

## THE DISRUPTION OF HOME AND IDENTITY IN BLACK BRITISH WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

*As people of the diaspora, most Black British writers have long been troubled and fascinated by the ideas of 'home' and 'identity.' A lot of their works present a sense of not belonging anywhere and a quest for a new kind of identity not limited to national boundaries. Such issues are portrayed most clearly in Buchi Emecheta's novel, Kehinde, where the protagonist's conception of 'home' and 'identity' is disrupted between Nigerian and British and how she ends up creating a new and more fluid identity for herself.*

**Key words:** *diaspora, Black British, disruption, home, and identity.*

### 1. Introduction

Diaspora, defined as 'the displacement of people across the world under different circumstances or forms of compulsion' (Yew, 2003: 1), has led to the birth of Black British literature or 'literature written in English by Caribbean, Asian, African, and other people who originated from the ex-British Empire' (Wambu, 1998: 1). Black British literature is influential for introducing the complexity of life and cultural fragmentation experienced by the black diaspora in Britain. Often written in the form of narratives that 'move from one nation to another, from one culture to another, with no clear sense of "home" and "abroad"' (Williams, 1999: 1), Black British literature predominantly portrays how the disruption of the notion of 'homeland' results in the problematic concept of Black British cultural and national identity.

Black British writers, especially the younger generation such as Caryl Phillip, Hanif

Kureishi, Sunetra Gupta and Buchi Emecheta, seem to share a similar sense of not belonging either in Britain or the countries of their origin. As quoted in Bronwyn T. Williams's essay "A State of Perpetual Wandering: Diaspora and Black British Writers" (1999: 1), the celebrated British-Caribbean novelist, Caryl Phillips, has admitted that, She has always been quite envious of people who have talked about "going home". It would be nice to feel a sense of belonging somewhere while Sunetra Gupta underlines the impossibility of ever finding 'home' when he states, 'I think one has to be comfortable with the notion that one has one's own cultural identity and that one doesn't necessarily have to be at "home" ... I think we have to accept that we are going to be perpetually wandering.'

Williams argues that in their state of 'perpetual wandering,' Black British writers are enabled and forced 'to create identities that defy the borders of the modern construct of

the Western nation/state' (1999: 1). In their case, identities are no longer defined by national boundaries which, according to Benedict Anderson's theory in *Imagined Communities*, are created through 'one particular aspect of European culture — the printing press and its associated social, economic, and cultural practices' (Landow, n.d: 1). Anderson believes the printing technology has spread a sense of nationhood, which is core to one's identity. Yet, contemporary Black British writers apparently no longer associate identities with nationalism but with 'new, more fluid, transnational and transcultural forces' (Williams, 1999: 1). Or, in Stuart Hall's words, 'Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference' (Hall, n.d: 2).

Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* is a novel which strongly reflects on the notion of not belonging and on the formation of the new 'nation-less' identity. A semi-autobiography, *Kehinde* tells the story of a Nigerian migrant woman in London who is forced to go back to Nigeria to save her marriage. Having stayed in London for eighteen years, she finds herself unable to re-adapt to the culture, customs, and life in Nigeria. After facing a great deal of conflicts, she is eventually forced to question her identity and where she actually belongs. This article will focus on the change of the protagonist's conception of home and identity.

## **2. The Disruption of Home(land) and Identity**

In his essay, 'Home(s) Abroad: Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces', Sura P. Rath (2000: 1) quotes Gayatri Spivak's definition of home for people on the margins as 'that which we cannot want .... It stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community.' The notion of home generally has a strong link with the political nation-state where one originates be-

cause nationality serves as the starting point for 'the domicile family condition of belonging' (Rath, 2000: 1). This should explain the reason why people of the diaspora often feel compelled to preserve their original cultures, the imagination of homeland and the sense of tradition in the new place. It is none other than their attempt to secure 'the nostalgia for an "irrecoverable" original history/tradition' (Yew, 2003: 1), or in a simpler term, to have a home and to belong.

Kehinde, the protagonist of Emecheta's novel, regards Nigeria as her home. Even though she moves to London when she is sixteen and has remained there for the next eighteen years, having a good family life and a good career, she still clings strongly to her Nigerian identity and to the idea that 'I never intended to settle here [in London] permanently' (Emecheta, 1994: 35). Her ideal is to come back to Nigeria as 'a rich, been-to madam' (Emecheta, 1994: 47), someone that her people will respect and look up to because she has been abroad and now comes back bearing the trace of success.

Her effort to preserve Nigerian tradition while living in London is reflected in the many different aspects of her life. The meal that she allows for dinner in her home, for example, is limited to 'ground rice and egusi soup' (Emecheta, 1994: 2). It is only after her children complain about the monotony of the traditional Nigerian meal that she sometimes half-heartedly serves baked beans on toast, the typical British food, which in her opinion is 'an awful meal' (Emecheta, 1994: 2). Kehinde's reluctance to embrace the British taste is symbolic of drawing clear boundaries between what's home and foreign. By not letting foreignness intrude her home, let alone her body, she is making an attempt to keep her notion of home and identity intact.

The way Kehinde uses language also reflects on how she tries to keep her identity as a Nigerian. Although she could speak perfect

English if she wants to, she opts for Nigerian Pidgin while she is among other Nigerians. Talking with her friend, Moriammo, who wishes that her husband would be transferred home to Nigeria, for instance, Kehinde says, 'Him be good man, though. They fit transfer him to home branch, you know Moriammo. Dem says our Naira almost be the same as pound. The value just dey rise every day.' (Emecheta, 1994: 9).

As 'a new language which develops in situations where speakers of different languages need to communicate but don't share a common language' (Bennet, et. al, 1999: 3), Pidgin is often branded as the carrier of a specific local culture. Contradictory to common belief that Pidgin is merely an inferior form of standard English, Lori Bennet, et. al argue that Pidgin is a different language in itself with 'fully grammatical systems which their speakers can use for effective communication on any topic and in any situation' (1999: 5). They further assert that 'one of the reasons Pidgin has endured for more than a century is because it is a language of identity and history' (Bennet, et. al, 1999: 9). Thus, the use of Pidgin for people of the diaspora, like Kehinde, signifies a conscious effort to preserve link with their ancestral home.

Moreover, even though she regards herself as a Catholic, 'evidently conversion had not been able to eradicate her parents' long-held traditional beliefs' (Emecheta, 1990: 5). She still believes strongly in spirits, reincarnation, and the Igbo Supreme being known as *chi* or *chi-ukwu*. Her decision to leave London in order to reunite with her husband and children in Lagos, for example, is made only after she feels that the spirit of *Taiwo* or her dead twin sister 'articulates her vaguely-acknowledged fears' about Albert's unfaithfulness: 'Why don't you go to Nigeria and find out what is happening, before it's too late? Have you forgotten that in Nigeria it's considered manly for men to be unfaithful? Even if he didn't

want women they would come to him.' (Emecheta, 1994: 46). Another instance is the abortion of her baby which she comes to regret not so much because 'the Catholic Church has always condemned abortion as a grave evil' (Brom, 2004: 1) but more because of her dream during the abortion which reveals that 'the child I just flushed away was my father's *chi*, visiting me again. But I refused to allow him to stay in my body.' (Emecheta, 1994: 32).

Concerning the 'henotheistic system of belief' in Nigerian religious traditions, Jude C. Aguwa argues in his essay 'Christianity and Nigerian Indigenous Culture' that 'the values of [African] society are rooted in religion which in the traditional society provides the spiritual framework on which issues about the universe and its reality are analyzed. Such a worldview enables religion to permeate other sectors of life, including activities and attitudes' (Aguwa, n.d: 16). Since this religion is central to both Nigerian life and identity, it is almost impossible to eradicate and exchange it with a new set of belief. Kehinde's identification with her traditional religion is most obvious in the case when she tries to suppress the voice of *Taiwo*'s. 'To dispel the voice, she would burst into a hymn, "Sweet sacrament of peace", singing it loudly, over and over again. But when she stopped, the voice would be there.' (Emecheta, 1994: 46).

In the attempt to preserve her identity, Kehinde also tries to play her part as a good Nigerian wife to her husband, Albert. Even though she earns more money for the family than her storekeeper husband and "it was because of her position in the bank that they had been able to get a mortgage," she is aware that 'a good wife was not supposed to remind her husband of such things' (Emecheta, 1994: 4). She dutifully refers to their house as 'your house' because after all, 'in Nigeria, the home belonged to the man' (Emecheta, 1994: 4) and while hosting Albert's farewell party at home, 'she changed clothes ten times, as rich men's

wives did in Nigeria, to advertise their wealth and boost the ego of the man of the house' (Emecheta, 1994: 37).

In spite of living in the country saturated with the spirit of feminism 'where a woman is Queen and where it's beginning to look as if we're soon going to have a woman Prime Minister' (Emecheta, 1994: 35), Kehinde apparently insists on preserving her traditional value concerning gender differences. As most women in Nigeria, she takes her greatest pride from the fact that she has a husband. Therefore, not only does she willingly submit herself to Albert as their traditional Igbo culture requires, but also shows contempt towards other black women who violate the cultural expectation. She refers to Mary Elikwu, who decides to leave her husband because he keeps beating her, as 'a fallen woman who had no sense of decorum' (Emecheta, 1994: 38). She can hardly believe that there are Igbo women who prefer freedom and independence to maintaining her marital status:

'What is the matter with this woman?' Kehinde wondered. 'Not wanting to be called "Mrs", when every Nigerian woman is dying for the title. Even professors or doctors or heads of companies still call themselves "Professor (Mrs)" or "Dr (Mrs)". This woman must be crazy. Is she bigger than all of them then? I don't understand her' (Emecheta, 1994: 39).

She clings to her traditional gender concept even though she should have known better after Albert forces her to have an abortion, leaves her alone in London and betrays her by marrying a younger second wife in Nigeria. Her decisiveness not to compromise what she believes is surprising yet understandable since her ideal has always been for Albert and herself to "return eventually and build their own house in Ibusa, their home village" (Emecheta, 1994:

41). Despite her present geographical situation, Kehinde never ceases to feel and behave and think about Nigeria.

It is interesting to notice, however, that she does at times admit her fear that '[m]y dreams about home are confused. I haven't a clear vision what I'm supposed to be looking for there' (Emecheta, 1994: 22) and when the family finally decides to move back to Nigeria, Kehinde thinks "[i]t looked as if she was the only one in the family satisfied with their stay in England" (Emecheta, 1994: 41). In spite of her rigid resistance towards the English culture, she could not prevent associating herself with her new 'home'.

Nevertheless, she believes that such association will no longer disturb her once she steps back on her 'real home' again. Much to her surprise, this does not happen. When she returns to Nigeria, two years after Albert and the children already settle down in Lagos, she finds that what she always regards as her home does not feel like home at all. In spite of the conviction of her kinsfolk upon seeing her that 'Ah London suited you, but here will suit you even better' (Emecheta, 1994: 73), Kehinde feels that she has come to a foreign unwelcoming place.

That first night [in Lagos] reminded her of her first visit to Ibusa, long, long ago, when she was a child. She felt as lost now as she had felt then. Even the way people talked had changed, showing a whole range of jokes and expressions which meant nothing whatever to her (1994: 74-75).

She is also shocked to find out that during her two-year absence Albert has remarried a younger woman, which is not unusual according to Nigerian common practice but which Kehinde finds impossible to accept. The thriving patriarchal culture in Nigeria forces Kehinde to refer to Albert as "our husband"

due to fact that now she has to share him with his new wife. She is also forbidden to call Albert by his name.

‘Little Mother, Ifi, call Albert for me. Where is he?’ Kehinde besought her sister. Ifeyinwa opened her eyes in horror. ‘Sh ... sh ... sh, not so loud! Don’t call your husband by his name here-o. We hear you do it over there in the land of white people. There, people don’t have respect for anybody. People call each other by the name their parents gave them, however big the person. We don’t do it here-o. Please Kehinde, don’t-o’ (Emecheta, 1994: 70).

Finding all these practices degrading, she then appeals to a culture she has previously considered foreign as her justification: ‘We had a church wedding, or have you forgotten? All those promises, don’t they mean anything to you?’ (Emecheta, 1994: 86). However, the only response she receives as the answer to all her dissatisfactions is a mere ‘You must realize this is Nigeria. Things are different here.’ (Emecheta, 1994: 85).

Shocked as she is, Kehinde begins to question who she really is and where her home is. She is a Nigerian by birth and she knows exactly the culture of the country she always regards as her home, ‘this was not new to her so why was she finding it so difficult to accept? She felt she was being cheated, undervalued.’ (Emecheta, 1994: 89).

Her dilemmatic conflict concerning the place where she belongs is most clear when she contemplates autumn in England in the middle of the hot Lagos marketplace. ‘... Suddenly, the heat made her remember that this was October, autumn in England. The wind would be blowing, leaves browning and falling. In a few weeks, the cherry tree in her back garden would be naked of leaves, its dark branches twisted like old bones.... Autumn in

England’ (Emecheta, 1994: 96).

Her reflection of England is strikingly similar to what a native English might feel towards his homeland when he is far away from home. The English poet, Rudyard Kipling, for example, writes a more or less similar expression of feeling in his poem entitled ‘In Springtime’ when he is living in India and contemplating springtime in England:

I am sick of endless sunshine, sick of blossom-burdened bough  
Give me back the leafless woodlands  
where the wind of Springtime range –  
Give me back one day in England, for  
it’s spring in England now!

The ‘homesick’ feeling that Kehinde experiences when she should be in fact feeling at home shows that she has been a product of the dispossessed diaspora, a stateless being who simply cannot belong because ‘[t]here is no “homeland” these children of the diaspora can recover, only other lands where their identities as Other will be constructed by the dominant cultures’ (Williams, 1999: 1).

Her eyes misted. She thought of Christmas shopping, which always used to annoy her, and longed for a brisk walk to Harrods, or Marks and Spencers, or Selfridges, just looking and buying little. She even felt nostalgia for the wet stinking body-smell of the underground. She took hold of herself. Surely it was foolish to pine for a country where she would always be made to feel unwelcome. But then her homecoming had been nothing like the way she had dreamed of it.... The Africa of her dreams had been one of parties and endless celebrations, in which she, too, would enjoy the status and respect of a been-to. Instead, she found herself once more relegated to the margins (Emecheta, 1994: 96-97).



Gregory Schneider refers to the critical moment that marks the shaping of Kehinde's consciousness of her diasporic nature as an experience of cross-cultural displacement, 'a realization that she is neither Briton nor Nigerian. Her mind's eye is comforting is seeing both places, but the realities of both are met with an aggravated sensibility.' (2005: 2). Such an experience eventually encourages Kehinde to make her own choice of where she wants to locate herself. She decides to leave Nigeria and come back to London. 'I have to go for my own sanity,' she confesses to her daughter, Bimpe and insists that 'No, England no be my country, but I wan go back *sha*' (Emecheta, 1994: 103).

A sense of not really belonging anywhere automatically deconstructs the idea that identity is connected to a certain nation state. When Kehinde decides to leave Nigeria, she also unconsciously decides that her identity will no longer be articulated by the geography where she originates. Here she echoes what Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg refers to as 'the undoing of one particular old certainty – the notion that there is an immutable link between cultures, peoples, or identities and specific places' (1996: 1).

Concerning the issue of homeland and identity for the people of the diaphora, Schneider gives a thought-provoking statement: 'If the underlying truth of having two homelands means having no homeland at all, then does the same apply to the character trait hybridity – that two dueling identities in one body means suffering for the loss of one whole identity?' (2005: 1). I would argue that the answer is no. Dispossessed individuals may have no place they could regard as homeland but they do not end up having no identity. On the other hand, they are enabled to create their own identity which 'cannot but contain so many resonances of the movement, the imagination of their homelands, sense of tradition, the circumstances of their removal, and the reaction to

the places they currently live.' (Yew, 2003: 1). Such an eclectic type of identity always has its root in the evitable two-ness in the operation of the self, the two-ness between the original and the current which would result in the development of a hybrid nature of the individual.

In the case of Kehinde, the search for her own identity produces a totally different character out of her old self. As she cultivates her two-ness of being Nigerian and British at the same time, she becomes free to adjust to what suits her interest best from both cultures. What she previously rejects as foreign-ness because of her inclination to preserve her Nigerian nature, she now embraces as a new learning experiment to help define herself. Soon after her return to London, she forms a liaison with her Caribbean tenant and for the first time in her life, 'she could go out to eat Indian or Chinese with a man who was not her husband or even Nigerian' (Emecheta, 1994: 135). As opposed to her previous limited approach to what London offers her, Kehinde now decides to open up and absorb more than she used to allow herself to.

The simple act of going out dining with Mr. Gibson, her tenant, marks the beginning of her exploration of her new self since '... she had not explored this aspect of London life at all. She had seen many dressed-up people going to eat in the hotel dining-room where she worked, but for some reason she had thought that sort of thing was for other people. She was learning' (Emecheta, 1994: 136).

She is no longer afraid to let foreign-ness intrude her body, which is clearly symbolized by her willingness to eat Chinese and Indian food, and also by her sexual intercourse with Mr. Gibson later. Her absorption of various elements of foreign-ness, including British, Chinese, Indian, and Caribbean altogether, constructs her as a product of hybridity, which is defined by Lavie and Swedenburg as:

a construct with the hegemonic power relation built into its process of constant fragmented articulation. One minority can form alliances with another, based on experiences its heterogeneous membership partially shares, each in his or her fragmented identity, without trying to force all fragments to cohere into a seamless narrative before approaching another minority (1996: 10).

The nature of hybridity is reflected most clearly in the new values that Kehinde embraces. She still clings tightly to her *Taiwo*, which undoubtedly represents her Nigerian side. However, she takes the liberty to go to bed with Mr. Gibson because now she believes in the philosophy that 'it's not a crime to love' (Emecheta, 1994: 138). She refuses to feel guilty about the affair even when her son, Joshua, furiously points out the unconventionality of her behaviour. She even rejects her traditional role as a Nigerian wife and mother who '[is] supposed to live for [her] children' (Emecheta, 1994: 139) and claims that: 'Mothers are people too, you know.' (Emecheta, 1994: 139). As a woman, she also perceives herself in the new empowered light when she decides not to give way to the pressure of Albert and Joshua to hand over the house in London to her son. While Kehinde is fully aware that according to Nigerian culture, Joshua as the first son has all the right to overtake the house, she knows the British law would on the contrary declare her the lawful owner since she is the one paying the mortgage. Thus, she simply says to Joshua: 'This is *my* house, though it may be yours one day' (Emecheta, 1994: 137).

Her refusal to adhere to her customary Nigerian ways puzzles Joshua. "The mother he had found in England was different from the one he remembered" (Emecheta, 1994: 140) and 'it seemed to him that Kehinde was not only depriving him of his rights, but duck-

ing her responsibilities as a wife and mother' (Emecheta, 1994: 141).

What Joshua is not aware of is the fact that his mother has eventually become a new breed of the diaspora. She defines herself and her own values, she becomes a product of hybrid nature. Thus, all of her actions are symbolic of the birth of her new identity, which is fluid, transnational and transcultural. She is no longer bound by her Nigerian identity yet she realizes she will never be a genuine British either. Her notion of 'homeland' is now neither Nigeria nor Britain and as a result, she will always be 'perpetually wandering' in between. Williams comments aptly on such a condition when he states: 'To engage questions of diaspora is to focus on the instability of the signs of national identity, the disruption of the idea of the "mother country" \_ of the nation as well as the empire \_ as well as the disruption of a "homeland"' (Williams, 1999:3).

In the end, where one belongs and what identity one chooses sometimes simply become a matter of choice, as Kehinde realizes when she first arrives back in London after her disappointing home coming to Nigeria:

Inside the narrow hallway, the smell of London terrace house welcomed her like a lost child. Before she could suppress it, a voice inside her sang out, 'Home, sweet home!' *Taiwo*, who had not spoken to her since she had gone to Nigeria, was back. Kehinde rebuked the voice: 'This is not my home, Nigeria is my home.' As she said it, she knew she was deceiving herself, and *Taiwo* would not let her get away with it. 'We make our own choices as we go along,' came the voice. 'This is yours. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that' (Emecheta, 1994: 107-108).

### 3. Conclusion

The issues of homeland and identity are two major subjects often depicted in diaspora

literature. Originating from one place and culture but living in another apparently creates a problem of displacement and dispossession for the people of diaspora. For such people, the notion of homeland and identity is no longer solid and intact but becomes fluid and blurring.

As Schneider has pointed out, one of the common trait of the character of diaspora is 'his or her blending into a dualistic consciousness' (2005: 1). Despite her primary effort to preserve her Nigerian-ness, I see that actually Kehinde cannot help shifting into two-ness. She neither rejects her original culture nor completely embraces the new one but she mirrors what most people of the diaspora experience: '[developing] their own distinctive cultures which both preserve and often extend and develop their originary cultures' (Ashcroft, 2000: 70). The cross-cultural displacement she

faces in a place she previously deems as home forces her to come to the realization that she has indeed lived with the two versions of herself. In order to develop her own distinctive identity, she needs to be at one with her twoness while at the same time nurtures her hybrid nature. This echoes Hall in his statement concerning the diaspora experience as 'the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity' (Hall, n.d: 2). Such a quest for identity is nevertheless daunting in its complexity yet I thoroughly agree with what Kehinde confesses complacently in the end of the novel: 'If anything it makes me more human' (Emecheta, 1994: 141). Her experience of displacement and dispossession has eventually led her to discover the nature of her true self and her humanity.

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