

## **FOSTER CHILDREN'S IDENTITY ISSUE IN THE CONTEXT OF IMMIGRATION: A CASE STUDY OF *THE NEW TRIBE* BY BUCHI EMECHETA**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses a protagonist's life whose membership inside his family seems to call in question his genuine identity for he is a foster child. This one is stigmatised because of his skin colour and hardly achieves to blossom within society. The goal is to depict the identity crisis experienced by him, how that identity crisis impacted his familial and social integration, and finally how immigration imposed itself to this afro-English boy as solution to clear away all doubts about his personality. With Postcolonial criticism, a deep analysis of foster children's identity issue in the context of immigration is achieved through the concepts of Adopt, Adapt, and Adept to examine hybridity and cultural polyvalency of the protagonist. Immigration provided a mixed outcome and led to realize the acceptance of the protagonist current identity

**Keywords :** Children, Discrimination, Europe, Identity, Immigration.

### **Résumé :**

Cet article analyse la vie d'un protagoniste dont l'appartenance à sa famille semble remettre en question sa véritable identité car il est un enfant adoptif. Celui-ci est stigmatisé à cause de sa couleur de peau et parvient difficilement à s'épanouir au sein de la société. Le but est de décrire la crise d'identité qu'il a vécue, comment cette crise d'identité a impacté son intégration familiale et sociale, et enfin comment l'immigration s'est imposée à ce garçon afro-anglais comme solution pour dissiper tous les doutes sur sa personnalité. Avec le postcolonialisme, une analyse approfondie de la question de l'identité des enfants placés dans le contexte de l'immigration a été réalisée à travers les concepts d'adoption, d'adaptation et d'adepte pour examiner l'hybridité et la polyvalence culturelle du protagoniste. L'immigration a donné un résultat mitigé et a conduit à l'acceptation de l'identité actuelle du protagoniste.

**Mots clés :** Enfants, Europe, Discrimination, Identité, Immigration.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Shao *et al.*, “Identity is a production process with multiple levels and changes with surrounding factors, such as environment and time” (2017, p.25). It emerges during childhood as children start to comprehend their self-concept, and it remains a consistent aspect throughout different stages of life. Having a sense of identity lends itself to a sense of belonging in society. When that identity seems compromised, it leads to damages hardly bearable for victims. Thus, the issues of identity crisis and quest for authentic identity for foster children have been a major subject of concern for Buchi Emecheta. In *The New Tribe*, the calling into question of a black adopted child identity almost upsets a familial and social balance for the benefit of an ambiguous adventure. Jasbir Jain’s premise, “Home is where your feet are”, (2003, p.39)’ was not a tangible truth for him and the lack of attention of his family increased and made worse his doubts. In such context, how can foster children grasp their identity in a host country? Is immigration in their ancestral land a probable clue to define themselves? This analysis thus leans on the postcolonial theory, to thoroughly explore the concepts of adopt, adapt, and adept so as to accurately understand the issue of crisis involving foster children.

This paper is considered around three main parts. Firstly, it will contribute to determine the author’s view of foster children’s experience of the identity crisis. Secondly, it will go beyond the complexity of identity and focus on its impacts on the black individual. Finally, it will provide a description of immigration as the ultimate resort to shape his requested identity.

### 1) BUTCHI EMECHETA’S INSIGHT FOR FOSTER CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCE OF THE IDENTITY CRISIS

Identity is a social construct and it is largely determined by the relationship between the Self and the Other. Sam posits that it is through their identity people recognize themselves as members of various ethnic groups or nation as well as social classes which provide them with a sense of social belongingness, (2013, p. 3). So, one defines himself according to others. The relationship with others is of key importance when one’s really values his interlocutor personality. Through one’s identity it becomes easy to be integrated to the society and have a particular status. Depending on your ethnic, race or social class, a connotation is bestowed to you and can have certain influence on people judgement on you, wrongly or not. The concept of identity provides people with a sense of belongingness, connectedness and society. Therefore, everyone is bound to his people and in need of attention within his interpersonal relationships. When there is a trouble of that non written law and somebody is relegated to secondary position,

it sets up a crisis due to his identity depreciation. Chester hung the expenses of that consideration while he was at school as that can be seen. Emecheta therefore writes, “you little devil, you started the uproar, and now look at you, laughing away with your sister!” The teacher smiled but Julia’s face clouded. She piped up, ‘Chester’s not the devil! He’s my brother!” (2000, P.11).

By admitting Chester, a devil, the teacher belittles him and subjects him to less than a human being. Such qualifications remind Chester that he is very different from other children and above all is a bad one who came to disturb their well and harmonious institution. He does not have his seat in such a place right now, he should be at home to receive a particular bringing up before being incorporated with his current classmates. School is a prestigious institution which deserves human beings and not devils, it means subhuman people like Chester.

Those words offended and reminded him that his black skin colour provides him a bottom place in his current society. School turns to be the institution which depreciates Chester by diabolizing him before his classmates whereas equity values need to be taught in that educational institution.

Besides school, such differentiation is also a reality in the neighbourhood. The neighbours classified Chester with a true belonging to another family owing to his skin colour. An adopted child cannot have the same status like a born child in no way. A visual look of Chester does not deceive their opinion about him for his blackness convicts him. The neighbours expressed the deep thought of their mind which was probably the common consideration about Chester everywhere he used to go.

‘My Ray said he met some of his own people who were on holiday there.’

‘Yes? Ginny asked, arching her brow.

‘Didn’t he tell you?’

‘What do you mean, his people?’ Ginny asked. ‘We are his people as far as I know.

I don’t know what you’re talking about, Doris. (Emecheta, *Idem*, p. 45)

Chester is not accepted by the neighbourhood like a legitimate son of the Arlington family. They consider him like a passenger who has his origin somewhere else. He does not share the same blood like them. His skin colour leads the neighbours to admit him with black people whose worth is to comply with muscular chlores. So is the living environment conception of Chester, they view him a step member of the Arlington family although he has been living with this family since childhood. He is from somewhere else (Africa) as he looks like people from that area. If school and neighbourhood seem unanimous about Chester supposed identity, another fact confirms their opinion. It is Chester own foster mother slip of tongue. Ginny

stuttered to answer a relevant question of Chester and at last she confirmed his doubts as follows:

what is the East? He pursued. Ginny was silent for a moment, then she said, Africa is the East. Where your people came from.'

In bed that night, he thought about her words. 'your people.' He thought the Arlingtons were his people. The sense of unbelonging strengthened. (Emecheta, *Op.Cit*, p.12)

Ginny accidentally confesses that Chester is not a genuine British child. He has been accepted through compassion with them. In fact, he is from another area. Despite his wonderful play, he has to know he is a black among white people. This is recognized within the British society (headmaster, teacher and the neighbourhood) and also inside his own family (Ginny). In short, Chester has to remind that he has two families, one in West and another in the "East". That confusion is at the basis of the identity crisis Chester is experiencing when we refer ourselves to Mercer's definition; "Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (1995, p.1000).

Emecheta pictures this aspect through Chester who thought to be fixed inside the Arlington family and entirely belonged to them. But he is caught up by a social reality which raises legal doubts and questions as we can perceive in the following dialogue. 'Dad, who's my real mother? (...) I just want to know who my parents are, said Chester' (2000, p.13).

Chester is aware that he is a foster child. His origin should be from somewhere else. He is very confused and in quest of truth about his personality. He faces a heavy reality more and more difficult to bear and at last claims identity since he is not recognized as such in his current family. Julia, the white sister of Chester wonders a lot of question. Her white skin colour does not settle the probable fears about her true identity. she also faces Chester realities and interrogations. Therefore, this conversation from the novel under consideration imposes itself to try to clarify her mind:

Julia, we don't actually know who your parents are. Not for want of trying, believe me. Your mother left you in a phone booth, inside a Tesco shopping bag. You were only a few hours old, and a boy called Julian found you on his paper round and brought you here. We fostered you and applied for adoption. (Emecheta, *Idem*, p.15)

Ginny reveals in supplication to Julia that she is an adopted child and the circumstances of her rescue. She is a last time miraculous recovery and owns her life to the Arlingtons' good will. In short, her blood parents exist, but they rejected her. So, she was born twice; first in her unknown family and secondly in Arlington family with all respect and consideration. If the Arlingtons

had not been there, she would not have had a so bright future. They constructed her human identity and integrated her in the society. They did a lot for her although they are not her blood parents. With a so great sacrifice, it appears troubling for her to be indebted for a particular single family. She is spoilt between both and can only have a grateful attitude for all of them. This identity crisis generates a mistrust fence within Arlington formerly joyful family. That is the reason why Ginny makes efforts to keep family united. Unfortunately, her efforts seem not to give the expected results as the author stipulates in the following extract:

the most important thing to us you're our children, and we love you both very much. (...) that evening, as the children were going up to bed, Ginny opened her arms wide to both of them. Julia walked into her embrace, but Chester hung back. Ginny spoke over Julia's head. (Emecheta, *Op.Cit* , p.15)

Despite all explanation and affection given to both, Chester is still reticent about his belonging to Arlington family. He feels a stranger while Julia adapts herself within the Arlington 's family. Chester continues to question himself. A lot of question taps his mind and disturbs his mental and emotional balance. The children have been affected a new identity for a stable social integration by erasing their past. But, the correlation between both identities on the one hand, and their impact on Chester and Julia's interactions with their environment and people on the other hand, constitute an axis to be explored in the following section.

## 2) LINK BETWEEN IDENTITY CRISIS AND COLORISM OR RACISM ISSUES IN ST SIMON

The identity crisis brought about a lot of misunderstandings and changes in the daily life of both children. The most impacted child was Chester due to discrimination he faced at home and in society. Most of his issues were associated with his compromised identity which favoured his relegation. Thus, Chester was almost obliged to make more effort to distinguish himself within his family. It was as he did not have the same advantages of a blood son. He had to strive to deserve his legal rights and natural affection, he should become someone he couldn't be to get the consent of his parents. Emecheta therefore writes:

nothing was ever said, but he was aware of his difference by subtle gestures which made him feel that much was expected of him. He had to try that much harder to be accepted, to show what was worth, and at times he was so overwhelmed by this that he would escape into his 'city' and stay there for hours on end. (*Idem*, p.20)

Chester felt obliged to overwork to be approved into the local religious community where he was born. His skin colour caused a big difference between the whole community and him. His special position (son of the vicar) hardly changed Christians' perception on him. He was discriminated in his own house where there was supposed to be love and equality among them

as religion teaches to human being. In fact, Hunter says that “colorism is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts. Colorism is concerned with actual skin tone, as opposed to racial or ethnic identity” (2007, p.237).” Discrimination especially occurs when individuals or groups are unfairly treated in a way which is worse than other people are treated, on the basis of their actual or perceived membership in certain groups or social categories. Facing such discrimination regularly led him to a mind evasion to get peace and life desire. Unfortunately, discrimination reflected itself in the relation between Chester and his sister Julia through the appearance of detachment in their confidence share. Moreover, this is corroborated in this sequence of the corpus as follows:

Once more he felt relegated to the margins. Ray and Julia had shared something he had wanted for himself, but knew to be impossible. Even when the opportunity had been there, a sense of obligation held them back. They were brother and sister, and accepted that restraint. (Emecheta, 2000, p.57)

Chester seemed to be betrayed by his sister Julia to whom he shared all his secrets and in return she did not do likewise. He confided her all his intimacy (dreams about his origin) for he trusted her. He considered to be part of her, that is why he behaved in this way, above all they are siblings. But the way he heard about Julia’s pregnancy proved that she had not trusted him equally, and convinced him to be an extra in the Arlington family. A gap of discrimination appeared among foster children and was noticeable in the school approach provided by their parents as follows:

Chester was silent. There had been no pressure on him to work hard at school either. He had done his tests simply because he was at school. That extra parental enthusiasm Mr Ugwu showed towards his children during the summer holidays had just happened to show more interest in her studies than he did. It was when they started talking about her going to university that he had known what he might have missed. (Emecheta, *Idem*, p.80)

Chester was not shown the importance of school. He was neglected by the non-involvement of his parents to point him out excellence. He did not perceive the pressure which could have encouraged him to really consider school. He attended school as it was an obligation for his parents to send him there. The familial enthusiasm noticed by Ugwu and his family convinced Chester that Julia was well care than him at home. She received more attention than him. She was convinced to go forward and achieve excellence at school. she had to study and probably be at the top. The parents took some specific measures for her so that their investments within her provide better results. Chester could only rely on the grace of God and his performances to raise to an upper position.

Besides family framework, Chester still experienced an unpleasant distinction in society. People focussed more on his skin colour than his British identity. He realized his skin colour was brought out in their interpersonal relations. They belittled and disowned his belonging to the Arlingtons because of an acknowledged racism.

At root, racism is, according to Wilson, “an ideology of racial domination” (1999, p. 14) in which the presumed biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or prescribe the inferior treatment or social position(s) of other racial groups. Through the process of racialization, perceived patterns of physical … difference … such as skin color or eye shape … are used to differentiate groups of people, thereby constituting them as “races”; racialization becomes racism when it involves the hierarchical and socially consequential valuation of racial groups. Chester underwent that racial depreciation at school. The author throws light on this by saying that “At school they say I can’t be your child because I’m black.” (...) ‘It’s OK Julia,’ he said, ‘you’re white, like them. You’re their child, but I’m different’ (2000, p.13).

Chester hardly adapts himself in the academic field. He is victim of stigmatisation due to this skin colour. He is perceived very differently of other students. They do not focus on his intellectual capacities but on his visible difference when compared to them. He cannot stand it anymore since his sister is white and from a different skin colour. Therefore, people are convinced that he is a stranger in his proper family. They easily guess his origin which is qualified an inferior and lower class. In their mind, they associate his skin colour to negation and even devil. Thus, Chester only relies on him everywhere he is. That is why, facing the theft of money at home, he hardly imagined people to defend him and preferred to run away as it is evidenced in this passage from the novel:

Despite there never having been any attempt to find him, Chester had never been able to dispel the feeling of having fallen under suspicion. He had carried a weight almost as heavy as actual guilt, and all the heavier for being kept secret. (...) But you’re innocent! You have nothing to be ashamed of. Yes, but I’m black. That’s enough to make me suspect. (Emecheta, *Idem*, p.105)

Chester is suspected of a theft in the house of his foster parents. He believes people to consider him as the potential culprit of a theft of that amount of money. without any investigation, the black Chester lost the community affection. Unfortunately, he did not have the support of his family to act as lawyer for his case, they seem to only care about his white sister Julia. He felt isolated and abandoned to his fate in this suffering the whole family was undergoing. Alone, he could not face the accusing look of so many people. The oppressive atmosphere inside home and community slurred Chester instead of someone else. He was

obviously the one to be condemned and the poor black Chester did not have any choice that to escape.

Identity crisis reached a culminant peak inside the Arlington's family and society because of errors of appreciations, considerations and judgements. A form of categorisation of human beings expressed in words and acts. Those data made trouble to Chester through an obvious discrimination and racism.

### 3) EMECHETA'S PERCEPTION OF MIGRATION AS A QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND SELF-FULFILMENT

Quest for Identity becomes legal when ambiguity sets up in one's mind. After having developed an internal urge to assimilate oneself with a local identity and you realize identity reveals itself a fake for you and step by step you admit identity "needs to be defined, established, maintained, constructed or reconstructed, and can be lost, searched for, questioned, reinvented or reaffirmed" Ilic and Lopicic, (2010, p. ix). it is not a fixed status which remains as such after procurement, its appreciation may evolve according to circumstances. So, Identity once established may change and it can be remade a new identity. In the passage below, the author highlights Chester's painful experience by writing:

Sometime after the revelation about his mother, Chester started to have a recurring dream. (...) Chester started identifying this compound as his very own. He didn't doubt its existence, but felt sure it was somewhere waiting for him to come and claim it. He did not however trust himself to tell anyone about it. Sometimes, during quiet afternoons, when he unguardedly drifted into his 'city', a smile would appear on his face, like the smile of an old person remembering childhood. (Emecheta, 2000, pp.16/17)

Ginny 's words disrupted Chester's tranquillity and brought into existence a hidden truth. Therefore, in an imaginary journey (dream), Chester found out his original area and the habits of this people. He was very happy to be revealed his origin and habitants. The simple idea of such a place existence provided him an inestimable joy. Chester had an unsatisfied internal need despite the good care he received in his foster family. In his mind, he is connected to another place and his "identity is not necessarily tied to a unique home" Ralph and Lynn, (2011, p.521)". Beyond Arlington, he has an identity that he should strive to find out. He would start a journey in the quest of that probable unknown identity.

Defined by Perruchoud, R. & Redpath-Cross, J. as "the movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants and persons moving

for other purposes, including family reunification" (2011, pp. 62–63), migration imposed on Chester as the ultimate resort to encounter truth for it is the result of people seeking a meaning to life and this might result in migrating to new geographical locations. Such decision was followed by act as we can notice:

you'll have to go home for a visit yourself one day; Ugwu remarked tentatively. Chester nodded.

I will uncle, but I have somethings to do first. I want to get more GCSE'S and train as a leisure attendant manager. And I want to visit Africa. Don't forget I'm a Nigerian. (Emecheta, 2000, P.99)

Indeed, Chester did a local migration inside Great Britain. He learnt to be a man of Africa. He accustomated to its new true life. He identified like a true Nigerian man. He completely sheared of the personality provided to him by his foster family, and he really feels himself an African man. Now, he is about to pass a new step in leaving Europe for Africa for he considers himself a Nigerian product. That journey would allow him to get physical contact with his African roots, a contact with a total black environment for the first time. Such a meeting with the earth of his ancestors has a special character and required a particular planning. That is why Chester started to get use to the Nigerian environment when living within Ugwu family in Great Britain as it can be perceptible in this excerpt:

In general, Chester felt comfortable. He had a room on the ground floor, and they all shared in the cooking. 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. It was very different from the kind of food he had been brought up on. Occasionally, for a change, he would eat at the college cafeteria. (Emecheta, *Idem*, p.88)

Chester easily adapted to his new British environment. He enjoyed African gastronomy with its delicious dishes. His capacity to absorb those dishes without difficulties proved his African identities. In a short time, he set apart his St Simon conveniences food he was brought up with to suit a less comfortable house because he felt himself at home there. He set up at Ugwu's, not only for food, but also for the warmhearted family atmosphere which procured him an invaluable happiness as it is certified in the quotation bellow:

Mr Ugwu, despite his strength, was a lonely man. He loved to talk and joke, and he laughed readily, even at his own jokes. Chester felt he had travelled from one extreme to the other. Arthur Arlington had not much of a sense of humour, and hardly ever made a joke. As for laughing, maybe in his next reincarnation. He rarely made eye contact and physical affection was reserved for special occasions. Enoch Ugwu, on the other hand, sought out your face constantly, as if trying to read your thoughts. (Emecheta, *Idem*, p. 84)

The African conviviality was not a reality at Arlington home. There was a certain distance between Chester and his foster family. There was hardly a complicity between them due to parents' rigidity. Chester discovered a new lifestyle that was unimaginable some time ago. Here,

parents were very close to their children. They could even share secrets and jokes. Chester encountered that dream world with Ugwu. He realised the world he idealized exists in an entire black family's members. His will was to experience such connection in his 'birth family'. Thus, there would not have been a vacuum in his inner sensitivity so that he decided to leave his foster family house and the stay to Ugwu's was a motivation for him to go forward in his adventure. Chester migrated outside Great Britain borders to find out his origin and blood family as we check it in the following quotation.

Karimu explained that Chester was a visitor from far away, who wished an audience with the Oba. He told him he had come from the country of the great Queen Elisabeth, to greet the king of Benin. (...)

This man is my brother from overseas. He has been called by the ancestors to come home, and he thinks Benin is his home. (Emecheta, *Op.Cit*, p. 126)

After an internal migration (from St Simon to Liverpool), there is now an external migration. Chester is in Africa on his ancestor land to have a physical contact with them and better know about his origin. He is in quest of his true black parents. Chester braved all sort of dangers (security, sanitary, ...) and a so long distance to be confronted the truth. He is certain Africa is his home and hopes to clarify his identity issue, and here can be the findings of his migratory quest. Through this journey, Chester achieved to draw a particular conclusion about himself as the following lines can justify it:

Chester, meanwhile, set back and relaxed. He had noticed since his illness and recovery that something, had changed inside him. He no longer felt isolated and adrift, his head had cleared. (...) yes, he would go back to Liverpool, and get on with his life. (Emecheta, *Idem*, p. 148)

The identity quest is a setback which ends with a great disillusion. Chester comes to the conclusion to accept himself as such for he did not get the expected outcomes of his investigation. Therefore, he has to comply with his birth and living environment life. It is this environment which is recognized for himself. He is a black among white people, an exception in that throng. His identity remains questionable and continues to arouse suspicion that migration did not totally solve. Perhaps, he would continue to migrate in his dreams and his mind to one day be able to deal with his bloody family.

## CONCLUSION

The real identity of Chester is still to be determined and the probable answers depend on the appreciation of the interlocutors. Therefore, some can admit that he is British whereas others will be at ease to say he is African. In other words, the unanimity about the answer will be difficult to achieve. It turns out that the identity crisis is a topical issue for foster children,

especially when they are from a different skin colour. Their skin colour difference with the other members of their foster family is very apparent and easily leads people to be doubtful about those children displayed identity.

Identity should be a matter of easy and social insertion so that no one be stigmatized and indexed every time and everywhere because of an identity negation. The pending world which is being built will be a success if people achieve to down those barriers and integrate everyone to be a world citizen without any categorization. If so, migration will no longer be the quest of a solution against a questionable identity, but an adventure to discover new places and people to deepen one's worldly knowledge.

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