



**The Fountainhead of African Identity-crisis: A Post-colonial Analysis
 of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><i>Article History:</i> Received 21 February 2024 Approved 27 April 2024 Published 30 April 2024</p>	<p>The African society in the present era is vexed by horrendous altitudes of identity-crisis. This marks the unyielding discriminatory and stereotypical outlooks that persist in marginalising African identities despite the various efforts that emerged to rehabilitate them in the post-colonial arena. This paper aimed to deconstruct the base of identity-crisis in the African context to establish the mainspring behind the crisis from a literary standpoint. In this regard, a literary text that mirrors the colonial setting of Africa has been chosen to be utilised as a case in point. Chinua Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> is a germane text for the paper and has been employed as a lens to probe the focal theme of the study. Furthermore, this study has relied on a qualitative research method to deconstruct the fountainhead of the African Identity-crisis. The data collected from the literary text has been textually analysed. The study, <i>inter alia</i>, finds that the contact between Africa and the West during the colonial period engendered identity-crisis that is still a problem in Africa despite the continent being no longer under colonial rule. This crisis is perpetuated by colonial remnants such as Western cultures and perceptions that are still predominant in Africa.</p>
<p>Keywords: African identity, colonialism, post-colonialism, religion, Western identity</p>	

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of colonial forces in the African continent elicited identity-crisis that is prevalent today. This identity-crisis set off when the colonialists and African natives presented conflicting cultures, behaviours and views to each other. With neither of the two (colonialists and African natives) keen to compromise, an identity-crisis ensued. According to Montle and Mogoboya

(2018), the colonialists during their rule in Africa embraced Eurocentric identities at the expense of African identities. These African identities are still imperilled even in the post-colonial dispensation. Furthermore, prior to the arrival of colonialists in Africa, the peoples of this continent championed their aboriginal African identities devoid of Eurocentric elements in their midst. Thus, the pre-colonial Africa is distinguished through ancestor worship and rituals for religious purposes, farming

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and hunting for food, reliance on kings and chiefs for governance, and oral literature for education. However, when the colonialists surfaced in Africa, they deemed most of the African identities as barbaric and unsophisticated, hence, their initiative to impose Eurocentric habits that they perceived as cultured through mechanisms such as language, culture, costumes, educational and religious systems upon the African natives (Roscoe, 1970). The Eurocentric cultural underpinnings clashed with the African ones and ultimately subdued the latter due to the advantage of political power that the colonialists held over Africans. As a result, most African identities became doctored and Westernised to some extent (Montle, 2022). This marks the adoption of Eurocentric religions, medicines, languages, routines and dressing styles by African natives. African identities became menaced when the aforementioned Eurocentric characteristics came to be the order of the day in the continent. It is then that African identities began to be lost to a degree that Africans in the present age are haunted by identity-crisis as they tussle to respond to the question, “who are we?” For instance, one of the compelling incidences that have been pointed out as a depiction of identity-crisis by a variety of scholars such as Riazuddin (2011); Murray (2012) and Thomik (2014) is the perception of beauty in the African context. The scholars above and others in their probes found that beauty in the present-day Africa is colonially-motivated as it is defined within the paradigms of Eurocentricity. Consequently, too dark-skinned Africans are often referred to as ugly. Dlova et al. (2012) affirm that people with lighter skin tones are the most preferred whereas pigmented conformists are perceived as unattractive. As a result, the dark-skinned Africans sometimes resort to measures such as skin whitening in an effort to beautify themselves, of which, Mushere (2010) depicts as self-hatred and identity-crisis. Therefore, this study sought to make a critical probe into the fountainhead of the looming identity-crisis in the present-day Africa and also anatomise its concierges.

Theoretical interpretations

This study draws from post-colonial criticism, which responds to the effects of colonialism. The previously colonised states upon seizing political power from the colonialists set out to redress the destruction triggered by colonial rule. Thus, post-colonial literature is perceived as a consequence of the colonial past as it deals with the appraisal of literary works written in formerly or presently colonised states, or literature penned in colonialists' countries, which centres on the colonised masses (Lye & Waldron, 1998, p. 10). Moreover, Kenalemang (2013, p. 6) affirms that “post-colonial

writers usually try to reassign new ethnic and cultural meanings to the groups of people that are treated as insignificant by their society.” This encompasses the reconstruction of new identities subsequent to the reclamation of independence. Identity-crisis lingers as one of the legacies of colonialism that demonises the previously colonised people in the present era. This ensues as a result of many hitherto colonised upon attaining political emancipation struggling to choose which culture to adopt between theirs and that of the colonialists (Kenalemang, 2013). It is the colonialists that institutionalised Western identities in the lives of the colonised and promoted these identities to look better than others, hence, some of the previously colonised, today, prefer these Western identities over their aboriginal ones, and this occasions an identity-crisis. Furthermore, the study supplements the post-colonial theoretical lens with Afrocentricity, which is a philosophical approach that qualifies this study to narrow the post-colonial criticism to Africa amongst other formerly colonised states. Some of the prominent scholars of Afrocentricity such as Asante (1998, p.35) assert that one of the characteristics of this theoretical approach is that it “seeks to uncover the masks behind the rhetoric of power, privilege, and position in order to establish how principal myths create place. The method enthrones critical reflection that reveals the perception of monolithic power as nothing but the projection of a cadre of adventurers.” Moreover, Afrocentricity is predicated on the thought that Africans need to activate a sense of agency to attain sanity (Asante, 2009). Africa, as one of the previously colonised societies, has and is still reeling and vexed by identity-crisis due to its ill-fated encounter with the European forces. The colonialists marginalised African identities in an effort to extend colonial power across the continent. Thus, today, Eurocentric identities such as Western languages, religions, medicines and cultures appear to be more predominant than the African identities in the African continent.

Methodology

The study has employed a qualitative research method amidst other methodological approaches such as quantitative and mixed methods. The qualitative method's relevance to the study arises as a result of the study being purely text-based and literary to fulfil its main objective, which is to deconstruct the fountainhead of the African identity-crisis through the prism of a literary text. According to Petty et al. (2012), qualitative research is concerned with the universe of aspirations, beliefs, motivations, observations, human feelings, and perceptions acquired through research respondents in their individual and

incarnate circumstances. This noted, the qualitative method becomes applicable for the study, which is non-empirical and makes a probe on the focal theme with reference to a literary text that mirrors issues through characterisation.

Sampling method

A purposive sampling method has been utilised to select an appropriate literary text for the study. Black (2010, p. i) states that a purposive sampling technique becomes relevant when “elements selected for the sample are chosen by the judgment of the researcher. Researchers often believe that they can obtain a representative sample by using a sound judgment, which will result in saving time and money.” In this case, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has been chosen amongst many texts focusing on African issues that Achebe has penned such as No Longer at Ease (1960), Arrow of God (1964), A Man of the People (1966) and Anthills of the Savannah (1987). These texts were chosen by virtue of their brilliance in portraying the driving forces of African identity-crisis and its germination.

Data analysis procedure

The researcher has made use of the thematic content analysis technique to generate pertinent themes to deconstruct the fountainhead of the African through Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Caulfield (2022) describes the thematic content analysis technique as a qualitative data analysis method that could typically be utilised in conventional texts where the researcher closely scrutinises data to detect common themes. This noted, the discussion of the findings from Achebe’s sampled literary text has been carved up into two major themes, Aboriginal African identities and Clash of African and Western Identities, which are aligned to the main objective of the study.

Results and Discussion

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is a reflection of the origin of African identity-crisis and its relentless development into a vexing problem. It traces African identity-crisis from the onset of its germination, and it mirrors how this identity-crisis has resulted from the clash of African and Western identities. Therefore, the discussion and analysis of findings from the novel has been apportioned into the two themes, Aboriginal African identities and Clash of African and Western Identities:

Aboriginal African identities

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* provides an image of the historical setting of Africa prior to the encounter with the colonialists through the Igbo society. It presents the pre-colonial Igbo society as a culturally ingrained civilisation. The society practices ancestor

worship, rituals, and sacrifices and embraces oral literature through proverbs, which scholars such as Montle (2022) depict as crucial characteristics of the aboriginal African identity. According to Kenalemang (2013), Achebe endlessly utilises proverbs to embrace the Igbo culture and language and to delineate them to the Igbo community. This could be evinced by the incident where Okoye paid Unoka a visit to request him to settle his debt:

“One day a neighbor called Okoye came in to see him. He was reclining on a mud bed in his hut playing on the flute... He immediately rose and shook hands with Okoye, who then unrolled the goatskin which he carried under his arm, and sat down. Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disc containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper and a lump of white chalk. "I have kola," he announced when he sat down, and passed the disc over to his guest. "Thank you. He who brings kola brings life. But I think you ought to break it," replied Okoye, passing back the disc. "No, it is for you, I think," and they argued like this for a few moments before Unoka accepted the honor of breaking the kola. Okoye, meanwhile, took the lump of chalk, drew some lines on the floor, and then painted his big toe. As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 4-5).

The excerpt above, firstly, vindicates how culturally-anchored the two characters are. Prior to engaging in the matter for discussion, the two extend worship to their ancestors and give grace to them by performing a short ritual using a kola nut. Burdock, Carabin & Crincoli (2009) note that a “kola nut is a caffeine-containing nut of evergreen trees of the genus Cola, primarily of the species Cola acuminata and Cola nitida.” In cultural societies such as Igbo, a Kola nut could be used for various events but chiefly to extend a warm welcome to visitors to a village or a particular house (Widjaja 2020). Furthermore, upon performing the Kola nut ritual, Okoye and Unoka began to engage in a discussion that was rich in proverbs:

“Thank you for the kola. You may have heard of the title I intend to take shortly.” Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally. In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two hundred cowries he had borrowed from him more than two years before” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 5).

The use of proverbs in the discussions such as the one presented above, among other things, points out who Africans were prior to colonisation. Toledo (2018, i) asserts that “proverbs are an integral part of African culture. Passed on from generation to generation for centuries, they are still in wide use today and are very much part of everyday speech.” This noted, proverbs are part of the substantial elements of African identity. Equally important, other significant insignia of African identity reflected in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* include polygamy. As reflected in the novel through the Igbo society, African cultural systems embrace polygamous marriages to the extent that a real man is defined according to the number of wives he can take. According to Kenalemang (2013, p.13):

...that a man needs to gain the respect of Igbo society by fulfilling either one of the three requirements that are used to define the social status of a man. That is by either having more than one wife, producing many yams (which are determined by the number of wives a man has, as women are responsible for crop production) or by defeating the strongest man in the village in a wrestling match, which also determines the number of women he marries because families usually marry off their daughters to strong wealthy men. The women of the clan are aware of this and have accepted this ritual; in some cases the first wife can even suggest to her husband to look for a younger

wife. The younger wives are also expected to respect the first wife. These women along with their husbands live together in peace and help each other with taking care of the children and other household chores.”

The male characters in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* made every effort to attain respect from the entire Igbo society and as a result, some of them took many wives. This, indeed, earned them great respect from the people. For instance: “Okoye was also a musician. He played on the ogene. But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 6), “There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo’s village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest,” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 6), and “Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 13).

The three characters Okoye, Nwakibie and Okonkwo were honoured with titles as well-respected men in the Igbo society, by virtue of, *inter alia*, having many wives. This noted, a man who had only one or no wife earned no respect from the society and was named *agbala*, which meant a man with no title. This is mirrored in the life of Unoka who was referred to as *agbala* because he had only one wife and when he died “he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 8). These incidents substantiate how polygamy is also an essential characteristic of African identity. According to Middleton (2015, p. ii), polygamy is “a common expectation for African kings in African societies is for African kings to symbolically unify his kingdom and the society through partaking in polygamous marriages with wives from a broad range of clans within the society.” There are various African cultural proverbs that appear to endorse polygamy. For instance, African cultural proverbs from the Northern Sotho tribe such as *Monna Ke selepe re a adimišana* (A man is an axe and lend each other), *Monna ke lepai re a apolelana* (A man a blanket that we exchange) and *Monna ke thaka wa naba* (A man is a pumpkin seed and he spreads) validate polygamy.

Other cultural practices that emerge from the story to provide an image of the pre-colonial identity of Africa include human sacrifice. According to Scholtz, Phillips and Knobel (1997), rituals, sometimes called muti killings are a practice of

human sacrifice undertaken by some tribes in Africa and usually, the killing is carried out by removing the body parts of the victim while he or she is still alive. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* presents many cases of human sacrifice in the Igbo society for different purposes that are concomitant to the society's cultural belief systems. For instance, to maintain peace, a woman named Ikernefuna was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia: "And that was how he came to look after the doomed lad who was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbours to avoid war and bloodshed. The ill-fated lad was called Ikernefuna" (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 8). Furthermore, young boys were also sacrificed to appease the gods of the Igbo land. The most enchanting example can be drawn from the decision to sacrifice the 16-year-old Ikemefuna:

"Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father." The next day a group of elders from all the nine villages of Umuofia came to Okonkwo's house early in the morning, and before they began to speak in low tones Nwoye and Ikemefuna were sent out. They did not stay very long, but when they went away Okonkwo sat still for a very long time supporting his chin in his palms. Later in the day he called Ikemefuna and told him that he was to be taken home the next day" (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 57).

Equally important, twins were also sacrificed for prosperity as they are believed to be a curse brought by the devil to cause misfortune and stagnancy. According to Imbua (2013), twin killing has been a cultural practice amongst certain tribal groups in Nigeria. Olukoya (2013) adds that it was deemed a bad omen that could result in calamity in an entire society when twins are born. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* depicts how they were killed in an effort to elude devastation and bad luck:

"A sudden hush had fallen on the women, who had been talking, and they had quickened their steps. Nwoye had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest, but he had never yet come across them. A vague chill had descended on

him and his head had seemed to swell, like a solitary walker at night who passes an evil spirit on the way. Then something had given way inside him. It descended on him again, this feeling, when his father walked in, that night after killing Ikernefuna" (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 61-62).

Clash of African and Western Identities

The arrival of colonial white missionaries in the Igbo society marks the beginning of identity-crisis. These colonialists that originated from Europe held their views, perceptions, belief systems, cultures and identities that clashed with the aboriginal African identities that the Igbo society embraced. The crisis intensified when colonial white missionaries reacted to African identities with stereotypical attitudes and started to sell a notion that Western identities are more superior, civilised and sophisticated than African identities: "He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal" (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 192). As a result, several African natives turned against their African identities and adopted Western ones. For instance, one of the African practices in the Igbo society that the White missionaries condemned was human sacrifice. Africans such as Okonkwo's son, Nwoye loathed this practice and were severely hurt when Ikemefuna was sacrificed. Thus, the white missionaries' Christian religion became the African natives' pillar of revolt against their African culture:

"The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there, won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages. That was a source of great sorrow to the leaders of the clan; but many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man's god would not last. None of his converts was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people. None of them was a man of title" (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 151).

The conversion to Christianity occasioned divisions and conflicts in families and communities. Those who chose to relinquish their Igbo religion for Christianity were regarded as lost, treacherous and victims of identity-crisis. For example, Okonkwo

disowned his son Nwoye upon discovering that has converted to another religion. Equally important, more Igbo natives converted to Christianity mainly to combat some of the African cultural practices that they deemed evil and unfair such as human sacrifice. These natives include Nneka, a pregnant woman who had already had her four children sacrificed upon birth by virtue of being twins:

“That week they won a handful more converts. And for the first time they had a woman. Her name was Nneka, the wife of Amadi, who was a prosperous farmer. She was very heavy with child. Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance” (*Things Fall Apart*, p.151).

Another clash of African and Western identities reflected in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* could be drawn from the perception of polygamous unions. The Igbo society embraced polygamy as their cultural practice and men who managed to wed many wives were highly honoured with titles. For instance, “there was a wealthy man in Okonkwo’s village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest [title]” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 6). Moreover, Uchendu said to Okonkwo, “...you have many wives and many children-more children than I have. You are a great man in your clan...” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 142). However, the white missionaries held negative sentiments about this cultural practice. Several biblical scriptures such as the ones below, specifically in the New Testament, forbid polygamous marriages:

1 Timothy 3:2 “Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.”

1 Timothy 3:12 “Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.”

Titus 1:6 “If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.”

The colonialists also perceived the Igbo society’s ancestor worship negatively. The Igbos relied on their ancestors and gods for wisdom, power, wealth and success. Thus, a variety of rituals such as kola-nut rite and human sacrifices were performed to appease them: “...And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm...” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 25). However, the white missionaries championed the idea that there is only one God and the mediator between God and mankind is Jesus Christ. Mr Brown preached this rigorously:

"You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth," said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods."

"There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown. "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood-like that one"(he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved Ikmgga hung), "and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood."

"Yes," said Akunna. "it is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were."

But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You, are the head of your church." No," protested Mr. Brown. "The head of my church is God Himself." (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 187).

This noted, it becomes substantial that the advent of colonialists in the Igbo society of Africa engendered identity-crisis as some African natives bought into Eurocentric principles to the extent of forging enmity with their African identities. Kenalemang (2013, p. 15) postulates that “Achebe shows the readers that although the missionaries are to be blamed for the destructiveness of their religion to Igbo society, readers should also

consider that tribes can also become divided on their own, hence the blame should go both ways and not just to the Europeans.” African natives such as Nneka and Nwoye who perceived their Igbo cultures such as human sacrifice as evil ultimately found solace in the Western culture, which they saw as their liberator. Moreover, many African natives as reflected in the novel followed suit and revolted against their African cultures, thus, occasioning an identity-crisis. Today, African identities are still menaced by domineering Western identities in the African continent

CONCLUSION

This paper has delineated the pretexts of identity-crisis in the African context. It has argued that the interface between the African and Western identities during the colonial period triggered identity-crisis. As reflected in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, African natives embraced cultural practices such as ancestor worship and rituals that conflicted Western observes like the Christian religion and Eurocentric behavioural patterns. This identity crisis as scholars such as Afisi (2008) and Kenalemang (2013) aver supervenes when the African natives like in the turn against their African identities and adopt Western ones to a degree of normalising them in their lives. This unmasks the height of the marginalisation of African identities by the colonialists and therefore, extreme efforts are needed to rehabilitate theses African identities that the colonial past stigmatised.

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