

**Otherness in Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe***

Mabandine DJAGRI TEMOUKALE,

University of Kara, Togo.

[iosiasdjagri@yahoo.fr](mailto:iosiasdjagri@yahoo.fr)

**Abstract:** Otherness consists in ascribing and applying negative values to individuals who are very often from minority and less powerful groups in order to show how inferior they are as compared to dominating groups. The discourse produced in this regard by the dominating groups which consider themselves as the Self gives birth to xenophobia and hatred toward the dominated groups labelled as the Other. In the light of Postcolonial criticism, this article attempts to discuss Otherness in Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe* in order to expose mechanisms through which the Self and the Other are constructed and show inconsistencies in the discourse produced by some characters in this regard. It will also show strategies mobilised by Buchi Emecheta in her narrative to bring the Self and the Other into dialogue in order to lay bare prejudices which nourish this bipolarisation in human encounters.

**Keywords:** Otherness, postcolonial criticism, inconsistencies, culture, hybridity, cohabitation.

**Résumé :** L'altérité consiste à attribuer et à appliquer des valeurs négatives aux individus qui sont très souvent issus de groupes minoritaires et moins puissants afin de montrer combien ils sont inférieurs par rapport aux groupes dominants. Le discours produit à cet égard par les groupes dominants qui se considèrent comme le Soi donne naissance à la xénophobie et à la haine envers les groupes dominés étiquetés comme l'Autre. À la lumière de la critique postcoloniale, cet article tente de discuter de l'Autre dans *The New Tribe* de Buchi Emecheta afin d'exposer des mécanismes par lesquels le Soi et l'Autre sont construits et montrer des incohérences dans le discours produit par certains personnages à cet égard. Il mettra également en exergue les stratégies mobilisées par Buchi Emecheta dans son récit pour faire dialoguer le Soi et l'Autre afin de mettre à nu les préjugés qui alimentent cette bipolarisation dans les contacts humains.

**Mots-clés :** altérité, critique postcoloniale, incohérences, culture, hybridité, cohabitation.

**Introduction**

Nigerian female novelist Buchi Emecheta falls in the category of postcolonial writers whose art highlights the negative aspects of otherness as a narrative strategy which she uses to deconstruct racial discrimination in England and call for peaceful cohabitation as one can read it through *The New Tribe*, one of her novels. Yet, despite the salient features of her narrative flavour on Otherness, critics tend to overlook them when approaching the novel.

Since the colonial period, there has been a bipolarisation of the world structured in Self and Other, respectively Europe also called the "Center" and the rest of the Third World Nations referred to as "the Margin or Other". From cultural perspective, Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, has tried to show that "European culture gained in strength and identity by

setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said, 1973:4). Thus, African postcolonial literature of the Emecheta generation responds to the call for identity claim and the negation of Eurocentric racist charges of acculturation that was allegedly laid on Africans. As an African writer, she uses Othering among characters as a symbol to critically address the larger problem of European racism and show at the same time that the ‘Margin’ is also responsible for ethnic and tribal discrimination and xenophobia in their midst. In other words, Emecheta engages in the novel the politics of writing not only back to the Center but also to the Margin.

Otherness, in the postcolonial context, consists in ascribing negative values to the colonised (the Other) in order to establish a binary opposition (of good and bad) with the sole objective of showing how good and powerful the Self is. The Other is used to refer to people who are different from those people whose self-construction has conquered so many into their cause. Because of his blackness, Chester, the young black boy in the novel, sees himself and is seen in a white community as the Other. The Other is, therefore, “black”, “evil”, “strange”, “barbarian”, “subhuman”, “from the Orient or Africa”, and the Self is “white”, “good”, “civilised”, “superior”, “human” from England.

However, in Africa, he also sees himself as the Other among his black fellows not only because of his cultural heritage from England but also because of the fact that he does not belong to a definite ethnical group. From the novel, it can be argued that the Other is considered as an “alien”, “a foreigner”, “a stranger” who comes from abroad and probably has enough means to cater for “us”, the “natives”, “owners” of lands; and if he does not want to be open handed “we” can plan how to rob “him”. Most definitely, it is crucial to note that Otherness “is the way of defining one’s own ‘self’ or one’s own ‘identity’ in relation to others. It is mainly a result of social, political, cultural and other kinds of constructions through different approaches” (Sisay, 2011:7). Chester’s becoming the Other of Whites in a white community and also the Other of Blacks in Africa is what this article qualifies as Emecheta’s narrative strategies to address both the Center and the Margin.

The article attempts to discuss Otherness in *The New Tribe* in order to show inconsistencies in the construction and perception of the Self and the Other. The analysis will be carried out in the light of postcolonial criticism which emerged during the 1980s. It actually started during 1920s and 1930s when, “refusing to be defined, on the basis of ‘race’, by the dominant white culture, African-American and French-speaking writers from Africa and the Caribbean began to define themselves and their culture in their own terms” (Bertens, 2001:193). In a sense, postcolonial criticism has been a reaction to challenge negative representations of the colonised.

In this study, postcolonial critical approach will help expose mechanisms through which the Self and the Other are constructed. It will also show strategies mobilised by Buchi Emecheta in her narrative to bring the Self and the Other into dialogue in order to lay bare prejudices which nourish this bipolarisation in human encounters.

The article has three sections. The first shows how some characters, in their attempt to define their Self, tend to reduce the Other to the colour of the skin and places where they are said to have come from. The second one exposes prejudices which make the Other become a

threat to the Self; and the last section discusses the dialogue between the Self and the Other as a narrative used by Buchi Emecheta to promote diversity and heterogeneity in a globalised world.

### 1. The Other and Self through Colour and Place in *The New Tribe*

*The New Tribe* is a story of a black boy in England called Chester. He is adopted by a white family consisting of Reverend Arthur Arlington, his wife Ginny and Julia, their white adopted girl. Chester grows up to realise that he is the only black boy in St. Simon, an English seaside town. All that he sees, hears and observes in the town and especially at school leads him to doubt about his being Arlingtons' child. The boy then falls in an identity crisis which leads him to seek his own roots. He is disillusioned after his journey to Africa where he meets many Blacks whose attitudes toward him are far from being those of brotherhood. His sickness there and surprisingly his being robbed by the people he is told to be his 'own people' disappoint him. Esther, a black girl and friend to Chester, who lives in Liverpool, traces him up to Nigeria where she succeeds in bringing Chester back to England after telling him this: "We don't belong in Africa, we're British. Black British maybe, but this is our home now" (*TNT*<sup>1</sup>: 113).

Identity, defined simply as "the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that distinguish people from others" (Hornby, 2000:593), is seen as a fundamental cause of resistance in social encounters. The colour of the skin which can distinguish, beyond any confusion, one individual or group of individuals from another individual or group of individuals is mostly used to explain, reject or sustain discrimination and racism.

In the case of Whites and Blacks, the contact has turned into Whites' favour who have defined their Self as superior and civilised, not only in areas where they find themselves as the majority and more importantly owners of lands on which Blacks are bound to dwell as slaves but also in colonies where these Whites can be classified among minority groups. So racism which results from the negative image fabricated by the Self (Whites) about the Other (Blacks or Coloured) is, according to Franz Fanon, due to the fact that "white men consider themselves superior to black men" (Fanon, 1986:3).

Using colour to build the Self is considered by Alan Burns as colour prejudice when he wrote:

It [colour prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated (Burns, 1948:16).

Thus, from Burns' statement, it can be noticed that ways and means through which the Self and the Other are constructed in the context of Blacks and Whites' relationship are narrowed to the colour of the skin.

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to *The New Tribe* will be abbreviated as *TNT*.

The colour of the skin is the biological and genetic heritage whereby children identify themselves to their parents. Here, Chester in the novel finds himself different from his parents though having a strong sentimental attachment to them. The pigmentation which is caused by “a substance that exists naturally in people, animals and plants and gives their skin, leaves, etc. a particular colour” (Hornby, 2000:593) shows, beyond doubt, that the Arlingtons are not Chester’s biological parents. This sense of defining himself as the Other of his adopted parents is reinforced by what he hears from other Whites as well as Blacks.

In the novel, it can be noted that black colour which is used, for granted, to identify people from Africa is considered as inborn and indelible marks whereby culture and environment (geographical location) have no influence in defining a Black. In other words, Blacks are from Africa and are, therefore, Africans no matter where they find themselves on this planet Earth. Chester becomes aware of his being different because the white Self which is defined against the black Other fails to see the influence of cultural values in the construction of the Other.

Ugwu is a black character in the novel who accepts his being the Other of Whites (Self) in England. However, in his attempts to find refuge in his African Self and comfort Chester (the confused Other), Ugwu tells Chester: “You are an *African*. As long as you’re a *black man*, you’re an African” (TNT: 97) [my italics]. Here, Ugwu’s definition of “Africanness” is colour and setting based to mean that all black people around the world are Africans as all Africans are Blacks. This shows that the Self-Other relationship changes according to power relations in that the Self can be seen by the Other in certain circumstances as the Other whereby the latter claims the Self’s identity.

In Ugwu’s statement, it can be noticed a sense of establishing a sentimental attachment to a geographical location called Africa where those who identify themselves to it do no longer define themselves as the Other but the Self. From Ugwu’s mouth, Chester comes to realise that the colour of his skin does not belong to England but Africa. The ‘Margin’, in its attempt to resist the dominating ‘Center’, produces a counter-discourse which defines it, not as a victim Other but a conquering Self.

In the beginning of Chester’s adoption procedures, it is noted that one of the social workers tells Arthur and Ginny: “Chester’s mother is Nigerian. You need to be aware he is a black child” (TNT: 7). In other words, this woman says that as long as Chester’s mother is from Nigeria and that Nigeria is part of Africa, there is no need saying that the boy is a Black. The colour of skin is therefore determined by the geographical location, as both Ugwu (a black man) and this white woman want to make people believe. As a white woman, she has taken the widespread white Self constructed in binary opposition to black Other as the norm. This construction has established that the black race is primitive and has originated from Africa and its presence in other communities in other parts of the world is an incident. Chester is then seen as a “stranger”, or “foreigner” or an “alien” who cannot enjoy full rights as a white English citizen should because of his black colour and also his black ancestors’ origin which is traced back to Africa.

Doris, another white woman, reports to Ginny, Chester’s adopted mother, that Chester has met some black people and insinuates that the latter are the boy’s people. However, though White, living in the same white society with its representations, Arthur, Ginny’s

husband, is able to ask Ginny from whom he gets the information: “You mean Chester met a black family, and our Doris jumped to the conclusion that they were his people?” (*TNT*: 47) In other words, Arthur refuses to jump to the conclusion that every black people is Chester’s. He then wisely asks his wife: “Ginny, there are so many black people in the world. Are they all Chester’s people?” (*TNT*: 47). This rhetorical question put by a white character questions white racists’ representation of Blacks. Buchi Emecheta has used this incident to voice, through Arthur, the need to reconsider how both Blacks and Whites construct their identities. Thus, Emecheta does not only write back to the ‘Center’ (the Self) but also to the ‘Margin’ (the Other).

To show that places cannot be used to define the Self or construct the Other, Emecheta makes Chester to refuse to also easily jump to the conclusion that he is an African at first when Ugwu calls him an African. The following exchange shows this:

‘You call me an African?’

‘Yes, you are a Nigerian!’

‘Mr Ugwu, how do you know I’m a Nigerian?’

‘Is that your problem? You are one of us, that’s all’ (*TNT*: 80)

Ugwu maintains that Chester is an African and specifically a Nigerian though the latter does not have any sense of belonging. Ugwu is unable to justify his referring to Chester as African or Nigerian if not by saying that “As long as you’re a black man, you’re an African” (*TNT*: 97). By rendering Ugwu incapable to explain and convince Chester, the writer exposes the limits of her character (Ugwu) in order to show how the ‘margin’, in its self-affirmation, can build a Self which excludes Whites living in Africa since no White can claim, from Ugwu’s point of view, to be an African though the latter would have been born and grown up in Africa. The writer, therefore, denounces and rectifies these stereotypes whereby Black is connected to Africa (East/Orient) and White to Europe (West/Occident) as Chester is told: “Africa’s in the East. Where *your people* came from” (*TNT*: 12) [my italics].

Emecheta continues to show how the ‘Margin’ contributes to its otherness through Chester and Ugwu’s relationship. Chester is surprised at the fact that Ugwu raises his voice over his children and the latter asks: “‘Your father never raised his voice to you?’ Chester shook his head. ‘Maybe because he’s a white man. My father in Nigeria used to cane and sometimes belt on us’” (*TNT*: 79). Ugwu, in this statement, does say Chester’s father is an English man but a white man. It means he does not think that the behaviour of Chester’s adopted father can come from the dictates of his living environments (England) and cultural values put in place for child upbringing. He quickly concludes that ‘not shouting over’ Chester is connected to the colour of the latter’s father’s skin. For Ugwu, a Black British who was born in Britain without any contact with Africa would ‘shout over’ his children because, for him, this seemingly violent, negative and bad attitude goes hand in hand with Blackness. And this, to paraphrase Amin Maalouf, is exactly because of these habits of thought and expression so embedded in us, because of this narrow, exclusive, bigot, simplistic conception of things that reduces the entire identity of a person to a single belonging (Maalouf, 1998 :11). By this, Maalouf shows that to belong to a black or white race or a place like Africa or England is not enough to define the Self or construct the Other.



## 2. The Other as a Threat to the Self in *The New Tribe*

History has recorded many instances where the Other is viewed as an intruder that can cause trouble in the community. In the words of Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi, “the *Other* by definition lacks identity, propriety, purity, literality. In this sense he can be described as the *foreign*: the one who does not belong to a group, does not speak a given language, does not have the same customs; he is the unfamiliar, uncanny, unauthorized, inappropriate, and the improper” (Al-Saidi, 2014:95). Chester defines himself as the Other because he notices through subtle gestures from Whites that he is a foreigner. It is said of him that “he was the only black boy in the community. Nothing was ever said, but he was made aware of his difference by subtle gestures which made him feel that much was expected of him” (*TNT*: 20). Subtle gestures from the white Self denote their fear to integrate the black Other.

It is underscored about Chester that “at the age of four or five, he felt a sense of unbelonging” (*TNT*: 9); and this can be explained by the fact that he becomes aware he is coloured. This feeling of being different is reinforced by what Chester hears as he reports to his adopted parents: “At school they say I can’t be your child because I’m black” (*TNT*: 13). In other words, the representations of the white society helps Chester conclude that he can’t be Arlingtons’ child because he is not white like Julia when he tells her: “you’re white, like them. You’re their child, but I’m different” (*TNT*: 13). Chester then represents himself as Black, different from the rest of his white fellows including the people he has considered as his parents since his childhood. This makes him become an intruder who causes disharmony and stains the white homogeneity.

The Self’s fear of the Other leads them to unspeakable paranoia and stigmatisation. When a young black school boy in America was asked to tell when he knew he was a nigger, he stated: “I can remember when I was real small how children in the downtown department stores would be drawn away from me by their mothers and told that I was a black African cannibal, and that was evil” (Fabre, 1967: 231). White women draw away their children from an innocent black boy because the image or representation they have of the former is a distorted one. They are told that black Africans are cannibals as opposed to the civilised white Westerners. Though none of those white women has ever seen a Black in America eating human flesh, they are still fearful.

Chester, in *The New Tribe*, refuses to play the role as kings of Orient because of what he hears from others. He tells Ginny, his adopted mother: “Mother, I don’t want to be a king any longer. The others call me king of the devils” (*TNT*: 22). Since nothing good is expected to come from “devils”, it is quite obvious that whoever is associated with them shares evil traits thereof. Thus, when it is said that the church money is missing, Chester, though innocent, tells his friend: “but I’m black. That’s enough to make me suspect” (*TNT*: 105). White racists are not taught that people ought to “see themselves as human beings ultimately bound to all other human beings by ties of common sensibilities, needs, aims, and concerns, and think of humanity in broader terms that transcend their narrow, local sympathies and concerns” (Gyekye, 2013: 136). Except Reverend Arthur Arlington who is openly critical about Otherness in the novel, other white characters continue to hold the negative values assign to Blacks as true.

When it comes to job matters, the Other is still considered not trustworthy even if he has the required qualification. Some Blacks in United Kingdom think they are discriminated against as Ugwu tells Chester: “[as] An African in the UK, you’ll end up sweeping the streets with those qualifications!” (*TNT*: 80). Ugwu observes again: “As I said, it’s hard for black people to succeed here, but we can still help each other” (*TNT*: 84). Ugwu, as the voice of the ‘Margin’, lacks consistency in his discourse. He knows that Esther is a black girl who has a job with her qualifications. He also knows that she has a car. So helping each other as a race or community is motivated by the desire to construct a Self in order to redefine roles in the community. The writer uses him, here, to expose prejudices that Blacks can have toward Whites since Ugwu fails to mention a concrete example of a Black sweeping the streets with his qualification.

The Other is also seen as a threat when colour, background, gender, race, and religion are mostly used as criteria to validate the fact that some group of people (the Self) are superior to others in every sense of the word. These injunctions are brought in to justify and sustain, racism, tribalism, religious fanaticism and patriarchal domination against women’s emancipation. These complexes are blinders on the eyes of those who, at a given time of history, found themselves in positions of power and believed that they deserved more respect and consideration than the rest. Their fear to lose privileges and their sense of worth nourish their hatred toward the Other as Promise Ogochukwu underscored: “The evil that sets a man against another starts first of all with giving him a false sense of his worth” (Promise, 2009: 127). For the white Self to remain “good” and “civilised”, the black Other must be “evil” and “savage”. For one tribe to be more important it needs another to be less important. So any means including Otherness can be used to keep the status quo.

In the light of all that has been said on the Other with relation to the Self, it is obvious that the former is not always seen as a full human being endowed with the same capacity as the Self; and prejudices and distorted images which demonise and lionise them cause them to be seen as a threat where the Self dominates.

### 3. Dialogue between the Self and the Other

Chester is advised to accept, claim and identify himself with the culture in which he lives in order to avoid more pains from the search of ancestral roots or connections which can be illusory. Esther admonishes Chester in this respect: “You don’t seem ready to accept reality, Chester. We don’t belong in Africa, we’re British. Black British maybe, but this is our home now [...] Look how black people have changed the face of British culture. Don’t you want to be part of that?” (*TNT*: 113). Chester’s journey to Africa and his disillusionment as to taking all Blacks as his own people shows the responsibility of the Margin in redefining their identity. Chester fails to construct a Self with his black African fellows who become the Other for him in the sense that he does not identify himself to many cultural values in Africa.

By the colour of his skin, Chester, in Africa, is easily categorised as African but the narrator notes: “Culturally, he had to admit, he was more English than anything. But here in West Africa, he became part of the background. In the bars and markets he visited, people took it for granted he was African” (*TNT*: 115). Thanks to Esther, Chester becomes aware that it is possible for Blacks to live and integrate the white British society without seeking for their

Others through either colour of the skin or geographical location and finally realises that Liverpool is his home. Colley writes, in this respect: “We have come to understand with more precision than before that Great Britain is a composite structure forged, as France and Spain were forged, out of different culture and kingdoms” (Colley, 1992:312). Esther is a successful self-accepted Black and this has helped her affirm and be happy about her identity. She says she is a “Black British” and is as happy as a “White British” since she has a job, a house and a car.

Learning the values of the Other who is not ‘Me’ helps the learner to be freed from fear and to discover the riches these values embody as Ugwu commands Chester: “Come into the kitchen and learn how to make chicken stew with tomato puree – the first step to being an African in England” (*TNT*: 84). This statement is revealed to be true when it is, later on, discovered that “Chester had come to love the peppery Nigerian stew, and had learned to make fufu with ground rice and to eat it with his hands like the others” (*TNT*: 88). This corroborates the culture-conditioning process mentioned earlier.

Discovering the Other and their cultural values leads to a change in social discourses. By going to England and staying there, Ugwu discovers: “White people think it’s a mark of friendship to address you by your first name, even when they’re younger than you. We don’t like it. It is bad manners. You address people older than you formally, however close you are” (*TNT*: 82-83). This statement shows that values used to judge and stigmatise others are culture-based in that what is considered as good manners in some communities can happen to stand for bad ones in others. However, the inconsistency in Ugwu’s assertion is the use of “White people” instead of “British people”. For him, Black British are not concerned as if the above mentioned values are genetically transmitted or colour-based.

In the final analysis, it is crucial to seek to understand the Other as Chester would ask: “What would you like me to call, Mr Ugwu?” (*TNT*: 83) Then the latter wholeheartedly answers saying: “Well, call me Uncle. Uncle Enoch. In my country that’s how a young person addresses someone older but familiar. I like Uncle” (*TNT*: 83). This dialogue between Chester and Mr Ugwu allows both to come to understand and accept the basic principle which helps to have peaceful coexistence and cohabitation. It means dialogue of cultures not only removes veils of fears and ignorance but also stops Otherness.

### **Conclusion**

This article has shown that Otherness through colour of the skin is a phenomenon which is as old as human encounters. It has noted that, in *The New Tribe*, the Self who is white and is in the position of power tends to define the Other who is black as subaltern. It has revealed that inconsistencies in the discourse of some characters like Ugwu and Doris are strategies mobilised by Emecheta to show that Otherness through the colour and place is based on prejudices due to the lack of dialogue between the Self and the Other.

The article has also demonstrated that wherever the Self-Other relationship is established, the Self would develop strategies and means to get rid of the Other in order to avoid heterogeneity. It has held that both the Self (Whites) and the Other (Blacks) are victims of Othering and that the way to self-acceptance which leads to the acceptance of others whosoever resides in the dialogue between the Self and the Other. It has noted that Emecheta



is not in the politics of writing only back to the Center as some black African novelists do but also denounces Othering carried out by the Margin through ethnic, tribal and other social discriminations.

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