodies. They understand their own power. When I married Caroline, she was beautiful, yes, of course. Like a Southern schoolgirl in bed. Like a child. And now we're too old. We dream, but we can't touch. To have Miss Kipps! But those days are gone! (OB 345)

After the ball, Victoria sends Howard "a series of emails she'd sent in the past week, liberally illustrated with the kind of home-made digital camera pornography that every teenage girl now seems so expert at" (OB 379). Although the emails excite Howard and instigate his imagination, he is not prepared to handle such a sexually progressive girl who sends him lascivious videos and pressures him into continuing their affair. In the end, Howard agrees to meet her in a hotel and sleep with her again, only to find himself overwhelmed and unable to do so. It is precisely in this episode that Victoria is finally given an opportunity to express her feelings. Her reaction to Howard's rejection is one of sadness. She says: "'You don't know me. This,' she said and touched her face, her breasts, her hips, 'that's what you know. But you don't know me. And you were the one who wanted this – that's all anybody ever…'She touched the same three places, 'And so that's what I…'" (OB 390).

Throughout the novel, it would appear that Victoria has it all – beauty, intelligence and charisma; however, it is obvious that even the girls who are naturally endowed with all of the right qualities suffer from their own lack of personal identity. Victoria is only appreciated on the basis of her physical looks and no one wants to really understand her or get to know her on a deeper level: "the sexual objectification of women limits their opportunities for self-presentation and therefore their autonomous agency and equal social status, by undermining both of these conditions" (Jütten 2016:35). She accuses Howard that he is not "interested in anything [she] has to say, because [she is] just a fucking idiot girl or whatever" (OB 390). Moreover, Jütten suggests that "men who objectify women make their sexuality the most salient feature of their public image regardless of the role that it plays in their own self-presentation" (2016:37). This statement points out gender inequality: "Sexual objectification poses another, different threat to the equal social standing of women. This standing is undermined when the imposition of sex object status on women represents them as less than the social equals of men" (Jütten 2016:39). This means that "we cannot characterize such a sexist society as well-ordered, and the reason for this is that its visual appearance expresses disrespect for women and makes it extremely difficult for them to see themselves as men's social equals. Thus the imposition of sex object status on women represents them as the sexual and social subordinates of men" (2016:39-40). Such degradation of women influences the perception of their intellectual and professional capabilities, which is reflected in their treatment within various professional and social fields: "The ability to cast women as sex objects enables men to undermine women's roles in many public and private institutions, from work places to the political sphere, and to enforce their compliance with their subordinate social roles" (2016:42). Victoria struggles to be

taken seriously and for that reason she uses her physical attributes to get what she wants. Thus, her sexual ways are assertive; as well as sending pornographic material of herself to Howard, later on, she also sends it to Carl: "She's so dirty. Photos and all'a that" (OB 407).

Zora and Katie, who is a minor character in the novel and a fellow Wellington University student, resent Victoria because she is a threat to them. Zora first meets Victoria when she comes to Howard and Kiki's anniversary party with her father and brother. From the start, there is friction between the two: "the instantaneous recognition (on both sides) of her physical superiority" (OB 112). When Monty suggests that Zora and Victoria will be running into each other at the university and possibly become friends, it is obvious that neither girl thinks it likely to happen: "the girls looked at one another without much enthusiasm at the prospect" (OB 114). Victoria obviously considers herself to be physically superior to Zora, while Zora considers herself to be morally superior. It is not because Zora considers herself smarter and chaster than Victoria that she does not want to be friends with her; it is mainly because Zora is jealous of Victoria and her beauty. She thinks that girls like Victoria are privileged in life and always get what they want, which makes her secretly angry with her. Thus, Victoria becomes the object of Zora's hatred, firstly, because she thinks Victoria will be more successful and discerned academically than Zora, due to her beauty, and secondly, because of the eventual relationship that takes place between Victoria and Carl. Carl has long been Zora's object of affection and she has been making an effort to seduce him by wearing revealing clothes. Therefore, it disappoints and enrages Zora even more to see that Carl has fallen in love with Victoria. On the other hand, Katie is also jealous of Victoria for reasons similar to Zora's. Katie prepares herself extensively for Howard's

class in order to participate in class discussions; but, due to her shyness and the fact that she is probably not as good-looking as Victoria, she is unable to attract the professor's attention even though her arguments are actually valid and intriguing.

For these reasons, Katie and Zora find it unfair that beautiful girls like Victoria are deemed more interesting just because they are attractive. Their contempt for Victoria results in them classifying her as a slut and a flirt, thus attributing negativity to her sexuality. Zora justifies calling Victoria a slut, using her behaviour towards Jerome and her alleged promiscuity as examples, even though Zora has not seen evidence of this behavior. Paradoxically, Zora is also very assertive with Carl and wears revealing clothes which accentuates her cleavage to him. Thus, Zora behaves essentially in the same way as Victoria and relies on her physical attributes to garner people's attention. The difference is that Victoria is apparently better looking than Zora, who, as Claire says, is starting to gain weight like Kiki: "She was getting fat, though; inevitably she would go the way of her mother" (OB 223). Zora is, in fact, angry at Victoria for possessing what she would like to have. It is not that she would like men to be attracted solely to her intelligence, like she says to Carl in the heat of their argument: "Actually, I look for a little more from my partners than just nice ass. For some reason I though you did too, but, my mistake" (OB 415); it is that Zora would like to be more like Victoria; this is evident throughout the novel, which emphasises her lack of self-confidence and her constant need to dress provocatively and wear large amounts of make-up. Both Zora and Katie are very insecure girls and Victoria represents a standard of beauty, which they are unable to achieve. Their sentiments are easy to understand if the reader takes into account the fundamental fight women have to battle for their rights on an everyday basis. It is much harder for women to accept new beauty trends because they relate directly to them; women

unwillingly become enslaved to trends. Women have always been expected to follow contemporary beauty trends in order to be considered desirable, fashionable and socially acceptable. They seem to always feel obliged to enhance their looks or their demeanor in order to attract and keep men's attention. This struggle is obvious from the way Zora tries to discredit Victoria, because Victoria is successful in attracting the above-mentioned male attention: "She's just a typical pretty-girl, power-game playing, deeply shallow human being…whenever things get sticky for her she just works her charms to her advantage. It's disgusting" (OB 240). What hurts Zora the most is not only that Victoria is beautiful and "has this coterie of boys just following her everywhere" (OB 240), she also meddles into her area of talent – the classroom– where Zora finds shelter from the social pressure to be beautiful: "She tries to hide it by reading one book by Barthes or whatever – all she does is quote Barthes; it's so tedious…but don't fuck up the dynamic of the class with stupid questions that go nowhere" (OB 240).

Finally, Carl is a young aspiring rapper who is uneducated, but, out all of the characters, seems to be the most socially progressive and adaptable. While others are too restricted by educational backgrounds or class so that they cannot efficiently keep up with the evolving times, Carl is liberated of such constraints and is ready to embrace the moment. This is evident from his relationship with Victoria. Although Jerome also accepts Victoria the way she is and harbour any ill feelings towards her in spite of their failed relationship and her relationship with his father, Carl is the only character who does not question Victoria's behaviour and deems her perfectly normal throughout the entire novel. He begins a relationship with her, but since Smith shuts Victoria's voice once again, it is not clear to

what extent the relationship is serious. Nonetheless, Carl proves that he is serious enough with Victoria when he defends her from Zora who walks in on them and starts an argument with Carl because she is disappointed in him for choosing Victoria over her. Zora begins criticising Victoria and calling her names and Carl does not approve of these actions. He draws a conclusion from Zora's behaviour that she is jealous of Victoria: "She jealous – that's her problem…Just jealous 'cos you finer than her. And she can't stand that" (OB 415). He does not question Victoria, nor does he doubt whether there is some truth to the accusations. To Carl, Victoria is a normal, beautiful, black girl whom he is happy to call his girlfriend. He embraces women's sexuality and liberal attitudes; therefore the incident with Zora does not make him change his mind about Victoria. The reason for this is the fact that when he started a relationship with her, he already had the proper mindset. Thus, it can be deduced that Carl represents the young generation, aware of the changing trends in beauty and sexuality, and fully accepting them.

However, although Carl accepts her and does not question her morality, it does not mean Carl does not objectify Victoria; this is evident when Carl first sees Victoria: "'Sister – *damn!*' murmured Carl, loud enough to be heard, but Victoria, practiced in ignoring such comments, simply continued along her way" (OB 389). Obviously, Carl's first association with her was sexual. Jütten discusses the dangers of sexual attractiveness in relation to a woman's sexual autonomy:

Consider, for example, leering, wolf-whistling, sexual innuendo, and sexually explicit remarks, taunts, offers, and threats randomly directed at women in public spaces. All of these behaviors reduce women to sex objects in the eyes of their harassers and invite others to see

them in this way. More generally, sexual harassment communicates to women that they lack control over their self-presentation; there is nothing that they can do in order to avoid being reduced to a sex object if the harassers enjoy reducing them to one for their own titillation (2016:44).

This does not imply that Carl sexually harasses women; it merely suggests that sexual objectification can lead to other, often physical, dangers which women can encounter when they do not possess the autonomy over their self-presentation: "It means that women do not enjoy equal opportunities to men in many areas of life and are vulnerable to gender-specific harms, including sexual assault and rape" (Jütten 2016:40). More clarification on sexual objectification and he problems it causes are as follows:

> To be a sex object is to be defined by one's sexual attributes, such as one's attractiveness and one's availability for sex. Sex object status is inherently "reductive" in the very specific sense that, as a sex object, one's sexual attributes are the most salient attributes of one's person and dominate one's public image. Note that this is not the same thing as being seen as sexually attractive or as being available for sex. Most of us sometimes want to be seen as sexually attractive to others, and most of us sometimes want to signal our availability for sex. But then we choose to self-present accordingly; we present ourselves as attractively as possible and signal our availability. In contrast, sex object status is an imposed status because the attitudes and desires of others come to define one's public image (2016:40).

Thus, the issue is that sexually attractive women are automatically associated with 'availability for sex' without their permission; in this way, their ability to present themselves non-sexually is limited. This is also evident when Victoria says to Howard that he thinks she

is just an "idiot girl" (OB 390), meaning that her intellect and her autonomy over her public image are endangered.

The perception that Victoria is a modern-age embodiment of the Jezebel lies in the fact that her objectification, is compliant with the already mentioned fact that Smith does not give Victoria her voice; Similarly to Kiki, who is stereotyped into a 'mammy', she is unable to self-present. Jütten says that "sexual objectification is a threat to women's autonomy, because it invites men (and other women) to see them as sex objects whose worth is defined by men's sexual interests, rather than as self-presenting autonomous agents who make claims on their own behalf and have the right to be recognized as such agents" (2016:38). Moreover, "this threat to autonomy differs from more obvious threats to individual acts of self-determination, but it is at least as serious as these threats, because it attacks women's social standing as autonomous agents that grants them the right to self-determination in the first place" (Jütten 2016:38). Victoria confirms this theory in the episode where Howard rejects her in the hotel. She articulates her struggles stating that men objectify her based on her body; her beauty and sexuality are desired, while her brain is disregarded. Townsend, Thomas, Neilands and Jackson conducted a study with the following purposes: "(a) to explore the relationships among stereotypic images, beauty standards, and identity components (specifically, the ethnic identity and academic self-concept) of African American girls and (b) to determine the impact of these variables on girls' sexual attitudes (specifically, sexual intent, attitudes toward sex, and condom efficacy)" (Townsend et al. 2010:276). Although Victoria is Trinidadian and English, some of these mentioned concepts can be related to her, such as the academic self-concept, beauty standards, her sexual

behaviour, along with the fact that she now lives in the United States. The reader will remember that Victoria and Howard did not use protection during their intercourse which can be deduced from Victoria's remark "I'm on the pill, so" (OB 318). One of the results of the study shows that "ethnic belonging and academic/cognitive self-concept were negatively related to many of the sexual risk outcomes" (Townsend et al. 2010:280). In Victoria's case, although she goes to university and even actively participates in the classes, it is evident that her self-confidence, regarding her intelligence, is very low. In her argument with Howard, she reveals that she has lost confidence in her intellect because it is the last thing people notice about her. This fact has made her doubt whether she is actually smart which is why she uses her body and beauty in social interactions and engages in many sexual relations. She says that it is only sex that men want from her and "so that's what I…" (OB 390). The insinuation in the unspoken remainder of the sentence is easy to guess. She retorts to physical relationships because she feels she is unable to attain personal relationships and connections through conversation. Therefore, it can be concluded that "the harm and wrong of sexual objectification resides in the fact that it makes women vulnerable; they can be reduced to sex object status at any time when their sexual attributes are made dominant in their public image" (Jütten 2016:42). What is devastating is the fact that it seems as though women cannot influence the objectification and that no matter how hard they try to avoid or prevent it, their efforts are almost always fruitless. Thus, as already discussed in this chapter "sexual harassment oppresses women as women, through the imposition of a social meaning that threatens their autonomy and reproduces their social inequality" (2016:44); "the resulting subordinate social status of women harms and wrongs them as a class" (2016:40).

6. At least they've got some flesh on their bones:
On breasts and buttocks

Recurring elements in *On Beauty* are breasts and buttocks, with a particular focus on these parts of Kiki's and Victoria's bodies. Smith uses her characters' breasts and buttocks to carry symbolic meanings which are not necessarily sexual. Victoria's body holds sexual connotations; whereas Kiki's large breasts are paradoxically perceived as asexual from others. However, both women's intimate body parts attract significant amounts of attention in the novel. The oldest known representation of a woman's body, or the human body in general, is the Venus figurine found in Hohle Fels Cave in "the Swabian Jura of southwestern Germany during excavations in 2008. This figurine was produced at least 35,000 calendar years ago, making it one of the oldest known examples of figurative art" (Conard 2009:248). Intriguingly, the figurine features particularly pronounced breasts, buttocks and genitalia. It is, however, unclear whether such an apparently sexualised figurine holds connotations of fertility or whether it represents the beauty standards and sexual tastes relevant 35,000 years ago. King elaborates on this topic, stating: "A glance around a modern teenager's bedroom reveals that humans, and especially young males, make (and these days purchase) models of things that they desire. If this is true in the case of these figurines, then what can be said of this glance back into human desire in the Ice Age?" (2015:206). Choosing the name Venus for this figurine "carries with it the implication that they were made as representations of feminine beauty" (Dixson and Dixson 2012:1). If Venus from Hohle Fels has sexual connotations, it means that woman's body and its intimate parts in

particular have practically always attracted sexual attention. It would also mean that women's intimate parts have always played a significant role in their identities.

The fascination with black women's intimate body parts can be traced back to the nineteenth century in the case of an African woman named Sarah Baartman, who was taken from South Africa to England, and later France, in order to be exhibited to Victorian audience as a part of a series of circus-like performances. The interest she provoked in the Victorian spectators was due to the fact that her body parts were unusually large compared to the typical European body in Victorian times, more precisely her buttocks and thighs. Large bodies were not common in England and the consequence was a widespread generalisation of all African women having abnormally large body parts. Thus, Sarah Baartman's case created first perceptions of black female bodies as overly-sexual, primitive and animal-like. Baartman was treated inhumanely and subjected to ridicule, having her body heavily examined and exhibited for many years after her death. She died when she was twenty-five years old in Paris in 1815. Her body instigated further interest after her death, but this time from a scientific point of view. George Cuvier started extensive examinations on her intimate body parts and preserved them as biological specimens while exhibiting her skeleton and a cast of her body at the Musee de l'Homme up until late 1970s. Her body was finally returned to her homeland, South Africa, in 2002 (Qureshi 2004:233). Baartman was notoriously named "Hottentot Venus", and the term "Hottentot", which is now derogative, would remain as the primary representative term for a black female. Studies into Baartman's case cannot conclude whether she was exploited because of the colour of her skin or because of contemporary politics. The answer to this question is important because it offers us some

perspective into the mindset of the nineteenth century Victorians regarding their interpretations of what was considered beautiful and what wasn't.

In "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature", Sander Gilman studies nineteenth century depictions of black women which focused on their buttocks and genitalia. "By the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general" (Gilman 1985:209). The impression of black women as overly-sexual lay in the fact that they were prone to a condition of large amounts of tissue on a person's thighs and buttocks, called steatopygia, something which Sarah Baartman had suffered from. Because of this condition, black women were often associated with animals, more precisely orangutans, deeming them sexually primitive, thus "more sexually intensive" (1985:212). "The physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the black" (1985:212). The obsession by Europeans and scientists with the size of buttocks coincided with the interest in African women's genitalia and their subsequent comparison to European women's genitalia: "In the nineteenth century, the black female was widely perceived as possessing not only a 'primitive' sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament-'primitive' genitalia" (1985:213). Beauty is intertwined with the notion of sexuality, therefore, "Sarah Bartmann's sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century", and the perception of their beauty (1985:216). Moreover, black female genitalia represented something primitive and overly

sexual, so automatically the perception of their beauty was associated with savagery and was considered a lesser form of beauty when compared to the beauty of white women.

Since Sarah Baartman's body parts were exhibited at the Musée de l'homme in Paris, Gilman states that her entire individual being was defined by the size and the shape of her intimate body parts. (1985:216). As a result, black women were generalised by Europeans as having similar bodies to Sarah Baartman. Considering how Sarah was sexualised and dehumanised, European society sexualised African women in the same way: "When the Victorians saw the female black, they saw her in terms of her buttocks and saw represented by the buttocks all the anomalies of her genitalia" (1985:219).

The polygenetic arguments which specified black women's bodies as being entirely different to white, European women's bodies, led Victorians to believe in white supremacy over black people: "If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan" (1985: 216). Gilman further argues that the polygenetic approach examined all aspects of mankind, beauty and sexuality included, concluding that the opposite of European beauty and virtue is the black (1985:216). The Hottentot was considered the lowest possible form of human life and "the physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the black" (1985: 212).

Black women were often compared to prostitutes due to their supposed primitive qualities. When commenting on the nineteenth century perceptions of prostitutes and black people, Gilman states that "the primitive is the black, and the qualities of blackness, or at

least of the black female, are those of the prostitute" (1985:229), thus "the perception of the prostitute in the late nineteenth century thus merged with the perception of the black" (1985:229). Considering that prostitutes represented a source of disease, "black females do not merely represent the sexualized female, they also represent the female as the source of corruption and disease" (1985: 231). Hyam writes that another link between prostitutes and African women might be that many black women in Africa were colonisers' mistresses, while in America female slaves were regularly sexually exploited by their white masters: "There has been a very particular devaluation of black American women, for so long regarded by whites as sluts and mammies, fir only for sex and suckling, scrubbing and skivvying" (1991:206). Some women in Africa resorted to prostitution as a source of income and as a way of establishing a good social standing among the white colonisers. For this reason, the belief that black women were immoral and promiscuous lingered. In reality, while it is true that plenty did have sexual relations with British administrators, most of them rejected their advances (1991:207). Richard Hyam in *Empire and sexuality* talks about the dynamics between black colonial subjects and the white colonisers on African countries, particularly focusing on how these dynamics impacted women. Regarding the prostitution of indigenous women, he states that "it is simply not true that native women had always to do the bidding of the white man because the structure of power relations in an empire left them no alternative" (1991:207). More specifically, in Africa "officers of the British South Africa Company in Edwardian Rodesia…certainly found some local women who conveniently believed that as rulers the Europeans had the right to require sexual relations; but equally there were many African women who refused in no uncertain terms to co-operate" (1991:207).

Using Sarah Baartman's example, Gilman focused on the meaning of "Hottentot" and what this term evoked in Victorian society. He found that Sarah's exhibitions were successful primarily due to an interest in African women's sexuality. On the other hand, Sadiah Qureshi presents us with a different theory in her 2004 article "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus'". She states that "the most problematic feature of the current literature is its treatment of race as an historically timeless concept and its role in the construction of deviance in the early nineteenth century" (Qureshi 2004:234). Qureshi believes that the immense interest in Baartman is not a consequence of the colour of her skin or her body shape, but the political abolitionist movements of the time which resulted in the societal interest in her. She states that "there was little mention of her whilst she remained a curiosity - the turning point in her status came with abolitionist interest in her repatriation" (2004:239). Although Qureshi considers politics the main reason for the sensationalistic treatment of Baartman, she does not quite eliminate the element of race out of the question, saying that Sarah was "both a rare sight and a political pawn" and that people "were paying to view difference but not difference resulting from race alone; rather, they were paying to view an exhibit with immediate political relevance" (2004:241).

However, given the highly profitable entertainment industry of the nineteenth century which offered a wide range of exhibitions of foreigners and people with all sorts of anomalies, it would be an exaggeration to say that Baartman was a sensation solely because she was black. Moreover, there were already many black residents in London, would not have made Baartman an unusual sight to white Victorians. However, Qureshi does acknowledge the importance of Baartman's ethnic background. Even though Victorians were

used to seeing black people, these people were mostly former slaves from the Caribbean, America and West Indies, who had completely integrated into the English society; therefore, to say that someone's skin colour alone would make a person stand out would be wrong, particularly since Baartman was Khoikhoi, a more exotic type of origin, she was naturally regarded differently (2004:240).

Whatever the reason for Sarah Baartman's rise into the category of legendary Victorian performers, the connotations her body parts carried are numerous, especially when observed from the perspective of 21st century beauty standards. Her body denotes various categories, some of them also contradictory, such as primitive, savage, overly-sexual and asexual. It participated in the making of black women's identity. This is particularly obvious in *On Beauty*, as Kiki and Victoria's bodies are described within the black female body narrative. Kiki evokes similarities to the 'mammie' or 'mammy' stereotype, with her breasts playing the role of a mediator in Kiki's conversations with people:

> She had only this brief glimpse of him, but Kiki suspected already that this would be one of those familiar exchanges in which her enormous spellbinding bosom would play a subtle (or not so subtle, depending on the person) silent third role in the conversation. Women bent away from it out of politeness; men – more comfortably for Kiki – sometimes remarked on it in order to get on and over it; as it were. The size was sexual and at the same time more than sexual: sex was only one small element of its symbolic range. If she were white, maybe it would refer only to sex, but she was not. And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting (OB 47).

Therefore, as above-mentioned, Kiki's breasts offer a variety of symbolic meanings, which are quite contradictory; the descriptions could be considered both sexual and non-sexual because they evoke the 'mammy' stereotype – a motherly, asexual and overweight African-American woman. Kiki's breasts are both threatening when denoting the stereotype of the aggressive black woman and comforting when referred to the 'mammy' stereotype. This observation could be connected to Sarah Baartman as she was also sexualised because of her accentuated body parts, while at the same time ridiculed, and therefore, non-sexual. Kiki says that if she were white, her breasts would be regarded as purely sexual, but since she is black they offer a variety of meanings. The reason for this observation is the amount of stereotypes that black women have been subjected to; thus, their appearance carries many connotations. Therefore, Kiki's body parts can at the same time hold both positive and negative agencies. Because of the sexual element of her breasts, she could be considered promiscuous. On the other hand, their size combined with the size of her entire body fits the 'mammy' stereotype of a motherly, asexual figure. Additionally, her weight gain has caused her to gain force, making her a physically strong and unfeminine.

On the other hand, Victoria carries almost exclusively sexual connotations; her breasts and buttocks are especially noticed by the male characters in the novel. Howard looks at her breasts more than once: "She seemed to have large nipples, like the old tenpence coins" (OB 125). He cannot resist it, even in the classroom, when "Howard realized that he'd be looking at her so absorbedly he'd neglected to answer her question" (OB 157); "Because he was not drunk this time he knew now for certain that her breasts were indeed a phenomenon of nature and not of his imagination, for here were the spirited nipples again, working their way through a thick green ribbed woolen jumper" (OB 156). Victoria is

presented as such a good-looking girl that every man she encounters is sexually attracted to her: "Howard watched with dismay her long-legged coltish stumble out of the door, pressed in on both sides by male friends. Each leg was perfectly wrapped, separated and fetishized in its tube of denim…The last thing he saw was the perfection of her ass – so high, so round – turning a corner; leaving" (OB 255). Her sexuality is so powerful that Howard "had stopped trying not to look at Victoria Kipps. There's no point in trying to do impossible things" (OB 255). Obviously, Victoria is not afraid to show her physical attributes, often wearing transparent tops and figure-hugging attire. In this a way, she puts her body parts to the forefront; and they clearly attract significant male attention. If we consider that "in Western societies, the female body is socially constructed as an object to be looked at and evaluated" (Tiggemann and Lynch 2001:244) and that "one consequence of being a woman in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body—for example, through male gaze—is that girls and women are gradually socialized to internalize an observer's perspective of their physical self" (2001:244), it is not surprising that "they begin to treat themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated" (2001:244); hence, Victoria's emphasis on her physical attributes.

In comparison with historical displays of women's bodies, such as through Sarah Baartman's performances and the Venus figurines, the representations of black women's bodies and sexuality today has been "ideologically controlled by the images presented in mass media" (Balaji 2010:6), most notably through "music videos, where sex is often used to sell both the performer (regardless of gender) and the performer's image" (2010:6). The question is whether depictions of women's bodies in mass media represent the liberation of female sexuality or act as implicit forms of oppression. Using music videos as an example, we could consider the employment of beautiful women in said videos is a celebration of

female beauty. However, we could also consider the representation of women in the music industry as an example of oppression. Regardless of how much their beauty is brought to attention, they seem to be, more often than not, presented as commodity; they are usually very scarcely clothed, their intimate body parts are accentuated and they cater to their male counterparts: "The modern images in music videos attempt to convey that women have more control over their sexuality. In reality, however, this professed control is tenuous" (Townsend et al. 2010:274).

An important aspect of music videos is the "fragmentation of the body" (Balaji 2010:12) which "can arguably further objectify and sexually disenfranchise Black women in music videos, defining and labeling them according to their body parts" (2010:12). Victoria's body is often fragmented, with Howard continually noticing her breasts, her behind, and even wondering what her nipples look like. Similarly, Carl and Levi pay close attention to Victoria's "booty" (OB 389). This fragmentation is an example of racial fetishism which emphasises woman's intimate body parts. Sexualised present-day representations of black women have roots in the colonial past and racial fetishism. Holmes says that "Black female bodies and black sexual practices are essentialized and fetishized as a continuation of their exploitation within the American imperialist narrative" (2016:7) and through the use of mass media such as "popular music, pornography, advertisements, and other popular media" (2016:7). The promotion of black women's sexuality in such omnipresent way, especially in popular culture which is highly profitable, leads to the conclusions that the former colonisers still make a profit on the formerly colonised. However, this creates a vicious circle because many women think that exposing their bodies

in such a manner will lead to the acquirement of a better financial and/or social standing. Therefore, it is not the empire that forcibly capitalises on their bodies, the women who choose to expose their bodies also cater to racial fetishism by choosing this path to material profit; Townsend states that "a more Modern Jezebel image (in which African American women are portrayed as highly sexual, materialistic, controlling, and demanding) may therefore be the image that has the most salience for inner-city African American girls today" (2010:274). Holmes writes that "while some people perceive racial fetishization as an empowering and respectful form of glorifying black female bodies, it is important to appreciate the historical routes of this phenomenon" (2016:8). Here, historical routes refer to the inaccurate and disrespectful colonial perceptions of black women as overly sexualised with animal-like sexual appetites suitable only for reproduction and manual work. Thus, "black women have and continue to be sexually sought after for their assumed hyper-sexualized body and behavior, which has been essentialised throughout history by the oppressor" (Holmes 2016:8).

This chapter has discussed the implications of female body parts and the representation of female sexuality; from the first displays of the female body in the form of antique figurines to contemporary mass media representations, it is evident that female intimate body parts, such as the breasts and buttocks, have always garnered much attention – both positive and negative. Nowadays, it is debated whether such sexualised images of the female body represent sexual liberation or if they are another form of oppression. There is no obvious conclusion to this debate, since both sides of the argument offer valid explanations. Perhaps the right answer lies in the way in which a woman chooses to dress; while some

women feel comfortable dressing in a revealing, sexual manner as it empowers their confidence and freedom of sexual expression, some women believe that such objectification is degrading and prefer other, conventional modes of expression.

7. *This is what white people fear and adore and want and dread:* On being coloured

In 2017, famous actress Halle Berry gave an interview for PeopleTV, in which she talked about her experience of being biracial. Berry has a white mother and an African-American father, but she lived and grew up living with her mother. At some point, Berry's mother enrolled her in an 'all-white' school where her plight with her identity began. The main cause for her confusion about her identity was the fact that she did not know how to identify herself within the racial framework. Although she is mixed-race, she says that she has always identified herself as 'black'. It did not help that her classmates called her 'oreo' which referred to those "having one white parent and one Black parent" (Haylock 2017). When commenting on how she reacted to being transferred to a new school, Berry says that "while we got taken out of imminent danger we also got taken out of what was normal for us" (PeopleTV). In this sentence, the parallel between physical and psychological danger is evident, with Berry stating that even though her former school was plagued with physical violence, she felt more normal and accepted there. Once she started attending a suburban school where most students were Caucasian, she was faced with another type of danger. Her classmates started bullying her because of her skin colour, which strengthened her identification with African-American culture.

Halle Berry is not the first mixed-race celebrity to be vocal about the struggles biracial people go through. The main problem that mixed-race people face is their difficulty fully belonging to multiple racial cultures. The most recent example of a celebrity sharing her experience of being mixed-race is Meghan, Duchess of Sussex. Before she became part

of the British Royal family, Markle was a prominent human rights activist who was very open about her struggles as a mixed-race individual; her mother is African-American, whereas her father is Caucasian. In 2015, Markle wrote an essay for ELLE Magazine called "I'm More Than An 'Other'" discussing the above-mentioned issues. She starts her essay by giving an example of how she describes herself when meeting new acquaintances, stating that she is "an actress, a writer, the Editor-in-Chief of my lifestyle brand The Tig, a pretty good cook and a firm believer in handwritten notes" (Markle); it is noticeable that none of these categories belong to the category of race. Then, she emphasises that leaving out the category of race from her descriptors always leads to more questions, such as "Right, but what are you? Where are your parents from?" (Markle). If she belonged to a single racial background, there would probably be no need for questions of this kind. But since her physical appearance clearly suggests that she is mixed-race and her racial background is rather ambiguous, she is subjected to the pain of explaining her genetic structure.

Aspinall writes that "historically, persons of mixed race have been accommodated in official classifications of ethnicity/race based on the selection of a single option from mutually exclusive, discrete groups" (2003:291); Markle's account of one impactful incident which took place when she was at school, clearly shows the identity confusion that all mixed-race children feel, not just Meghan, and gives an insight into the reality of the above-mentioned issue first-hand:

> There was a mandatory census I had to complete in my English class – you had to check one of the boxes to indicate your ethnicity: white, black, Hispanic or Asian. There I was (my curly hair, my freckled face, my pale skin, my mixed race) looking down at these boxes, not wanting to mess up, but not knowing what to do. You could only choose one, but that would

be to choose one parent over the other – and one half of myself over the other. My teacher told me to check the box for Caucasian. 'Because that's how you look, Meghan,' she said. I put down my pen. Not as an act of defiance, but rather a symptom of my confusion. I couldn't bring myself to do that, to picture the pit-in-her-belly sadness my mother would feel if she were to find out. So, I didn't tick a box. I left my identity blank – a question mark, an absolute incomplete – much like how I felt (Markle).

On that note, Aspinall writes that "persons of mixed race have expressed a wish to describe their 'full' ethnic/racial identity and users of ethnic/racial statistics have urged a review of categorisations to reflect this diversity. These trends have been acknowledged by national census agencies who, during the 1990s, have sought ways of capturing those of 'mixed' ethnicity/race" (2003:270). However, the remnants of the historical treatment of mixed-race people are visible in practice, since most of them are still considered black in spite of the efforts to officiate the mixed-race group in the US census: "Perhaps the rather closed black/white interpretation of mixed-race has been influenced by the historical background of the one drop rule in the US" (Gilbert 2005:62). In explaining the one drop rule in the United States, Gilbert writes: "The one drop rule became known, via anthropology, as the hypodescent rule. In this instance, hypo meant under or lower, and the rule operated whereby the mixed-race child assumed the status of the lower racial group. This served to perpetuate the myths of racial purity and Caucasian superiority" (2005:62); thus, mixed-race people were obviously used for the political purpose of strengthening the notions of white superiority.

Aspinall also studies the different ways mixed-race has been politically treated in the United States as opposed to the UK; while in the US "multiracial activists have pressed for

official recognition on the ground of civil rights, claiming that societal pressures have frequently placed mixed race persons in groups like residual 'other' categories that have little political power" (2003:271), in Britain "the political dimensions to the debate about mixed race categorisation have been less important" (Aspinall 2003:271). What's more, in Britain, "the attitude of the state has also been influential in concealing the salience of mixed race identities until the late 1990s" (2003:271). On the contrary, a different kind of climate was spreading through the United States where "the rise of identity politics" (2003:271) appeared: "Mixed heritage persons have increasingly rejected depictions of their identities as simply 'black'" (2003:271). Nevertheless, "in the United States the way persons of mixed race/ethnicity have been treated in official data collections has been largely determined by the state's practice of classifying black people over the last century and a half" (2003:280).

However, there are similarities between Britain and the United States in terms of how mixed-race persons perceive their own racial identities: "Research in both Britain and North America shows that a substantial number of persons of mixed parentage or multiethnic ancestry choose to identify their mixed origins in preference to identification with a single group when given an opportunity" (2003:282). In the United States alone, "in the case of Black/White mixed-race people, we increasingly see evidence that individuals do not follow the long-standing norm of hypodescent (identifying with the lower status race), blindly accept the one-drop rule (that would mandate Black identity), nor do they uniformly identify as Black" (Rockquemore et al. 2009:23). In terms of official classification in Britain, another problems occurs: "Persons of mixed race do not have a single view of their identity that is experienced in 'mixed' terms. Rather, there is evidence that some persons identify with one

of the Black groups or another single category option" (Aspinall 2003:283). Because "persons of mixed race/heritage challenge the theoretical and conceptual approaches to ethnic identity" (2003:270), and the fact that "the last two or three decades have witnessed an increase in the size of the mixed population in North America and Britain to make it one of the fastest growing" (2003:272), there is a need for further study and research so that mixed-raced people are enabled to define and settle into their identities.

In tackling the topic of mixed race in Britain, "there has been a significant scarcity of discussion about mixed-race identities in the context of sociological, educational or social anthropological writings" (Gilbert 2005:55). "The situation of published research on mixed-race individuals in the UK is in sharp contrast to the work conducted in the USA, where a great deal of literature has emerged in the last decade" (2005:56). Rocquemore, Brunsma and Delgado write that "the confusion in identity development theories today speaks volumes about the uncertainty around racial identity, racial categories, and racial identification in post–Civil Rights America" (2009:15). Gilbert states that the problem with writing about mixed race comes from the difficulty to "capture, however fleetingly, an essence of the meaning of some elements of the experiences of mixed-race individuals" (2005:59). He adds that "identity is perhaps one of the most highly-contested and theoretically-complex concepts to understand when seeking to fuse the conceptual with the lived experiences of people. Identity cannot be described, explained or categorized" (Gilbert 2005:65). Rocquemore, Brunsma and Delgado identify three challenges to critical theory and research on mixed-race:

First, epistemologically, we must recognize that the questions we ask in our research are embedded within a specific historical moment and remain critical of the potential reproduction of dominant ideologies. Second, scholars must understand that the characteristics, histories, and current structures of their own disciplines place significant parameters on what can be known about mixed-race people. Finally, scholarship on the mixed-race population has an important and critical place in the larger social scientific understanding of the structures of race, gender, class, and human societies (Rocquemore et al. 2009:23).

What should be kept in mind and what could lead to successful academic research is that "identity may be strategic, uneven, unstable, fragmented, heterogeneous; always in a process of change, never static, always in the state of 'becoming'" (Gilbert 2005:65). Thus, academic studies on mixed-race have mostly focused on identity issues, which are an intriguing, but, for the most part, a difficult topic. However, precisely because identity issues are surrounded with ambiguity, they instigate debates on the acknowledgment of mixed-race as a separate racial category:

The theme which occurs most frequently in sociological writing about mixed race is that of racial identity and ambiguity of social position: the idea that occupants of an intermediate position in the racial structure have identity problems is, for many writers, the main reason for regarding them as a separate group. At the individual level – and particularly for a child – there is something stark and pointed about having one parent from each of two opposing races; one black, one white. With very little exaggeration, the mixed race child can appear to

be a living dramatization of the relationship between the races, torn by conflict or blended in harmony, depending upon one's perspective (Wilson 1984:46).

As for popular culture, black and mixed-race racial groups have long been underrepresented in the film, music or fashion industries, and only in the last decade has there been a more serious attempt at actively and equally involving them in the 'business'. The most recent example is the casting of 19-year-old actress Halle Bailey for the role of Ariel in the live-action film "The Little Mermaid", which witnessed some serious backlash from fans of the original animated film, who expected a ginger-haired Caucasian actress to be cast. However, many have spoken in her defense, including the Disney Network and the director Rob Marshall who commented on the casting choice by saying that Bailey "possesses that rare combination of spirit, heart, youth, innocence, and substance – plus a glorious singing voice – all intrinsic qualities necessary to play this iconic role" (Yasharoff 2019). A comment left by American model Chrissy Teigen on Bailey's Instagram post in which she announced her role in the upcoming film points out what the casting actually means not only for this generation of mixed-race children but as well as the future generations: "My little toons is gonna see a piece of her in her favourite Disney princess" (Bleznak 2019); Teigen's daughter is mixed race. As Markle stated in the article, she has experienced rejection numerous times in Hollywood, as she was considered neither black nor white, they could not find the right role for her. In the music industry, for example, rapper Drake is often thought of as not black enough to be rapping about the hardships that black people go through (Davies 2019). But the issue with popular culture and mixed-race representation is that of a double-edged sword: "tension exists between a racist elevation of mixed race people on one hand and a harsh critique of them on the other" (Leverette

2009:437). Some, like Markle and Drake, are able to recount their personal negative experiences with being mixed-race, but there is another perspective from which to view their experiences; others might judge the extensive representation of mixed-race people as hypocritical and at the expense of those people who consider themselves black. For example, in the case of Markle, some people rejected her being called "the black princess" (Musiwa 2017) because it would "do a disservice to our evolving grasp on race and the complexity of blackness" (Musiwa 2017). Furthermore, it has been contemplated that the only reason she was accepted into the British royal family was because "she herself had just the right amount of white privilege as not to truly rock the boat" (Davies 2019). Additionally, rapper Kanye West, who is famous for his fashion line, wanted to cast only multiracial women in his fashion show, which created controversy stemming from the black community (Reece 2016). Furthermore, "the use of the camera as a means of documentation has played a role in 'substantiating' or 'illustrating' racist discourse that has had damaging social consequences. For example stereotypes have been created and maintained due to the photograph's authority as presenting reality" (Bolatagici 2004:78). Therefore, increasing the representation of mixed-race people in popular culture is important in spite of its possible backlash because this is the only way for those who are opposed to this form of representation to become gradually habituated to seeing mixed-race people in films, videos, music and advertising, enabling mixed-race individuals, and other people of colour, to find acceptance, belonging and equality. Having such an immense platform, and the advantage of tackling the issue from a practical, real and influential matter, popular culture should have the responsibility of equally representing every race and thus promoting racial equality in general. What is certain is that mixed-race people, especially those who identify themselves within this category, are

considered very beautiful, with studies revealing that "mixed race identification is considered very attractive. For example, perhaps it is considered more 'exotic' than traditional singular racial identities" (Sims 2012:74). Moreover, the reason for their attractiveness could lie in the fact that mixed-race people embody both the ideal standards of beauty, which tend to be associated with white bodies, and hypersexuality, which tends to be associated with black bodies (Leverette 2009:438), making them desirable for the big screen, or the fashion and music industries which promote almost exclusively beautiful and attractive people; and recently a form of exoticism, too.

There is also another way of making use of pop culture in discussions on race: through the classroom. It is clear that, for example, many songs from different genres explore the topics of racial injustice: "In the song 'Colors,' by Ice-T, also released in the early 1990s, the lyrics are a powerful indictment of society's neglect of the inner- city youth and suggest the birthplace of gangbanging" (Martinez 1998:210). Martinez writes about the usage of music in classrooms to instigate discussions among students, since "music has always been a 'springboard' for discussing issues and provoking students to think through various course concepts" (1998:210). The feedback she got from students was largely positive and "the somewhat negative reactions and sometimes negative comments…were far outweighed by positive ones as well as positive interaction in the classroom" (Martinez 1998:211); "Student responses indicate that it raises important questions for their lives, and it encourages them to exercise an imagination that connects popular songs to the social fabric, that is, a distinctly 'sociological imagination'" (1998:212). Therefore, combining

popular culture with education might lead to positive and active approaches in addressing crucial racial issues.

On Beauty explores not only marital or class issues, but racial as well. The character who struggles with his racial identity the most, aside from Kiki, is her son Levi. Markle's experience in the acting world where she "wasn't black enough for the black roles and I wasn't white enough for the white ones" resonates with Levi's struggle to find his place in either ethnic community. Levi is described as a good looking sixteen-year old boy who lives in an academic community, has an intellectual Caucasian father and an African-American mother who complies with their intellectual and sophisticated lifestyle. Despite this, or more precisely because of it, Levi experiences deep identity issues resulting from not being able to conform to their 'white' lifestyle. Moreover, he is not quite in touch with his black part as well. In the timeframe of the novel, Levi desperately wants to belong to the 'black' culture which often triggers semi-comic and exaggerated reactions from him when confronted with supposed racist situations he encounters. Considering a very complex theme of the novel is a link between identity and race, it is not, however, peculiar that Smith applies comedy in Levi's interactions because "comedy occurs as both a form of expression and as a social/psychological experience" (Jackson 2015:242). Moreover, since "comedy's effect is to draw a line between those who tell the joke and those about whom the joke is told" (Jackson 2015:247), it is an intelligent way to point out both the absurdity of Levi's account and different perspectives of the same story to an intuitive reader.

One of these situations happens when he has an interaction with Carlene Kipps. Having recently moved into the neighbourhood where Belseys live, sitting on her porch,

Carlene notices Levi in the street and starts intently watching him as he passes her by. In return, he "tried to shame her by staring her out in turn" (OB 80). From the initial contact between the two, Levi immediately attributes her stare as having racial connotations. The absurdity of it is that Carlene is black as well. However, Carlene watches him not for racial reasons, but because she suspects that Levi is Kiki and Howard's son, noting that Levi and Howard's "faces are the same underneath" and that they "have exactly the same cheekbones" (OB 81). What is interesting to note is that Levi shows a degree of racial and cultural prejudice towards Carlene. Once he hears her accent and deducts that she originates from the Caribbean, he changes his demeanour: "Her accent, to Levi's ears, was a shameful, comic thing. To Levi black folk were city folk. People from the islands, people from the country, these were all peculiar to him, obstinately historical – he couldn't quite believe in them" (OB 81). Levi's attitude can be attributed to his lack of real connection to the black community and culture. Moreover, he lacks the maturity in his efforts to belong to it, thus failing to accept people's differences. The sentence "to Levi black folk were city folk" (OB 81) insinuates that Levi, too, has prejudice despite his active efforts to erase them in other people. He gets angry when he thinks that someone is racially unjust to him, but then he himself is not completely cured of it. Because of his age, he has a one sided perspective which prevents him from successfully immersing into African-American culture. His abrasive and impolite behaviour towards Carlene is the result of his judgment being clouded by his partial vision of what the notion of being black comprises. He has an opinion of what being black means, which includes hip-hop culture, urban landscape and poor financial standing, failing to comprehend that there are other ways of identifying with being black. Building on his observation that his reactions are semi-comic, his assumptions in the

conversation, or more precisely his argument, with Kiki and Howard about Carlene are exaggerated since he says "someone thought I was robbin' you again" (OB 84) even though he is very well aware that Carlene's intentions were not racially motivated. However, in order to prove his point, he irrationally makes up stories.

Levi takes serious measures to immerse himself in what he considers to be African-American culture. He starts by discrediting Wellington, saying to his sister Zora on one occasion that "This ain't America. You think this is America? This is toy-town. I was born born in this country – trust me. You go into Roxbury, you go into the Bronx, you see America. That's street" (OB 63). Zora, on the other hand, responds in a semi-comic fashion that surrounds Levi's story by telling him: "Levi, you don't live in Roxbury…You live in Wellington. You go to Arundel. You've got your name ironed into your underwear" (OB 63). Following his desire to distance himself from his former lifestyle, Levi starts to rebel, first quitting his job in a store and instigating his colleagues to stand up to their employer, and later joining illegal street vendors. Levi's obsession with being black is obvious in his description of Felix, the leader of the vendors. He proclaims that Felix is "the essence of blackness in some way" (OB 242) and "it was like, if you looked up black in a dictionary…It was awesome" (OB 242). Another aspect of Felix which captivates Levi is the fact that he is from Angola and he is "blacker than any black man Levi ever met in his life" (OB 242). However, the second quote in this paragraph suggests another aspect of his search for identity. It suggest that Levi perhaps wants to belong to his black culture not only out of his desire to identify with one ethnic group, due to his mixed-race heritage, but because he believes that being black makes you different and it makes you cool. This complies with his

pubescent age and his desire to be accepted, while at the same time demonstrating his desire to be considered unique. Once he joins the vending gang, Levi meets Choo, his Haitian colleague, who inadvertently inspires him to become even more obsessed with black culture. On their first encounter, Levi wants to prove himself to him by acting tough and hiding his background. He once again retorts to his comic ways by saying "I lived on these streets all my life, so it's like second nature to me" (OB 244) and instructing Choo on how to behave if the police comes: "And you got to see them before they even there – you got to get that street sense so you can smell a cop eight blocks away. That takes time, that's an art. But you got to acquire it. That's street" (OB 244). It is needless to say that Levi comes from an educated family that lives in a nice neighbourhood. What comes next is the absurdity of Levi's perception on the meaning of 'blackness'. While Levi is excited to be out on the streets "hustling" (OB 245) and thinks it brings him closer to black culture, Choo exclaims: "I really fucking hate to sell things, you know?" (OB 245) To this, Levi responds with "the most complete version of Levi's personal philosophy that he himself had ever articulated" (OB 245):

> 'Choo – you ain't selling, man,' said Levi keenly in reply. Now that he understood the problem he was happy – it was so easily solved! It was just a matter of attitude. He said, 'This ain't like working the counter at CVS! You hustling, man. And that's a different thing. That's street. To hustle is to be alive – you dead if you don't know how to hustle. And you ain't a brother if you can't hustle. That's what joins us all together – whether we be on Wall Street or on MTV or sitting on a corner with a dime-bag. It's a beautiful thing, man. We hustling!' (OB 245)

Levi's search for identity reaches a pinnacle when he and Choo steal Monty's painting, believing that he is doing right by his black community. Since Monty is the supposed enemy of black people, he feels it is justifiable that he takes Monty's painting because the painting does not actually belong to Monty. Levi explains that "this painting is stolen anyway. It don't even belong to that guy Kipps" (OB 428). Levi is so lost in his search for his identity and his desires to be a part of the black community that he allows himself to be manipulated into thievery. When he encounters Carl, whom he once considered to be one of his role-models, he feels disappointed: "And it was so strange to stand next to this ex-Carl, this played out fool, this shell of a brother in whom all that was beautiful and thrilling and true had utterly evaporated" (OB 389). Levi contributes this feeling to his maturity: "Just shows what happens when you mature" (OB 389). Smith once again turns to a little bit of comedy, when in one of the last scenes of the novel, after the Monty's painting debacle, Levi turns back to his former life and has to ask his father for money. After all his rebellion, 'hustling' and maturing, he goes back to the point from which he started – being a teenage boy who lives with his family.

Levi exemplifies mixed-race children who are uncertain of their racial identity and who consequently feel obliged to choose between multiple ethnic backgrounds. It is essential to understand how mixed-race people are treated within white and black communities, respectively, which might also lead to an answer as to why they choose a particular side. Historically, "while there has never been a law against interracial marriage in Britain, unlike the US which finally abolished such laws in 1967…children in this country who were judged to have parents from different 'races', were often stigmatized" (Gilbert 2005:59). Moreover,

"interracial sexual union was seen as a degradation of the white partner and the resulting child was often judged to be a physical and mental hybrid or mongrel" (2005:59-60). There were also concerns that mixed-race children, conflicted with their identity and not being able to classify themselves as belonging to either race fully, would encounter psychological and social issues (2005:60). In the United States, "racial mixing, in and of itself, is not a new phenomenon…; however, it has increased since the passage of Civil Rights legislation and dismantling of state laws banning interracial marriage" (Rockquemore et al. 2009:14).

In the quest to understand why a mixed-race person should choose to identify with only one side of their genetic composition, it is important to consider that every individual comes from a different background, has different aspirations and interests and, most importantly, different experiences: "How individuals may perceive themselves in the social context, how they are perceived by others, and how they interpret the perception of others, are all important considerations in shaping both positive and negative social interactions. Thus, a mixed-race individual may have multi-dimensional emotional, social and ideological processes flowing back and forth" (Gilbert 2005:66). McRoy and Freeman write that "there are two basic processes involved in the development of racial identity. The first, racial conception, is concerned with when and how the child learns to make racial distinctions at a conceptual level. The second process, racial evaluation, deals with when and how the child evaluates his or her membership in a racial group" (1086:165). Therefore, within black/white dichotomy, as personal experiences are perhaps the most important aspect of an individual's identity, it is evident that mixed-race people would choose to identify as black if they, for example, have experienced rejection from the white community, if they are closer to their

black parent or depending on "their phenotypical appearance, their families, the composition of peer groups, linguistic competences and participation in key cultural activities" (Gilbert 2005:70). Moreover, what pop culture succeeds in is reaching a large number of people and consequently, influence them better. For example, with the emergence of hip-hop music, which has been associated with the black culture, those of mixed-race origin choose to identify with their black side, perhaps because of their love for this type of music, or out of solidarity with the political and social injustice that black people go through (since that is what hip-hop and rap songs often tackle).

On the other hand, when Markle says that her teacher suggested that she distinguish herself as white, it evokes a phenomenon of American history called 'passing'. This refers to people of African origin who physically look white, and to whom passing "could afford…the opportunity to flee from racial oppression, discrimination and exploitation" (Gilbert 2005:68); "The act of passing may be a deliberate act on the part of an individual, or it can happen to an individual" (2005:69). Gilbert emphasises the trickiness of this phenomenon and the possible implications it manifests: "Can a person who has part of their heritage based in a community that experiences discrimination and oppression embrace all that comes with the privileges of whiteness? How could someone reconcile such personal and social contradictions? Is whiteness seen as desirable? Could whiteness always be assumed to be superior?" (2005:70). This phenomenon, can also lead to animosity from black people, which will be discussed in the next paragraph, because of "suppositions that those of mixed race feel superior to Blacks because of their White ancestry; although many mixed people, for varying reasons, have succumbed to White supremacist views, others do

not, and the presumption that they feel superior often arises through projections from Blacks rather than from an inherent sense of superiority within the mixed race individual" (Leverette 2009:437).

On the topic of black community's acceptance of mixed-race people, Leverette writes that the reactions are mixed for several reasons, one of them being "color-conscious distinctions between Blacks and mixed people that favored phenotypes more closely resembling Whiteness" (2009:436); "Falling prey to dominant standards of beauty, many have displayed animosity toward those of mixed race who more closely approximate the dominant ideal. Associations of Whiteness with beauty, goodness, intelligence, and worth often have elevated those of mixed race" (Leverette 2009:436). However, within the white community, "mixed race individuals have been seen by Whites as more closely embodying the benefits of Whiteness, while at other times they have been denounced for the presence of Blackness within them" (2009:436). Historically, mixed-race individuals often enjoyed a certain amount of privilege compared to the blacks by white people, which was also a cause for dislike by the blacks (2009:436). All in all, "this double-edged sword and the paradoxical views of mixed race individuals as sometimes desirable and sometimes pitiful continue to problematize the reception of mixed race identity among African Americans and among those of mixed heritage who identify themselves as Black" (2009:439).

Therefore, the choosing of sides represents a major problem for racial differences and an obstacle in reaching a highly improbable racial situation. If a mixed-race child chooses to be regarded as white it reinforces the white superiority myth, while choosing to identify more with their black roots, deepens the separation between the races and instigates hatred

and discomfort towards the white people. All of this suggests the urgency of an official classification of mixed-race people as a separate racial group, not only legally, but in practice as well. This way, mixed-race people can not only identify with all of the parts of their racial background, experiencing a sense of belonging, but also can contribute to the union of the races and the overall acceptance of racial differences. As Rockquemore, Brunsma and Delgado write, "The changing terrain of race relations has also been accompanied by an emergent cultural space where mixed-race people who identify as 'multiracial' are visible in the media and 'multiracial' identity is increasingly viewed as a legitimate racial identity" (2009:14), but at the same time, it is important to acknowledge that it is still work in progress.

Going back to Markle's essay, she shares that her parents moved to Los Angeles to a neighbourhood that was "leafy and affordable" (Markle). But apart from living in an agreeable neighbourhood, her mother faced discrimination because of its homogeneity. She says: "And there was my mom, caramel in complexion with her light-skinned baby in tow, being asked where my mother was since they assumed she was the nanny" (Markle). Kiki's story is similar to Markle's mother since Kiki also struggles with her identity as black in a privileged and academic community. Even though she is African-American, her lifestyle has been influenced by white people. She married a Caucasian man and lives in predominantly white Wellington. The reader can sense Kiki's uneasiness with her surroundings in her social interactions. For example, when speaking to the Haitian vendor she tries to have a conversation about his origins and poses herself to be his 'sister', but soon realizes that she has very little in common the everyday plight of less privileged. She tries to have a

conversation about Haiti, only to find herself unfamiliar with the topic and unable to converse about things that connect her and other black people other than the colour of their skin. Kiki articulates the issue during an argument with Howard when she shares: "Everywhere we go, I'm alone in this…this sea of white. I barely know any black folk any more, Howie. My whole life is white. I don't see any black folk unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your fucking college. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor" (OB 206). The last two sentences in the quotation are a reference to Monique, the Belsey's cleaning lady. Since Monique is also black, Kiki feels uncomfortable ordering Monique where to clean and paying her for it. She is well aware of her privileged life and it gives her discomfort because she realises just how detached she is from her African heritage. Because of it, she grapples with her identity, sympathising with less fortunate 'sisters' and 'brothers', while at the same time not being able to properly connect with them.

Kiki often wonders how she arrived at this point in her life – married to a white man, with white acquaintances and neighbours, living in a white, upper-middle class neighbourhood. She contemplates the procession of events in her life that led her to her present situation: "…if it were not for the bedside charm of my grandmother…there would have been no inherited house; and if it were not for the house, there would have been no money to send me to New York – would I have met Howard, would I know people like this?" (OB 54) Kiki suffers from an inferiority complex as well attributing her success not to her own capabilities and intellect, but to other people. It seems as if she considers the stream of luck she has had throughout her life to be the result of firstly her grandmother's

inheritance, and then her husband's intellect. There might be another reason why she feels attached to African-American culture and it has to do with her self-image. Given her insecurities with body image, Kiki feels betrayed by the white community that surrounds her. She says that white men do not find her attractive anymore; they "find [her] funny" and "flirt with [her] violently because there is no possibility of it being taken seriously" (OB 51). In contrast, African-American men are still sexually interested in her with one "brother half her age…would not relent until she said he could take her out some time" (OB 51). Adding to the disappointment she has experienced in the stability in her own home – her husband's infidelity – she feels the need to get closer to those who appreciate her more. It is obvious that Howard's affair has greatly influenced her self-esteem; therefore, getting this kind of attention from men makes her feel more desirable. It is possible that she has turned to her African-American background even more now that she has experienced betrayal from her husband because her 'brothers' think she is still desirable.

The need to fit in is in human nature; whether the person seeking acceptance is a celebrity, a mixed race boy or a middle-aged overweight woman it does not matter. Halle Berry and Meghan Markle are both very beautiful women who obviously had to fight on other fronts in order to fit into the society and/or the film industry. Levi is quite a privileged young man who lives in a nice neighbourhood and has every opportunity to be university educated but he, too, is confused about his identity because of his mixed-race origin. And lastly, Kiki has lost touch with her African-American culture due to her life in a predominantly white community and struggles to attain it.

8. Not an identity, but an accidental matter of pigment:
On the culture of victimisation

Since university should be one of the main places where discussions about race take place, and where young people are educated about it, it is important to also reflect on those who conduct these discussions - professors. However, the problem here is that "instructors might struggle to understand their role in addressing issues related to discrimination and racism in higher education" (Walls and Hall 2018:3). Smith et al. talk about the challenges white professors face when teaching about race in the United States; firstly, they found that it can cause "anxiety, self-doubt, and a sense of oneself as an impostor, bringing up questions such as: Who am I to be teaching this class?" (2017:656). This observation stems from the fact that it is white people who created the socially constructed concept of race; therefore, students from other ethnic backgrounds can have negative attitude towards the professor's possible bias or competence to talk about the matter (Smith et al. 2017:656-657). Smith et al, professors themselves, share possible solutions to such feedback from students: "These reactions must be processed openly; in this case, the professor initiated a discussion and deconstruction of students' expectations, exploring questions such as: 'What are the underpinnings of our assumption that White people have little or no relationship to race and racism?'" (2017:657). This way, "the professor openly acknowledged that White teachers can never duplicate the perspective that a professor of color may bring to a course on race, yet they can provide students with another kind of educational experience about racism" (Smith et al. 2017:657). Rothschild says that it is also "important to meet the students at their own level of experience and expertise" (2003:32). This means "validating the experience of

a student of color who has experienced power struggles and institutionalized inequality but who does not have an academic language to express it" (Rothschild 2003:32). When it comes to white students, it is essential to realise that they do not have the same experiences as students of colour and that "it is necessary to begin this process of educating the White student to increase her or his understanding of diverse cultures and contexts" (2003:32). Smith et al. emphasise the importance of continuing with "the ongoing process of personal exploration" for professors (2017:660-661) as well as returning to the observations on the type of privilege they possess from being white and how it affects their perception of others (Smith et al. 2017:661). Thus, "the notion that racism is a system of privilege from which White people can never completely step outside, but to which they can stand in opposition, can in and of itself provoke the beginnings of a cognitive shift for some students" (2017:661-662). White professors who are willing and able to be transparent about their own antiracist learning can embody this counterintuitive stance for their students" (2017:661-662). Finally, white professors who are actually passionate and sensitive to what they teach might encounter "healthy skepticism of colleagues, administrators, and students of color, many of whom will have encountered countless well-intentioned White multicultural experts who speak the language of tolerance and celebrate diversity, yet demonstrate little awareness of the prevalence and impact of racism or their own privilege" (2017:663). This last sentence can be paralleled to Howard and Claire, along with the rest of the white Wellington faculty, who hold liberal values, but, then again, fail miserably at understanding their own privileges that come along with the colour of their skin. Thus, Wellington is in need of professors such as the ones Smith et al. describe, who conscientiously approach the issue. If Wellington is a representative of universities in general, it is clear that Smith's message in the novel is

directed towards real world. This topic of diversity at Wellington, that is universities, will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter, through analysis of the particular passages from the novel that raise those issues.

Nevertheless, despite the hardships of race discussions in the classroom, they are usually rewarded by students, as Walls and Hall have found out in their study on the experiences of African-American students in the discussions on race at predominantly white university: "some students were 'excited' to talk about race because they viewed it as an opportunity to educate others. They also viewed it as an opportunity to gain information from 'other people that are not of the race we're discussing' and 'learn a lot of new perspectives in classrooms'" (Walls and Hall 2018:8). The main role of educators is "to help students to develop an appreciation of the identities of others" (Rothschild 2003:33). "When students comprehend that all individuals are racial beings, a greater awareness of similarity, difference, and, above all, equality is possible. To reach these goals, 'talking race' in the classroom needs to be tailored to the specific identities of students as well as to the specific social institutions in which they are enrolled" (2003:33).

Smith addresses the topic of diversity in her own way. She performs it by introducing us to two families, Belsey and Kipps, who have a very different point of view on the concept of race. While the Belseys give much importance to it, the Kippses, on the contrary, deny its relationship with one's identity. For example, Monty's son Michael tells Jerome on one occasion that "being black was not an identity but an accidental matter of pigment" (OB 44). Thus, the Kippses believe that race does not identify a person and live their life according to that belief, with Monty being very much vocal about his perceptions on race in the academic

world. On the other hand, the Belseys accentuate it; whether through Howard's liberal speeches, or Kiki's continuous attempts to get closer to her 'brothers'. Their attitudes are symbolically represented in the family pictures on their staircase where on the top: "The children come first…After the children come four generations of the Simmondses' maternal line. They are placed in triumphant, deliberate sequence: Kiki's great-grandmother, a house-slave, great-grandmother, a maid; and then her grandmother, a nurse" (OB 17).

Given that one of the many themes that this novel seeks to explore is the concept of race, Smith makes the Black Studies Department to be the most controversial department at Wellington University. The most prominent figures of the department are Erskine Jegede and Monty Kipps. It is impossible to completely determine what exactly their job description comprises; therefore, their role could be interpreted as an attempt to enhance the diversity of Wellington's course offer (Batra 2010:1080). Batra further writes: "Such tokenism casts doubt - as the author presumably intends - on the very nature and purpose of Black Studies at Wellington" (2010:1080). If the essence of Black studies is "tenuous link between the social and the academic" (Batra 2010:1082), then Wellington academia fails to understand the importance of both. When the date of the big faculty meeting approaches, Claire asks Zora to give a speech on allowing people from poor background to attend lectures without being previously enrolled. What she says to Zora resonates on a much higher scale than just letting Carl attend lectures:

'I think it would be much more powerful if it was you speaking your own mind. I mean, what I'd really like to do is send Carl himself, but you know…' said Claire sighing. 'Depressing as it is, the truth is these people won't respond to an appeal to their consciences

in any language other than Wellington language…when I think of Carl, I'm thinking of someone who doesn't have a voice and who needs someone like you, who has a very powerful voice, to speak for him. I actually think it's that important. I also think it's a beautiful thing to do for a dispossessed person in this climate. Don't you feel that?' (OB 263)

This passage points to the absurdities that can still be found at universities; although universities should represent progressive institutions of education and culture, Claire says to Zora that the faculty will be able to understand the point of the discussion only if spoken by another educated person, otherwise it will be discredited. Therefore, Smith insinuates that universities still have an issue with diversity. Faculty members obviously would still deem a destitute African-American young man speaking a vernacular unworthy of attending university. Moreover, going back to the above-mentioned statement of black studies having both social and academic aspect, there is an impression that Wellington University provides only the academic side. At one moment, Claire contemplates this phenomenon of how universities serve only to discuss pointless arguments while not actually discussing the practicalities, which are useful to implement in real life. But, although she thinks about this from the point of view as a poet, the message Smith conveys is obvious: "They were having an intellectual argument…Claire felt very tired. She was a poet. How had she ever ended up here, in one of these institutions, these universities, where one must make an argument for everything, even an argument for wanting to write about a chestnut tree?" (OB 219). This lack of practical purpose is visible from the chapter where Carl starts working at the library. Not much attention is given to the social aspect of black studies; the archive of hip-hop music, which is an important part of African-American culture, is outdated. The archives need to be more accessible to students, which Carl is enthusiastic about improving,

but no one from the faculty seems to share his opinion or his enthusiasm. The only thing the faculty does is giving endless speeches, avoiding problems or just patching them up, while at the same time a complete lack of practical measures is evident. In theory, "diversity action plans propose to 'feed the educational pipeline' to open access, to 'widen the net,' and to eliminate barriers and obstacles to increase the 'presence' and 'prevalence' of people of color who 'remain hardly noticeable.'" (Iverson 2007:593). Their purpose is to open "access for people of color, supporting their entrance to and participation in the university, and increasing numbers of people of color to achieve 'critical masses'" (2007:593). However, the problem with diversity measures, which universities take, is the superficiality of actions taken to implement them. Namely, universities concentrate on the consequences of the issue, instead of its roots: "Although harassment and discrimination are viewed in the policies with dismay and concern, no exclamation of surprise exists, suggesting that racism is accepted as pervasive and commonplace. Rather than address the source of the problem - subtle and overt acts of discrimination - the policies suggest support services" (2007:598). Furthermore, diversity actions' agenda is obscure; instead of having real interest in the solution to the problem of the people of colour's education, the goal of diversity measures might be to better the university's reputation: "Analysis identified diversity (people of color) as useful (e.g., the university can use diversity to advance its reputation). Numerous diversity action plans describe the use of diversity in promotional materials to market the university's commitment to diversity and the 'value and benefits of diversity'" (2007:599). However, it must be remembered that "having a racially diverse society means very little if campuses remain racially homogenous and, more importantly, if there is little interaction among students of different races" (Pitt and Packard 2012:296).

By presenting two opposing sides, the Belsey family, along with the Wellington faculty led by Howard, and the Kipps family led by Monty, Smith tries to emphasize how both sides have their own failings; both sides meaning the beliefs they represent - liberal and neo-conservative. Howard, Claire and Zora symbolise liberal, whereas Monty symbolises the neo-conservative side. Smith presents Wellington University's faculty as all-liberal who are suddenly confronted with a brilliant Trinidadian-English conservative professor, who questions their morals and the righteousness of their politics. Gross and Fosse found that American professors tend to be liberal "because cognitive upgrading occurs in graduate or professional school that leads individuals to question conservative ideology or the values that underlie it" (2012:151). However, Smith challenges the liberal ideology with the already mentioned employment of Carl at the university. Liberal Howard, Claire and Zora who propagate the inclusion of youth of colour, who come from poor backgrounds into the university, fail to carry the matter out. They want Carl and Chantelle Williams, another girl who is a talented writer but has not had any university education, to attend classes in Wellington, possibly at the expense of formally enrolled students. However, Smith does write that letting Carl attend university lectures is actually beneficial for him. She first says that his attitude in classes slowly meliorates: "The transformation was most noticeable on Carl. Three weeks ago he had attended his first class wearing a comic, sceptical slouch. He read his lyrics in a grumpy mumble and seemed angered by the interested appreciation with which they were met" (OB 259). Being a poor and uneducated rapper is a classification of identity Carl has been used to, and he has never imagined that he could improve his social standing. That is why he is at first suspicious of the genuine interest with which these educated people approach his work. He also warms up to his professor Claire Malcolm who

motivates him: "Claire had that special teacher thing he hadn't felt since he was a really small boy, back in the days before his teachers started worrying that he was going to mug them or rape them: she wanted him to do well. And he wanted to do well for her" (OB 260). His poems are met with enthusiasm from other students and feels "a sensation he'd never experienced in a classroom before: pride" (OB 260). He also develops a desire to present his work in a proper way; instead of handwriting his poems on a piece of paper, he now realizes he has to give a more serious presentation, which is in accordance with the poem's quality and his quality as a poet; therefore, he types it on a keyboard. When Erskine gives him a job at the Black Studies Department as Hip-hop Archivist, his enthusiasm grows even more. He thinks that "he was being hired because he knew about this subject, this thing called hip-hop, and knew much more about it than the average Joe – more maybe than anyone else in this university" (OB 372). Carl takes his job very seriously and does not want to gamble with the best opportunity someone has ever given him. Although his job includes coming to work only three days a week, he comes in "every day of the week" (OB 374) and has "all kinds of ideas on how to improve the archive, how to make it more student-friendly" (OB 374). He proves himself to be a hard-working young man with innovative and practical ideas. However, the reader is made aware in the previous chapter of the novel that Carl's employment is nothing but a farce. Claire turns to Erskine to find Carl a job position at the university. From their conversation, it is clear that even though Claire is in favour of Carl staying at the university, she is not willing to thoroughly analyse the underlying problem. She is not ready to actually help Carl prosper and her interest in him reaches only surface: "I know I probably should never have accepted him into the class in the first place, but now I've made this undertaking and I'm feeling like I've bitten off more…" (OB 371).

Erskine, in turn, invents a job post for Carl to settle the problem. However, Erskine's actions are not motivated by his desire to see the young unprivileged man prosper and move away from the street. He finds Carl a job at his department because "when someone was determined to destroy his peace and well-being, when they refused either to like him or to allow him to live the quiet life he most desired, when they were, as in the case of Carl Thomas, giving someone a headache who was in turn giving Erskine a headache…Erskine…simply gave them a job" (OB 372). It is clear that Erskine, and Claire, after all, are unwilling to actively change university policies, and in Carl's case, do not care to actually stand up for the boy. Therefore, providing Carl with a job at the university is their way of avoiding guilt for not properly and thoroughly inspecting the issue that Carl represents. In this way, Smith suggests that there is hypocrisy that pertains to universities; the issues that occur are resolved superficially even though universities should be the pillars of healthy society. Morfin et al. write that "White European Americans are quite willing to tolerate disadvantageous conditions (i.e., poverty, poor schools, health care) for persons of color as long as the former group is not compromised or threatened" (2006:253), which could be paralleled to Howard and Claire's beliefs and inconsistent behaviour. Elisha, Carl's colleague at the library, knows the truth:

> "'This is the kind of job,' said Elisha, 'that you have to make something of for *yourself*. It's all very well walking through those gates and sitting in the lunchroom and pretending that you're a Wellingtonian or whatever - '…'But people like you and me,' continued Elisha severely, 'we're not really a part of this community, are we? I mean, no one's gonna help us feel that way. So if you want this job to be something special, you got to make it something special. No one's gonna do it for you, that's the truth" (OB 374).

The Wellington faculty represent what Fish calls 'strong multiculturalism', which turns out to be "a somewhat deeper instance of the shallow category of boutique multiculturalism" (1997:383). He writes that in theory, "the boutique multiculturalist will accord a superficial respect to cultures other than his own, a respect he will withdraw when he finds the practices of a culture irrational or inhumane, a strong multiculturalist will want to accord a deep respect to all cultures at their core, for he believes that each has the right to form its own identity and nourish its own sense of what is rational and humane" (Fish 1997:382).

However, "in the end neither the boutique multiculturalist nor the strong multiculturalist is able to come to terms with difference, although their inabilities are asymmetrical" (1997:384). Whereas it is clear the main problem with boutique multiculturalism is its superficiality, the issue with strong multiculturalism is a little bit harder to understand, since at first sight, strong multiculturalists are accepting of differences. However, because of that, they often lose themselves in the amount of tolerance and become contradictory: "The strong multiculturalist takes difference so seriously as a general principle that he cannot take any particular difference seriously, cannot allow its imperatives their full realization in a political program, for their full realization would inevitably involve the suppression of difference" (1997:384). Fish suggests that the only resolution to the problem "for the would-be strong multiculturalist is to speak not for difference in general but for a difference, that is for the imperatives of a distinctive culture even when they impinge on the freedom of some other distinctive culture" (1997:384). This is particularly evident with Howard who propagates inclusivity at universities, but, at the same time, is unable to discuss race with his son: "He

disliked and feared conversations with his children that concerned race, as he suspected this one would" (OB 85).

On the contrary, Monty is very radical in his opinions. As already mentioned, the Kippses regard race as a notion that should not define an individual. While the Belseys think that "Equality [is] a myth, and Multiculturalism a fatous dream" (OB 44), the Kippses are of the opinion that "Art [is] a gift from God, blessing only a handful of masters, and most Literature merely a veil for poorly reasoned left-wing ideologies" (OB 44). This fundamental difference between their attitudes creates a conflict between the two families; that is, it creates a conflict between Howard and Monty. The two men, being the polar opposites in what they stand for, become enemies in the academic world. Their feud started when they both endeavored to write a book on Rembrandt. Monty's book "had the great advantage of being bound between hard covers and distributed throughout the English-speaking world" (OB 21). On the other hand, Howard could not even bring himself to finish his book and it ended up "strewn across the floor before his printer on pages that seemed to him sometimes to have been spewed from the machine in disgust" (OB 21). This indicates that Monty is passionate about his academic and writing career and that he is much better at articulating his arguments, whereas Howard has ideas, but, he is unable to thoroughly analyse them, and consequently elaborate on them. Blinded by jealousy on the prospect that Monty's book will be more successful than his, Howard writes a letter critiquing Monty's discussion on Rembrandt's *Self-portrait with Lace Collar*. However, he fails to recognise what painting Monty is actually talking about, so "in front of the entire academic community Howard had picked up the same rope and hanged himself" (OB 29).

For fifteen years these two men had been moving in similar circles; passing through the same universities, contributing to the same journals, sometimes sharing a stage – but never an opinion – during panel discussions. Howard had always disliked Monty, as any sensible liberal would dislike a man who had dedicated his life to the perverse politics of right-wing iconoclasm (OB 29).

Their conflict reaches a peak during the faculty meeting, when Howard and Monty have a face to face argument in front of their colleagues. Howard protests that the University allowed Monty to give lectures when "last year member of this university lobbied successfully to ban a philosopher who had been invited to read here, but who…expressed, in his printed work, what were deemed to be 'Anti-Israeli' views and arguments that were offensive to members of our community" (OB 325). He indicates that Monty also makes "political speeches that potentially alienate and deeply offend a variety of groups on this campus" (OB 325). However, Howard does not insist on prohibiting Monty from giving lectures. Given Monty's controversial literary history, he states that the university faculty ought to know what topics Monty's lectures will cover and how he intends to conduct them. Monty rejects Howard's request by making numerous remarks on Howard's liberal views calling them "fairytales" (OB 326) and manipulating the American stance on the "freedom of speech" (OB 327) to which he refers to: "In answer to his requests I fear I must decline all three, given the free country I stand in and the freedom of speech I claim as my inalienable right." (OB 327). Furthermore, he mocks Howard by saying that he knows "how much the liberal mind likes to feel better" (OB 327). This quotation relates to the already mentioned argument that Howard and his liberal colleagues, such as Claire, are disconnected from the real world and that despite propagating equality and diversity, they avoid further inspection

into actual problems for fear of being wrong, and consequently feeling guilty. On that note, Monty also says that by allowing non-enrolled students to attend classes "liberal – as ever! – assumes there is benefit, only because doing so makes the liberal herself…feel good!" (OB 329). At the end of the meeting, there is a vote on whether Monty's lectures should be held and everyone, except for Howard, votes in Monty's favour. There is another intriguing observation that Smith makes with this episode. Monty is obviously a controversial character, which can be concluded from his conservative views on homosexuality and race. He does not want to share the intentions of his lectures with his colleagues; nonetheless, his colleagues all vote in his favour. Despite Howard bringing into light some serious concerns on possible discrimination on Monty's part, no one seems to be as concerned about it, even though they are largely unaware of the contents of his lectures. Thus, Smith also suggests the dangers of charismatic and eloquent individuals, expressing controversial opinions. Monty has been described as a fascinating character, who is able to easily work the room; therefore, Smith implies that people, even intellectuals, as seen from this example, are easily manipulated into supporting questionable ideas expressed by charming people. However, later on in the novel, the reader has the opportunity to hear more about Monty's intentions.

On the contrary from the liberals, Monty is very much invested into the practicalities of the real world, despite contemplating issues within academic framework. For example, Smith puts emphasis on the fact that he opposes the liberal idea that black identity should comprise the category of victim. In the faculty meeting, Monty opposes Howard's argument by stating that at Wellington University "students who are NOT enrolled at this college are yet taught in classes here, by professors who … allow these

'students' into their classes, choosing them over actual students better qualified than they – NOT because these young people meet the academic standards of Wellington, no, but because they are considered needy cases" (OB 329) In his conversation with Kiki, Monty further expands on the topic, by taking Chantelle Williams as an example:

> Here is a young African-American lady…who has no college education and no college experience, who did not graduate from her high school, who yet believes somehow that academic world of Wellington owes her a place within its hallowed walls – and why? As restitution for her own – or her family's – misfortunes. Actually, the problem is larger than that. These children are being encouraged to claim reparation for history itself. They are being used as political pawns – they are being fed lies. It depresses me terribly (OB 365).

Smith wants to points out the complexity of the topic by giving valid arguments on both sides. She, cleverly, does not argue one particular view, but shows the reader that Monty is being largely misunderstood in his opinions. When he says: "What message do we give to our children when we tell them that they are not fit for the same meritocracy as their white counterparts?" (OB 365), it is evident that his attitudes are not for the purpose of limiting the success of less fortunate people. On the contrary, Monty thinks that equality can only be achieved if people of all colours were given opportunities according to their own merit, instead of their race or financial background. Monty and Kiki provide the reader with an interesting exchange, which only deepens the complexity of the argument. Kiki argues that, in America, the rights of black people have long been denied and that there is a need for redemption in order to create historical balance. Monty's response is: "As long as we encourage a culture of victimhood…we will continue to raise victims" (OB 365). However, what Monty fails to understand is that the concept of race does not mean the same in

America, as it does in England. He lacks the insight into the intricacies of American culture, which Kiki points out. Thus, his views are too radical for America, which is still heavily affected by its history. Erskine emphasises this in a conversation with Howard: "'The coloured man must look to his own home, the coloured man must take responsibility.' The coloured man! And he *still* says coloured! Every time it was one step forward, and Monty was taking us all two steps back again. The man is sad. I pity him, actually. He's stayed in England too long. It's done strange things to him" (OB 21). It is evident from Monty's usage of the word "coloured" that even political correctness is differently exercised in America, when compared to England. Monty is influenced by British approaches in dealing with multiculturalism and race, not considering how they shape people's identity in America, due to its different history. Commenting on Erskine's remark how Monty uses different terminology to refer to black people as opposed to the American terminology, it is important to reflect on this practice so as to understand the differences in attitudes towards race in the two countries. For example, when it comes to terminology used to refer to mixed-race people terms, such as "'mixed race', 'multiracial' (implying at least two groups), 'biracial' (two groups), 'inter-racial' (usually referring to unions), and 'multiethnic' are pervasive in the USA as self-descriptions and in wider public usage" (Aspinall, 2003:273), whereas "'mixed', 'mixed race', and 'mixed parentage' are salient in Britain, both as self labels and in the wider society" (2003:274). However, "while there has been no exploration of preferences for terminology amongst 'mixed race' persons in representative population samples in Britain, some evidence on such preferences is available" (2003:274). Namely, "persons of mixed Black–White parentage used the terms 'mixed race', 'Black British' and 'British'" (2003:274). Apart from politically correct terms, there are also various negative

terms used for mixed-race people, both in Britain and USA: "There are, in addition, a set of colloquial, including pejorative and debased terms that have been (or still are) used in either North America or Britain such as 'mixed blood', 'half blood', 'creole', 'half caste', 'mestee', 'mulatto' ('mulatta'), 'hybrid', and others, some - such as 'half caste' - continuing to be used as self-labels" (2003:274). Aspinall points out that "none of the current terminology accurately describes mixed race persons or satisfactorily captures the possible diversity of their heritage. All generic terms suffer from some ambiguity or inaccuracy in meaning, a recognition which has led many researchers to proffer operational definitions in the context of their own studies" (2003:275). Nevertheless, he does acknowledge that "the term 'mixed race' also implies that pure races exist which can be distinguished from one another unambiguously" (Aspinall 2003:275). Gilbert suggests on the topic that "because mixed-race is a social construction, it seems sufficient to acknowledge that there can be no single or fully satisfactory label. There is a strong argument that in all circumstances it should be left to individuals to self-identify for reasons of self-empowerment" (2005:59).

As for those who identify as black in the United States, the terms most often used are 'black' and 'African-American', although both terms are considered problematic by certain groups. For example, those who born outside of the United States, consider the term 'black' as referring to them; moreover, as 'African-American' is a relatively new term which became popular during the 1990s, those who are older, and live in smaller towns in the South, prefer the term 'black' while, on the contrary, young and educated from bigger cities most often identify with 'African-American' (Aspinall, 2008:63-65).

It is interesting to note that the term 'Negro', which today is considered offensive, is actually

preferred by a small percentage of people of African descent, mostly the elderly population and those who live in the South (2008:66). In the UK, the terms used most often are 'Afro-Caribbean' or 'African-Caribbean'; similarly to the United States, an interesting observation can be made about the preference for the term 'Black British', which is popular in usage among younger generations, just like 'African-American' is with younger black Americans (2008:66). Aspinall reminds that when discussing terminology it is important to remember that "terminology evolves within multi-faceted contexts, including those of the long-term processes of ethnogenesis, such as colonialism, migration, and discrimination, political and social processes, including the actions of elites and community leaders, and of officialdom as an interested party, all of which are played out within country-specific settings" (2008:63).

Although 'people of colour' term is used in the US, it is mostly related to the UK; interestingly, it has been questioned whether this terminology is actually politically correct in both countries. This term "allows for a kind of political solidarity between non-White citizens of the country and the rest of the world. It acknowledges how racism and White supremacy affect people from many groups, not just Black people, and is a platform for their collective shared experiences and concerns" (Adams 2018). "However, it has its limits - and that's why we need to stop saying 'people of color' when we mostly (and sometimes only) mean 'Black people'" (Adams 2018). The speculation is that 'people of colour' has stopped being used for the purpose of "solidarity" and instead it is used to avoid "negative connotations" that come with the use of 'black' (Adams 2018). Furthemore, "in our modern discourse, the phrase has come to be thought of as both the most courteous way to refer to a nonwhite person and a signal that its user is down for the cause of racial justice… person of

color on some level serves to make the (typically white) speaker feel better, rather…the person whom the terminology is theoretically for" (Hampton 2018). Askari from the UK contemplates the constant change in political correctness and says that now 'people of colour' is considered offensive because "it implies that a person's 'colour', or skin tone, is something that's been added to them and that being white is the default and thus normal. But a person who isn't white has not coloured their skin" (2019). For example, she thinks "'people of colour' feels like a hiding place, as if [she] must hide an important part of [her] because it still isn't deemed vital enough to define [herself]" (Askari 2019). However, in the end "there are times and places where it is the most accurate term - when discussing the need for diversity in the largely white publishing world, for example. But we cannot allow people of color to erase specificity for the sake of ease, to suggest that calling someone black is somehow impolite or to allow those uncomfortable with blackness to obscure their discomfort behind 'progressivism'" (Hampton 2018).

To sum up, Howard and Monty's conflict represents the clash of two different ideologies – liberal and conservative. It would be inaccurate to present them as the only two positions on racial diversity that exist. For example, Solórzano et al. write about Latinos at American universities and conclude that "unfortunately, higher education has embraced the meritocratic illusion that it has been, is, and will remain objective and color blind, but we believe that its assertions of neutrality serve to maintain existing race, class, sexual, and gender privileges while clearly devaluing and marginalizing Latina/o college students" (2005:289). Moreover, Berrey writes that "all forms of diversity - including racial diversity - bring institutional benefits such as an enhanced educational environment, better national

leadership, stronger national security, and greater competitiveness in the global economy" (2011:580) and that "racial minority inclusion is valuable because it pays off, and not just for students of color" (2011:577). He also states that "rather than prioritizing only the needs of racial minority students, diversity discourse and initiatives often incorporate, represent, and even cater to white students" (Berrey 2011:577), meaning that, among other things, any person can learn and consequently benefit from being in contact with other cultures, races, financial and ethnic backgrounds, which, therefore, shifts the focus of the benefits of diversity from minorities. However, since Smith's novel puts only those two views into opposition, this chapter has briefly tackled the topic in accordance with the structure of the thesis, which primarily focuses on the analysis of the novel. Thus, the two positions discussed in the novel were the primary focus of this chapter.

8. You can never just say…I like the tomato:
Conclusion

In the previous chapters, both in discussions related to real-life issues and the analyses of the novel's main characters, it could be seen how those characters, who are at the same time representatives of real people, perceive themselves and how other perceive their class, education, age and appearance. Thus, it could be observed that Kiki struggles with her age and weight gain, her daughter Zora has insecurities over her appearance which is typical of young girls, her son Levi has trouble with settling into his identity as a mixed-race person, and Victoria feels misunderstood and objectified, while Howard and Monty have opposite opinions on the way inclusivity of black people should be tackled.

Smith's work in this novel is of great significance because it offers very relatable stories shared from various points of view: those who are young, those who are middle-aged, obese, beautiful, ugly, educated, uneducated, wealthy, poor, coloured and white. She discusses the fickleness of beauty, the fragility of marriage, the duality of racial diversity, the fluidness of identity. The interesting point of the novel is its very ending, which also serves as a sort of conclusion to all the issues raised by the novel – after finally separating, Howard and Kiki seem to warm up to each other once again. Smith's decision to leave an open ending which suggests that Howard and Kiki might reunite, could enrage some readers who expect Kiki to continue with her life as an independent and strong black woman. But, such ending is also very realistic and symbolic. Firstly, to anyone who has both carefully read the book and paid attention to all the intricacies that lie between the lines, and takes into

consideration the complexness of real-life interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, it is clear that a long-lasting marriage is not that easy to end, and it is certainly not that easy to start your life over at fifty-something-years old. Secondly, this ending is symbolic in a sense that it takes us back to where we started. This could be understood that there is no right answer, no right solution to the issues that the novel raises. Such is the case with this study – considering how world trends, which shape identities change very quickly, it is impossible to set standards that would please everyone and stick to them. Hence the novel's ambiguous ending.

What can be concluded both from the novel and this thesis is that the struggle with one's identity is likely to be influenced by continuously changing trends. However, there is the need to write about these changes and present diversity in a way that can be understood and accepted. The immense influence of mass and social media in people's perception has been discussed; therefore employing this type of vehicle for information in spreading awareness of differences among people is crucial. There is a sense of foreignness, fear and unattractiveness toward anything that does not conform to the set standards: such feelings toward race or beauty primarily stem from colonial times when white and thin represented not only beauty standard, but evoked intelligence. Thus, as already mentioned, there is a need for written work and visual campaigns that could further debunk and bring closer the concepts of equality and diversity to a greater number of people. In this way, those marginalised whose identities are primarily shaped according to prejudices and stereotyping can continue to rewrite history and start writing the future.

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