

Home and Belonging in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*

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The concept of 'home and belonging' lies on the cusp of Diaspora studies. It would not be an exaggeration to posit that there can be no diaspora without a 'home'. Cohen states that ". . . a diaspora meant 'dispersion' and if people were dispersed, some point of origin – more concretely a homeland – was necessarily implied" (2). Home is ". . . a compelling notion both for those who study diaspora and for those who live it" (Stock 25). In the exemplary works of Saffron, Clifford, Cohen, Brah, Hall, Gilroy and other critics the issue of 'home' figures prominently, though some shifts have entered with the advent of new movements like cosmopolitanism, transnationalism and globalization. S. Sayyid asserts that diaspora is an anti-nation, but there is an inseparable relation between the two. He observes:

. . . Unlike the nation with its homogeneity and boundedness, diaspora suggests heterogeneity and porousness. Nations define 'home', whereas diaspora is a condition of homelessness; in the nation the territory and people are fused, whereas in a diaspora the two are disarticulated. The diaspora is not the other of the nation simply because it is constructed from the antithetical elements of a nation . . . it interrupts the closure of nation. The existence of a diaspora prevents the closure of the nation, since a diaspora is by definition located within another nation. (41-42)

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.

Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta's novel *Kehinde* (1994) begins with a confrontational discussion about 'return to Nigeria' between Kehinde and her husband, Albert. Both of them belong to the "phenomenon of soft emigration" (Wieviorka 73). A letter from his sisters in Nigeria arouses Albert's desire for "return to home" (Emecheta1). They mention that Nigeria is going through an oil boom and people

can enjoy the lavish materialism produced by it. Albert is fascinated by his sisters' description of neocolonial Nigeria developing through western materialism. He argues with Kehinde: "Nigeria needs us. The government says so. Even the Europeans are leaving their countries and rushing to Nigeria. My sisters are thinking of our own good . . ." (Emecheta 3). But Kehinde does not concur to Albert's materialistic plan of making a fortune in Nigeria as she is aware of the neocolonial and hegemonic propensity of Europeans. She postulates: "Everybody knows they [Europeans] always rush to any place that has cooked yam ready for them to eat" (Emecheta 3). Emecheta aims to aver that Nigeria is a men's land/home. And because of the patriarchal structure of society in Nigeria Kehinde does not want to go back there. She has made a 'home' of her diaspora location and she does not intend to leave this comfortable space which she has secured in Britain. "In Nigeria, the home belonged to the man, even if the woman spent her entire life keeping it in order" (Emecheta 4). Safran observes in this context:

Some diasporas persist – and their members do not go "home" – because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which the can identify politically, ideologically or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora. In the meantime, the myth of return serves to solidify ethnic consciousness and solidarity . . . when the family is threatened with disintegration. (91)

The location of 'home' for Albert is different from that of Kehinde. He holds essentialist notions about home, ethnicity, and nationality. It is contrary to Kehinde's syncretic views. This disparity of ideas creates a wide lacuna in their relationship. "Albert . . . regarded Kehinde as if she were an alien being, rather than the woman he'd lived with for fifteen years". Albert feels nostalgic for his homeland and wants to relish the material prosperity in Nigeria. He is ambitious to establish his own identity as a business tycoon in the neocolonial country. Albert does not feel London to be his home, as somewhere in the depth of his heart he perpetuates a strong affinity with his original roots and ethnicity. He argues that ". . . [his] people never lived in London . . .", so he plans to make his 'home' in Lagos. But the incident which thwarts

his “going home plans” (Emecheta 5, 7, 4) is Kehinde’s immediate pregnancy.

Kehinde strongly believes in the African family system. She does not consider her friend, Moriammo’s suggestion to let Albert go to Nigeria and live as a single wife in London only. She does not imagine a ‘home’ without her family and the African women living without her husbands are despicable and aberrant in her view. She does not like Mrs. Elikwu as a single parent with six children. In Kehinde’s traditional view it is so humiliating and unfruitful for an African woman to live without her husband. But she does not want to lose her independence as a woman which she enjoys in England. Her Nigerian ‘home’ is dominated by orthodox patriarchy, so it does not suit Kehinde’s interests and ambitions. She holds ambivalent views about her ‘return to Nigeria’. She argues with Albert: “When we get to Nigeria . . . if I am really going with you, I am going to enjoy myself. . . . And I may not even go with you. My dreams about home are confused. I haven’t a clear vision what I’m supposed to be looking for there”. She is in an ‘in-between’ position. Muoneke argues that “. . . Kehinde’s problem is different and is best summarized in a simple question: Where is home?”. While being at hospital for abortion Kehinde expresses her surficial feelings to Leah, a young white girl. Kehinde tells her that she is going back to Nigeria. And that is the reason of her decision about abortion. Albert’s ardent desire for return to Nigeria renders him insensitive to Kehinde, who feels emotionally shattered after her experience of the child abortion. She takes such a tough decision for the sake of Albert’s dream, but Albert’s bland response disheartens and alienates her painfully. The author narrates: “She felt like a boat adrift on a stormy night, lashed by winds. . . . She was alone. . . . She glanced at Albert as if he were a new person . . .” (Emecheta 22, 62, 33).

Departure from London is an ecstasy for Albert. He plans a lavish party and invites his friends before leaving for Lagos. He articulates it to his friend, Prabhu that “. . . it’s not everyday [one] return[s] to [one’s] homeland after almost eighteen years in London” (36). His friends, who are from different nationalities, do not deem this decision to be sagacious as he has sacrificed his fifteen years for this employment in London. “But most of his country people living in Britain understood, and some even viewed him with envy. The picture of the life he would lead at home was very vivid in their imagination. . . . The country was virtually swimming with oil, and oil meant money . . .” For Nigerians generally, it is a great fortune to return to the homeland eventually. Their nostalgia keeps on prodding them into thinking about ‘return’. Amaka and her boyfriend, Oseloke, whom Albert and Kehinde help to stay in London, come to England only to complete their education. They do not have any wish to settle down in London. “Like Albert, they did not want to stay longer than necessary. They never stopped talking about Nigeria, the friendliness, the money, the carefree

attitude” (Emecheta 36, 37, 45). Amaka and Oseloke are the typical Nigerians, who always cherish an idea of return to homeland.

After Albert’s arrival in Lagos, Kehinde receives a letter from Albert describing a demand for the children and the necessary belongings. The children, Joshua and Bimpe, are elated and excited to learn about “going home”. Their sudden predilection for Nigeria after their father discomfits Kehinde and she begins to feel lonely and chagrined. Although the children are born in England, they like to go to Nigeria, their father’s ‘home’. “It seemed that without Albert, she was a half-person. Unable to cope with the nagging silence, she plunged into depression . . .” (Emecheta 59).

The politics of “going home” is brought forth in Kehinde’s context. Kehinde is forced to return to Nigeria as her marriage with Albert is on the brink of rupture. The diasporic location (London) which has given her comfort and satisfaction of being a ‘home’ throughout her eighteen years becomes repelling to her, because still she is strongly adhered to her African traditions and family system. Her friend Moriammo encourages her to go to Lagos, live and enjoy life with Albert, feel free like “a white woman” and “enjoy the sunshine” (Emecheta 52). But Moriammo’s orthodox husband, Tunde reviles Kehinde for sending her husband to Nigeria and enjoying her life alone in London.

Kehinde feels unable to assimilate to this ‘patriarchal home’ of the Lagos Albert, for her own freedom as a black British woman is at stake. “After all, their going home was his [Albert’s] idea in the first place, urged on by his sisters” (Emecheta 67). She comes to know from Ifeyinwa, her elder sister, here that Albert has married another woman, Rike, a university lecturer. This thwarts the remaining hopes of Kehinde to save her family as Albert would hate polygamy before their marriage. The condescending attitude of all the relatives except Ifeyinwa traumatizes her. She repents her arrival in Lagos. She comes to realize that she has no importance for Albert. He is so enmeshed in his family chores and job affair. Safran remarks: “Returnees, particularly from host countries that are more advanced than the homeland, might unsettle its political, social, and economic equilibrium . . .” (93-94).

Actually, Kehinde’s vision of the ‘African home’ is opposite to that of Albert’s. She yearns for a modern, West-like life devoid of the traditional restrictions, which are imposed on women; she longs to savour her ‘been-to’ status as a woman who has lived for years in England. Instead, Albert craved for a traditional African life before coming to Nigeria. The dreams of both Kehinde and Albert remain unfulfilled. Kehinde is caught in a dilemma. She does not get a job in Nigeria. She wishes to return to London. Her fortitude and tenacity desists her from acknowledging her own desire for her diasporic home. Stock remarks that, “Moving between contrasting settings may be liberating for some at some times; for others at other times it may mean a disturbing in-

betweenness of belonging nowhere” (26). She receives a letter from Moriammo with a mention that her house is getting ramshackle and she must return to mend it and make it her stable ‘home’. Moriammo sends her money for the journey back to London. “Kehinde felt deeply gratified by Moriammo’s gestures of friendship. For the first time, a way out of her situation had presented itself”. She goes to meet her children at their school and informs them that she is “going back to London” (Emecheta 101, 102) to have a job and look after the house.

Kehinde’s congenial welcome at the Heathrow airport (England) denotes that she is well received by her diaspora space, her own ‘home’. She comes to feel that she belongs to England, not Nigeria. This ‘return’ experience signals new, sanguine possibilities for her settlement in England. She feels quite exuberant, placid and pristine when she reaches her house (now her real home). Nature, too, appears to be welcoming her and the weather shows optimistic signs:

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 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. (Emecheta 107)

Kehinde’s twin spirit, Taiwo, speaks to her that the London house is ‘her’ home. She must not have any misgivings about claiming it. And the removal of the ‘For

Sale’ sign by her denotes Kehinde’s inevitable resolution to settle down in England. Cooper observes that “. . . Kehinde’s house in London is a literal place, whose living plan is outlined at the outset and to which she returns at the end” (Emecheta 33).

Kehinde’s daughter, Bimpe takes things practically; she knows that Nigeria is not a well-off country, therefore, to avail a better education she wishes to be in England. She writes to Kehinde: “. . . because I was born in England and can easily go back to London. . . . But Nigeria is great too. I like the clothes, the weather, the music, but you need a lot of money to enjoy all this. . . . Most of my friends still think that England is the gateway to Heaven, and I think they are right sometimes” (Emecheta 120-121). Bimpe represents the ‘deterritorialized diaspora’, where “. . . the links between hostland and homeland are becoming more tenuous” (Cohen 7). According to Stock, second or third generation descendants of diasporic migrants respond differently to the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’. It is more complex for them to identify themselves singularly with any home (26-27).

Kehinde turns a rebel when she is challenged by her own son’s patriarchal intransigence. She is not a submissive Nigerian mother any more. She assertively tries to make him understand that the house in London belongs only to her. It is her ‘home’ now where he (Joshua) and his father can live, if they wish. She postulates to Joshua: “Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human” (141). She flouts the essentialist traditions and ideologies for the sake of making her own ‘home’ in London.

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