

# Portrayal of Tribal Identity Crisis in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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## Abstract

*Things Fall Apart* is a novel by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, first published in 1958. It is widely considered a classic of African literature and is one of the most widely read and studied African novels. The novel is set in the late 19th century in the Igbo community of Nigeria and follows the life of the main character, Okonkwo, as he navigates the cultural changes brought about by the arrival of European colonizers. The novel explores themes of cultural identity, colonialism, and the effects of change on traditional societies. It is written in English and is widely regarded as a seminal work in post-colonial African literature. This research paper explores the theme of tribal identity crisis through the evaluation of the prominent characters in the novel, i.e. Okonkwo, Unoka, Nwoye, and Ike-mefuna.

**Keywords:** Colonialism; Cultural; Identity; Igbo; Tribal.

## Introduction

Chinua Achebe is a renowned Nigerian novelist, poet, and critic who is best known for his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which was published in 1958. This novel, which tells the story of an Igbo tribe in Nigeria during the late 19th century and the arrival of European colonizers, is considered a classic of African literature and has been translated into more than 50 languages. Achebe grew up in the Igbo culture after being born in Nigeria in 1930. He studied at the University of Ibadan, where he became interested in literature and began to write. After graduating, he worked as a teacher and a radio producer before publishing *Things Fall Apart*. The novel was a huge success and established Achebe as a major voice in African literature. Achebe's work is characterized by its ability to convey the complexities of the African experience and the impact of European

colonialism on the continent. He is known for his use of traditional African storytelling techniques, such as the use of proverbs and folktales, to convey deeper truths about the human condition. It is true that *Things Fall Apart* exhibits regenerative literary power. This relates to synthesising multifarious quality of Achebe's erudite fiction, which eludes imperialistic ratification through its minimal interpretive approximation" (Jweid 530). In this book, pre-colonization Africa is portrayed as a society that still had a connection to nature and worked to protect it from conquerors. Achebe has consistently worked to draw his people's attention to these problems in an effort to preserve the original African culture.

In addition to *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe wrote several other novels, including *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*. He also wrote poetry and essays on literature, politics, and culture. His work has been widely anthologized and studied in schools and universities around the world. Achebe was also politically active and was an advocate for the rights of the Igbo people and for an independent and democratic Nigeria. He was a vocal critic of the Nigerian government and its treatment of ethnic minorities. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe portrays the Igbos' traditional heritage to instil self-confidence, while also pointing out universal truths that taint their propensity for violence. He sets out to demonstrate that, prior to the arrival of European colonial powers in Africa, the Igbos had a philosophy of great depth, value, and beauty, that they had poetry, and, most importantly, that they had dignity. He sees it as his duty as a writer in a new country to restore the dignity that his people lost during the colonial period. Here it appears that Achebe intends to test "Igbo culture against the goals of modern liberal democracy" and tries to "show how the Igbo meets those standards" (Rhoads 61).

### **Concept of Identity: An Introduction**

Identity, in philosophy, refers to the set of characteristics that make something the same as itself over time. This can include both physical and psychological attributes. The concept of identity is central to many branches of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. There are many theories of identity, including personal identity, which deals with the question of what makes a person the same entity over time, and social identity, which deals with the question of how we identify ourselves and others as members of a group.

## **Critical Theories about Identity**

Critical theories about identity are a broad range of perspectives that challenge traditional notions of identity as fixed and essential. These theories argue that identity is fluid, multiple, and constantly evolving. They also emphasize the importance of social and historical context in shaping identity.

**Postmodernist Conception:** Postmodernism challenges the idea of a single, unified self. Instead, it views identity as fragmented and multiple. Postmodernists argue that identity is constantly being constructed and deconstructed through our interactions with others and with the world around us. In Stuart Hall's opinion, "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." (392) Judith Butler observes, "The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes." (xxvi)

**Feminist Conception:** Feminism has been a major force in challenging traditional notions of gender identity. Feminists argue that gender is a social construct, not a biological fact. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (273) They also argue that gender identity is shaped by power relations, and that women have been systematically oppressed by men. Bell Hooks points out, "'To be an oppressor is dehumanizing and anti-human in nature, as it is to be a victim.'"(114)

**Conception of Identity in Critical race theory:** Critical race theory examines the ways in which race and racism shape identity. CRT scholars argue that race is a social construct, not a biological fact. They also argue that race is a central organizing principle of society, and that it has a profound impact on our lives. Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, "[R]acism as experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender – male – tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women who are of a particular race-white-tends to ground the women's movement." (1252) Ibram X. Kendi points out, "... racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment,

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determines what - not who - we are." (10)

These are just a few examples of critical theories about identity. There are many other theories that could be mentioned, and the field of critical identity studies is constantly evolving. However, these theories provide a starting point for understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of identity.

It is important to note that critical theories about identity are not without their critics. Some critics argue that these theories are too relativistic and that they do not provide a foundation for moral or political action. Others argue that these theories are too focused on the negative aspects of identity and that they do not do enough to celebrate the positive aspects of diversity. Despite these criticisms, critical theories about identity have had a profound impact on our understanding of who we are and how we want to live our lives. These theories have helped us to see that identity is not fixed, but rather is fluid and multiple. They have also helped us to understand the ways in which our identities are shaped by social and historical context.

## **Identity and Postcolonial Deliberations**

The postcolonial conception of identity reflects the multifaceted impact of colonialism on individuals and societies. It challenges the homogenizing effects of colonization, emphasizing diverse cultural, ethnic, and historical backgrounds. Identity is seen as a fluid construct shaped by interactions between colonizers and colonized. Hybridity and creolization emerge as central themes, acknowledging the blending of cultures. Postcolonial thought seeks to reclaim and celebrate marginalized voices, aiming to restore a sense of agency and autonomy. It underscores the need to deconstruct colonial ideologies and redefine identities on authentic terms, fostering a more inclusive, decolonized worldview.

### **A. Claiming the 'Subject' Position**

One of the central themes in *Things Fall Apart* is the exploration of African identity within the context of colonialism. Achebe challenges the prevailing narratives of the time that portrayed Africans as passive recipients of European dominance. Instead, he presents complex and multifaceted characters who actively shape their destinies and resist the erasure of their culture and traditions. Okonkwo, in his pursuit of success and recognition, embodies the determination to reclaim agency and assert a distinct

African identity in the face of brutal colonialism. Jeyifo rightly points out, "no colonization is ever given up easily, voluntarily, in "a fit of absent-mindedness." (854)

## **B. Ethnic Character of African Identity:**

Achebe delves into the ethnic character of African identity, emphasizing the richness and diversity of African cultures. Through vivid descriptions of customs, rituals, and communal life in Umuofia, he paints a nuanced picture of Igbo society. The novel showcases the importance of kinship, oral tradition, and communal values in shaping individual and collective identities. By highlighting the intricate fabric of African culture, Achebe challenges the monolithic representations often perpetuated by colonial powers. Rhoads is of the view, "Igbos as a whole reveal themselves more tolerant of other cultures than the Europeans, who merely see the Igbos as uncivilized. In other words, the Igbo are in some ways superior to those who come to convert them."(63)

## **Cultural Fabric of the Tribal Community in Africa:**

**A. Social Hierarchy and Gender Roles:** Within the Igbo community, *Things Fall Apart* portrays a hierarchical structure where age, gender, and titles dictate one's position. Achebe examines the significance of titles and the value placed on masculine traits, as Okonkwo's success is measured by his ability to embody the ideal warrior archetype. Additionally, Achebe sheds light on the experiences of women, revealing their resilience, contributions, and the constraints imposed upon them by patriarchal norms. The narrator tells us that Okonkwo's father, Unoka, was considered a failure by his community because he had never taken a title. A title is a sign of achievement and respect in Igbo culture, and Unoka's lack of one made him a social outcast. Okonkwo was ashamed of his father, and he vowed to never be like him. Corley observes:

Unoka, having taken no title was socially regarded as agbala. Agbala . . . , is 'not only another word for a woman [but] could also mean a man who had taken no title' . . . Here the narrative exposition of agbala suggests that maleness and femaleness exist in a hierarchical relation. What's more, the suggestion, implicit in the communal usage, that maleness is built upon, or an aggregate of, femaleness or that femininity is the ground of masculinity disarticulates the binary opposition of genders both in western regimes and in critical accounts of the novel. (208)

**B. Religious and Spiritual Beliefs:** The novel explores the religious and spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people, highlighting the importance of ancestral worship, rituals, and the presence of multiple deities. Achebe showcases the interconnectedness between the spiritual and physical realms, and the role of diviners and priests as mediators between the community and the supernatural. These beliefs and practices are essential components of the cultural fabric and contribute to the characters' motivations and actions. Nwoye argues, "Igbo traditional world-view is seen as heavily anthropocentric. In it, the activities of the various categories of spirits as well as the happenings in the other realms of the universe are seen as meaningful insofar as they relate to human life and the general welfare of humans in the environment." (307)

### **Delineation of Identity Crisis in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

#### **Identity crisis - Okonkwo**

The novel opens with a portrayal of Okonkwo as a strong, successful, and respected member of his community. He is a wealthy farmer and a fierce warrior who has achieved great success in the traditional Igbo system of achievement. As a fierce warrior he "defeated Amalinze the Cat was proclaimed the greatest wrestler in Umuofia and Mbaino" (Nnoromele 42). As the story goes on, it becomes evident that Okonkwo's sense of identity is profoundly rooted in these ancient Igbo values and that the entrance of the European conquerors poses a grave threat to that sense of self.

One of the key ways in which Achebe explores the theme of identity crisis in the novel is through the character of Okonkwo's father, Unoka. Unoka is a weak and lazy man who is viewed as a failure in the traditional Igbo society. Okonkwo is deeply ashamed of his father and works tirelessly to prove that he is not like him. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that Okonkwo's fear of being like his father is not just a fear of physical weakness, but also a fear of being rejected by his community for not conforming to the traditional values. His father as depicted in the novel "was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow" (Achebe 1). His love for music was well known to all the villagers:

He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the

village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace (Achebe 1).

Okonkwo did not want that his son should follow the life of Unoka that is why “he has transcended the value of strength and industry to Nwoye and Ikemefuna” (Agustin 49).

As the European colonizers begin to arrive in the community, Okonkwo’s sense of identity is further threatened. He is unable to accept the changes that are happening around him and becomes increasingly isolated from his community. He is unable to reconcile his traditional Igbo values with the new culture and religion that the colonizers are introducing, and this leads to a deep sense of alienation and a loss of self. When Obierika narrates the story of the white people’s influence in Abame and Umofia, Okonkwo is finding it difficult to believe. He rebuts Obierika by saying that they would be called “cowards to compare” themselves “with the men of Abame” and he further says that they “must fight” (Achebe 57) the white “men and drive them from the land” (Achebe 57). He is suspicious that “whether his people are courageous enough to accompany him to declare war against the white man and his authority” (Avestan & Mordaunt 36).

In the end, Okonkwo’s identity crisis leads him to take his own life, unable to accept the changes in his community and unable to find a sense of self that is not tied to the traditional Igbo values. This is a powerful example of how Achebe uses the character of Okonkwo to explore the theme of identity crisis in the novel.

### **Identity crisis - Unoka**

In Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, the character of Unoka plays a significant role in the exploration of the theme of identity crisis. Unoka is the father of the protagonist, Okonkwo, and is depicted as a weak and lazy man who is viewed as a failure in the traditional Igbo society. In the very first chapter of the novel, we are told about the laziness and careless attitude of Unoka:

... he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. Through the portrayal of Uno-

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ka's identity crisis, Achebe illustrates the impact of societal expectations and the pressure to conform on the individual (Achebe 1).

In order to "cover up for his father's failure, a flute-playing idler and loafer. Okonkwo is also hard on his eldest son in order to wipe out the symptoms of Unoka's weakness" (Eke & Mukoro 99).

Unoka's identity crisis is rooted in his inability to conform to the traditional Igbo values of masculinity, hard work, and wealth accumulation. He is seen as a disgrace to his family and community, who value strength and success above all else. Unoka is unable to measure up to these expectations, as he is not a successful farmer and is in debt to his fellow villagers. He is also depicted as being unmasculine, as he prefers music and storytelling to the traditional Igbo pursuits of hunting and warfare. Unoka was a man who could not stand the sight of blood. He would not even kill a chicken, and so he was not considered a man at all.

Unoka's identity crisis is also reflected in his relationship with his son Okonkwo. Okonkwo is deeply ashamed of his father and works tirelessly to prove that he is not like him. Okonkwo had heard many stories of his father's laziness and weakness. Okonkwo had always been ashamed of his father:

Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back (Achebe 2).

Unoka's identity crisis is further magnified by his untimely death. He dies without a proper burial, which is considered a great shame in the traditional Igbo society. This further reinforces the idea that Unoka is an outsider in his own community, unable to conform to the societal expectations. Unoka's name was never mentioned in Okonkwo's presence because of the shame he brought to his family and the tribe.

### **Identity crisis - Nwoye**

Throughout the novel, Nwoye is portrayed as being different from the other members of his community, particularly his father. He is not as interested in the traditional Igbo pursuits of hunting and warfare, and instead finds solace in storytelling and music:



Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children--stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird eneke-nti-oba who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat (Achebe 17).

This is seen as a sign of weakness and unmanliness in the traditional Igbo society, and Nwoye's father Okonkwo often beats him for not conforming to these expectations. In the novel we also find that when Nwoye was merely twelve years old even at that time he was a cause of concern for his father:

. . . causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth".(Achebe 4).

As the European colonizers arrive in the community, Nwoye's identity crisis intensifies. He is drawn to the new religion of Christianity, which is seen as a rejection of the traditional Igbo culture and values. Nwoye finds comfort and acceptance in the teachings of Christianity, which provides him with a sense of belonging that he does not find in his own community. However, there was a little boy who had fallen under its spell. The first child of Okonkwo had the name Nwoye. He wasn't mesmerised by the Trinity's bizarre logic. He failed to comprehend it. It was the new religion's lyricism, which touched people deep within. It is pertinent to point out that:

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul--the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed (Achebe 48).

The hymn's description of two brothers who were sitting in darkness and terror seemed to provide an answer to a nagging dilemma that had been plaguing his young spirit regarding both the twins who were wailing in the bush and the murdered Ikemefuna. As the hymn soaked into his parched spirit, he let out a sigh of relief. The hymn's lyrics had the same melting effect as iced raindrops on the parched ground.

However, Nwoye's conversion to Christianity is not without consequences. He is rejected by his father and the community, who see his conversion as a betrayal of the traditional Igbo culture. Nwoye's identity crisis is further complicated by the fact that he is torn between the two worlds, unable to fully embrace either one, "Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled" (Achebe 48). Achebe says, "Nwoye had been attracted to the new faith from the very first day, he kept it secret. He dared not go too near the missionaries for fear of his father" (49).

When Nwoye truly embraces his new identity as a Christian and departs from his village, Nwoye's identity dilemma is ultimately overcome. He returned to the church and informed Mr. Kiaga of his decision to travel to Umuofia, where a school had been established by the white missionary to instruct young Christians in reading and writing. Mr. Kiaga was quite happy:

"Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake," he intoned. "Those that hear my words are my father and my mother." Nwoye did not fully understand. But he was happy to leave his father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith" (Achebe 50).

### **Identity Crisis - Ikemefuna**

In Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, the character of Ikemefuna plays a significant role in the exploration of the theme of identity crisis. Ikemefuna is a young boy who is taken in by the Igbo tribe as part of a peace settlement between neighbouring tribes. He is adopted by the protagonist Okonkwo and is treated as a son, but his identity crisis stems from his inability to fully assimilate into the tribe and his uncertain status as a "stranger."

Throughout the novel, Ikemefuna is portrayed as being different from the other members of the tribe. He is not familiar with the customs and traditions of the Igbo people and struggles to understand their way of life. This is further complicated by the fact that he is not fully accepted by the tribe, as he is seen as a stranger and an outsider. Ikemefuna had begun to realize that he would never be able to fully assimilate into the tribe and would always be seen as an outsider.

Ikemefuna's identity crisis is also reflected in his relationship with Okonk-

wo, who struggles to understand and accept Ikemefuna as a son. Okonkwo is depicted as a strict and traditionalist, who values strength and masculinity above all else. He is unable to connect with Ikemefuna and often treats him harshly, which further exacerbates Ikemefuna's sense of alienation and uncertainty:

To show affection was a sign of weakness,-the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else - with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy (Achebe 8).

As the novel progresses, Ikemefuna's identity crisis is further intensified when he is eventually killed on the orders of the tribe's Oracle. The oracle tells Okonkwo not to participate in the killing of Ikemefuna but "Okonkwo defied the warning from Ezeudu and took part in the killing of Ikemefuna" (Okoro 62). This killing of Ikemefuna affects Okonkwo and others in the tribe as they have to face their own inner turmoil and guilt. Ikemefuna's death was a turning point for the tribe, as it forced them to confront the reality of their actions and the consequences of tradition and customs.

Furthermore, Ikemefuna's death also highlights the theme of the loss of tradition and cultural identity. The fact that the tribe would sacrifice one of their own in the name of tradition and customs shows the extent to which they are willing to preserve their cultural identity and tradition, even if it means losing a member of their community.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a novel that explores the theme of identity crisis in the character of Okonkwo. Through his portrayal of Okonkwo's struggle to reconcile his traditional Igbo values with the new culture and religion brought by the European colonizers, Achebe shows how the arrival of colonialism can lead to a deep sense of alienation and loss of self in individuals. This novel is a powerful commentary on the impact of colonialism on traditional cultures and the human condition. "Okonkwo's seeds of self-destruction" are "concealed his desire to be the antitheses of his "feminine" father" (Strong-Leek 29). Through the portrayal of Unoka's identity crisis, Achebe illustrates the impact of societal expectations and the pressure to conform on the individual. Unoka's struggle to conform to the traditional Igbo values of masculinity, hard work and wealth accumulation, and his untimely death without proper burial, highlights the impact of societal rejection and exclusion on one's

sense of self. Unoka's character serves as a powerful commentary on the dangers of societal pressure to conform, and the impact it can have on the individual. In Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, the character of Nwoye, the eldest son of the protagonist Okonkwo, is depicted as struggling with an identity crisis. Nwoye's identity crisis is rooted in his struggle to reconcile the traditional Igbo culture and values, which are embodied by his father, with the new culture and religion brought by the European colonizers. In conclusion, through the portrayal of Ikemefuna's identity crisis, Achebe illustrates the impact of societal acceptance and belonging on one's sense of self. Ikemefuna's struggle to assimilate into the tribe, his uncertain status as a stranger and his eventual death, highlights the devastating impact of exclusion and rejection on the individual. Ikemefuna's character serves as a powerful commentary on the importance of belonging and acceptance in shaping one's identity, and the consequences of losing tradition and cultural identity. Finally, the novel exhibits the tragic struggle of the protagonist to assert and protect his tribal identity in the face of foreign influences which threaten to subdue that very tribal identity. However, the tragic end of the protagonist does not belittle the spirit of struggle shown by the protagonist to preserve and maintain his pride and tribal identity. In fact, it is the struggle which matters, not the result of struggle.

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