



Delineation of Eurocentric Attitudes towards African Hairstyles as Catalysts for Identity Crisis in Kopano Matlwa's Coconut

Malesela Edward Montle

Faculty of Humanities, School of Languages and Communication Studies, Department of Languages (English Studies), University of Limpopo, South Africa

E-mail: edward.montle@ul.ac.za/eddiemontle@yahoo.com

<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v5i12.672>

Abstract

Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* depicts hairstyles as an essential insignia of identity, especially in the African context. The ancient African civilisations championed their identities through their hairstyles amongst other representations of aboriginal Africanness. These hairstyles in their diversified forms, served beyond beautification purposes as they were also utilised to communicate meaning, give a message, convey status and position in society, perform rituals and embrace Africanness. However, the colonial intervention in African affairs moulded many epitomes of Africanness including the representation and essence of African hairstyles. It is the colonialists that occasioned demeaning stereotypes against African identities and imposed Eurocentric standards upon Africans. This resulted in many Africans abandoning the African manner of hairstyling and adopting Eurocentric charms in an effort to elude the stigma that colonialists attached to African identities. This engendered an identity crisis that is still at large even in the post-colonial period as portrayed in *Matlwa's Coconut*. The main characters in the novel, two black women, Fikile and Ofilwe menace their African identity by giving in to Eurocentric ideals of beauty and this affects their lives dearly. The paper uses a qualitative methodology to delineate Eurocentric attitudes towards African hairstyles as catalysts for identity crisis in the post-colonial day through the lens of *Matlwa's Coconut*. It has been found that African identities are gradually being lost due to Eurocentric canons that appear to be the source of influence on the perception of beauty, success and sophistication in the modern day Africa.

Keywords: *Afrocentricity; Colonialism; Eurocentricity; Hairstyles; Identity*

Introduction

In the early days of colonialism in the African continent, Eurocentric identities such as the English language, Christian religion and Whiteness amongst many others, quarrelled with African identities such as African languages, traditional customs and Blackness. The conflict culminated in many

African natives yielding to Eurocentricity due to the colonialists emerging victorious in the battle for power and conquering Africa. This resulted in the erosion of many African identities as the colonialists sought to control and Westernise Africa in an effort to expand the European power. To a worse extent, Africa ultimately attained independence but has not utterly de-westernised herself nor resuscitated the African identities that the colonialists eroded earlier. Thus, Eurocentric identities are still lively today and posing a menace to Africinity in the post-colonial period (Montle 2020). The imperilled African identities include the significance of African hairstyles, which is the primary focus of this study. The pre-colonial African societies attached significant meanings to various hairstyles to embrace their Africanness. Byrd and Tharps (2001) note that hairstyles were utilised as a means of communications in the 15th century in African societies and the messages they transmitted included the delineation of age, marital status, wealth and societal rank among others. However, the colonialists advented in Africa and championed the notion that Eurocentric identities are better than African ones: “If you are white, you are alright, if you are black, get back, if you are brown, stick around” (Byrd and Tharps 2001, 52). Thus, African hairstyles began to be scarcely detectable among Africans whereas European hairstyles rose rapidly in the African continent until today notwithstanding the continent being under a democratic administration. The relevance of African hairstyles is yet to be embraced nor are the hairstyles re-essentialised as the Eurocentric canons that prevailed in the course of colonialism are still doing so even though the colonial government has been subdued by the democratic administration in the African continent. Most Africans have resorted to adopting Eurocentric identities by straightening or styling their hair in line with Eurocentric standards and perceived their own African hairstyles as inferior (Montle 2021). Consequentially, the subscription to Eurocentric ideals engenders identity-crisis and poses a threat to the African heritage. The endangered African hairstyles are demonstrated by the pictorial examples below:

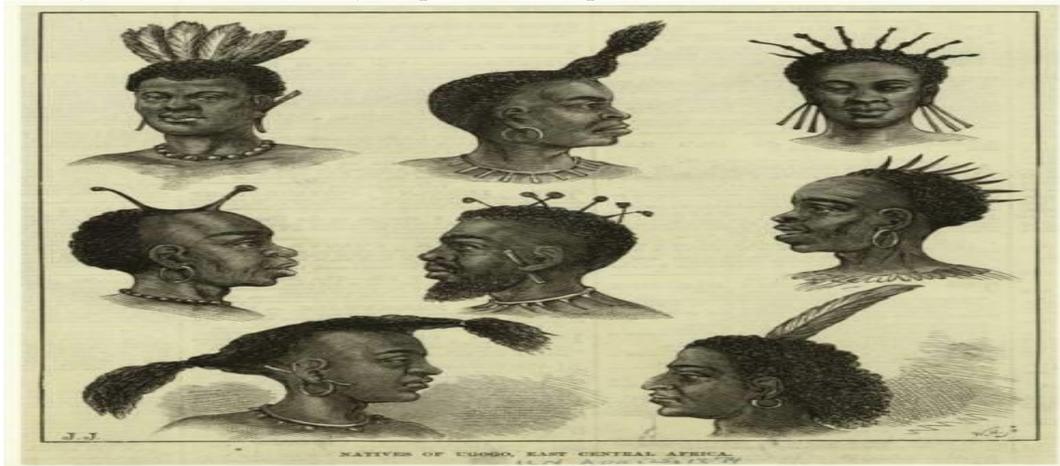


Figure 1: African traditional hairstyles

Source: <https://ibiene.com/culture/history-of-african-women-hairstyles/>

It is the colonialists that engineered stereotypical attitudes against African identities such as the above hairstyles. Hall (1990, 225) notes that the “ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation.” The colonialists’ notion that Eurocentricity is beautiful, sophisticated and civilized, and Africinity is ugly, unsophisticated and backward appears to be still prevailing in the present day Africa. This is evinced by the appalling preference for Eurocentric hairstyles over African ones in the modern day. Thompson (2009, 101) asserts that “creating straight hair and imitating a Eurocentric standard of beauty was the preferred standard of representation for Black women post slave era, with straight and long hair being the highly sought after commodity, the natural repercussion was that delineations started to erupt in Black communities.” Beauty, like in the colonial times, is predominantly defined within the paradigms of Eurocentricity today. Thus, most African women

resort to imitating Eurocentric hairstyles by straightening their hair and using weaves and extensions in an effort to beautify themselves, of which, Henry (1995) opines that this ordeal de-Africanises them and occasions identity-crisis. Correspondingly, Mushure (2010, 30) notes that “the use of hair extensions by African women is a symptom of self-hatred and ...if black women feel that their race is inferior.” Below are some of the Eurocentric hairstyles that are championed at the expense of African ones mostly by African women:

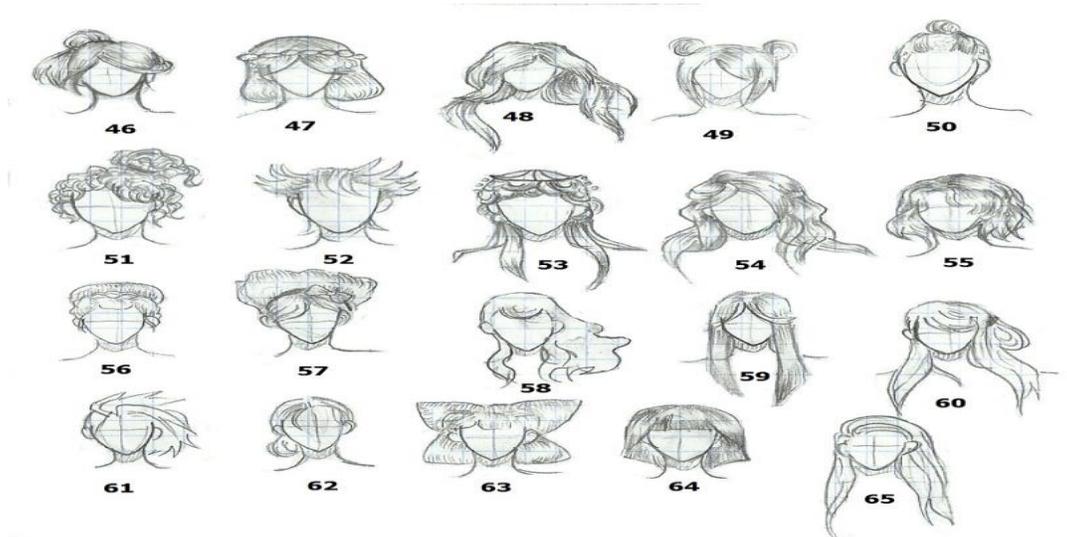


Figure 2: Eurocentric traditional hairstyles

Source: <https://www.deviantart.com/tapspring-352/art/Hairstyles-3-365431880>

Figures 1 and 2 present various African and European traditional hairstyles respectively. The African hairstyles from Figure 1 appear as short hair, natural and dreadlocks *inter alia* whilst the Eurocentric hairstyles are displayed as straight, long and curly. Moreover, the latter hairstyles appear to be more dominant in the present day especially in African societies than the former as they are preferred by many. Ashe (1995, 579) notes that “the straightening of hair is a way through which black women seek to fit in the White society’s ideals of beauty, however unconsciously.” For instance, on a television talk show known as 3rd Degree, part 2 episode themed: isn’t just hair? , a participant notes:

I am a weave queen...primarily because it just looks good on me...and the women who give their hair away at the temples [of india] know where their hair is going and are happy with the fact that their hair has been used elsewhere around the world by other women then it is okay if they approve it and they have given the go-ahead for the manufacturers then it’s okay.

Theoretical Lens Underpinning the Study

This paper centres on the stigmatisation of African identities, specifically African hair (styles). It points out the enduring Eurocentric attitudes as the perpetrator of the African identity-crisis in the modern day. Thus, Afrocentricity becomes a relevant theoretical framework to underprop this study. This theory is espoused by Asante Molefe and it primarily asserts and re-asserts the essence of Africanity. Asante (2009,1) affirms that Afrocentricity is “a paradigm based on the idea that African people should reassert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity.” Furthermore, it is the colonialists that Westernised the African continent to erode the quintessence of Africanity in an effort to expand the European empire. Today, in the democratic dispensation, Africa is endeavouring to break away from colonial identities and re-essentialise African ones. Hence, Afrocentricity “proposes that blacks (at home and abroad) must look

at knowledge from an African perspective” (Chawane 2016, 78). This includes the question of beauty in the modern day, which is still predominantly perceived from a Eurocentric lens than the African perspective. As a consequence, African beautification contrivances such as the African hairstyles demonstrated in Figure 1 are marginalised and to a worse extent, identity-crisis is engendered when Africans shun their own African hairstyles and express preference for Eurocentric hairstyles in an effort to elude the stigma attached to African identities.

Methodology

This paper has utilised a qualitative method to delineate Eurocentric attitudes towards African hairstyles as catalysts for identity crisis from a literary point of view. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a qualitative approach could be explicated as the comprehension of the phenomenon of a particular study through the contestants’ outlooks in a natural context. Furthermore, by virtue of this study being purely text-based, textual analysis becomes an applicable design to aid the researcher to meticulously anatomise the selected literary text for this study.

Data Collection

The study utterly relies on textual data and uses texts as instruments. It has collected its primary data from Matlwa’s chosen literary text, *Coconut*. These data have been further supplemented by information from other sources such as academic papers, books and essays.

Sampling Method

The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select Matlwa’s *Coconut* out of expansive African literary texts by virtue of its representation of hairstyles and identity-crisis. The purposive sampling technique qualifies the researcher to select a sample based on its characteristics that align with the main objective of the study (Lucas 2014). Therefore, Matlwa’s *Coconut* is appropriate for the study and aided the researcher to fulfil the objectives.

Data Analysis

The textual data collected for this study has been intently analysed, presented and discussed through a thematic analysis technique by generating appropriate themes that are in line with the main objective of the study, which is to explore the representation of hairstyles and identity-crisis in the post-colonial African context. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), the thematic analysis technique is “the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data.” Therefore, a thematic content analysis technique has been utilised to qualify the researcher to generate the relevant themes.

Results and Discussion

This section of the study presents and discusses the findings from Matlwa’s *Coconut* through the themes: Stereotypical attitudes against African hairstyles and Hairstyles as catalysts for identity-crisis. Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* delineates the stereotypical attitudes against African hairstyles and the consequential effects that include identity-crisis. It presents two female characters’ Fikile and Ofilwe who go to extreme lengths to relinquish their African identities and adopt the Eurocentric ones. This is due to the stigmatisation they have endured by virtue of the embodiment of Africanity.

Stereotypical Attitudes against African Hairstyles

Matlwa's *Coconut* unveils the extent to which Eurocentric stereotypes continue to marginalise African identities specifically African hairstyles. It delineates hairstyles as "socially embedded and represented in historical Black societies as well as in a contemporary society where there remain political and colonial undertones" (Marco 2012, 10). It is the colonialists that engineered discriminatory attitudes towards African identities in the course of their rule in the African continent. Despite the African continent being under a democratic leadership that aimed to embrace and resuscitate African identities amongst other goals, the colonial influence still persist in moulding and menacing the African identities. This is reflected in Matlwa's *Coconut* where Eurocentricity appears to be the architect of stereotypes against African hairstyles. The characters in the novel are discriminated against whenever they embrace their African hairstyles. For instance, Fikile's boss, Miss Becky considers her African hairstyle as completely undesirable and commands her to "do something about it, anything, just don't come to work looking like that again" (*Coconut*, 122). Miss Becky's sentiments are discriminatory and perpetuate the colonialists' perception of African identities being ugly, unacceptable and unsophisticated. The prevailing stereotypical attitudes against African hairstyles in the modern day could be further unmasked through the picture below, which went viral on social media platforms in 2020. The picture was espoused by a Clicks store in South Africa for marketing purposes:



Figure 3: Stereotypes against African hairstyles

Source: <https://www.ibtimes.co.in/african-hair-dry-damaged-racist-shampoo-ad-sparks-protests-south-africa-827794>

Many South Africans deemed this picture racist and championing Eurocentricity at the expense of Africanity. Nisar (2020, 1) concurs that "the 'Clicks' advertisement depicted pictures of African hair labelled dry, dull and damaged, while an example of white hair was described as fine and flat." This caused an intense outrage in the South African society where several Clicks Stores in the country were forced to shut down and others were damaged due to the colonial trademarks such as racism in the picture. The experiences such as Fikile's where one is discriminated against for embracing their Africanity as well as pictures such as the one above are likely to engender identity-crisis and institutionalise the notion that "creating straight hair and imitating a Eurocentric standard of beauty is the preferred standard of representation for Black women post slave era, with straight and long hair being the highly sought after commodity" (Thompson 2009, 101). Another central figure in the novel, Ofilwe, encounters negativity towards African hairstyles. She recalls what transpired in Ous Beauty's salon where the clients openly expressed their preference for Eurocentric hairstyles over African ones. Hence, they came to the salon for "washing, blowing, dyeing, cutting, penning and styling" (*Coconut*, 3).

Hairstyles as Catalysts for Identity-Crisis

According to Thompson (2009, 38), “for black women, hair is more than a mere covering or protective sheath from the cold; rather it holds ‘emotive qualities’ which are associated with the lived experiences of Black women.” Thus, hairstyling is one of the resorts that some of the women bank on for beauty. Furthermore, Murray (2012, 91) asserts that beauty is more of a glyph of affluence for women than men and “for a woman to be properly feminine, she must thus manipulate her appearance to conform to the very specific ideals of beauty that flow from distrust of the female body in its natural state.” Like most women, both Fikile and Ofilwe desired to be beautiful and due to the stereotypical attitudes against African hairstyles, Ofilwe concluded that to be beautiful, a woman’s hair needs to be “straight and silky soft” (*Coconut*, 4) as per Eurocentric ideals, of which, Riazuddin (2011, 2) depicts as “ideas of beauty placed within a historically racist as well as gendered framework.” Due to this ensuing perception coupled with the discriminatory attitudes that they have endured due to embracing their African hairstyles, Fikile and Ofilwe resolved to relinquish their African identity specifically African hairstyles and adopt the Eurocentric one. This saw the women going to extreme lengths to alter their physical appearances to be like that of a white woman. It is Fikile that said she wants to be “white, rich and happy” than be “black, dirty and poor” (*Coconut*, 118). As a result, she starts “wearing emerald-green coloured lenses and caramel blond hair” (*Coconut*, 117) displayed below:



Figure 4: Emerald-green coloured lenses

Source: https://www.colouredcontacts.com/en_US/products/emerald-blend-natural-lenses-30-day



Figure 5: Caramel blond hair

Source: <https://www.latest-hairstyles.com/color/caramel-blonde-hair.html>

The images above exude Eurocentric identities that Fikile is making every effort to adopt. According to Healthline (2019), “Green eyes are most common in Northern, Central, and Western Europe [and] about 16 percent of people with green eyes are of Celtic and Germanic ancestry [and] the iris contains a pigment called lipochrome and only a little melanin.” Thus, Fikile, who aims to appear like a white woman, considers green coloured lens to fit into the Eurocentric space. Furthermore, Fikile wishes to be a “charming young waitress with soft, blow-in-the-wind caramel-blond hair (pinned in perfectly to make it look real)” (*Coconut*, 117). She wears blond hair, which is “primarily found in people living in or descended from people who lived in the northern half of Europe, and may have evolved alongside the development of light skin that enables a more efficient synthesis of vitamin D, due to northern Europe's lower levels of sunlight” (Socrates 2017, 1).

According to Socrates (2017), in the Western world, blond hair epitomised beauty and liveliness. The colonialists successfully injected this notion into the African minds, thus, today, Eurocentric depictions such as the blond hair are deemed as better than African hairstyles. Hunter (2002, 188) affirms that “racial constructions continue to hold sway and, as a result, light skin and straight hair are associated with whiteness which, in turn, is linked to competence and intelligence.” This could be substantiated by figure 3 where it is evinced that African identities are still stigmatised despite being in a democratic period. In the novel, like Fikile, Ofilwe also develops extreme interest and passion for Eurocentricity, which she perceived as a prerequisite for beauty subsequent to her encounter at Ous Beauty's salon where the clients desired Eurocentric hairstyles in an effort to look beautiful. This noted, Ofilwe concluded that for her hairstyle, she longs for “every last tiny weenie curl straight” (*Coconut*, 4). Ofilwe and Fikile's fondness of Eurocentricity to an extent of making efforts to adopt it at the expense of their Africanity engendered an identity-crisis. This is braced by Henry (1995, 289) who postulates that the embodiment of Eurocentricity instead of Africanity by Africans such as Ofilwe and Fikile are actually de-Africanising themselves. Furthermore, Mushure (2010, 13) affirms that African women who “choose to go with the mainstream ideas of beauty, consider the Eurocentric ideals of beauty to be superior to their own African looks.” This is a conclusion that Ofilwe and Fikile made that to be beautiful, one needs to subscribe to Eurocentricity even if it comes at the expense of their African identity. These black women “are choosing to use hair extensions primarily because of the styling convenience that hair extensions provide, [however], to a small extent preference for European hairstyles was found to be associated with self-enhancement values of success and achievement ” (Mushure 2010, 43).

Conclusion

The colonial remnants are still vexing African societies despite the dispensation of democratic waves in the modern day as portrayed in Matlwa's *Coconut*. These colonial legacies are influential to the attitudes, perceptions and reactions of many Africans today. Specifically, the perception of beauty in the modern day is verily moulded by colonial influence where African identities such as African hairstyles are shunned and depicted as ugly whereas Eurocentric hairstyles are normalised as beautiful. As a result, most Africans desired Eurocentric hairstyles in an effort to be considered as beautiful and this could only be achieved by de-Africanising themselves (Mushure 2010). The subscription to Eurocentric ideals of beauty saw Ofilwe and Fikile denouncing their African identities such as their African hairstyles as well as their lifestyles. Thus, Fikile asserts that she “white, rich and happy” than be “black, dirty and poor” (*Coconut*, 118). This occasions identity-crisis as the preference for another identity over their own demonstrates self-hatred if not inferiority. Mushure (2010: 30) asserts that “the use of hair extensions by African women is a symptom of self-hatred and ...if black women feel that their race is inferior. It has been the colonialist's mission to subject Africanity to inferiority and Eurocentricity to superiority. Therefore, to utterly break away from the colonial identity, Africans need to make tremendous efforts to embrace and value their identities such as the African hairstyles displayed in Figure 1.

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