

THE QUEST OF ETHNIC AND CULTURAL SYMBIOSIS IN *THE NEW TRIBE* BY BUCHI EMECHETA

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Abstract : The purpose of this paper is to appreciate and understand the narrative discourse within *The New Tribe*. We wish to deepen our knowledge of the imaginary of the novelist as she endeavours to establish social peace among people from different ethnic and cultural background. Buchi Emecheta uses her creative writing to emphasize the importance of active solidarity across different systems and scales of human societies as a means for dealing with social discrepancies and managing complexity and uncertainty related to ethnic or cultural issues. The quest of this symbiosis is particularly prominent in *The New Tribe*. Through her writing strategies Emecheta unveils actions prior to minimise ethnic discrimination and inequalities.

Keyword: narrative-society- diversity- solidarity-culture

QUÊTE DE SYMBIOSE ETHNIQUE ET CULTURELLE DANS *THE NEW TRIBE* DE BUCHI EMECHETA

Résumé : L'objectif de cet article est d'apprécier et comprendre l'importance du discours narratif mis en place dans *The New Tribe*. IL est question d'approfondir la connaissance de l'imaginaire chez la romancière dans sa tentative de résister aux disparités socio-culturelles et discriminations à relents racistes. Buchi Emecheta utilise l'écriture comme une arme pour promouvoir la solidarité active comme stratégie de gestion des disparités sociales et les autres formes d'injustice liées à l'ethnicité et aux différences culturelles. La solidarité agissante en tant que stratégie de gestion de la complexité et de l'incertitude transparaît dans le faire des personnages de l'ouvrage *The New Tribe*. La quête de cette symbiose entre les peuples issus de races différentes est sensiblement évidente dans le roman *The New Tribe*. Emecheta, par ses stratégies d'écriture, dévoile les actions susceptibles de favoriser la naissance d'une communauté à l'échelle mondiale dépouillée de racisme et de barrières culturelles nocives pour les uns et les autres.

Mots-clés : récit-société-diversité culturelle-solidarité

Introduction

The New Tribe is a loaded narrative that is at once symbolical and analogical. Every home is vulnerable and no society can experiment sustainable peace without mutual understanding. Facing a world of rapid decline in terms of moral values, the author attempts to take fate by the throat by turning every liability into an asset. Solidarity through resilience outstandingly emerges from the analysis of the text structures as one of the most efficient key to achieve social and cultural peace in a highly interconnected world. How does the author attempt to reject cultural or ethnic dogmatism? *The New Tribe* is a space where meanings of concepts such as culture, space, body and self are remodelled to challenge ethnic inequalities in ways that may

have a lasting impact on communities. This issue is linked to social relations. Therefore, sociocriticism is advocated as the exploratory approach to deal with textual structures through their attempts to express social norms.

1. Denunciation of ethnic and cultural absolutism

Emecheta is very critical about any cultural system which lock up peoples. Her role as a right thinker is manifested in diverse ways in her novel. She proves to be an active agent in the improvement of human condition. At a moment of multiculturalism and globalism, race consciousness considered as an object of idealization can be a jeopardy for the welfare of the world community. Likewise a spokesperson, the novelist speaks on behalf of the oppressed and those suffering from any sort of discriminations in the world. The writer clearly situates herself as an agent in the development of humanity.

The New Tribe relates the story of Chester, a black child and Julia, a white girl, both adopted by a white couple, Ginny and Arthur. They named the baby Julia after the paper boy Julian who brought her to them. Chester was abandoned by his mother and left to the Arlington to be adopted. To escape the reality and the gloomy atmosphere of misunderstandings between blacks and whites, Chester set himself as a mediator between the different communities in the novel setting. From this perspective, he saw the meeting with Julia as a way out towards freedom and peace for the community as a whole. His communion and interactions with others help to put balm on his troubled soul, calm his anxieties and give him hope. Unfortunately, the way to freedom is never a bed of roses. The opening paragraph of the fifth chapter immediately brings the reader into a context of someone soaked in hallucinations: "though it usually came at night, it sometimes came during the day as well, and nothing he could do would dispel it." (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.16)

Whenever Chester looks critically around him he realizes that the society in which he is forced to live is not meant for him. Chester's skin colour had an impact on his relations to his schoolmates. One of the most pathetic aspects of Chester's life is the deep emotional turmoil he had to content with in his contacts with others. He argued: "at school they say I can't be your child because I'm black." (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.13). These lines explain the burning bitterness of the young black child in a white society. The assertion is denigrating and humiliating. Worse still, on one occasion of Christmas nativity play, they acted "the wise men" in which Chester performed very well the king's role. Although « many of the parents congratulated him..., he was called "king of devils". Therefore, he decides not to be "king" any longer in order to avoid such mockeries. (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.22). Insolence is another form of humiliation. It arises out of an attitude, conscious or unconscious, to wound the pride of another. The following extract clearly expresses the fact: "Drawn by the noise, the headmaster came to investigate. As Miss Slattery explained the problem, she said jokingly to Chester, "You little devil, you started to uproar". (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.11)

Chester realised he was different from all the other children of the community. Fear and doubt filled his mind and he eventually became unwilling to live with the white family. He felt submerged by insecurity. Therefore he found it compulsory to leave away and seek for his own people. He felt he didn't belong to the community: "What's the East? He pursued. Ginny was silent for a moment, then she said, Africa's

the East. Where your people came from. In the bed, he thought about her words. "Your people". He thought the Arlington were his people. The sense of unbelonging strengthened." (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.12)

He felt conspicuous and terribly shy as a victim of discrimination. This remark sounds a thunder in the reader's mind to understand that the so-called joke of the school headmaster was meant to affect the child's concentration in the classroom. In *The New Tribe*, colour as a distinguished characteristic appears to be overtly important in the society which is depicted in the story. Race-consciousness is dangerous since it makes the subject feel exposed. When the protagonist Chester realised he was different from all the other children in the community, he became "weird" (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.22) and unwilling to live with his foster parents. That feeling of 'being different' overwhelmed him to the point that: "In the bed, he thought about (her) words: "Your people". (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.12). Therefore he felt depersonalised and lost in the area. He had a sense of rootlessness because he thought the Arlington had always been his people. Chester awakes to the fact his strengths have dwindled to zero. Therefore, he went to Nigeria where he was told he would meet "his real people". But all his efforts finally turn into a nightmare: "He was dazed and confused at where his dream had led him (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.131).

The quest for his "real people" proved to be an unrealistic dream. The helplessness of Emecheta's protagonist in the face of the situation becomes quite apparent. At this juncture, there is a discernible bewilderment on the part of Chester and by extension everyone caught up in the web of racial discrimination.

Nowadays in many places, racial conception and culture have made the whole society a place of permanent fear and tension. Therefore, in the tussle for freedom and justice for everyone at the world scale, Buchi Emecheta, through her work tempts to challenge the issues of multi-cultural societies and eventually pinpoints the compelling reasons for peoples to live peacefully in spite of their dissimilarities. The role assigned to Chester by the author consists in showing his predicament and desire for peace and unity. But what is the *raison d'être* of humankind without unity and mutual understanding? This central question seems to be the cornerstone of the writer's vision of world.

Denouncing some evils of the society requires self-confidence and audaciousness. *The New Tribe* is indeed an appeal to solidarity. The social dynamics of the novelistic space of our corpus reflect all this reality. Resilience discourse can be embedded in a social context. Resilient attitudes are expected to be positive for the community inasmuch as they help them escape misunderstandings and overcome hardship. The novel, *The New Tribe*, is built on a structure of learning process. The central character, Chester, is a strongly desiring being. He embarks on a quest at the end of which he has acquired a new perceptual mode which puts him in rupture with the established order. It allows a psychological liberation of the character and Chester excels well in this posture.

2. A stylistic analysis of symbiosis in the novel

Emecheta has a real "flirtatious" style and flexible writing. The novel underpins determination as a key to wipe out colour lines between peoples. The paratext and the symbolic expressions or imageries of ethnic symbiosis that pervade the novel have enthralled our attention. Emecheta's message hinges round them. According to Gerard

Genette the value of a paratext can be verbal, iconic, material, or factual. Encompassing titles, subtitles, author names, illustrations, back covers, dedications, footnotes, etc., the paratextual elements surround and support the core text. Their functions consist in explaining, instructing, supporting, defining, or adding background information. (Adapted from: Le dictionnaire du littéraire, p.562)

On the front cover of the novel there is a portrait of two young children and a woman standing between them. The top part features the name of the publisher and the title in capital letters "THE NEW TRIBE". In the lower part we see the author's name. These paratextual strategies are in perfect line with the factual paratexts, i.e. they tell us a great deal about the author's vision of world. They propel Emecheta's work as a social novel by presenting the main protagonists who are Genny, Chester and Julia as heroes having each a crown on their head. They all fought against odds to live in a perfect harmony. The title of the novel as a paratextual element enhances the aesthetic quality of the semiotic product through its expression. As a narrative technique, the front cover symbolizes racial integration. Emecheta overtly rejects cultural isolation to such extent that in her mind, colour as a distinguishing characteristic does not appear to be important. Here lies the true sense of her "new tribe" where people of different origins are found in the same family, by extension in the same country. In every respect it is an allegory. Style is a key issue in literature. Emecheta enables her characters to express their feelings, emotions and ideas through the use of language.

The New Tribe works upon the reader's mind as a sensitive needle which spreads emotional insights. The language is quite emotive. This emotion rises from the simplicity of the language deployed in the narration. The use of simple style with commonplace language rather than complex metaphors can just evoke emotion. The language used in the text is expressive and emotionally meaningful to lay out the author's message. Emotion is perceived through the experiences of the different protagonists which undoubtedly make a great impact on the reader to acquire a sense of purpose, determination and identity.

As a matter of fact, in the fictional universe of *The New Tribe*, The Arlingstons are the representatives of the multiracial community which could serve as a prototype for the entire world community. This novel by Emecheta while evoking emotion is an invitation to realism because "sometimes we have to accept what we can't change." (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.14) Ethnic and cultural diversity is what makes humankind special. Unfortunately everybody does not see in that way. Diversity should drag behind mutual understanding and co-operation. Ginny and Arthur are strongly against the lowering of the Black in his relationship with the White. They manifested courage and resilience to safeguard a mixed-raced family in a context where black people were regarded as inferior beings. It is once again a call for the recognition of the dignity of the African people. The Arlington's family in the novel represents a living symbol of resilience because they successfully resist all outside influences. The writer emphatically uses expressions to reveal the state of his face showing that Chester is inevitably living in a privileged home. Furthermore "silence" is presented as a resilient language. Chester confirms: "My mother, Ginny, used silence to divide and conquer in the household. My dad thought he was in control, but she was really. With her silence she could heal as well." (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.106). The imagery of "silence" presented by Emecheta can be said to have expressed resistance against

racial discrimination. Silence can be used as a weapon to overcome any persecution no matter where it might come from. In *The New Tribe* the imagery of silence acquires meanings on different levels. The writer manipulates emotions to go as far as possible into the feeling of the reader.

“Silence” represents peace, stubbornness and stability. The names of the adopted two children by the Arlington are related to “silence.” The “S” sound in “Ches” and “Jules” evokes silence to figure out peace and stability. The arrival of Chester into the white couple’s family is appreciated as a real spot of light. Ginny testifies: “How could a woman give up this beautiful child? (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.7) Therefore with tenderness, Ginny and her husband cared for Chester like their own child. Catherine Mba, Chester’s biological mother could not find a place better than the Arlingtons’ house to foster her child: “She knew we were Christians, and hoped you would get the love you needed from us. She was Nigerian. We tried to trace her, but she had disappeared. The most important thing is that to us you’re our children, and we love you both very much”. (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.15)

The smoothness of the new relationship established in the Arlington’s family can be read through the following conversation between Chester and Julia:

“We have each other Julia. You’ll always be my sister. “Julia smiled. “Thanks, Ches. And now, you have Esther too. You’ve made a very good choice. Esther has style, and she obviously cares a lot for you”. Chester and Julia held hands silently in the taxi to the station.” (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.152)

The repetition of the consonant sound /s/creates an effect of “silence” and smoothness. Ginny could not accept injustice and ill-treatment. So she remained silent before all external words tending to deter her from being engaged to rear the black child. The metaphor of “Silence” as manifested by Ginny indicates that interactions with others are at the heart of the construction of individuals. Racial or ethnic difference is more and more often invoked as a cause of conflict and a means of demarcation. However, we cannot know what we are if no one sends back to us the image of it. We cannot be ourselves if the other is not different. Therefore, we must be conscious of the contribution of others, but also conscious of our own reality. Diversity is prior to the preservation of social cohesion. The fact of human frailty should not be an unbearable barrier to the building up of mutual trust. In the novel, there is an appeal for religious syncretism: “He performed an elaborate ceremony, offering a long payer to Allah, and then to the Christian God, and finally to the ancestors.” (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.110)

If people all over the world remain faithful to moral principles which are the foundation of all religions they will make no difference between whites and blacks. The primary objective of the author is to create a healthy climate indispensable to self-realization. Not the whites should keep growing healthy while the blacks are kept in perpetual servitude. Emecheta's work of fiction is characterized by a symphony of forms which can be translated as the realization of a symbiosis of cultures, one white, the other black, what could be considered as a third culture and a new human order stripped of the artifices of color lines: “We don’t belong to Africa, we’re British. Black British may be, but this is our home now.” (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.113)

We can also find the suggestive power of description, and a subtle symbolism, imbued with humor and irony: “Who do you think you are, Chester? Michael Jackson? Boh, take the rag from your nose. You look like say you dead, with cloth over your

face like that. Abi, you no get petrol from the UK? Well this na the same.” (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.131)

The author plays on the multiplicity of genres. She borrows from several literary genres such as novels, short stories, play, poetry, oral literature, etc. Literature regularly uses the Bible as a hypotext. If we look closely the paratext, the title suggests the presence of biblical elements. The new tribe as the biblical “Promised Land” where honey and milk flow, is the utmost dream of the writer. The names of characters are inspired by biblical characters: Esther, Enoch, Jonah etc. Schools organize skits about historical religious events. One example is the story of the celebration of the nativity. Indeed, in the main story there are sub-stories: an abundance of feelings, memories and characters. The alternation from one story to another creates a tower of stories across the novel.

The novelist’s writing technique is an attempt to pull apart discrepancies related to racial differences. The uses of various forms of languages to depict the real sense of unity shed light on her determination to keep pounding the ground like an athlete. Arlington and Ginny, as characters, are aware of the significance of unity among all human societies.

3. Buchi Emecheta’s contribution to global peace advent

The story can be considered as the lay foundation of a peaceful just society where people are respected and loved from all levels. Putting the highest priority on seeking new values to bring people from all cultural backgrounds together, the Nigerian woman writer tries to stop societal disorders such as hatred, racial discrimination, and gender-based violence. Emecheta romanticizes inter-racial contacts, encourages education and raises opportunities as conditions for sustainable global peace. She is stubbornly committed to the defence of all social norms.

At this juncture, we can look over Emecheta’s work as a whole. The author’s strength lies in the straightforward message she tries to get across hoping to be perceived by the largest audience in the world. Therefore, writing with simplicity becomes a deliberate choice. This writing style is also advocated by André Brink as a manner “to accept fully the responsibility for everything the author writes.” (André B.: 1982, p.91) In this logic, *The New Tribe* can be admitted as an outstanding appeal for justice and equality between races. It is intended to break down any atmosphere of racism, violence and crude exploitation. The author believes in change and is well-conscious of the notion of equality. It transpires through her writings by calling Whites and the Blacks to join in forces and build a peaceful world, a colourful one. The main characters like Arlington, Ginny, Julia and Chester symbolise unity between communities. The writer gives voice to her characters through self-determination. Correspondingly, in André Brink’s *A Chain of Voices*, Galant, a black child and Nicolass a white boy, were raised together by Ma-Rose who used to call them her lambs: “My two lambs, black and white. So many things had been stirred up by that thas-jackal. One day, when the last of my race had died and we would remain only as a memory....” (André B.: 1982, p.176.)

In analyzing this assertion, we can underpin that humanity is condemned to live together regardless of race or ethnicity. Here is a historical truth that should transcend all generations in time and space. In *The New Tribe*, the Arlingtons surely acted out of love and all the dynamics of racial integration issues settled in our work

pivot around it. Indeed love is the primordial place where the encounter with the other can take place. It becomes imperative that individuals unite in love for better social integration. The seed of change for a racially egalitarian society manifests itself in the Arlington around three pillars. Mutual acceptance is a fundamental element. In this respect, the maternal instinct of Ginny can be very appreciable: "Consider! What is there to consider! Ginny responded calmly, her protective instincts awakened. (...) the fact he was black only added to their feelings of having been chosen" (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.7).

Another aspect of human values is education. School is the ideal place to acquire knowledge necessary for the development of individuals in a society. It is a place where people sharpen their critical mind and gain autonomy in their choices. Chester's schooling is an important lever that proves the Arlington family wanted to ensure his full development. The white couple manages to transcend racial differences:

"He was unprepared for his first encounter with the outside world, when he was sent to school. Julia had been at the same school since the year before, and had told Chester so many stories about it that, in his imagination, it had become an extension of Sunday school." (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.10).

Chester is portrayed as an intelligent young boy: "I passed GSCE in Mathematics and Woodworks" (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.80). The equality of opportunity between the two adopted children exposes the will of the white couple to give echo to their inner sensitivity. Arlington Arthur and his wife Ginny are models. Their altruistic commitment symbolises the quest for an identity which is not limited to ethnicity but rather based on relationships between humans and marked by love. Despite their differences, The Arlingtons, fight hard to carry on dreaming of the same object which consists of building a family of justice. The new parents are full of joy and happiness: "Ginny was overjoyed, and talked of nothing else to her friends and parishioners" (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.6).

This work by Emecheta is a contribution to the debate of racism and the need to achieve a symbiosis for the humankind. She advocates an end to authoritarian and racial discrimination. The discourse has the option of deconstructing prejudices built on Blacks. The seed of hope, similar to Ngugi's grain of wheat is sown and will surely end up germinating and bearing fruit. In *The New Tribe*, the catalyst for racial harmony is hope which is an imperishable seed. Therefore, the key to change is hope. André Brink states it in *A Chain of Voices*: "Hope is an indestructible weed." (André B.: 1982, p.91) For the South African writer, hope is comparable to weed on a farm. They can be pulled up, dried out, burned, but they will always grow up again and over again. Resilience through hope enables Emecheta to open new vistas for a bright and flamboyant future to humankind. She inevitably believes in change. This analysis is reinforced by the expressions of unity that pervades in the novel as proofs of her firm determination to succeed and live peacefully as a Nigerian woman in England. Chester's integration into the Arlington family can be a sound example:

"He stopped a few feet away from Chester. "Yes, what can I do for you, young man? He enquired. Before Chester could reply, he went on 'You're the vicar's boy?' Chester smiled. His confidence rekindled, and his face glowed. He stood up straight, his feet firmly planted on the ground. He laid a hand on the Iron Gate as he replied, "yes sir, my name is Chester'. (Buchi Emecheta: 2000, p.27)

The whole message conveyed by the novel is displayed by the above-statement. It pinpoints Chester's forceful integration into the family cell and the whole society as well. Not surprisingly, Chester carries himself with pride and pays homage to his adopted family. Emecheta is undoubtedly building a "new culture" and participating to the growth of a common consciousness.

Conclusion

The New Tribe by Buchi Emecheta must be read as an experiment wherein the notion of building ethnic and social symbiosis through facing adversity can lead to suggest a number of possible ways for progress. Indeed, Emecheta's work shows that despite difficulties linked to the meeting of several cultures, it is possible to engage in intercultural relations and keep surviving. For the author, mutual respect should be a universal virtue. When this awareness is made, the perception about others positively instils confidence and feeling of equal human dignity to people's minds. Within silence of pains related to ethnic discrimination and social anomy, the Nigerian writer proposes a speech of pride in the face of everything tending to relegate human beings to an inferior status. Indeed, Emecheta's hope is to build a world where people are respected and loved from all levels. There lies the verdict of the novel.

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