## H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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

**Reviewed by** Ronit Fainman-Frenkel (Program in Comparative Cultural and Literary Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson)

Published on H-AfrTeach (May, 2001)

## The New Tribe

The New Tribe

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

The storyOs 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, EmechetâÒs description of St. Simon is one of a town that harbors no overt racism. The inhabitants accept Chester as the ArlingtonÔs 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 Gilrov calls cultural racism. Chester is always selected to play the part of the leader of the three wise kings in Christmas pageants because ÓAthe kings came from the Orient, and would have looked like Chesterô (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 ChesterOs best friend) refers to as ^Óhis own peoplêÔ (p. 45). EmechetâÒs 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 Arlingtonôs and St. Simon, moving to Liverpool and living with the Ugwûðs. 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, ôIs that what real fathers do?ô (p. 79). Enochôsôextra parental enthusiasmô inspires Chester to continue with his education, as he becomes Chesterôs elder or guide in a wider context. Enoch is the first person to tell Chester that he is an African, even specifically a Nigerian: ÑMr. Ugwu, how do you know fòm

a Nigerian?Ò ... NIs that your problem? You are one of us, thafÒs all...Ô (p. 81). Emecheta reveals the mechanisms of Pan-African identity formation, that extends into ChestefÒs search for his ÓrootsÔ.

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 ChesterOs 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 `ÓhomêÔ. 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 childrenÔs books set in Africa, Ginny constructs her own for her child. Emecheta thereby highlights the relationship between identity and memory as mediated forms of representation, with family and belonging being reliant on love rather than genetics.

Buchi EmechetâOs, *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.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Ronit Fainman-Frenkel. Review of Emecheta, Buchi, *The New Tribe*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. May, 2001.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5157

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.