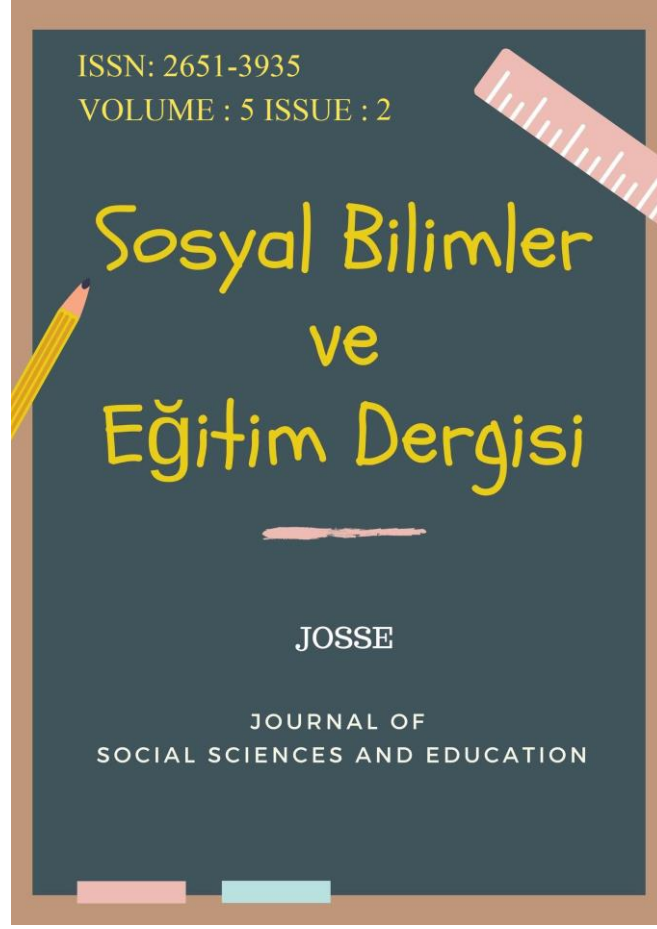


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Reluctant Igbo: The matter of cultural identity in Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde

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Kehinde

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Abstract

Culture and identity issues occupy a great deal of place in postcolonial studies. Contemporary scholars have been highly debating the intersection of cultures belonging to divergent groups and the identity crises of individuals within those groups. Accordingly, new insights based on understanding the invisible aspects of these relations are gained to literature. In this study, Nigerian feminist writer Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994) is analysed through the lenses of culture and identity since the protagonist Kehinde is forced to prefer either her native African culture, called Igbo or her acquired European culture. Such pressure causes Kehinde to strive for two different identities: a Nigerian woman adhering to local traditions and a European woman favouring freedom, though she is inclined to the latter. The paper has been approached by theorist Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial notions since he holds culture and identity issues complementarily with particular terms which are hybridity and third space.

Keywords: Kehinde, identity, hybridity, third space, Homi Bhabha

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Introduction

In her work *Kehinde*, Emecheta explores the complications of making choices while being motivated by two different cultures. Postcolonial academics refer to this circumstance as cultural conflict. People's differing perspectives and perceptions of specific issues may generate difficulties in the shared community, which constitutes the basis of cultural conflict. Homi Bhabha proposes a solution to this state of conflict in his *The Location of Culture* (2004) by offering a term called "cultural hybridity", which allows for the survival and integration of diverse ideas within a multicultural environment. According to Bhabha:

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement and domination ... For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory (1994, p. 112).

Based on Bhabha's claim, hybridity refers to the notion that individuals' identities are a synthesis of various cultures which come into touch. When two different cultures or countries come into contact with one another, they exchange not just ideas but also language, culture, religion, and other commodities. This process of sharing compels both of them to adjust and develop new skills; and because of this, it is impossible for either side to have a pure or untouched culture. For Bhabha, this way of acculturation is necessary to establish a place that integrates several cultures for the good of people in order to avoid the problem one would confront while dealing with a mixed setting. Thus, instead of evaluating a person's or a particular group's worth by dividing them into parts based on their race or culture, hybridity makes the newly created identity more cohesive by uniting their disparate parts. At this point, it is remarkable to also add Bhabha's theory of "third space", which polishes the individuality gained through cultural borders that in a similar principle set in hybridity. With his own words, Bhabha calls this notion "the binary thought and essentialist identities produced by colonial knowledge" (as cited in Bhandari, 2022, p. 171). Once the hybridity is achieved, third space emerges as a formative stage by which the colonised party creates their exclusive aspects. Rutherford by establishing a link between hybridity and third space epitomises the issue as "For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space', which enables other positions to emerge" (1990, p.211). Back to Bhabha's approach, hybridity—as well as third

space—stands for a crucible in which various pure aspects are melted away, and a new item is benefited through the process.

On the other hand, living in a hybrid culture does not always mean having a hybrid identity. In other words, individuals experiencing a setting consisting of blended cultures may head for either their domestic background or target environment after a certain amount of time. In Mohsin Hamid's novel —*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), for instance, Changez, the hero, prefers to move back to his home country, Pakistan, after having spent more than four years in America. In Emecheta's *Kehinde*, even though the heroine and her husband Albert seem to have settled their dual cultural identities in London, the way of their conversion after eighteen years from the exact origin to opposite cultural poles reveals the two-fold output of cultural hybridity. Albert, brought up with a Eurocentric outlook, unfolds his suppressed identity by returning to Nigeria. In contrast, *Kehinde*, who attempts to preserve her homeborn qualities as much as possible, ends up in her in-between situation in the accultured surrounding by deciding to stay in London.

In this regard, the present paper handles the process during which the two characters—Kehinde and Albert—finalise their identities and how this process can be associated with Bhabha's postcolonial ideas. The basis under such associating between the selected work and Bhabha's premise stems from the suitability of Emecheta's identity-based plot belonging a colonised folklore and Bhabha's expertise on the matter. In another way, while Kehinde is being examined by a series of identity-reasoned occurrences, Bhabha's proposal of hybridity is questioned whether it is fully solid to cover culture and identity concerns in the mentioned contexts. Considering these points, the study presents a concrete analysis of Bhabha's postcolonial views on a specific work that contributes to the evaluation of African literature and culture as well (Gündüz, 2014, p.66).

The Journey of Identities: From Target to Native and From Native to Target

With her Igbo identity, the author of *Kehinde*, Emecheta, is one of the writers in England who came from another country. Her book is about an Igbo woman whose mother and twin sister died when she was born. As expressed in the book, in Igbo culture, "Kehinde" means "second-born of the twins" (p. 18). Thus, the name creates a feeling of dualism and signals Kehinde's cultural transformation into a British setting. In other words, her biological twin constitutes the Nigerian side, while Kehinde, unlike her essence, forms the assimilated twin. In the storyline, Kehinde is reported to be taken to the Yoruba community by her aunt Nnebogo since twins are considered evil in Igbo customs. This way, Kehinde's existence is

secured by this transfer and this new community's conviction in the Christian religion that embraces twins. To talk more openly about Kehinde's survival in the Yoruba community, her transfer and the fact that she is still alive show that acculturation also happens between cultural minorities, as well as at the international level. Kehinde's preservation is shown to depend on her new society's willingness to accept positive cultural exchange based on the good values of Christianity and Yoruba customs. If not, mishaps or unfortunate incidents would still be linked to Kehinde in the Igbo community at that time. In such a manner, based on cultural and social matters, the novel shows how positive integration at the level of religious beliefs helps innocent people in Nigeria stay alive. After years, Kehinde moves to England to live and start a family with her spouse, Albert. Albert's receiving a letter from her family telling him to return to Nigeria triggers the problems in their marriage and gives way to a cultural resolution. Symbolically, this letter is a bridge to the space where both characters feel good and secure. In order to sell their property, Albert leaves Kehinde in London and goes to his home country to prepare a setting for his family. However, failing to find a buyer for the home, Kehinde chooses to move in with her husband and children in Nigeria. On the first day, she is baffled to discover that after only a year, Albert has already started a second family with another Nigerian lady who is pregnant with a son. Kehinde struggles to manage a polygamous lifestyle, but in the end, she has concluded that her husband is emotionally distant from her. She returns to London, and during her time there, she re-establishes her position as a woman, wife, and mother, which results in Kehinde's liberating herself from the conventional life that is often patriarchal in Nigeria.

Kehinde and Albert are depicted at the beginning to be adapted in London by melting their two-dimensional personalities in the same pot, which is a case of hybridity uttered by Bhabha. Even though they cannot be classified as entirely either Londoner or Nigerian, this blended lifestyle provides the opportunity by which they make themselves accorded and accepted into the society they live in. According to Yousfi, such a way of integration makes it easier for both parties—the coloniser and the colonised—to accept each other and increase their compatibility, while its effects are more observable on the colonised ones (2013, p. 398). Living in such a tolerant society, the family enjoys the modernity of the culture, especially Albert. While he does not show any objection to his wife's earning more than him, he also offers a solution to the unexpected pregnancy of Kehinde with an abortion, which would not even be suggested if they resided in Nigeria. Kehinde's reluctant acceptance of this abortion offer demonstrates that she is indeed committed to the Igbo culture that resists abortion, and

in the same way, it shows how Albert embraces his second culture for the sake of his interests. To Albert, this abrupt pregnancy is an obstacle in the way of his return to Nigeria since he finds himself in an ambivalent situation due to the multicultural society. While Kehinde insists on staying in England, Albert has already set his mind on returning:

But I want to go back to the way of my life my father had, a life of comparative ease for men, where men were men and women were women, and one was respected as somebody. Here, I am nobody, just a storekeeper. I'm fed up with just listening to my wife and indulging her. The only alternative is go to the pub, but going to stand among all those drunken whites is no solution. No, to be at home is better (p. 35).

Albert seems to have a sense of being estranged from the western way of life and being uprooted from his position in a community to which he does not feel he belongs. Despite this, he acts as if he were "Londoner," by pretending to behave in a western manner. Due to this alienating idea, Albert believes he can only feel strong in Nigeria, where he is seen as a patriarch who is superior to the other local people there, owing to his Londoner image. Accordingly, Kehinde appears to have a place in the western world thanks to hybridity, while Albert's relative instability pushes him to the edge of the in-between position, from which he later leaves by going to Nigeria.

Kehinde's conflict with her identity—indeed her in-between case—becomes visible after she starts living alone in London to sell their property. Both psychologically and socially, Kehinde experiences pressure and restlessness of loneliness: "It seemed that without Albert, she was a half-person. Unable to cope with the nagging silence, she plunged into depression . . ." (p. 59). Besides, her friend Mariommo's husband insults her for leading a single life since it is considered to be a shame in Nigerian culture. On the one hand, Kehinde desires to maintain her life in England as a black and free woman with her self-reliance; on the other hand, she would like to perpetuate the unity of her family by returning to her homeland and obeying the traditions imposed on her. Finding herself at the intersection point of her native culture and western habit, she unwillingly decides to move back to her husband and children in Lagos, Nigeria, with the influence of her inner voice. As the couple is in search of a convenient home concept for themselves, this quest as shown above is formed according to their emotional states and surrounding circumstances, which is described by Bhabha as follows:

What is being iterated or articulated around the concept of home are certain needs, certain interests, certain passions and affects, which actually then create that life-world, that existential comfort that you associate with home. [...] There are very distinct forms of narrativity, choices, judgments, which evaluate certain locations, which create a home around certain location. [...] There is a continual transvaluation, or a changing. That depends very much on decisions you make. (as cited in Akçeşme, 2021, p. 18; Bhabha, 2017).

In this regard, Kehinde's mental state and the patriarchal order in her native culture, which also spreads into her neighbourhood, push her to act in a way she does not wish to establish her conception of home.

Even though Nigeria frames the home notion for both characters, it means different connotations for Kehinde and Albert. Figuratively, Nigeria becomes heaven for Albert while it represents hell for Kehinde. Umeh highlights the first reason for this discrepancy: “According to Emecheta, Igbo society embodies the principle of male dominance and female subordination. Emecheta’s women, for the most part, are sacrificed at the altar of a male-oriented society, and men exploit the sex/gender system to maintain male-dominance” (1996, p. xxiv). To Umeh, women are considered to be in a subaltern position against men in that particular African culture, which locates the female gender as devoted wives or mothers, just like addressed in the Victorian Period of Britain as “The Angel in the House”, meaning an ideal domestic woman. Thus, being in her homeland while saving Kehinde from being exploited by the Whites, cannot save her from being oppressed under male hegemony. Correspondingly, sex discrimination is presented in Albert's second marriage, alias polygamy. To Kehinde's surprise, he gets married to a well-educated—holding a PhD degree—a woman called Rike to meet the expectations of his society. Kehinde always used to—till coming to Nigeria—deem that she and her husband have sound ties in their marriage. Besides, European culture had influentially been positive in changing the dark mentality of her husband coming from his childhood. However, as observed, Albert prefers the privileges of his native culture over the sophistication of his accultured habits. Baloyi lightens the case of males' multiple marriages within the African context as follows: “In almost all African societies, polygamy is an acceptable and valid form of marriage – in fact, monogamy has been associated with people of lower social status” (2013, p. 164). Based on Baloyi’s explanation, it would be wrong of Albert if he did not marry for the second time. Furthermore, to display how intense the influence of male dominance is, Emecheta presents a striking utterance from Ifeyinwa, an

essential female character in the novel, upon Kehinde's calling her husband in a personalised way: "That's one of the things you must learn. Stop calling him 'my' husband. You must learn to say 'our'. He is Rike's husband too, you know" (p. 71). From Kehinde's side, the concept of family in her home country cannot go beyond a crowd of people living under one roof. In another way, men show up as the masters acting with the sense of entitlement to choose their female partners, whereas women are held equivalent to an object that is picked up depending on their beauty. To have an inference, such cultural approaches shape not only the community's values but also have a widespread impact on a larger scale; to put it differently, the more sophisticated culture means the more intellectual country or even continent for this case. In one of the reports of UNESCO, the matter of sophistication depended on culture is handled: "One of the most fundamental issues to Africa's modernisation efforts concerns the indigenous cultural factor, more precisely the interplay between traditional sociocultural values and practices and modern development imperatives" (1997, p. 99). In this context, societies accommodating humiliating values or customs that do not please each member should be given up to take grounded steps for future generations. To sum up the Nigerian context for Kehinde and Albert, it clears off Albert's hybrid identity since he entirely devotes himself to his native tradition. On the other side, Nigeria creates a tremendous ambivalence for Kehinde as she is accustomed to living with Western practices. Indeed, her hybrid identity due to her living in London leaves Kehinde in a dilemma. She has difficulty accepting the norms of her home culture that she once used to live with.

Due to the cultural conflict, she experienced in Nigeria, Kehinde feels sure about returning to London. Emecheta depicts her arrival in London with an ecofeminist approach:

Outside, though it was cold, the sun was shining, and she felt a surge of elation. She got out of the taxi in front of the house in Leyton, and was surprised that nothing had changed in the twelve months she had been away. She did not know what changes she had been expecting but it looked as if things had stood still. Only a few hours before, still in Nigeria, she had thought the whole world was collapsing. Now she noticed that the trees the council had planted along the street were just beginning to bud. In a few days, they would burst into bloom, and it would be spring (p. 107).

Kehinde takes a step from a world of inequalities and injustices to a world where humane values are prioritised. Her time in Nigeria is implied as a period of turmoil, a kind of dark habitant, in which she is exploited as a female. Yet, London welcomes her with stability and

serenity as well as with its flowers preparing to blossom for spring. In a way, a female character's revival through shifting from one culture holding outdated customs to a Western one is symbolised by nature's blooming. Thus, by regarding Kehinde and nature equally valuable, Emecheta signals that the value given to both is vital for the future of humankind. Other than this, Kehinde's landing as shown in the quote, indicates that she has been welcomed into her diaspora, her true home now. Her sense of identity shifts from being Nigerian to English. This change of scenery for her future in England augurs new and optimistic prospects. Eventually, Kehinde's coming back to England fills her with joy, peace, and a sense of cleanliness, as demonstrated by nature. In this sense, Kehinde's in-between case ends, and she takes a step into a new extent named as "the third space" by Bhabha. To him, the third space refers to a liminal zone wherein cultural identities are reshaped and take their final forms (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 57-58). With a further explanation, Byrne states that: "[Third space] is not simply one thing or the other, nor both at the same time, but a kind of negotiation between both positions" (2009, p. 42). In this respect, Kehinde's ambivalent manner between her local and Western cultures is reconstructed upon her arrival in England, and she finalises her identity crisis by embracing the target Western culture. At the end of the novel, when her son Joshua declares his right to the ownership of the house in London, Kehinde claims her own authority on the property with an insurgent stance: "Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human" (p. 141). Obviously, Kehinde's transformation from a patriarchal background to a modern framework seems to be completed, which positions her into Bhabha's third space. However, Kehinde's pursuit of independence and refusing a lifestyle based on polygyny should not be viewed as her overall denial of her native culture in favour of a modern one. In her third space, she adopts Western manners but does not entirely give up or omit her Igbo culture.

Result and Discussion

Emecheta's *Kehinde* is broadly about a Nigerian marriage that is in transition and struggling because of their in-between situation in a diverse community. They cannot revert to their traditional beliefs or embrace the host culture's modern standards, and because of that, they vacillate between two spheres. Albert solves his problem by returning to Nigeria to restore his manhood image; Kehinde, on the other hand, feels that she has a much more tolerable patriarchal in England to which she can stand. It is observed that their different

perspectives and behaviours cause tension in their marriage. The situation is also summarised by Sings as follows:

Buchi Emecheta deals extensively with the issues of home and belonging in her works. Most of her characters are incessantly in search of a stable home; they fluctuate between the different locations, seminally the “original” home and the “diasporic” home; though finally they find their “desired” or pertinent location of home, whether it is their native place or it is the place of settlement. They nurture dreams of home, perpetuate a quest for it, become enmeshed in its labyrinthine trajectories and finally reach their destination through several ordeals of self-definition and an inherent urge to be anchored in some home-location (2018, p. 382).

Prominently, Buchi Emecheta, as an active voice of females in her cultural setting, reflects the women’s accepted problems in her country. Indeed, her works are not so distant from her experiences in her own life. In this connection, she can be regarded as a live recorder of cases she has experienced. Her novel *Kehinde* represents a strong female character’s dilemmas. On the one hand, she is a British citizen trying to live as much as dependent on her roots, but on the other hand, she becomes the victim of the trap that those roots bring. Till the end of the storyline, she is neither British nor Nigerian, but a floating character just shuttling between those two and struggling to create her own space. However, what changes Kehinde is her realising the facts of life. The identity she once much aggrandised is indeed a black mask closing women’s eyes and othering them.

The incidents in the novel are clarified through Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial views. In the beginning, though having spent long years in London, Albert shows an in-between situation, while Kehinde's case can be explained by hybridity; Albert is keen on returning to Nigeria due to the multicultural setting, and Kehinde prefers staying in London. In Nigeria, Albert succeeds in locating himself in his third space, in which he finishes his ambivalence. However, Nigeria becomes a place of dilemma, an in-between situation, for Kehinde since she has a well-adjusted personality in the context of England. Finally, she finds her solution by returning to London, which represents Kehinde's third space. From an outer view, Bhabha’s theory regarding the postcolonial exercise is figured out how truly it conceptualises the identity matters of the coloniser and the Orient. Though it has a fictional narrative, Kehinde proves what Bhabha puts forward. A similar disposition may be noticed in Muhsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, from which this study generates its title. As in

Kehinde, the hero in Hamid's work, blended with the mixture of two different cultures, struggles to establish his own particular identity, which also supports and covers Bhabha's notions.

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