

# H-Net Reviews

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**Buchi Emecheta.** *The New Tribe*. Portsmouth and Oxford: Heinemann, 2000. 154 pp. 95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-435-91204-8.

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## The New Tribe

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Buchi Emecheta's latest novel, *The New Tribe*, is an engaging text that tackles complex issues in a seemingly simple manner. Emecheta focuses on questions of cross-racial adoption, the relationship between Africa and its diaspora, race, identity and family.

The story's central protagonist is Chester, a black child who is adopted by a white family consisting of Reverend Arthur Arlington, his wife Ginny and their white adopted daughter, Julia. Chester is the only black child in the small English seaside town of St. Simon where he grows up. Interestingly, Emecheta's description of St. Simon is one of a town that harbors no overt racism. The inhabitants accept Chester as the Arlington's son. It is only Chester himself who doubts his place in the family. The racism that Chester encounters is more subtle, consisting of what Paul Gilroy calls cultural racism. Chester is always selected to play the part of the leader of the three wise kings in Christmas pageants because "the kings came from the Orient, and would have looked like Chester" (p. 12). As a teenager, Chester works in a summer resort where he first encounters Enoch Ugwu, a Nigerian on holiday with his children; a family who Mrs. Miller (the mother of Chester's best friend) refers to as "his own people" (p. 45). Emecheta's astute portrayal of the mechanisms of racism, on both an internal and external level, delivers a strong message in very accessible terms.

Chester leaves the Arlington's and St. Simon, mov-

ing to Liverpool and living with the Ugwu's. It is in this very different environment that he is able to question who he is. Chester observes Enoch with his sons and asks himself, "Is that what real fathers do?" (p. 79). Enoch's "extra parental enthusiasm" inspires Chester to continue with his education, as he becomes Chester's elder or guide in a wider context. Enoch is the first person to tell Chester that he is an African, even specifically a Nigerian: "Mr. Ugwu, how do you know I'm a Nigerian?" ... "Is that your problem? You are one of us, that's all." (p. 81). Emecheta reveals the mechanisms of Pan-African identity formation, that extends into Chester's search for his "roots".

A strong motif in the text is a memory that Chester has of a Nigerian village, an image that he tries to find in Nigeria. As the caretaker of the local youth center, Chester works with Jimoh who is in England to earn money before he returns to his family in Nigeria. The two swap passports and Chester goes to Nigeria in search of his half-remembered village. Emecheta describes Chester's perceptions of Nigeria in terms that convey his position as an outsider. He is perplexed by the world he apprehends rather than finding any type of "home". Emecheta convincingly captures the disjuncture between identities and their relation to the real. Chester eventually realizes that his memory of a Nigerian village is actually a memory of a book that Ginny had made for him as a child. Unable to find children's books set in Africa, Ginny constructs her own for her child. Emecheta thereby highlights the relationship be-

tween identity and memory as mediated forms of representation, with family and belonging being reliant on love rather than genetics.

Buchi Emecheta's, *The New Tribe*, tackles complex issues without sentimentality. She is able to convey the complexities of both identity formation and their representations in everyday life. I strongly recommend this novel in its uncovering of contemporary complexities in

an accessible form.

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