

Teacher Guide
"I Am Not My Skin" Short Story by Neema Komba

Suggested Lesson Procedure: ~95 Minutes

1) Have students complete the before reading activity titled "Possible Sentences." Students will write one original sentence for each pair of words. Then, they will make a prediction about what the story will be about. (~10 minutes)

2) Review the introduction material using the "Introduction Lesson" (powerpoint presentation). This provides essential background information needed before reading the story. (~15 minutes)

3) Teach students the vocabulary words using the Powerpoint presentation. Students should copy down the definitions using the graphic organizer. (~10 minutes)

4) Read the short story. You can either have students do this independently in silence or out loud as a whole class. (~10 minutes)

5) Students will work in pairs or independently on the Reading Questions. (~30 minutes)

6) Review the answers together and lead a class discussion to deepen students' understanding of the story and demonstrate key literary analysis skills. (~20 minutes)

"I Am Not My Skin"
Short Story by Neema Komba (January 12, 2017)

What is a one-arm Zeruzeru doing at a security guard interview? I could sense their disbelief but I didn't let their gaze deter me. I had travelled far for this job. I needed it.

I'd put on my best outfit—a dark blue polo shirt tucked in my combat-green cadet trousers. I adjusted my sun hat and waited in line.

"Yona Kazadi," the receptionist called.

My heart was thumping but with my head held high, I walked into the interview room. Two men sat beside a woman behind a large wooden table. They had stacks of paper in front of them. I held out my hand to greet them. The woman asked me to sit. I took off my sunglasses and sun hat, and sat on the wooden chair in front of them. The room was quiet except for the buzz of the ceiling fan, as its blades sliced through the heat of the room.

Dressed in a yellow hijab and a dark blue long sleeved dress, the woman introduced herself as Miriam, the human resources manager. The men were superintendents. From the way they looked at me, I knew they wanted to know just one thing: what in the hell made me—a man with a missing arm—want to be a security guard?

"Tell us about yourself," the woman said. And so, I sat before them and told them.

It was the dead of the night, I said. I lay awake on my thin sponge Dodoma mattress listening to the sound of rats running on the plywood above me. I tried to force myself to sleep. I had been having trouble sleeping since Baba Joseph told me it was time to move out of the home. I was almost 18, he explained—an adult in the eyes of the law, and old enough to survive the streets. But I wasn't ready; I didn't know what I would do to survive in Serema—a town seething with hate for people of my kind.

The faint squeak of the rusting hinges of our front gate broke into my thoughts. It might have been my mind playing tricks. It's hard not to be paranoid when you've been hunted all your life. I heard footsteps outside my window. I held my breath and forced myself to lay still. Sweat ran down my brow, and my mind began to churn with images of the massacre of the thirty children asleep in the rooms of this asylum—and me, Yona Kazadi, unable to protect them.

I tried to pray but God has always been elusive to me, even though my grandmother and Baba Joseph, our guardian, insisted he was real.

From infancy, I was called a child of the devil. They said my mother slept with Shetani, which is why my skin and eyes are pale, and my hair the colour of maize. People pointed when I passed and called me Zeruzeru. They spat into their clothing whenever they were close, to protect themselves from the evil they thought I carried. They feared my blinking eyes, and the wobbling of my head.

But that night I clutched the rosary beads my grandmother gave me, and said, "God, if you exist, if you hear me, protect us."

It felt like a defeat—an acceptance of my own weakness—but I wanted to believe that someone out there was more powerful than the evil in the hearts of men. Where was God all these years we have

been ridiculed and killed? Where was his power when machetes chopped off our limbs? And when he created us, did he run out of melanin?

The abduction and killings had started with people calling albinos dili. Witch doctors had told them that potions made with albino bones could make them rich, and the younger the zeruzeru, the more potent the potion.

I was living with Bibi Ghasia, my grandmother, in Siwanda when the rumour started. Siwanda was a village on the plains, with a handful of trees and red mud huts with thatched grass roofs. The red plains rolled all the way into the clouds.

We lived on one of the hills, kept chickens, grew cassava and cultivated millet on a small patch of land in front of our house. Abandoned pits of old gold mines pockmarked the bare valley beneath us.

In the distance, we could see the shiny aluminum roofs of Victoria Gold—the Mzungu’s mine. People weren’t allowed near it but, occasionally, locals broke in to steal gold. I’d just started primary school when news of albino abductions became commonplace. The prime minister begged people to stop the killings, but that didn’t help.

My school was 5 kilometres from our house on the other side of the valley, where the Christian mission and the church were. With a khanga draped over my head to protect me from the sun, my grandmother walked me to school every morning. She was old but strong, and was never without her panga—a machete secured to her waist by a tight khanga. She wore a red rosary on her neck. I always felt safe with her. People feared her; they called her a witch. But Bibi told me to ignore them. One day they will get tired of their own ignorance. It wasn’t long before the superstition about albinos reached Siwanda. Impoverished miners began seeking our bones.

My grandmother and I were walking to school one morning when two miners wielding machetes launched themselves at us from a fence. I can still hear the scream from my grandmother when they caught me. I remember her charging with her panga, and trying to drag me from their hands. I remember the crack of bones as a blunt panga shredded my flesh. I remember the blood, the sharp dizzying pain, and my grandmother’s shivering body against mine. I remember the silence from her God.

A worker from the mission found me later—my grandmother had died protecting me. They said it was a miracle I was alive. My forearm was barely attached to my elbow. They brought me to Lubondo hospital where, they said, it had to be amputated. I was later taken to Kivulini asylum.

Kivulini means “under the shade.” I was nine years old when they took me to live there. It was in the outskirts of Serema. A red-bricked wall topped with broken glass enclosed a half-acre compound, which consisted of a large dormitory for children, a few classrooms, a chicken hut, a pigsty, and a small vegetable garden. Baba Joseph opened the doors to this place in 2007, after his wife and son had been murdered by a gang of men. He doesn’t talk about what happened, but I’d seen the story in the newspaper. We all have similar stories: fugitives running from human poachers—some even from their own parents.

I got up from my mattress; I couldn’t just lay there and wait for something to happen.

“Courage is not the absence of fear, my children,” Baba Joseph told us. “I know you are afraid, but you must learn to live even when you are afraid.”

I tiptoed to the corner of the room and grabbed a spear from the stash of weapons I kept there. A machete would make me more like them, and I refused to be like them. I tiptoed to the door, and with a shaking hand, I turned the key of the Solex padlock. The door opened into the room where all the boys slept. The girls' dormitory was on the other side of the wall, but they left and entered through a different door. Sophia, the only other adult, took care of the girls and helped in the kitchen.

I thought about alerting the children and Baba Joseph – whose house was just beyond the walls of the asylum – by blowing the whistle that I kept around my neck. But I decided that this was my chance to prove that I was man enough to stand on my own. I sneaked my way to the guard's post – a thatched gazebo near the metal gate.

Saimoni, our watchman, wasn't there. The gate was slightly open, and the padlock and key were hanging on the open latch. He'd clearly let the intruder in. My heart was somersaulting with fear, but I resolved that I wasn't the one dying that night. I eased the gate close, put the latch and padlock in place, and stashed the key in my pocket. Then I began tiptoeing around the house.

There was no one in sight. The bright moonlight cast thick shadows of the trees on the ground.

I went around the children's classrooms. They were all locked. I looked in the chicken hut and the piggery, but the animals looked undisturbed. There was no one at the garbage pit, or in the vegetable garden. The only place left was the graveyard.

A little girl, Lina, had died of malaria a week before. We had buried her bondeni on the south side of the compound, behind the chicken hut under the big mkungu tree. The poachers exhumed our dead too, and took away their body parts. Lina's mother had brought her to the asylum when she was two months old. She was among the few children that had all their limbs intact. The asylum kept her safe from people outside but it couldn't protect her from the mosquitoes.

At the burial, her mother had cried inconsolably at the loss of her child. I doubted her sincerity. She, like my mother, had abandoned her offspring. In the four years Lina had lived with us, the woman had never once visited. It was Sophia who had bathed her when she was sick, and tried to nurse her back to health. It was Sophia, who—despite the risks—had taken the child to the Serema hospital and stayed with her until she took her last breath.

The other children had cried for Lina. Some were too young to understand death; some had mourned briefly and moved on with life. I felt sad for Lina but also relieved that she had died a normal death. I hoped for that kind of death myself—the kind that doesn't befall me because of my skin.

The thought of Saimoni and the intruder digging up Lina's body made my stomach churn.

The intruder was a woman. She was swaying as if rocking a child to sleep while Saimoni dug. Their backs were turned to me. I could hear the woman sobbing softly, and the sound of her whimpering enraged me. I couldn't decide who to kill first – our gatekeeper, or the woman.

I stood there for what felt like an eternity until I couldn't bear it anymore. I took aim, and launched the spear. It struck Saimoni in the back, glanced off his body and hit the ground. He screamed, dropped the shovel and fell writhing. The woman offered him no help. She simply remained where she was, sobbing while holding on to something wrapped in a khanga.

I had imagined a different reaction—perhaps guilt, or shame; even rage. But the gatekeeper, struggling to get back on his feet, looked shocked and terrified. The woman simply stared. I retrieved the blood-stained weapon and aimed it again at Saimoni.

But I couldn't kill him. I sprinted towards the house blowing on the whistle.

Children ran about the dorm crying. Many had been attacked before, so the old demons came back. I ordered them to assemble in the dining room. Sophia and the older girls watched over them while the boys gathered weapons and stood guard at the door. Baba Joseph came running with some neighbours. He carried a rifle in his hands. I let them in and locked the gate again.

Breathless, I told them about Saimoni and the woman. Baba Joseph phoned the police. We found the two at the same spot. Saimoni was on his knees, his face twisted in pain.

"Please don't kill us; I can explain," he cried.

Baba Joseph stood back, rifle at the ready, and let him talk. The woman had walked 20 kilometres from Kanzera to the asylum with the body of her three-week-old son, he told us. It was election season, and baby parts were in high demand. Her husband had wanted to sell the corpse. The midwife had told her about Kivulini, and so she took her child and left at nightfall. He was only helping her. When the police arrived, they buried the child, took Saimoni to the hospital, and left to arrest the husband and the witch doctor.

It was almost 4 in the morning when we put the children back to bed. After they'd all gone back to sleep, I sat at the guard post and watched the sunrise. Though the sun is my enemy, dawn always holds a promise of better things to come. Perhaps Baba Joseph was right. Perhaps it was time for me to step beyond the safety of these walls.

I'd heard of a man who travelled around villages asking people to touch his skin.

"I am human," he told them. "What wealth could there be in my limbs if I am poor myself? I carry no evil. I carry no magic. I blink because of the brightness of the sun. I am not my skin."

Maybe that is what it meant to be brave—to look your enemy in the eye, let them see the human in you.

In the morning, I told Baba Joseph I was going to Dar—the city where anything is possible. He said I'd be safe with his relative in Mbagala. In the bus, I sat beside a Masai man who worked as a security guard. He told me there were plenty of security jobs in the city. I applied. Now here I am.

After the interview, I went to the bus station to board a daladala to Mbagala. It was buzzing with people and vehicles. I found myself in the middle of the crush. No one looked at me; no one cared about my arm, or my skin. There was something magical about being ignored, something extraordinary about being ordinary. And there, in a bus full of strangers, I felt for the first time, human.

It was a long month until Sekei Security called me back. They had decided to give me a chance.

I told them that a chance is all anyone could ask for.

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I AM NOT

MY SKIN

By Neema Komba

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Neema Komba is a poet and writer from Tanzania.

She co-founded La Poetista, a platform that supports poets and performing artists in sharing their work and using the arts to inspire positive change in the community.

"I am Not My Skin" was published in 2017 by Adda Stories, a Commonwealth Writers Initiative.

The story follows Yona, a young man who faces adversity due to his albinism.



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TANZANIA

Tanzania is an East African country known for its vast wilderness areas.

Swahili is the official language in Tanzania.

The Swahili culture (also called Waswahili) developed along the East African coast, especially in areas like Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, and the islands of Zanzibar and Comoros.



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ALBINISM

- Albinism is a condition people are born with that causes little or no color in their skin, hair, and eyes.
- This happens because their bodies don't make enough **melanin**, the pigment that gives color.
- People with albinism often have very light skin and sometimes white hair.
- They usually have vision problems too, like being sensitive to light.
- Albinism is inherited, meaning it is passed down through genes from parents to children.
- Albinism is a lifelong condition, but it does not get worse over time.



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DISCRIMINATION

- Individuals with albinism in Tanzania often face significant social stigma and discrimination due to their appearance.
- This stigma is deeply rooted in cultural myths and superstitions that portray people with albinism as **cursed**.
- If a child is born with albinism in a dark-skinned family, the family is seen as being punished by God for their sins.
- People with albinism are often called derogatory terms like "ghosts" and "white goats."
- They are blamed for natural disasters like famine, drought, or locust invasions.



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SUPERSTITION

- People with albinism in Tanzania are hunted for their body parts which have supposed magical value.
- According to witch doctors, their limbs, bones, skin and internal organs can be used to make charms, potions, amulets or concoctions that will bring good fortune.
- People with the condition are frequent victims of violence.
- A complete set of albino organs in Tanzania is priced at \$75,000.
- Since it is too dangerous for albino children to go to regular schools, many of them never leave their houses.
- Some will go to live in special boarding schools.
- These schools were created only after the government realized they needed to step in to prevent the murders of so many albino people.
- In Tanzania, election seasons have historically coincided with a surge in attacks on individuals with albinism because people believe the potions could sway an election in their favor.



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ZERUZERU

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- **noun**
- **a Swahili term for people with albinism in Tanzania meaning “ghost”**

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BABA

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- noun
- "Baba" literally means father
- It also can be a respectful way to refer to an elder man or someone in an authoritative role

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DILI

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- noun
- "dili" literally means "deal" or "bargain"
- it refers to the practice of trading the body parts of people with albinism on the black market

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DALADALA

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- **noun**

- **a minibus or van that operates as a public transportation system in Tanzania**

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SHETANI

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- noun

- Shetani are evil spirits from East African mythology

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ELUSIVE

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- adjective
- describes something difficult to find or achieve

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POTENT

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- adjective
- very powerful or effective

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IMPOVERISHED

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- adjective
- describes a person or area that is very poor

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PANGA

● noun

- a large, broad-bladed knife used as a cutting tool or a weapon (similar to a machete)

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ASYLUM

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- noun
- asylum is a place of protection, offered to individuals who face serious threat of persecution or danger

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POACHER

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- noun
- a person who hunts illegally

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INCONSOLABLY

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- **adverb**
- **in a way that is so sad, that it's impossible to be comforted or to make one feel better**

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Name:

Date:

Possible Sentences

Directions: Read each pair of words. For each pair, write one original sentence that includes both words.

1. interview, security

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2. footsteps, paranoid

3. miracle, protect

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4. courage, graveyard

5. chance, human

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What might this story be about?

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Name:

Date:

Vocabulary

Word	Part of Speech	Definition
Zeruzeru		
Baba		
Dili		
Daladala		
Shetani		
Elusive		
Potent		
Impoverished		
Panga		
Asylum		
Poacher		
Inconsolably		

Name:

Date:

"I Am Not My Skin"
Reading Questions

1. What job is Yona Kazadi applying for at the beginning of the story?

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2. What physical differences set Yona apart from others?

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3. What happened to Yona's grandmother?

4. What is Baba Joseph's advice regarding courage? Do you agree with it?

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5. Who was the intruder Yona found in the graveyard, and what was she doing?

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6. How did the authorities respond after learning what had happened in the graveyard?

7. How does Yona demonstrate courage in the story?

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8. What moment in the story does Yona describe as making him feel truly “human” for the first time?

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9. Why is the story titled “I Am Not My Skin”?

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10. How does the story address themes of identity and self-acceptance?

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11. Explain why you believe Sekel Security gives Yona a chance.

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12. Analyze how flashback is used in the story. How does this literary technique impact the story?

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13. Speculate: What factors contribute to the community's continuous belief in curses and superstitions surrounding albinism?

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14. Resolve: What actions can individuals, communities, and/or governments take to challenge harmful beliefs and reduce discrimination against people with albinism in Tanzania?

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15. How would you describe the tone at the end of the story, and what effect does it have on the reader?

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