

Emecheta, Buchi. *Kehinde*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994. 140 pp.

With the publication of *Kehinde*, Buchi Emecheta further entrenches her position as one of Africa's premier creative artists. *Kehinde* expertly weaves together the diverse elements and problems faced by a Nigerian woman about to return "home" to Nigeria after spending half of her life in London. Reluctant to leave London, Kehinde Okolo finds her life in Lagos even more precarious than she had imagined. Her husband Albert quickly rediscovers the patriarchal privilege of Igbo life denied him in London, takes two more wives and fathers several more children. Unable to reconcile the reality of her life and relationship with Albert in Lagos and her desire for recognition of her subjective identity, Kehinde takes what appears to her Nigerian friends and family to be a radical departure by returning to London to pursue an education and a life independent of her husband and children. *Kehinde* traces the development of its protagonist's construction of a subjective self which simultaneously recognizes its female and African identities. As in her earlier works, Emecheta forges an African feminism which carefully denaturalizes Igbo gender relations, exposes the contradictions of romanticized mother, wife and womanhood, and suggests a progressive model for African gender relations.

Early in the novel, Emecheta's narrator details the first of Kehinde's multiple estrangements from romanticized, idealized Igbo life. During childbirth Kehinde's older twin sister, Taiwo, and mother die. Considered ill-luck, Kehinde is sent to live with her aunt in Lagos, where twins are thought to bring fortune. Her aunt Nnebogo has no family of her own and raises Kehinde alone. Not until she is eleven does Kehinde learn of and return to her extended family in Sokoto. Almost immediately, however, she is estranged again and sent off to a Catholic boarding school. After completing her studies she leaves Nigeria for London to marry Albert. Kehinde's early life then is marked by a rupture from a "normal" Ibusa family life. Though her life in London appears more common to those of her fellow Nigerian exiles, she nonetheless continues to transgress expected boundaries. First, she supports her family economically, earning considerably more than her husband. Second, in an effort to make their return to Nigeria easier, Kehinde and Albert decide to abort their third pregnancy and Kehinde subsequently decides to have her tubes tied. And, third, Kehinde stays behind alone in London for nearly two years to sell their house and to give Albert time to find a job and a residence in Lagos. Yet, a third category of estrangement comes in Lagos, where Kehinde finds her husband married with a new son and a second on the way. In Lagos, she struggles to remember, and sometimes to ignore, traditional gender relations. Though Nigerian, she finds herself largely alienated from the

country's patriarchal daily life. Kehinde's series of estrangements from the constructed Igbo ideal functions to identify and emphasize the contradictory position of women within that ideal and simultaneously forges a space within which Kehinde, in later chapters, will be able to produce an African feminist identity.

Florence Stratton points to the tendency in critical writing about Emecheta to dichotomize "traditional" African culture and feminism, and furthermore to read into her work "parables of western civilization and African barbarism" (1994, 110). As in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Slave Girl*, Kehinde's male protagonist finds himself easily lured by the privileges of Igbo patriarchy and consequently easily forgets the alternative, more egalitarian life he and Kehinde formed in London. Kehinde does not experience the extreme physical and economic hardships faced by her literary sisters in Emecheta's earlier works, yet she nonetheless experiences the same emotional turmoil and near-humiliation. Kehinde's actions--seeking out western education and economic independence, rejecting polygyny -- should not be considered a wholesale dismissal of Igbo culture in favor of a western-modeled feminism, as the critics in Stratton's analysis are wont to suggest. Emecheta herself has at times distanced herself from western feminist movements, yet as her literature suggests, she does not maintain the same distance from feminism and certainly not from situational African feminisms. Kehinde's return to London does not suggest a necessary move away from the continent for the maintenance of independent female subjectivity, instead, the move must be read as one alternative among many and, for Kehinde, the most convenient.

Kehinde's Igbo and African identities infuse the narrative. Born the second of a set of twins, as mentioned earlier, she occupies a precarious position within her culture. The novel is partly structured around an internal dialogue and relationship Kehinde carries out with her *chi*--the spirit of her twin sister, Taiwo. Through this relationship Kehinde remains firmly grounded in a uniquely Igbo world no matter how far she strays geographically. Other forms of Kehinde's African identity find expression through her knowledge and criticism of the mechanics of economic neocolonialism and through her repeated self-identification as a Nigerian, an African and an Igbo. It is important to note that the novel's London is very much a postcolonial space inhabited by Pakistanis, Arabs, Indians, West Indians, Chinese and Africans, all sharing similar exilic cultures. Emecheta's narrative works ultimately toward creating a space in which Kehinde is mostly free of her culture's patriarchal baggage while sustaining a strong African identity.

As the novel ends, Kehinde has put herself through college, supports herself on a small salary from cleaning hotel rooms and secures a part-time job as a social worker. Before coming to terms with herself she must assert her sovereignty and voice against the sexually

harassing demands of a wealthy Arabic hotel patron and again with her patriarchally demanding son. Thus asserting her self-defined subjectivity, Kehinde comes to terms with her *chi*, ending the novel with the words, "Now we are one." The unity found at the end of the novel acknowledges the relationship between cultural minutiae and socio-political history and, ultimately, it acknowledges the contradictions and possibilities of living successfully as a woman and an African.

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