

**Re-visiting History, Re-negotiating Identity in Two Black British
Fictions of the 21st Century: Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*
(2003) and Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe* (2000)**

by

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Abstract

Notions of home, belonging, and identity haunt the creative minds of fiction writers belonging to and imagining the African diaspora. Detailing the ways in which two diasporic authors “re-visit history” and “re-negotiate identity”, this thesis grapples with the complexity of these notions and explores the boundaries of displacement and the search for new home-spaces. Finally, it engages with the ways in which both authors produce “new tribes” beyond the bounds of national or racial imaginaries.

Following the “introduction”, the second chapter titled “River Crossing” offers a reading of Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore*, which features a black African man fleeing his home-country in search of asylum in England. Here, I explore Phillips’s representation of the “postcolonial passage” to the north, and of the “shock of arrival” in England. I then analyse the ways in which the novel enacts a process of “messing with national identity”. While retracing the history of post-Windrush migration to England in order to engage contemporary immigration, *A Distant Shore*, I argue, also re-visits the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the final section, I discuss “the economy of asylum” as I explore the fates of the novel’s two central characters: the African asylum-seeker and the outcast white English woman.

My reading aims to advance two points made by the novel. Firstly, that individuals are not contained by the nations and cultures they belong to; rather, they are owned by the circumstances that determine the conditions of their displacement. Phillips strives to tell us that individuals remain the sites at which exclusionary discourses and theories about race, belonging and identity are re-elaborated. Secondly, I argue that no matter the effort exerted in trying to forget traumatic pasts in order to re-negotiate identity elsewhere, individuals remain prisoners of the chronotopes they have inhabited at the various stages of their passages.

The third chapter focuses on Buchi Emecheta’s *The New Tribe*. Titled “Returning Home?”, it explores the implications of Emecheta’s reversal of the trajectory of displacement from diasporic locations to Africa. *The New Tribe* allows for the possibility of re-imagining the Middle Passage and re-figuring the controversial notion of the return to roots. In the novel, a young black British man embarks on a journey to Africa in search of a mythic lost kingdom. While not enabling him to return to roots, this journey eventually encourages him to come to terms with his diasporic identity.

Continuing to grapple with notions of “home”, now through the trope of family and by engaging the “rhetoric of return”, I explore how Emecheta re-visits the past in order to produce new identities in the present. Emecheta’s writing reveals in particular the gendered consequences of the “rhetoric of return”. Narratives of return to Africa, the novel suggests, revisit colonial fantasies and foster patriarchal gender bias. The text juxtaposes such metaphors against the lived experience of black women in order to demythologise the return to Africa and to redirect diasporic subjects to the diasporic locations that constitute genuine sites for re-negotiating identity.

Opsomming

Idees oor tuiste, gemeensamenheid en identiteit spook by fiksieskrywers wat deelmaak van en uitbeelding gee aan die Afrika-diaspora. Hierdie proefskrif ondersoek die kompleksiteit van hierdie begrippe en verken die grense van verplasing en die soeke na nuwe tustes deur verwysing na die manier waarop twee diasporiese outeurs geskiedenis herbesoek en identiteit herverhandel. Ten slotte bespreek dit die maniere waarop dié twee outeurs “nuwe stamme” buite die beperkinge van nasionale of rasverbonde verbeelding vervaardig.

Die eerste hoofstuk ondersoek Caryl Phillips se *A Distant Shore*, wat handel oor ’n swart man wat sy moederland ontvlug op soek na asiel in Engeland. Ek ondersoek Phillips se uitbeelding van die “postkoloniale deurreise” na die noorde, en die “skok van aanlanding” in Engeland, en analiseer ook die maniere waarop die roman ’n proses van “verknoeiing van nasionale identiteit” verbeeld. Terwyl dit die geskiedenis van post-Windrush migrasie na Engeland naspoor ten doele hedendaagse immigrasie te bespreek, herbesoek *A Distant Shore* ook die trans-Atlantiese slawehandel. In die finale deel van die hoofstuk, ondersoek ek “die ekonomie van asiel” terwyl ek die lot van die roman se twee hoofkarakters bespreek: die asiel-soeker van Afrika en ’n verstote wit Engelse vrou.

My lesing mik daarna om twee punte wat die roman maak aan te voer. Eerstens, dat individue nie ten volle omskryf word deur die nasies en kulture waaraan hulle behoort nie: hulle word eerder ge-eien deur die omstandighede van hulle verplasing. Die individu is die terrein waar diskoerse en teorieë oor ras, gemeenskap en identiteit heruitgewerk word. Tweedens wil ek wys dat individue steeds vasgevang bly in die kronotipes wat hulle tydens die verskillende stadiums van hulle deurreise bewoon, ongeag die moeite wat gedoen word om die traumatiese verlede te vergeet ten einde identiteit elders te heronderhandel.

Die derde hoofstuk fokus op Buchi Emecheta se *The New Tribe*, en ondersoek die implikasies van Emecheta se omverwerping van die trajektorie van verplasing: van diasporiese lokale terug na Afrika. *The New Tribe* bied die moontlikheid vir herverbeling van die Middel-Deurgang (die “Middle Passage”), sowel as ’n nuwe manier om die omstrede idee van “terugkeer na jou stamwortel” voor te stel. In die roman vertrek ’n jong Britse man na Afrika op soek na ’n mitiese verlore koninkryk. Alhoewel sy reis hom nie toelaat om na sy stamwortels terug te keer nie, moedig dit hom aan ’n akkoord te bereik met sy diasporiese identiteit.

Ek worstel verder met verskillende begrippe van “tuiste”, deur bespreking van die familie troop en die “retoriek van terugkoms”. Ek verken die manier waarop Emecheta die verlede herwaardeer om nuwe identiteite in die hede te bewerkstellig. Die roman onthul veral die geslagsverwante gevolge van die “retoriek van terugkoms”, en suggereer dat verhale oor die terugkeer na Afrika koloniale fantasieë herbesoek patriargale geslagsvooroordeel bevorder. Die teks stel hierdie metafore in teenstelling met die alledaagse ondervinding van swart vrouens, ten einde die terugkeer na Afrika te ontmitologiseer en diasporiese subjekte te herlei na die diasporiese plekke wat werklike liggings konstitueer vir die heronderhandeling van identiteit.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

“Re-visiting History, Re-negotiating Identity” is an attempt at reassessing narratives of belonging, home, and memory in relation to how these notions impact on the lives of individual characters of the African diaspora. My choice of focal texts – Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* (2003) and Buchi Emecheta’s *The New Tribe* (2000) – enables me to engage two distinct strands of diasporic identity: diaspora-born and African-born. The diaspora concerned here thus falls broadly into two categories, which Paul Tiyambe Zeleza identifies as “historical diaspora” and “contemporary diaspora” respectively (261); the first stands for the “diasporas of enslavement” and the second for “the diasporas of colonialism and neo-colonialism” (263). Zeleza points out that “[e]ach of these diasporas, broadly speaking, has its own connections and commitments to Africa, and its own memories and imaginations of Africa, and its own conceptions of the diasporic condition and identity” (263).

Although both are post-Windrush¹ migrants to Britain, the two writers whose texts are under scrutiny in this thesis belong respectively to the “historical diaspora” (in the case of Phillips) and the “contemporary diaspora” (in the case of Emecheta). Both writers deal with the problematic issue of negotiating identity in a strange and hostile milieu and dramatise their characters’ relations with the historiography of their origins. Emecheta and Phillips have divergent “connections and commitments” (Zeleza 263) regarding how they imagine and situate themselves vis-à-vis Africa. Phillips claims his diasporic identity by inscribing it in the unlocalisable spaces of oceanic transits. Emecheta, on the other hand, locates her diasporic self on the boundary between Africa and England, espousing a liminal identity.

The notion of a return to Africa as the location of roots is one that has fired the imaginations of generations of African and diasporic writers and thinkers. Past generations of Africans (such as Léopold Sédar Senghor), African-Americans (such as Frederic Douglass, W.E.B du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Richard Wright) and other diasporic subjects (such as Martiniquan Aimée Césaire) have theorized the idea of Africa being the location of memory as well as of diasporic escape. They have either put forward race as the converging medium between black cultures or have denied it as an ineffective one in view to recognise black peoples’ humanity and rights to full citizenship wherever they might be in the world. A more recent group of black intellectuals, returning to the notion of blackness and origins encoded in

¹ The Windrush generation refers to the first major black Caribbean migrants to England in 1948 (see page 3).

earlier literary movements such as Negritude², advance a newer version of essentialism. Some of the prominent advocates of this movement are intellectuals Molefi Asante, Isidore Okpewho, and Michael Echeruo (to cite only a few), who hold that there is still meaning in excavating the essence of African culture and that this essence in its original, pre-modern purity, forms part of every black person's "psyche." Returning symbolically to the "source" is often presented by them as the only way to ensure not only the survival of Africanness in diasporic locations, but also the re-activation by black people of their identities.

The 21st century has witnessed great migratory movements from the so-called 'third world' in general, and Africa in particular, to Europe. The circumstances behind these movements go beyond the failures of postcolonial national independences to meet promises made at the dawn of the 1960s to include the bleak picture created by the new world order. The experience of the contemporary black presence in Britain still exemplifies the predicament of the condition of exile and of the nature of asylum. This reality thus contrasts with the possibility for asylum-seekers to be "optimis[ti]c" in terms of finding safer havens while fleeing their locations of origin (Arendt 110). As a result of this quandary, subjects become suspended between past and present, thus being not only restless but also directionless. Home, belonging and identity are key concepts in this thesis, as is both personal and historical memory, which is shown in my primary texts to circle from the diasporic subject's sense of self back to Africa as the location of origin and to slavery as the archetypal experience of displacement. These thematic concerns are tied to Phillips's and Emecheta's locations as black British writers of African descent.

Black British is a generic designation of minority ethnic groups residing in Britain or having a British cultural upbringing. According to Mark Stein, the term was initially used "in an overarching sense, referring to distinct groups of West Indian migrants from Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana, and Barbados, etc. [...] Later the concept was used to include migrant groups from other parts of the world" (Stein 12). The term reveals the problematic position, from the point of view of the dominant discourse of Englishness, of these settlers being both *black* and British. The impossibility of blacks being regarded as British by white segregationists was strongly expressed in Enoch Powell's notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech in April 1968, which insisted on the mutual exclusion of the two terms 'black' and 'British' (see Stein 8). Despite the innuendoes of ethnic, racial, and historiographic essentialism, the

² The movement of Negritude, pioneered by Senghor and Césaire, consisted of black intellectuals praising their blackness as a way of affirming black personality. The focus was on race as being a uniting phenotypical factor against colonialism and western domination in general.

category *black British literature*, according to Stein, covers a “wide conception of a body of writing, wide enough to accommodate a variety of black British literary forms, and to cut across the bounds of cultural identity, ethnicity, race, class, generation, and gender.” Stein concludes, however, that “[t]he category of *black British literature* does not reify nationalist categorizations since the second adjective is kept in check by the first, and because of its references to cross cultural and transnational cultural contexts” (17). Inhabiting this category in very different ways, Phillips and Emecheta each take up varying positions regarding both England and Africa.

Living today in New York, Caryl Phillips was born in the British colony of St Kitts in 1958. He was a little over three months old when his parents journeyed to England on the *SS Empire Windrush*, the ship that, in 1948, transported the first major influx of black migrants to Britain from the Caribbean in response to the call for labour to rebuild post-war England. Phillips was raised in Leeds and later graduated from Oxford. As John McLeod argues, his writing is mostly “grounded in those painful experiences of growing up in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s” even as “these experiences do not seem overtly to suggest the subject matter of his work” (10).

Phillips’s first novel *The Final Passage* was published in 1985, staging a story of displacement as a Caribbean family moves to England, where they encounter racism, and the woman is abandoned by her husband. *A Distant Shore*, his seventh novel, presents another story of displacement and loss in which the narrative voices transcend oceans, nationality, individuality, and race. *A Distant Shore* positions life experience as the only reliable prism through which to peer into silenced selves. Stephen Clingman notes that, “what counts primarily to Phillips ... is not so much race but the condition of being an outsider” (46). Phillips writes mainly about what Renée Schatteman describes as “the precarious nature of British identity” (99). Although *A Distant Shore* is more about negotiating entry into a new society than about diasporic identity, the novel nonetheless stresses the conditions of exile, asylum-seeking and the meaning of home, and is written from and informed by Phillips’s diasporic location

Whereas the second chapter of the thesis concludes with an inquiry into the condition of asylum in England, the third chapter centres on the notion of returning to roots (i.e. to Africa). The author of *The New Tribe* (2000) was born Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta to Igbo parents in 1944 in Lagos, Nigeria. Emecheta followed her husband to England in 1960, and by the age of 21 was the mother of five children. From her first novel, *In the Ditch*, published in 1972, to her latest, *The New Tribe*, Emecheta has earned her position as one of the most

prolific and successful black writers of the contemporary African diaspora. The focus of much of her fiction falls on the confrontation between traditional Nigerian life and modern European cultures, in both of which women fill the rank of ‘second-class citizen’ – a phrase that provides the title of her earlier novel.

The difficulty of simply locating Emecheta becomes apparent on reading the titles of critical works about her writing, which range from *Modern British Women Writers: An A-To-Z Guide* (2002) to Florence Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994). Under the label of both British and African, Emecheta figures as a black woman writer who has a footing in her native Nigeria and in her adoptive England. According to Christine Sizemore, this “liminal situation” offers Emecheta an advantageous position: “because from the perspective of England, she sees the problems of women within patriarchal Nigerian society but from the perspective of her homeland she sees the problems for blacks within racist British culture” (qtd. in Fischer 62). My reading of *The New Tribe* is concerned with the ways in which Emecheta examines the relationship between Africa and its diaspora by bringing together two overlapping historical and contemporary themes: the trans-Atlantic and intra-African slave trades and the notion of ‘returning’ to the homeland.

Following the trajectory of Emecheta’s literary career, from *In the Ditch* through *Kehinde* to *The New Tribe*, I argue that the author’s resentment of certain traditional practices inimical to African women does not make her deny nor reject her Africanity, even when she engages them fiercely in criticism. Rather, as Donna Haraway suggests, Emecheta gives herself the role of “reinventor of African tradition” as well as of “deconstructor of tradition” (par. 20). In *Head Above Water*, she recognizes Nigeria as her “home”, although England is often a more viable, liberating space for her not only as a writer but also as an African woman. Despite living in England, Emecheta remains ingrained in the traditions of her natal Nigeria; this is evident mostly in her creative life where her writing flows in and out of her Nigerian oral tradition. Yet, in England, as Susan Alice Fischer points out, Emecheta “finds room to define herself outside gendered norms and to develop a sense of connection with other women” (Fischer 62). Thus, “[a]t home in both England and Nigeria,” (Fisher 113), Emecheta, I argue, regards the notion of ‘return’ to Africa as an essentially productive one, because the journey opens the eyes of her protagonists, allowing them to acknowledge the difference between ideas of home and experiences of belonging.

“Re-visiting History, Re-negotiating Identity” is about the trajectory that leads to a place from which subjects attempt to make sense of their lives. The second chapter, concerned with *A Distant Shore*, takes the reader from Africa to England and explores contemporary

experience with a window into the past while offering a diagnosis of contemporary English society. The third chapter travels in a reverse direction: from England to Africa. This time, however, the journey is ultimately circular, returning finally to England. *A Distant Shore* and *The New Tribe* constitute contemporary attempts to make sense of the present by leafing through the disturbing and painful pages of the past. The fourth and last chapter consists of the general conclusion of the thesis.

Chapter 2 – River Crossing: Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore*

The title of this chapter is inspired by Caryl Phillips’s earlier novel, *Crossing the River* (1993). This novel tells the story of forced displacement in which a father, over two and half centuries later, laments his “foolishness” (*Crossing* 1) in selling his three children into slavery. I allude to it here in order to demonstrate the indescribable pain of being extracted from one’s original location, of suffering the journey that gradually and painfully stretches bonds away from relatives, and the trauma of having to face memory in an attempt to come to terms with present identities. This chapter will focus on one of Phillips’s latest novels, *A Distant Shore* (2003), which follows in his tradition when it comes to addressing race, identity, migration and loss. As a Caribbean by birth who was raised in the United Kingdom and now lives in the United States, Phillips identifies, as he puts it in *A New World Order*, with “the migratory condition, and the subsequent sense of displacement, [which] can be a gift to a creative mind” (131). He considers his diasporic identity to be the vantage point from which his literary art blossoms.

A Distant Shore is truly an encompassing novel in which events that appear scattered are all in some way intertwined. It tells the story of two characters whose inner suffering constitutes their commonality. Dorothy is white, English and female. Gabriel is black, African and male.³ While apparently of different worlds, their utter loneliness makes possible their friendship. My argument is that Phillips uses the individual lives of these two characters as lenses through which to peer into questions of nationality and race, and as tools for discarding the all too archaic racial “manichean opposition” (JanMohamed 63) in the formation of identity. Solomon and Dorothy are different in almost every aspect of their lives: location of origin, race, gender, social and historical background. Yet, however different they are in their outer characteristics, Gabriel and Dorothy have in common the destiny of most of Phillips’s characters as they “share a common experience of pain and an almost instinctive urge to go against the odds” (Ledent, “Caryl Phillips” 6). Through an engagement with the profound loneliness of Phillips’s characters, I want to draw attention to the idea that “home” has nothing to do with the qualification of *developed* – for England – or *underdeveloped* for Gabriel’s country. Indeed, the author chooses ultimately to lock Dorothy away in an asylum and to kill off Gabriel as a way of suggesting that pain, loneliness and loss are equally shared between races, genders and locations.

³ Gabriel later changes his name to Solomon Bartholomew in England at the suggestion of a social worker after he was arrested for alleged rape

In *A Distant Shore*, Gabriel undertakes the long and painful passage from Africa to England. Gabriel initially wants to make a life in his home country. Before his father talks him into partaking in the civil war that tears his young country apart, he had not contemplated leaving. He had even “[n]ever before ... left the capital” (*Distant* 140). Unfortunately for him, having entered the war as a rebel fighter, he is betrayed by his fellow combatants when he refuses to massacre the innocent inhabitants of a village. In a violent turn of events he is then himself accused of perpetrating the massacre; fleeing home, he impotently witnesses the reprisal slaughter of his father, mother and two sisters in the parental house. His loss of ‘home’— “this is not my home anymore” (*Distant* 88) — is dramatic and tragic, and precipitates his departure from Africa.

Gabriel needs money to flee the country, and visits his friend and former employer, Felix, for help. However, as the money he receives cannot cover his trip, Gabriel decides to rob his friend, and in the process, bludgeons him to death. The journey of his flight from his unnamed country to England is a dangerous one and almost claims his life on the final leg. He travels with and becomes infatuated by a fellow refugee, Amma, who has a baby. However, Amma sneaks out at dawn, and leaves him while they are still in France. Gabriel makes the Channel crossing to England clinging to the side of the ship together with his companion Bright and a Chinese man. Soon after he disembarks, Gabriel is arrested for allegedly raping a white teenage girl. He is locked up in a cell that he shares with a Middle Eastern immigrant, Said, who is accused of stealing from a white couple. Later, after he is released, he makes a trip to Weston, in northern England, thanks to the generosity of an Irish immigrant, Mike, who gives him a free lift and introduces him to the Andersons who take him in as their ‘son’ and family, and to whom he is known as Solomon Bartholomew. Although not their biological son, Mike has also been ‘adopted’ by the Andersons, such that this ‘family’ grouping come to form some kind of “new tribe” comprised of members originally from different locations. The Andersons help Solomon secure a job and a home of his own in Stoneleigh, the new development on the hill. In Stoneleigh he is the night watchman and caretaker and it is there that he befriends Dorothy. But his life ends tragically when he is stoned to death by young racist thugs who just wanted to “have some fun” (*Distant* 54).

Also swimming against the current of the “river” is Dorothy Jones, a retired music teacher who is divorced and quite unfortunate in her experiences with men and human contact in general. The loss of her parents, her being abandoned by her husband Brian and, as of late, the news of her sister’s illness and death have a shattering effect on her and she ends up in a state of total loneliness. But it is the loss of her African friend, Solomon, that lands the final blow

on her already troubled mind and sends her to an asylum for the mentally disturbed. Dorothy feels a connection with Solomon whom she sees as a reflection of her own vulnerable self. Like him she is lonely, rejected, and burdened with the past and things she wishes she had done differently.

A Distant Shore is about the sway exerted by society over individual lives. The novel depicts Gabriel as a victim of socio-political contingencies in Africa. He is embroiled in a socio-political system that renders him a mere “messenger” of those in power in his capacity as a messenger clerk. As he acknowledges, a “messenger clerk is not a man: I was a thing to be tolerated, a creature in T-shirt and torn pants who was not much better than the cockroaches that skittered noisily across the floor” (*Distant* 139). Burdened by the death of his family, Gabriel realises that he has not been “prepared for the life” he is living (*Distant* 138). In representing Gabriel’s experience before his departure for England, Phillips presents Africa as holding a bleak future. But Gabriel’s victimization in Africa and the impact it has on his life is not compensated for by hospitality in the European space that he enters.

In this chapter, I propose that the text suggests ways in which to read it as a critique of the persistence of what Abdul JanMohamed calls the “machinery of the manichean allegory” (63), with the duo of the two central characters presented as a means of deconstructing it. Through the parallel set up between Dorothy’s and Solomon’s lives the text seems to discard race, origins and culture as cause of the characters’ impossibility of integrating into English society. Gabriel as African is rejected as a result of his being objectified by a social discourse that “reproduces him in a potentially infinite variety of images, the apparent variety of which *makes him not only an other but also sees him as an evil intruder*” (JanMohamed 64; emphasis added). But through the example of Solomon’s and Dorothy’s intersecting lives, Phillips engages with and deconstructs this opposition.

In *A Distant Shore*, name and experience become the window to the soul. Phillips reflects further on the nature and effect of what I will call the “postcolonial passage” in his characterization of Gabriel, and particularly his naming of this character. The instability of Gabriel's identity through a series of shifting names allows for a reading that insists that identity is linked to the individual and the circumstances in which he/she finds him/herself. It becomes difficult for the reader to fix the character in one identity while trying to arrange the chronology of the plot. Thus, three names refer to one individual according to the events they address. The man who flees to and eventually ends up dead “face down” in Stoneleigh in northern England is respectively known as “Gabriel”, “Hawk”, “Gabriel” again, and finally, “Solomon”. Gabriel is the African man whose father urges him to partake in the war and it is

he who is arrested on arrival in England for alleged rape. Hawk is born to the civil war and this name, by it being located in the past of the character, represents the roots of his future predicaments. Solomon emerges at the suggestion of a social worker, Katherine, who helps him find his way to northern England. Solomon, then, is the offspring of the character's past as Hawk and Gabriel. The question of who the male leading character in *A Distant Shore* is can thus only be answered by unravelling the past of the character.

The passage Gabriel undertakes from Africa to England transforms the asylum-seeker entirely. In *A Distant Shore*, Phillips reveals how the passage is not only in itself traumatic but also a representation of shifting identities – historical, cultural and personal. This experience is neither specific to the asylum-seeker nor is the view peculiar to Phillips for, as Stuart Hall points out, “identity [is] a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (“Cultural Identity” 392). The identity of the asylum-seeker in England dramatises this condition as the subject becomes particularly unstable due to the chaotic experiences he undergoes.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first, “The Postcolonial Passage”, explores the movement from Africa to England, viewed through the lens of internal shifts in self. Phillips's representation of this journey ensures that it not only designates the contemporaneous feature of South-to-North migration, but it also becomes a neo-Middle Passage narrative. The second section, “The Shock of Arrival”, explores disillusionment with England and questions the viability of seeking asylum in a country that remains racist and alienating. In “Messing with National Identity”, I examine identity as both objectified and allegorical. This section examines the notion of otherness and its link to location and nationality. The last section, “The Economy of Asylum”, will be concerned with defining notions of home and belonging and the condition of the contemporary world order in which the search for and refusal of asylum are central tropes.

2.1 – The Postcolonial Passage

The title of this section alludes to the trans-Atlantic crossing of enslaved Africans to the new world and its resonances in the postcolonial present. Whereas the Middle Passage entailed forced displacement to an unknown land, the postcolonial passage, though motivated by an urge to survive, remains a choice made to escape from a place that was once home. Mapping the postcolonial passage from Africa to England of its protagonist, Gabriel, onto the prior Middle Passage traversed by the enslaved, *A Distant Shore* becomes a textual re-visiting of the past, even as it engages the present.

In the mid-sixteenth century, European merchants initiated the trans-Atlantic slave trade; for the next three centuries, Africans were systematically and inhumanely shipped to the West Indies and the Americas, shackled in cramped conditions in the holds of ships and deprived of light, fresh air, and privacy. The slaves' experience on board the ship was revealed more acutely on arrival: "The arrival of a slave ship was heralded by its characteristic stink of crowded, sick humanity which had been wallowing in stable-like squalor for weeks past" (Walvin 40). Writing of his own experience of this passage, Olaudah Equiano records that: "[t]he closeness of the place and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us" (25). The Middle Passage was that dark, rocky carpet unfolding in the immensity of the ocean that constituted their route. It was a duplicitous journey which doubly alienated the enslaved. On the one hand, they were extracted from their original locations; and, on the other, their familial bonds were severed. As James Walvin notes, it was "the moment of enslavement and brutal separation from family, and the searing experience of oceanic transit" (5; see also Hartman). After arrival in a new land, Africans' mandatory "accommodation" to the slavers' cultures did not quell the trauma of "[losing] loved ones, their distant communities and the complexities of social customs which had shaped their African lives" (Walvin 5).

In *A Distant Shore*, Phillips depicts Gabriel's postcolonial passage in somewhat analogous terms, albeit in less tragic a tone. The novel, which is set in the early 21st century, reveals the dreadful reality of late modernity: that it has opened a route to another form of middle passage which, for lack of a suitable phrase, I name the "postcolonial passage". This passage is what Joan Dayan, in "Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes", calls "the new passage of those who do not choose to leave their homes in celebration of 'nomadism', but are forced out because of dire economic facts and political terrors" (11). In other words, the postcolonial

passage is one that is opened by political and natural calamities such as drought, poverty and a series of civil wars and acts of ethnic cleansing that ultimately force the African immigrant to flee to the North, where he/she finds him/herself straddled between an irreconcilable past and an unaccommodating present.

Before his crossing, Gabriel is a soldier conscripted into a rebellion in his country. His journey as a wanderer starts when he flees the war zone in horror, but this unfortunate tragedy will cost him the lives of his parents and two younger sisters. With his home utterly destroyed, he is, with the assistance of his uncle, able to set off on his postcolonial passage to Europe. Embarking on his journey, Gabriel is first transported under a heavy tarpaulin in blazing heat; then by a plane without seats, which “looks like a tubular warehouse” wherein he and his companions – the cargo – “squat awkwardly” (*Distant* 99); they then ride a bus, cross a river and undertake a long journey in a “cramped train” (*Distant* 103), which concludes in northern France. Finally, Gabriel embarks for England clinging to the side of a ship under perilous conditions that claim the life of one of his companions.

My reading of Phillips’s decision to present the final leg of this arduous journey as a crossing by ship argues that it explicitly evokes the Middle Passage and its ability to transform the individual by cutting him/her off from his/her (old) self and re-inventing a new one. The partial parallel set up between the trans-Atlantic crossings of the slave trade and Gabriel's postcolonial passage is evident in the description of Gabriel's circumstances of departure and conditions of crossing. Here the differences and similarities between slavery and elective immigration under desperate conditions are pointed to both in the crowded mode of transport and in the implicit distinction between the enslaved chained in holds and the immigrants clinging to the side of the ship. The difference between Gabriel's subject position and that of the enslaved is immediately evident when he boards ship (albeit very precariously):

Gabriel chases after his younger friend [Bright], and the two scamper quickly in an effort not to lose sight of the Chinese man [who] dashes to the side of the ship and swings himself off the quayside ... and now Gabriel runs out, his heart pounding, and he too grabs a rope and disappears over the quayside. (*Distant* 135)

Such active verbs as “chases”, “dashes”, “swings”, “runs out”, and “grabs” evoke the choice made by Gabriel and his two companions to challenge the danger of the sea, thus being the

historical subjects of their own fates. This differs markedly from the trans-Atlantic embarkation, where slaves were forced on board with whip and chain.

The inversion of history here marks the temporal and spatial difference of Gabriel's crossing, while still invoking the passages of the past. Phillips makes space and time converge into one unit: the experience of crossing. The space of the ship and the contemporaneous nature of Gabriel's crossing form part of what Stephen Clingman identifies as Phillips's way of evoking "Bakhtin's 'chronotope'—the spatial-temporal grounding for the action of the novel" (48).⁴ This conjunction of space and time resurfaces the past and its enduring pathology in the present. History thus repeats itself as the water claims a life. Walvin, who speaks elsewhere of the harrowing displacement suffered by Africans during the slave trade, tells of "millions and others" (Walvin 12) – the innumerable lives that perished during the passage; and Paul Gilroy mentions the additional deaths of those who were murdered or thrown overboard in the course of the Middle Passage (*Black* 14). In *A Distant Shore*, both similarly and with a difference, the Chinese man's disappearance into the sea (where we must assume he dies) goes unnoticed by Gabriel until after they have disembarked: in both eras the sea makes death an insignificant event.

The ship is not only the means to reach the other side of the "river", it also allegorizes what follows. Whereas Gabriel's means of traversing the sea points out both the similarities and differences between the Middle Passage and the postcolonial passage, it seems also to foreclose any chance of his being accepted into English society on arrival: his exclusion from the social life of the ship heralds the exclusion he will suffer from society as a marginal being who will become the focus of native hatred. Gilroy represents the ocean as the site of transcontinental connection, with the Atlantic conceptualised as a triangular structure that presents a model of global intercultural heterogeneity: "cultural historians could take [the image of] the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (*Black* 15). In her discussion of Gilroy and the chronotope of the ship in "Sailing Ships and Distant Shore", Ayesha Hameed argues that "[t]he space of the ocean becomes apparent in the spatiality of the ship. The sailing ship highlights the heterogeneity of the port towns it connects, of the diversity and quotidian experiences of the crew" (233). Phillips in contrast presents a preview of the non-heterogeneity of the towns Gabriel's ship is heading to. Gabriel's entrance into England by clinging to the sides of the ship, rather than being

⁴ See also Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (4) on the ship as chronotope.

accommodated inside it, foretells the unwelcoming reception and the persistent exclusions he will face from the society he will try to integrate into on arrival.

In his travelogue *The Atlantic Sound*, Phillips represents the conjunction of the slave trade, the *Windrush* crossing and the postcolonial passage in one temporal unit. Gabriel's crossing represents the most recent stage in the history of voluntary oceanic transits. His experience contrasts with that of Phillips's parents while they were crossing the ocean on their *Windrush* passage. For them, the "white cliffs of Dover signified the end of a long arduous journey" and "the hope" of being accepted (Phillips, *Atlantic* 15). Gabriel, in contrast, barely sees anything: "He opens his eyes. The ship is approaching a coastline that looks like a long, thin black shadow decorated with speckles of white light [...] the sea water is burning his eyes" (*Distant* 136), and instead of disembarking he jumps.

The postcolonial passage, I argue, is a contemporary form of erasure of the character's history, layered in two major forms in the novel. On the one hand, the erasure is expressed through the route and condition of crossing, with darkness being the primary trope of Gabriel's itinerary, which takes the texture of a dark tunnel symbolizing progressive distancing from the past. This act of journeying in the dark presents a second major similarity between Gabriel's passage and the Middle Passage in that in both instances these modes of transport leave no tracks (Phillips, *Crossing* 237). Gilroy's notion, in *The Black Atlantic*, of "double consciousness" and Orlando Patterson's "natal alienation" articulate this erasure, pointing to the moment of the crossing where the subject's self becomes hyphenated by simultaneously being linked to and separated from two incompatible worlds. This is symbolically presented by the character's trajectory: from the moment he leaves his razed parental home in Africa to when he reaches the rocky British shores, via Italy and France, Gabriel travels either by night, shrouded in darkness, or by day, in which case he is either covered by a tarpaulin or enclosed in a train with window-shades. The night, then, comes to represent for him the trauma of crossing. Gabriel says farewell to Africa with no intention of returning, and thus becomes subject to Patterson's "natal alienation". With no remaining family, he becomes, like the slaves shipped across the Atlantic, a "genealogical isolate" (Patterson 5); by taking a new name, he becomes a hyphenated subject, with two irreconcilable halves.

With the experience of the passage, the mother comes to symbolise the homeland. While – making a link between mother and homeland – Saidiya Hartman (see *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*) speaks of the loss of the mother to point out the

foreignness of a character in the presence of a historical location, Phillips tells of Gabriel's dreams of a faceless mother in order to point to the separation from location of origin. For instance, while still in northern France, Gabriel has a nightmare in which "[he] reaches down and pulls back [his mother's] shoulder in order that he might look into her eyes, but there is no face" (*Distant* 132). The mother with "no face" epitomizes a place of non-return and the erasure of memory. His country, like the mother who bore him, does not exist for him any more. To emphasise this point, the text links new beginnings to spatial movement. Where history cannot be erased by the simple fact of a geographical shift, there is a wilful attempt to expunge it. Thus, in England, Solomon attempts to soothe his trauma by "train[ing] himself to forget" (*Distant* 297). Later, as his nightmares subside, and he commences his new life in his new home, he declares: "I am a one-year-old ... I am a man burdened with hidden history" (*Distant* 300). But the participle "hidden" here attests to Solomon's futile attempt. Indeed, the text suggests that time never succeeds in exhaustively erasing history from consciousness, nor does it recede. Ultimately, for all his effort, Solomon does not succeed in forgetting his original anchorage, both geographical and familial. While being assaulted by the youths who eventually stone him to death in Stoneleigh, he unfolds the map of his origins:

They do not know who I am. I am the son of an elder, a man who decided disputes and punished crimes. I am a man who travelled a very considerable distance... I am a man who has survived, and I would rather die a free man than suffer my blood to be drawn like a slave's. (*Distant* 282)

By flagging the youths' ignorance, Solomon conveys the gratuity of the assault and their denial of his humanity. Through the repetition of the pronoun 'I', he claims his individual history and, through the reference to his father's socio-political position, asserts his belonging to a community and thus to a location.

Gabriel's death evokes the trans-Atlantic slave trade where murderers enjoyed impunity. At the same time, it resonates with Patterson's argument that, "[p]erhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated...as a substitute for death, usually violent death" (5). In refusing to "substitute" and sacrifice his freedom by abjectly kowtowing to his assailants or, as he puts it, preferring to "die a free man than suffer [his] blood to be drawn like a slave's", Gabriel/Solomon reclaims his Africanity. Even as Gabriel dies a brutal death, Phillips does not mean this end to be utterly hopeless; rather, he gestures towards Gabriel's reclaiming of identity and self, while the latter was being abused by the

young louts. The importance Phillips gives to history shows in these moments prior to Gabriel's death, in which he evokes his father as asserts his belonging to a past, even if it is one that held no future for him. Gabriel's reaching out to the past can be linked to the end of *Crossing the River* in which the father, two and a half centuries later, though still lamenting, redeems his "guilty" self, wishing the best to his offspring that he sold: "A guilty father. Always listening. There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my beloved children...But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved" (*Crossing* 237). Both novels conclude on a tentatively redemptive note in the face of unrecuperable loss. The parallel between the two novels, besides ending with traumatic images, resides in recognising the significance of the past, even when it cannot be recovered.

2.2 – The Shock of Arrival

In *A Distant Shore*, as in many black British fictions, the notion of England as paradise is revealed to be an empty myth. Since the early black immigrants of the Windrush generation⁵ this theme has been present in literature from the so-called margins as it writes back to the centre. In his earlier narrative, *The Final Passage*, Caryl Phillips addresses this disenchantment through the character of Leila, whose “disillusionment with England”, C.L. Innes points out, “echoes the disillusionment of earlier immigrants who found not the shining metropolis they had envisioned, but a bleak and wintry waste land” (24; see also Stein 21). My title, “The Shock of Arrival”, articulates this painful experience of disillusionment – of the divide that opens up between fantasy and reality. Through the character of Gabriel, Phillips addresses the contemporaneous nature of the disenchantment of black immigrants with English society. Underpinning the shock is the persistence of the “manichean allegory” in 21st century England (which Phillips tries to deconstruct through the intersecting lives of Dorothy and Solomon).

Gabriel’s encounter with an English girl conveys the shock of arrival through an allegory of interracial interaction. Landing on shore with a hurt leg, Gabriel is dragged by his friend Bright to an abandoned house in search of refuge. While resting there, they are provided with food and first aid by a white teenage girl. The text makes a considerable leap here, for the reader has no clue about what happens until he or she learns that Gabriel has been arrested for the rape of the girl. The author seizes the opportunity to address the issue of the myth of the black rapist that transcribes, as Paul Gilroy notes, the “romance of racial and ethnic absolutism” (*After* 62), and is recurrent in white (male) supremacist discourse. In the dominant discourse, the charge of rape connotes an intention to criminalize the (black male) ‘other’. In *Women, Race & Class*, African-American author Angela Y. Davis gives a disturbing historical account of the manufacture of sex-related crimes. She specifically decries the instrumentalisation of rape in the production and maintenance of terror against people of colour: “The myth of the black rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justifications” (173).

⁵ See Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which is a classic expression of black people’s disillusionment with the British setting.

Phillips addresses the problematic issue of rape in *A Distant Shore* by not naming it, as a way of deconstructing this mythic narrative. His symmetrical approach to the cultures on both sides of the “river” is especially explicative of the ways in which rape is encoded in the “manichean opposition”. In Africa, Gabriel witnesses the rape of his two sisters after they are shot. In England, this traumatic past resurfaces as Gabriel is accused of raping Denise. The actual rape in Africa and the alleged ‘rape’ – which the author chooses not to name – in England, seem to be Phillips’s way of addressing the issue of racism that designates the black man as naturally oversexed. In a 2007 interview with Maya G. Vinuesa, Phillips notes that “People are *frightened* of black male sexuality and people are *fascinated* with black female sexuality” (9; emphasis in orig.). Davis elaborates:

The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted... the entire race is invested with bestiality. If Black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white, *or any*, men. Viewed as “loose women” and whores, Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy. (182; emphasis added)

I argue that the reason in *A Distant Shore* why the black girls, Gabriel's sisters, are denied even the ability to scream their pain is because the novel is addressing the fact that “Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy” and is thus deconstructing the insidiousness of racial-cum-sexist discourse embedded in the mythologizing of black sexuality. In Africa, too, rape is not named; rather the female body is designated as “food” (*Distant* 84).

In linking the two episodes of rape, Phillips achieves a dual role: on the one hand, refuting the myth of the black rapist and denouncing what Abena P. A. Busia, in “Silencing Sycorax”, pertinently calls the “symbolic laryngectomy” of African women (90); and, on the other, critiquing the value placed on the white female body to the detriment of the black female body. Correlatively in her recently published book, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?*, feminist Meg Samuelson speaks of “the unspeakability of rape” (152) in two South African novels, concluding that “carefully placed [textualised] silences ... produce an acoustic space in which ... echoes of the female body being violated resound” (147; emphasis added). The “unspeakability” of the word ‘rape’ in the novel is disruptive of the discourse which Davis, Phillips and others critique, and which, as Samuelson notes, are “a regulatory regime by which black men [a]re cast as rapist and white women [a]re marked as fragile and

threatened bearers of white purity, dependent on white male protection” (142). *A Distant Shore* concludes its subversion of the racialised rape narrative in the story of Dorothy’s sister, Sheila, who – as Dorothy finally comes to accept – had been sexually abused by their father. The “protection” offered to white women is thus shown to have no other meaning except to convey that the white female body is made to suffer in silence under the protective watch of white male patriarchy.

Mythologizing the black man as rapist speaks to the English desire to create a national identity that nourishes the “romance of racial and ethnic absolutism” (Gilroy, *After* 62). Another fabulous construct is that English nationals preach their ideals of human rights and democracy abroad (Iraq, Zimbabwe, and Afghanistan come readily to mind) while at home they organise the cleansing of England’s ‘streets’ of the presence of empire. Revealing this paradox, Phillips shows us, firstly, an African man and a Middle Eastern man imprisoned in England and, secondly, after Gabriel’s release, the alienation the African man experiences in the streets of London.

Gabriel’s experience in the city after his rape charges are dropped echoes to the saga of the “lonely Londoner” (after Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*) and thus follows in the tradition of black British writing. Far from constituting the hope of the third world immigrant, London is instead shown to mark the condition of his/her alienation; wandering its streets, Gabriel finds himself metaphorically at sea. These narrative moments enhance Gabriel’s trauma and create ground for hopeless regrets. Like his predecessor Caribbean and African migrant writers, Phillips writes of London, the big metropolis, as a place of despair. He does so by deconstructing and taking apart the notion of London (to quote Abdulrazak Gurnah) as “a metaphor of the colonial and postcolonial migrant’s fantasy of England” (12).

London becomes a maze in which Gabriel gets lost. Searching for Bright (his travelling companion who abandons him on the morning of their arrival), he drifts through “the endless streets of London” (*Distant* 169). When he meets someone he relates to as a brother, because the latter is black and claims to be from Gabriel’s country, the last flickering flame of hope dies out. As it turns out, the “brother”, Emmanuel, tricks Gabriel out of the money he had been given by a social worker to find his way out of London. Through this unproductive encounter, Phillips suggests that in the “new world order”, the “new tribe” toward which he and Emecheta write need not be made of people sharing the same race. As he puts it: “Tribes are not always made up of people who look the same” (qtd. in Warnes 39). Shying away from essentialist notions of identity and belonging even as he critiques England’s inhospitality,

Phillips shows that Emmanuel's presence in London is not sufficient to make Gabriel feel at home:

The London sky has darkened like a bruise, and Gabriel still does not recognise a single building that he walks past, or a junction that he crosses, or a street that he turns into. For hours he has searched for Jimmy, then Emmanuel, and finally Bright, but he now understands that these directionless streets were not laid out to welcome the feet of newcomers. (*Distant* 176)

The imagery of this passage demonstrates that Phillips is keenly aware of the fake welcoming face of London. The author therefore has Gabriel driven away to northernmost England where the latter may stand the chance – which I understand as both opportunity and risk – to interact with English individuals. Gabriel thus follows a social worker's advice to change names and leave London.

However, Gabriel's moving from London to the north of England hardly solves the problem of racial prejudice. The author shows that it does not matter who Gabriel is or what he has done: 'race' itself is a factor of non-belonging. Gabriel himself cannot come to terms with the reason why he receives such xenophobic treatment in a place he has dreamed of as a safe haven. The human interaction he longs for comes in the form of antagonism. His moving from London (alienating and anonymous) to Stoneleigh (a closed society in which the newcomer cannot escape being noticed) becomes a metaphor of his growing isolation and imprisonment in himself.

Yet, *A Distant Shore* makes the reader believe in human possibility and presents the conviction that the individual can exceed the national discourse. This is evident in the clear contrast between the popular racism that Solomon faces in his new environment and Dorothy's idiosyncrasy in befriending him. Indeed, whereas her parents "disliked coloureds", Dorothy likes everything about Gabriel, from the way he dresses to his driving style and his whole decorum.⁶ He can provide the human interaction Dorothy needs. She takes a stand against populist racist discourse and even contemplates her happiness through Solomon:

⁶ However, as Bénédicte Lédent suggests, "one cannot help thinking that Dorothy, whose conservative mentality is clearly that of 'the anti-asylum voter' (Harding 63), would never have been attracted to Solomon if his marginality had not been associated with some outward sign of decency" ("Of" 156-7). This claim is supported by the fact that her attraction to Solomon is in sharp contrast to her dislike for the black man that robs and assaults her sister. While the 'criminal' fulminates in threatening her, Dorothy "stares at him and wonders what possible nobility Sheila sees in such savages [against whom she has refused to testify]. He was...standing there ...[t]wo steps removed from the jungle" (*Distant* 265). However, my reading gives more attention to the ways in which Dorothy develops as a character, and to the commonality of loneliness between her and Solomon.

“[he] was a man who could have made me happy” (*Distant* 65). Hankering after making a home in the village, Solomon is disillusioned with Stoneleigh. The only communion allowed him is that established by his and Dorothy’s shared loneliness. Dorothy notes: “Like me, [Gabriel] is a lone bird” (*Distant* 14). In his house, Solomon has no (black) family pictures on the walls except that of a middle-aged white man – Mike. Here, Solomon anticipates a place where family ceases to be a matter of race relation. Instead, however, he will be persecuted in the village; not simply because he is a newcomer, but because he is black.

On a personal level, lack of communication is a hurdle to the negotiation of space. As in London, Solomon still gets lost in Stoneleigh not only because of his marginalization as the only black in the village, but also because he cannot share his story. Thus, he suffers the same condition as Leila in *The Final Passage*, who “is characterized by both her silence and her longing to break it. [Her inner needs] remain unspoken” (Innes 25). When finally he meets Dorothy, Solomon feels like opening up, but will not have the opportunity to share his inner crisis.

The question of how Gabriel intends to integrate into English society is crucial because of his being divided between a past he cannot re-visit and a present that is hostile. Gabriel's trauma is different from Dorothy’s, although both are equally devastating. In both cases reprieve is a semblance. In “‘Acting-out’ and ‘working-through’ Trauma’, a conversation with Amos Goldberg, Dominick LaCapra lays out the psychological state of traumatised subjects such as Gabriel, arguing that they “have the tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it” (2). This happens in the case of subjects being caught in the process of “acting-out” trauma and who undergo a series of repeated “nightmares” (ibid 2).

Although LaCapra’s theorising is focused on the historian, it nevertheless has important bearings when transferred to the subject of study. Following LaCapra’s theory of trauma, it appears that in *A Distant Shore* Gabriel cannot “transcend acting-out the past” (ibid 2) because he has no structure to replace it with in England. The unexpected hostility of the people of Weston and Stoneleigh hinders his chance to “create” (Phillips in Goldman 115) a peaceful home and does not allow him to break with his burdening past. LaCapra explains this situation by arguing that, for a victim of trauma like Gabriel, the only way to “work-through” trauma is to recreate a life in England:

[working-through trauma] may never entirely transcend an attachment to a lost other, over some kind of identification with a lost other, but one may generate countervailing forces so that the person can reengage an interest in life. One

sign of this in the process of mourning is the ability to find a new partner, to marry...and not to be so enmeshed in the grieving that the present doesn't exist for you. (in Goldberg 6)

But Gabriel/Solomon is not given the opportunity to reorient himself toward the present. Indeed, he is denied his wishes: he is drowned before he has had a chance to *work through* his friendship with Dorothy, just as he was earlier extracted from Hamma when he tried to make a connection with her. In the end, Solomon is still Gabriel as he is still imprisoned in his traumatic past. Gabriel will never be whole because the link that could have helped him “work through” his trauma is broken: for him the past must be deleted, and yet he himself is deleted from the present by his premature death. Even more unfortunate is the fact that the only real friend he will make in Stoneleigh shares his condition of exclusion in her own homeland.

2.3 – Messing with National Identity

Phillips's reaction against England's sense of national identity as continuity shows in the opening words of his novel: "England has changed" (*Distant* 3). The statement is made by Dorothy, who proceeds to inform the reader that she finds this change "disturbing". Through these words, we understand that immigration is "disturbing" to the narrative of Englishness. In this section I raise the question of how Solomon will negotiate belonging as an asylum-seeker when his very presence is perceived as threatening by the natives. Why and how does being English require racial identification? Phillips integrates the search for home within a definition of identity, both of which are inscribed in the narrative of English national imagining. Coming to grips with the notion of identity and its rapport with constructs of home and belonging is a reflective activity that further complicates and confuses the definition of identity.

In "The Question of Cultural Identity", Stuart Hall argues that the post-modern subject is "historically, not biologically, defined" and its structure shifts according to social, cultural and political mutations (274-277). The dynamism of the notion of identity, as historicised by Hall, reveals the crisis that sees a post-modern ethics of representation falling apart. This is reflected in English society, which displays obvious patterns of identity fragmentation. Phillips explains that his work, and that of many others "born outside Britain", "display[s] a tendency to both experiment with discontinuities of time, and revel in the disruption of conventional narrative order". Such narrative experimentation reflects the (im)migrant writer's experience of Britain, and his attempts to challenge its narrative of homogeneity:

what stirs the writer into feeling that the relationship with Britain is discordant is Britain's desire to promote herself as a homogeneous country whose purity is underscored not only by race and class, but, perhaps more importantly, by a sense of continuity. (*New World* 291-2)

Whereas change has always been a characteristic of English society, this observation urges another reading of the novel's opening words, now in the imperative: 'England has to change'.

In his introduction to his valued work, *Out Of Place*, Ian Baucom relates to Gayatri C. Spivak's notion that "Empire messes with identity", "indicat[ing] that empire can equally disrupt the cultural identity of a colonizing nation" (14). Post-colonial critics and social

theorists (Hall, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, to name only a few) observe the disruption of Englishness as it struggles to maintain its fantastic belief in the purity of English identity in the presence of its colonial other. To integrate the previously colonised subject into mainstream British national identity further proves impossible in the post 9/11 world where the other is not only scrutinised and objectified, but where fear of the other is systematically instrumentalised. It is no accident that Gabriel shares a cell with the Middle Eastern Said⁷ on arrival in England. With Gabriel (as alleged rapist) being perceived as a threat to racial purity, and Said marked as a potential terror threat, Phillips grapples with the contemporary Western world's fear and loathing of its racial and religious others.

The English racial fantasy proves unsustainable in the face of the history of the country. Ford Madox Ford's *The Spirit of the People: An Analysis of the English Mind* emphasises, in the early twentieth-century, the absurdity of the English "theory of race purity" (Baucom 15):

In the case of people descended from Romans, from Britons...from Germans, from Jews, a people so mixed that there is in it hardly a man who can point to seven generations of purely English blood, it is almost absurd to use the almost obsolescent word 'race.' (qtd. in Baucom 17)

The diversity of English national origins is shown symbolically in the novel through the Andersons as a family of individuals not related by blood: Mr and Mrs Anderson are from Scotland; Mike is Irish; Solomon is from Africa. The bond they form in northern England surpasses their national identities as tied to their locations of origin. Although living under the same roof, none of them is from Weston, or from England. Instead, these individuals congregate into a "new tribe", in a new grouping that rejects commonality of race and national origin as the basis for communalism. Viewed from this perspective, we understand why the author stages betrayal during the encounter between Gabriel and Emmanuel. He does so in order to refuse an essentialist understanding of community based on race or national origin. While Ford and Phillips demonstrate the indefensibility of the notion of pure Englishness, the most striking feature of this fantasy is its refusal to acknowledge that "England has changed" and to do away with the persistent racial "manichean allegory". It is against this denial of social reality that Phillips writes.

In *A Distant Shore* Phillips conveys some of his conceptions of identity and belonging. He admits in "Home, Blood and Belonging", a conversation with Paula Goldman, that his writing

⁷ This could be interpreted as an authorial deliberate echo of Edward Said's name in order to historicise the predicament that Middle Eastern immigrants face in the West.

is only “an attempt to answer [the] question” of where home is and concludes: “It’s okay that home can’t just be summed up in one sentence. It’s okay that you can’t put your finger on a map and say that’s where you’re from” (in Goldman 115). What adds to Phillips’s personal view of identity and belonging is his understanding of the new condition of the individual in a new world order: “We have yet to accept the fact that the old descriptions which usually have to do with religion or with nationality are actually inadequate for our new condition. We’ve got old labels but we’ve got new people. I write for the new people, for whom the old labels don’t fit” (in Goldman 115-6). This applies both to the marginal black and the ostracised white British who, as in the case of Dorothy, is an “other”, although she is an English native and apparently part of the majority. As Phillips strives to show, the “old labels don’t fit” for Dorothy.

Dorothy is the character that embodies this “other” discourse because, although white and English, she can be read as a minority voice. It is she who breaks the taboo of acknowledgement with her statement: “England has changed”. This three-word sentence sums up the contemporaneous reality of English society. She adds: “These days it’s difficult to tell who’s from around here and who’s not. Who belongs and who’s a stranger. It’s disturbing” (*Distant* 3). What makes Dorothy an outcast in the novel is perhaps not merely her mental instability, but rather the ways in which Phillips uses her to represent a discourse that is needed – by those in the margins – and denied – by the majority narrative; as Phillips conveys in the novel’s opening words, this is a discourse of disturbance. Phillips thus presents Dorothy’s acknowledgement of change as an unsettling “*diagnosis*” of the “disruption of national identity” (Clingman 50-51; emphasis in orig.) that, in turn, makes her a native “other” at home. I consider her story as a valuable opportunity to re-visit the notion of belonging and home and use this articulation in relation to, and as an instance for analysing, Gabriel’s position as an asylum-seeker.

A Distant Shore, notes Benedict Ledent, “examines the state of contemporary Britain which is reluctantly coming to terms with the social and cultural changes taking place in her midst” (“Caryl Phillips” 3). The following passage, occurring on the first page of the novel, and coming after the leitmotiv phrase “England has changed”, tells us, with a satirical undertone, more about the textual meaning woven around Dorothy’s character and the status

of her society:

I moved out here to this new development of Stoneleigh. None of the villagers seem comfortable with the term 'new development'. They simply call Stoneleigh the 'new houses on the hill'. After all, our houses are set on the edge of Weston, a village that is hardly going to give up its name and identity because some developer has seen a way to make a quick buck. (*Distant* 3)

Along with her initial diagnosis of change, this depiction of the condition in which Dorothy settles in her house after her early retirement demonstrates that she is disturbed by the resistance to change around her. Dorothy's difficulties in walking up the hill to reach her house in "the new development" show her grappling with the new direction her life is taking. This stifling feeling of hers will last until she meets Solomon and sees herself in him. She admits: "I glance out of the window, half-hoping to find Solomon washing his car, but there is nobody in sight. Then I understand the strange feeling that has come over me. Loneliness." She adds: "In the town there are plenty of dark faces, but in this village he's alone. And maybe he feels alone" (*Distant* 37, 45). Dorothy grows out of the English myth of purity and decides to embrace the other; but her embryonic friendship with Solomon brings forth painful memories and ultimately, his death crushes her.

Dorothy symbolises the authorial attempt to disrupt national identity and zero in on individual identity. Although her life prior to meeting Solomon is pregnant with meaning in terms of understanding how the individual grapples with a sense of self destabilized by individual experiences, it is her life as Solomon's friend that offers an insight into the nature and conditions of 21st century metropolitan identity. Dorothy's existence is far from being a paradigm, and yet it is in the fragmented structure of her personality that we can find evidence of an essentially non-racially categorised English identity. As the pariah of English purity, Dorothy breaks the ban of essentialism by opening herself up to a brief love affair with Mahmood the Punjabi, and to communion with Solomon. The text suggests that dialogue can make space for heterogeneity and set the cornerstone for a "new world order" (see Phillips in Goldman 122). Indeed, prior to her and Mamood becoming lovers, Dorothy had invited him in "as an opportunity for social intercourse and cultural exchange in an English home" (*Distant* 200).

For Phillips the individual represents a genuine site for negotiating cross-cultural relationships. He proposes that multiculturalism is "too broad, too complicated" a term to rely on (Phillips in Goldman 120) and one that, to quote Alexander and Alleyne, is heavily coated

with “political trumpeting” (542) alongside which

“the debates on race and ethnicity have coalesced (or congealed) ... in the ethnicity-rich guise of a pluralist ‘cultural difference’ ... that has served to reify and reinforce essentialist ideals of ‘community’, experience’ and ‘belonging’ within a multiculturalist landscape and legislates the racialized common sense of public discourse and policy” (543-4).

Phillips argues that “[r]eal multiculturalism is, ‘Mum, this is Abdul. I’m marrying him.’ That’s multiculturalism. Because it has to be in the family, on a personal level” (in Goldman 120). While the politics of identity enacted in multicultural policies categorise and essentialise people, when the individual embraces the other without prejudice of race, location or religion, true multiculturalism can be inscribed in the core of the society.

With no family to speak of, Dorothy finds in the other the solace that she has been craving for all her life. Solomon becomes the missing piece that would fill the void left by her loss. By remaining faithful to the reality of places such as Weston and Stoneleigh, Phillips denies Dorothy the bracing experience of cross-racial and cross-cultural personal relationship. This denial serves not to reject multiculturalism, but rather to infuse the reality that “England has changed” by insisting that this “change” means society has to move beyond the retrograde racial “manichean allegory”. How then does the author define the notions of home, belonging and identity for one who suffers complete loss of family and social rejection?

2.4 – The Economy of Asylum

This section unveils a discourse that insidiously permeates the private lives of people in the margins, for whom the England of *A Distant Shore* is a place of non-belonging. After fleeing from London, Solomon's search for asylum leads him to Stoneleigh where, far from finding repose, he is stoned to death. Dorothy is sent to an asylum when her mind collapses largely due to her sister's and Solomon's deaths. I will show in this section that asylum allegorises both a wish to end the narrative of national identity as well as the persistence of this narrative. Caryl Phillips puts two forms of asylum in conversation: political asylum and mental asylum. This conversation sustains his opinion that the search for 'home' is the concern of the native as well as of the stranger.

Political asylum concerns the condition of exile, of forced immigration under dire circumstances. Phillips's interest in political asylum seems to mark an intention to address "the reformulation of the global geopolitical map in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001" (Alexander & Alleyne 544). In "Reflections on Exile", Edward Said defines "exile" as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (137). Despite the fact that exile has been the "potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture" (ibid 137), the refugee's right to his/her humanity has not yet been recognised accordingly. In fact, he/she is treated simply as outsider whose right to a new existence is adamantly denied. In the novel, Solomon's brief stay in Stoneleigh evinces the continuation of his "postcolonial passage", wherein grappling with racism remains one of the persistent currents.

In order to discuss political asylum, I intend to focus on the boundaries of the identity negotiations of asylum-seekers, instead of dwelling on the conditions that produce these subjects; for, as Es'kia Mphahlele argues in "Africa in Exile", "[i]t does not make an essential difference" what reasons preside at the point of departure (120). In the preface to his book, *Cultures of Exile and the Experience of Refugeeness*, Stephen Dobson contextualises the condition of contemporary asylum, noting that it "betrays a modern fascination with the sequestration of experience" whose meaning we can find in "the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, or belonging and non-belonging" (7). The key word here is "boundaries" whose modes of negotiation I am interested in. *A Distant Shore* is an examination of the precariousness of asylum-seekers trying to integrate into their host country. Phillips explores this condition through the change of names, from Gabriel to Solomon, by which means the

character remains in internal and geographical transit while at the same time trying to pass unnoticed: he cannot go back and is not allowed a brighter future. In order to discuss the nature of political asylum in *A Distant Shore*, I rely on the novel's description of the penitentiary space as it metaphorises the individual's entrapment and vulnerability within the space of the host country (namely the space within and around the cell in which Gabriel and his "friend" Said (*Distant* 75) are being kept).

Presented as a condition of asylum, the prison becomes allegorical of the social space of England. The cell Gabriel is held in is a barren, confined space. His movements are restricted to "[crossing] to the door of the cell" (*Distant* 75) and jumping from one bunk to another. Gabriel is only able to imagine what the outside world looks like as his vision reaches only to the other end of the hall, where he can see the warden's feet on his desk and the television's flickering image on the wall. He laments from within his cell: "Beyond this prison is England" (*Distant* 77). Later, after he is released, Gabriel practically resumes life behind bars when he establishes himself in Stoneleigh. Living in utter loneliness, he barricades himself "behind his blinds" (*Distant* 34) in order to avoid exposure and what Mphahlele calls the "[v]ulnerable" state of the refugee/exile (125). For him, then, England is a continuation of the prison, rather than a liberating space lying "beyond" it.

Like Gilroy's slave ship, the cell also represents a chronotope – the space/time conjunction of the "new world order" – wherein the narrator identifies the status of refugees: that they have no rights. According to Giorgio Agamben, "[i]t is necessary resolutely to separate the concept of the refugee from that of the 'Rights of man' in the nation-state" ("We Refugees"⁸). The refugee's rights are not recognized, as we see in the novel when Said suffers and dies of lack of medical care in the cell; and Gabriel suffers the trauma of spending the night in the cell with Said's corpse. The space of the cell indeed becomes the space of social death (see Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*), as did the slave ships of a previous era. It is the social worker, Katherine, who warns Gabriel of the facts: "Remember, you have no rights in this country, and they can just throw you out" (*Distant* 116).

The menacing figure of the prison night warden, who represents the space between Gabriel and freedom, is metonymic of the legal system in England. He is "a tall stocky man, and his dark uniform, and the jangling keys that hang from his belt, suggests a severity that is betrayed only by his boyish face" (*Distant* 75-6). The contrast between "severity" and "boyish face" designates the ambivalence of the role of the state in the granting of asylum. The

⁸ Agamben's title refers to and is borrowed from Hannah Arendt's 1943 article, "We Refugees".

description both humanises him and emphasises his function as a representative of the state. If (as Obrad Savić argues) the asylum-seeker or refugee “represents a central figure of our political and social life” whose protection is supposedly guaranteed by Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1-2), the sad reality is (as Ranja Khanna puts it) that “Asylum is, after all, the right of a state, and not of an individual” (373). The reluctance of the host society to recognise asylum-seekers’ rights is revealed in the night warden’s reluctance in helping when Gabriel begs him to attend to Said’s ailment. The warden, far from being the villain, stands as the pawn of the state. However, for Phillips asylum is not only the condition of the refugee and immigrant seeking the protection of the state.

The mental asylum is equally a prison of the self as well as the prison of the discourse of heterogeneity. When Solomon moves to Stoneleigh, he and Dorothy become each other’s friends. Therefore, when Solomon is murdered, Dorothy’s “nerves” collapse due to loneliness and the intense emotional loss. In the following soliloquy uttered from the space of the mental asylum, Dorothy displays her emotional state:

My heart remains a desert, but I tried. I had a feeling that Solomon understood me. This is not my home, and until they accept this, then I will be as purposefully silent as a bird in flight. Sometimes before dawn, as light begins to bleed slowly through the night sky, I will ease myself out of this bed and proceed to put on my day face. (*Distant* 312)

Not only is she, like Solomon, a “lone bird”, but her internment in the mental asylum makes day as unbearable as her “cell”. This shows in the slashing imagery of “light begins to bleed slowly through the night sky”. Whereas the asylum is supposedly a place of rest and recuperation, Dorothy remains disturbed. Yet, if asylum is a confining space, it does not contain her. However, while she is “as silent as a bird in flight”, she is not able to find a nest in which to rest.

Phillips brings together the two notions of asylum through expressive symmetries that convey the brutal treatments that both native and immigrant subjects receive. In the prison cell, Gabriel is tied down as if in a strait jacket: “Both of his hands and his feet are strapped down and he cannot move” (*Distant* 94-5). Similarly, in the mental asylum, nurses strap Dorothy down when she becomes disturbed. A further symmetry is the concern both Solomon and Dorothy share for friends and family: after Said’s death, Gabriel begs for his friend’s family to be informed; and Dorothy tortures herself with the knowledge that Solomon’s family might be *out there* and that they should also be informed of his murder. Whereas both the

state and the national discourse annihilate the individual, Phillips foregrounds the individual as a figure enmeshed in various personal relationships.

The above quoted passage of Dorothy's thoughts in the mental asylum, as well as the general conduct of the character who articulates it, suggest that the hospital for the mentally impaired in which Dorothy is interned is allegorical of an English national discourse that resists change. With Solomon, Dorothy had found refuge from a life-long anxiety of being insecure around people, be they boyfriends, neighbours or even family. But she has come to recognize that "England has changed", a realisation which, beyond her feeling of disturbance, suggests that she is at least able to acknowledge the change and eventually embrace it, as she later does through her friendship with Solomon. Her statement after Solomon's death that "This is not my home" makes us think that Dorothy was able to feel at home around Solomon only. Her being locked away – like Solomon's murder – becomes synonymous with a social refusal to acknowledge change.

Michel Foucault's definition of asylum can help us uncover the meaning behind Dorothy's madness and internment. For Foucault, asylum is less a place of healing than a place of hiding the truth about ourselves. It is where we hide what we are – the disturbing reflection of ourselves; and we make of asylum the only place where we can be whole and truthful towards ourselves. More relevant to my argument is Foucault's notion of asylum as ultimately the place where we send the societal facets that we choose to deny. David Cooper argues in his introduction to Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* that:

Foucault makes it clear that the invention of madness is in fact nothing less than a peculiar disease of our civilization. We choose to conjure up this disease in order to evade a certain moment of our own existence – the moment of disturbance, of penetrating vision into the depths of ourselves. (viii)

That "moment of disturbance" reaches back to Dorothy's own "disturbing" acknowledgement of the change taking place around her. Her disturbance reveals, in the prime of her friendship with Solomon, that she has grown out of her society's mindset because she has acknowledged change and accepted it.

Dispatching Dorothy to the asylum thus becomes the expression of the banishment of an alternative discourse that is not welcome in England. She becomes the bad seed and her confinement the image of the intractability of society. This stance surely finds resonance in Foucault's meaning of asylum and its occupant, the leper or the madman (sic.). Foucault makes it clear that it is not so much the illness, the disturbed subject or the asylum institution

that are important, but rather “the values and images attached to the figure [of madness] as well as the meaning of [their] exclusion” (*Madness* 4). In fact, according to Foucault, it is “the social importance of that insistent and fearful figure which was not driven off without first being inscribed within a sacred circle” (ibid 4). I argue that the “sacred circle” referred to by Foucault finds a contextual meaning in the novel, referring to the society that claims to be homogeneous.

The asylum is not Dorothy’s home; nor is Weston or Stoneleigh any more. She belongs and yet does not belong. Agamben would argue that she suffers the post-modern condition of exclusive inclusion: Dorothy is excluded from her society precisely because she belongs to it; and simultaneously, she is rejected because, although she is a member, she no longer shares its seeming confidence in mere orderliness (see *Homo* 19-22). That seems to be why, in a surge of rhetorical programmatic new life decisions, she takes to wearing a face of “deceptive appearances” the same way the society does (Ledent, “Of” 156). Dorothy’s social presence is erased along with the memory of Solomon, which only she holds dear. In the end, Dorothy perhaps does indeed find a home in her mind, where she breathes harmony and peace as a “lone bird”: here at least she can live undisturbed in friendship with Solomon, and the newly-found peace with the memory of her dead sister.

Through the re-visiting of memory in the asylum, the text achieves recognition of the fragmentation and danger of family – with Dorothy coming to accept that her father was a sexual predator – and of society – with Solomon’s hosts as murderers. Sending Dorothy and Gabriel into asylum serves a double purpose for Phillips. On the one hand, he underscores the fact that remembering can be therapeutic even as this process can at times deny the subject (Solomon) the possibility of a new beginning. Gabriel’s brutal death at the hands of racist skinheads similarly deprives asylum of its true meaning as place of rest and recollection. English society as allegorised in Dorothy’s asylum, being a place of anxiety, is no different from what he experienced in his originary country. Dorothy tells us that “The unit, as they like to call it when they’re being official, is supposed to be a place that’s different from out there” (*Distant* 392). This “out there”, which points to the world outside the walls of asylum, could also easily be linked to Solomon’s country where neither the massacre of the villagers by his companions of war, nor the massacre of his family, is dissimilar from the condition of his death: being stoned, drowned, left lying face down in the canal. Indeed, Stoneleigh was supposed to be “different from” Africa. Although he depicts characters as victims of social

exclusion, Phillips concludes the life of each character with “a gesture of belonging” (see Head 206). Dorothy finally reconciles with her sister, and Gabriel is able to recover history.

Through the unfortunate fates of Dorothy and Solomon, Phillips evokes the sway of socio-political discourses over the private lives of individuals. The similar fate of these characters suggests the author’s gesture toward deconstructing the racial “manichean allegory”. What emerges from this economy of asylum is the understanding that not only is the “manichean allegory” a mythic structure but also that individuals, through affective relationships with others, are the only suitable candidates to dismantle it.

Chapter 3 – Returning Home? Buchi Emecheta’s *The New Tribe*

This chapter takes an opposite course from the previous one: here the journey starts from a diasporic location and takes us to Africa. It also differs from the previous one in that, instead of abandoning the place of departure, the character involved visits Africa on a round-trip that ultimately returns him to England. This narrative trajectory underpins Buchi Emecheta’s *The New Tribe*. I will examine the reasons that produce the need to search for roots and explore the ways in which this voyage serves as a conduit for a productive relationship between the subject and his past, mediated by the disillusioned reality of the present. Although my analysis focuses on one character, I intend to integrate his search for roots within a broader narrative of historical rediscovery by subjects of the diaspora.

The New Tribe presents the story of a young black boy, Chester, given up for adoption by his mother to a white English family, which had previously adopted a white baby girl, Julia. In the absence of clear history of his origins, the only reference to Chester’s past is the story that his adoptive mother produces for him. As Chester and Julia grow up, his identity crisis strengthens. When Julia decides to run away from home on account of pregnancy, Chester feels betrayed and rootless. He sets out on a journey that leads him to an older, Nigerian man who teaches him through cooking “the first step[s] of being an African” (*New Tribe* 84); and eventually he decides to ferry to Africa – after swapping passports with a dubious Nigerian man, Jimoh – in search of the kingdom that his mother’s story had made him believe was waiting for him to claim. Chester will be disillusioned by the harshness of life in Africa, and by his realizing the deep schism between England and Africa and between the idea of ‘Africa’ – Africa as fiction – and everyday life in Africa. When he eventually returns to England, he recovers his repressed affection for his adoptive parents, reconnects with his black British girlfriend, Esther, and his white sister, Julia, and gains a sense of equilibrium in the space he had previously consigned to “an irrevocable past” (*New Tribe* 68).

I argue that Emecheta’s *The New Tribe* is particularly pivotal in terms of questioning and reassessing, validating and negating, the social imagining and functions of the notion of the return to Africa. Through a close reading of the text, I emphasise that, whereas I agree with Paul Gilroy et. al regarding the counter-productiveness of the discourse of essentialism (that emphasises the need to and possibility of the return to roots), I do so following a line of

argument that breaks free from their negating of Africa.⁹ I take the very idea of a return to a mythical past as an intellectual fallacy, if not a proof of bad faith. I argue that a focus on individuals' ways of negotiating their African past and everyday experience allows for a counter-position to, firstly, the negation of the value of Africa and, secondly, the essentialist imaginings of Africa (as enduringly primordial yet attainable) in contemporary diasporic identity formation.

I identify two positions in the diasporic scholarship on Africa. Firstly, those I call separatists, mostly of the 'historical diaspora,' who claim to have no more ties with Africa, or deny it as site of return for those in search of roots, and who do so, as I argue, largely due to the traumatic memory of slavery. Secondly, the essentialists,¹⁰ who think that Africa remains the historical location that can enable those in the diaspora to harmonize with their contemporary identities and make homes for themselves in their social environments by retrieving ideals of the past – either symbolically or literally – in the process of identity formation (for instance, Isidore Okpewho; Michael Echeruo; Ngugi wa Thiong'o).

On the one hand, Gilroy insists that the "Black Atlantic" identity, as an identity formed at the moment of extraction from Africa, is a cultural and political identity that is not purely affiliated to Africa. He articulates that "[t]he syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures alone supplies powerful reasons for resisting the idea that an untouched, pristine Africanity resides inside these forms, working a powerful magic of alterity in order to trigger repeatedly the perception of absolute identity" (*Black* 101). While I agree with Gilroy, my position strays from his when he debunks Africanity by locating it in pre-modernity in his endeavour to de-essentialise black identity. Another member of the historical diaspora, African-American Saidiya Hartman, is an important referential source here; not only does she bring new insight to my own understanding of the slave experience in her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, but the recurrence of the theme of disillusionment in this work indicates that the return journey might be viewed as a wasteful enterprise. Stuart Hall also bases his sense of separateness and difference from Africa on the idea of the impossibility of returning to a "mythical past". Nevertheless, Hall recognises the importance attached to the passions that are ignited due to the narrative of the Middle Passage. Thus, speaking of the Caribbean experience in Britain, he warns that "We should not, for a moment, underestimate

⁹ Masilela laments that Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* "expresses an unremitting disdainfulness for Africa, for things African, and for things that come from our 'Dark Continent'" ("Black Atlantic" par. 3).

¹⁰ Brenda Cooper uses the phrase "new essentialists" to refer to Afro-essentialists such as Isidore Okpewho who believe that the diaspora has some sort of symbolic connection with Africa. As Okpewho argues, "the race [in the locations of the historical diaspora would be] reaching back to an ancestral principle" (*African* xvii).

or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered essential identity entails” (“Cultural” 393).

On the other hand, the essentialist project (read: “new essentialist”¹¹ project) is utterly invested in this act of rediscovery. For instance Okpewho, of the contemporary diaspora, in his introduction to *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New Identities*, ponders the “centrality of Africa in the identity and outlook of blacks in Western society” (xi). For Okpewho, the idea of Africa as a metaphor of full recovery of black identity is a notion intrinsic to the black “collective psyche” (*African* xvii). Whereas I sympathise with Okpewho’s idea of the possibility of the “collective psyche” being linked to cultural retention and historical memory, I contend with the assumption that the African diaspora would have a “certain African instinct *that would be genetically passed on and retained for almost three centuries*” (*African* xvii; emphasis added).

I articulate my distinct position around a set of rhetorical questions addressing the issue of ‘return’. I will be asking such questions as: What is return? Where does one return to? Can the word have a conceivable meaning in the awareness, as Hartman acknowledges, that

The vision of an African continental family or a sable race standing shoulder to shoulder was born by captives, exiles and orphans and in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade. Racial solidarity was expressed in the language of kinship because it both evidenced the wound and attempted to heal it. The slave and the ex-slave wanted what had been severed: kin (6) [?]

What is at stake is the question of who the diasporic African is returning to. Considering the near impossibility of diasporic subjects drawing a genealogical tree as do native Africans who can “[recite] proudly their genealogies back ten and eleven generations” (Hartman 71), it becomes problematic to ‘return’ to a land where one would not be able to say ‘I am related to this person or that clan.’ Do the descendants of slavery have a duty to revisit the Middle Passage and return to the ancestral land? Does (re)visiting the Middle Passage or Africa imply returning? What roles do metaphors play in the project of return? How does the everyday impact on and fit in with the evocation of the traditional? Is tradition necessarily enmeshed with pre-modernity or a gender bias? Are cultural retentions situated in an abstract past or are they part of a contemporary, transcultural African experience?

¹¹ I prefer the use of the phrase “new essentialist” here because it contextualizes the contemporary debate on the theme of re-visiting of Africa by those in the diaspora.

This chapter seeks to engage with black scholarship on the myth of return to Africa through a close reading of *The New Tribe*. I will examine, proportionally to the scope and space of this chapter, various stances on the subject as they tend to oppose scholars of black cultural studies and criticism. *The New Tribe* advances my argument that (the notion of) returning is not a prerequisite for those in the diaspora to celebrate their ethnicity; rather, being instead a construct, the notion of return needs to establish conditions under which it can be considered. What springs from these conflicting ideas is that the notion of Africa still influences ways in which those within the historical diaspora define their views of home and the meaning of history.

As a consequence – whether direct or indirect – of some of the negative diasporic conceptions of the ‘homeland’, the notion of returning has for some become tainted with a congruent condescension. Indeed, the notion of returning to roots has been placed awkwardly side by side with that of a mythic past. On reading strands of black diaspora scholarship and its attempts at deconstructing the mythic (e.g. Gilroy and Hall), I make these observations: Africa is spoken of in its originality and factuality by these scholars only as a pre-modern world; every mention of returning alludes to images not only of a factually unattainable past, but also ones in which the occurrence and process of modernity is erased. Thus, the idea of a mythic past tends to negate and erase African modernity and presents African societies as primitive, in remarkably similar ways to the representations of Africa within European imperial discourse.

This chapter is composed of four sections. In the first, I argue that the psychological and identity instability that triggers Chester's search for ‘roots’ results from defective multiracial family management, and is not inherently due to his blackness. The second section analyses the diasporic ontological search as one that is likely to fail, for the notion of return to a mythical past stands on shaky ground due to the near impossibility of pinpointing where to land and/or of locating family members. In the third section, I discuss the ways in which the novel frees Africa from the shackles of a diasporic imagining that has bound and frozen it in the past. I dedicate the fourth and last section to a feminist reading of a notion of return; I intend to argue against such a notion as it tends to reproduce (with intent or not) colonial metaphors of male-centeredness and patriarchal thinking; in the process, I show how metaphors of the motherland are deconstructed by the text.

3.1 – Contemporary English Family Narratives

This section centres on the manifestations of Chester's anxiety of (un)belonging in a strange society that he had long considered himself a part of. Whereas society is too broad and ambiguous a construct, I focus on family as it tends to represent the basic environment for identity formation, whether in an assumingly homogenous or multicultural milieu.

A focus on the Arlington family allows me to offer a close reading of interactions between its members. Chester, the main protagonist, is a black child given up for adoption to the Arlingtons by his Nigerian birth mother after she had read in the local newspaper that the Arlingtons had previously adopted a white baby girl, Julia, abandoned in a phone booth a few hours after her birth. Arthur and Ginny Arlington raise both Chester and Julia in a caring and loving environment. Chester's adoptive mother, Ginny, the daughter of retired colonial administrators, "had settled for staying at home" until she received a late marriage offer from Arthur Arlington, the newly appointed vicar of St Simon's church. The couple cannot have children of their own, and their adoption of Julia and of Chester is described as a blessing; the "fact that Chester was black only added to their feelings of having been specially chosen" (*New Tribe* 6).

Among the claims I make is that it is not his sense of blackness that triggers Chester's identity crisis; rather, it is produced by his parent's objectification of his colour. My aim is not to blame but to trace the conditions of insecurity that grow into Chester's desire to conduct the quest of returning to Africa. The novel seems to convey the idea that the search for roots is not an aspect inherent to blackness; instead, we are shown that there are specific conditions that help to shape the diasporic need to seek the past.

To advance this argument we need to ask: How can the family that loves and cares for Chester be blamed for his sense of rootlessness and his subsequent decision to journey to Africa? What accounts for the child's "sense of unbelonging" (*New Tribe* 12)? Does the trip represent the inevitable conduit as part of the inherent "psyche" of black people, as Isidore Okpewho suggests? What is the place of race in the enterprise of searching for roots? Coming back to my theoretical framework – in an attempt to answer these questions – it seems central to ask also: how and to what degree does the discourse of race and belonging in British society impact on multicultural family relations—and can we even speak of such a family? What is the nature and what diagnosis do we make of contemporary British multiracial society? A focus on the Arlington family, as the sphere of everyday life (for Chester), allows

for a broader analytical framework, as the story of the family becomes also allegorical of English national narratives.

Emecheta's narrator offers the reader a reliable framework from which to begin devising various answers to these questions. These are wrapped up in what it seems fair to call the parents' benign ignorance. Ignorance, here, accounts for an innocent perpetuation of colonial narratives of objectification of what Edward Said would call, in the word's generic sense, the "Other" (see *Orientalism*). Early in the novel, the narrator delimits the origins of Chester's anxiety in his social environment as a black, and not merely an adopted, child. We find the source of this particular angst at the preparation for school's Christmas activities when Chester is chosen to perform as the King of the Orient in the biblical story of nativity. Most traumatic to the child is the public display and incorporation of his oddity amidst "a sea of white faces" (*New Tribe* 115).

Adding to the fear of display are the gradual but assertive fallacious enumerations of the place Chester is supposed to have come from. At this moment what I identify as benign ignorance in terms of intentional to objectify is revealed as based on a grave ignorance of African historiography. As Chester "[tried on his costume] over and over again," his mother cries, "You are a real African king!" On the day of the play, it is his father's turn to add to the joke; he "laughed and said jovially, 'Chester, king of the Orient'." After he is told the Orient was the East, Chester asks his mother what the East is and Ginny answers: "Africa is the East. Where your people come from" (*New Tribe* 12). This interaction between family members starts with benign allegories before impinging with shattering impact on the child's psyche.

The effects of Ginny's words on Chester are devastating: "In bed that night, he thought about her words. 'Your people.' He thought the Arlingtons were his people. The sense of unbelonging strengthened" (*New Tribe* 12). Although Chester has already been feeling the symptoms of being what Clair Alexander calls the "British anomaly" (552), as the only black kid in the village, this sentiment pales in comparison with the effect his parents' words have on him. Emecheta thus underlines the role of family in the psychological equilibrium of the child and his/her confrontation with reality. In fact, having Chester put on the Christmas costume exemplifies Clement Abiaziem Okafor's argument, in his article "Exile and Identity in Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe*", that Chester's identity was defined by others (Okafor 116) rather than through his own endeavour (at least, I argue, until he returns from Africa). One of "the defining moment[s] of Chester's life", Okafor notes, "occurs when the vicar

informs him of the circumstances of his adoption [after the episode of the Christmas play]” (116). At this point of his life, his father flips the last page that tells the story of his birth.

Chester’s enterprise in searching for his roots stems from the circumstances of his adoption. As the “adoption proceedings [drag] on”, his mother decides “to try and keep alive for Chester some memories of where he came from” (*New Tribe* 8). Ginny constructs Chester’s (hi)story from a repertoire of images gathered from what we, following V.Y. Mudimbe, might want to call the “colonial library”. She goes to the public library and since there “[a]re no children’s books about Africa...she decide[s] to make one” (*New Tribe* 8) that tells of Chester’s origins. In Ginny’s story, which is adapted from a Nigerian folktale, Chester is an African prince who had to be sent away for reasons of safety. When the traditional doctor suspects that the child would be in grave danger, he advises the pregnant mother to give birth out of the village; at birth, the child is entrusted by his mother to a white couple who smuggle him out of Nigeria and take him to England. After the couple’s sudden death, their house girl takes care of the child. Ginny reads this story repeatedly to the boy, who ends up knowing it by heart. As he grows up, especially “after the [vicar’s] revelation about his mother”, Chester starts “to have a recurrent dream” which then “acquired concrete images and a definite theme” borrowed from the story Ginny had created for him (*New Tribe* 16). Chester believes this revelation to be a version of what he thinks to be true regarding the history of his origins: fiction becomes reality and the real story its modified version. To the child, then, the story of the book becomes more real than his present reality.

Chester’s story appears as a fictionalised fiction; a sort of single-stage *mise en abîme* in which Chester plays a double role: besides being Emecheta’s fictional character, his supposed original circumstances are merely a figment of Ginny’s imagination. This specific feature of the novel has significant import in analysing the nature of the contemporary English family, which is the focus of this section. The parents’ (ir)responsibility in fostering Chester’s sense of alienation is shown by the role his mother plays in trying to reconstitute – or rather, create – “some memories of where he came from” (*New Tribe* 8), even though her only clue as to where to begin her project is a vague idea about Nigeria, the biological mother’s country of origin.

The story Ginny produces for Chester presents him with an alternative family narrative. For her, Chester’s blackness and the Nigerian origins of his mother tie him essentially to Africa. Ginny’s unintended harm results, I argue, from her embedding in a culture that prompts her to enter the colonial “library” (*New Tribe* 8), which stands for her immediate

repository of knowledge of the rest of the world, as the daughter of retired colonial administrators. In a sense her knowledge of history and geography is informed by her cultural heritage. In fact, her creativity “is not epistemologically inventive”; rather, “[i]t follows a path prescribed by tradition” (Mudimbe 16). I argue that by creating this story out of the materials at hand in the “colonial library”, Ginny’s narrative is embedded in an essentialist discourse.

The child nurtures his feeling of alienation within the family; his blackness – once objectified in the Christmas play scene – being a constant reminder of the boundary that separates him from the Arlingtons and bringing him closer to his ‘idea of Africa’, produced in his dream. As reality and fiction mingle in Chester’s concrete experience, the family grows apart as Ginny unconsciously makes clear the racial divide between ‘them’ – the white family – and ‘him’ – the black component. We read this distinction prior to Arthur Arlington’s informing both children of the circumstances of their adoption. Chester says to his sister: “It’s OK Julia, you are white like them. You are their child, but I’m different” (*New Tribe* 13). Okafor points out that Julia could easily be mistaken for an Arlington by birth (Okafor 116), but Chester could not.

Having internalised the essentialist perspective created by his adoptive mother, Chester finds solace in identifying with a black family. After he leaves home, he searches for affiliations among the people who look like him. Although the dream of his kingdom is a powerful catalyst of his alienation, it is his contact with African family life that strengthens his sense of rootlessness in England. Chester remembers Enoch Ugwu whom he met in St Simon at the resort where he worked during school holidays. There, Chester had met the Ugwu family, the first black people he had ever seen in his life. Later, after seeking out Enoch Ugwu when he leaves the Arlington home, Chester lives with this family for about two years. Through this family, Chester is introduced to African culture and learns to become African: “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 was brought up with” (*New Tribe* 88). Enoch Ugwu, whom Chester learns to call Uncle Ugwu, is like a father to him. As he becomes fond of African ways, Chester is further drawn to Africa and to the kingdom of his dream.

Family appears as an important concept in the novel’s re-imagining of the Middle Passage and its negating of the theme of return. Ginny’s story of Chester’s origin and her comment about “your people” implicitly express her denial of being Chester’s mother on racial grounds. His journey to Africa thus also reads as a search for a real family. To explore this

proposition, I draw upon the novel's parallel with Saidiya Hartman's notion of the lost mother. For Hartman, the diasporic subject needs to have kin on the other side of the Atlantic in order to contemplate the notion of return. The lack of kin is symbolically expressed through the absence of a mother; thus does Hartman draw the line between the historical diaspora and native Africans (6). Hartman suggests that Africa was lost to the slaves and their descendants from the moment they were separated from kin. She notes that "the slaves had been forced to *forget mother*, now their descendants were being encouraged to do the impossible to reclaim her" (162; emphasis in orig.).

The novel takes up this problematic. Chester's mother was lost when he was forsaken to the Arlingtons; even "his dream did not show him his mother's face" (*New Tribe* 121).¹² Yet, although *The New Tribe* shows similarities with Hartman's thesis, it ultimately goes beyond it. Even as the journey into the ancestral space evinces diasporic loss and the absence of a point of reference – that is, the loss of mother – it nonetheless offers opportunities for looking towards diasporic spaces as sites of home, in novel and productive ways.

The narrator shows that for all Chester's efforts to reconnect with the past, it is in his present relationships with fellow blacks from Africa that new connections can be forged. After Jimoh has returned to Nigeria he writes to Chester, now back in England. The signature of the letter – "Your Friend and Brother in God" (*New Tribe* 149) – suggests that the novelist does not endorse the belief in an essentialist identity, based on race, shared between those in the diaspora and those in Africa, and discards blood relations in her new definition of family, which is based on fraternal friendship. The trip to Nigeria reveals to Chester that his supposed royal African origins were the product of his adoptive mother's imagination: he is not a prince and, more importantly, his father is not a king, but a member of the historical diaspora. This revelation casts more confusion on the boy's relation to Africa. But if Chester has no family in Africa, what is the nature of his ties to the continent, as son of the diaspora?

If the quest for biological kin is a failure in terms of locating actual family members in Nigeria, Chester's trip to Africa proves to be productive beyond expectation. Three major steps conclude his quest during which he reaches a definition of a family that best suits him.¹³ Firstly, he feels rejected by the white English family in an allegory of the exclusions of English national discourse. Secondly, his trip to Africa is a failure regarding the attempt to

¹² In *A Distant Shore* Gabriel also cannot see his mother's face: "[he] reaches down and pulls back [his mother's] shoulder in order that he might look into her eyes, but there is no face" (*Distant* 132).

¹³ Here the verb "to suit" is a pun intended to refer back to the robe Chester is given to wear in the Christmas play, which results in his identity crisis.

search for his imagined original kingdom. Thirdly, Chester is not disillusioned by the failure to locate his kingdom, but instead returns to England with a sense of accomplishment.

What then is the “new tribe” that the novel’s title encapsulates? My proposed answer is threefold. Firstly, the “new tribe” is comprised of the generation of blacks, the likes of Esther, Chester’s girlfriend, who despite the lingering discourse of racial bias manage to make a living in England by daily celebrating their diasporic identities. Unlike Chester, Esther is rooted in the everyday, and has a good relation with her actual mother, in contrast to Chester’s mythological one. Her status as a black British subject is not at stake, and she believes that the notion of roots that Chester subscribes to is obsolete. Secondly, the “new tribe” includes the subjects such as Chester for whom the journey into the ancestral land adds value to their diasporic selves. The failure of Chester’s quest becomes productive in that it opens his eyes to reality by de-mythologising Africa. Thirdly, the “new tribe”, in that it also includes Jimoh and Julia, becomes an inclusive grouping able to encompass Africans, white English and black British individuals.

3.2 – Rhetoric of Return

Emecheta frames the notion of return in a rhetoric that eventually refuses it. In the novel, the Arlingtons initially live a quiet life, until ‘race’ emerges from the hidden columns of the book of ontological history and slips through the fragile foundations of multiculturalism. Chester quickly develops a sense of “unbelonging” (*New Tribe* 12) which, I have argued, is less the result of outward racism (such as that faced by Phillips’s Gabriel/Solomon) than of familial mishandling of sensitive matters regarding race and origin. As he grapples with the difficult task of making sense of his self within the white family and a society that stubbornly chooses to identify itself as homogeneous, Chester is burdened with the “bizarre mission” (*New Tribe* 125) of finding his roots.

The first leg of Chester’s journey originates at a holiday resort on the seaside in St Simon where he meets Enoch Ugwu and his two children. It then leads him to Liverpool where he lives for two years among the Ugwus. In Liverpool, Chester also meets his girlfriend, Esther, a young black British woman who works at the Council, and befriends Jimoh, an asylum-seeking Nigerian man, who assists him in organising his trip to Nigeria. In general, Chester’s stay at the Ugwus is positive, softening the path of his search for the lost kingdom. His decision to travel to Africa is solidified by Jimoh, who enters into Chester’s life at a time when the latter is desperate to find answers to his questions of identity, self and historical meaning. Unaware that Chester’s dream is in fact based on a Nigerian folktale (as mediated through Ginny), Jimoh confirms its authenticity, and then suggests to Chester that they swap passports so that he is able to enter Nigeria in search of the kingdom of his dream. With the agreement that both Jimoh’s wife and brother will meet him on arrival in Nigeria, Chester boards the ship *Sisi-Eko* as a free man embracing his destiny.

His journey to Africa nonetheless has as subtext a narrative of slavery and the Middle Passage through which Emecheta confronts the past with the present. Although the kingdom of his dream was a powerful presence in Chester’s troubled life, the text emphasises another determining event that strengthens his desire to seek his ‘roots’. This event is an historical and educational revelation to Chester: he has read about an event taking place in his town called “The Equiano Week”. Besides the title of the scheduled talk, “The life of Oulaudah Equiano”, what captivates Chester’s attention and seals his fate to that of the historical figure seems to be the single word “African” in the lecture description: “The eighteenth century *African* who

was sold as a slave, became a free citizen of England and wrote a celebrated autobiography which influenced the Abolitionist Movement” (*New Tribe* 51; emphasis added).

That Chester takes the event as a landmark in his journey of self-discovery reveals the narrator’s interest in the relation between the historical diaspora and Africa. The relevance of Olaudah Equiano’s story here is to mark the pioneering of diasporic notions of the motherland. This encounter with history gives Chester a sense of belonging somewhere out of England among people who look like him, since his place with the white family has become problematic; his hankering to attend the talk associates with his intuitive – though inculcated – knowledge that if he is black he too must have come from Africa, like Equiano.

As a novelist of the contemporary diaspora who has espoused a liminal identity not only as a means to deal with her blackness in a predominantly white culture, but also as a woman who expresses her mistrust in the patriarchal tropes of return to Africa, Emecheta revisits the Middle Passage, adopting an equally liminal discourse as she evokes (as does Phillips) the trans-Atlantic slave trade. *The New Tribe* acknowledges that Africa as motherland was lost to slaves as soon as the wind of captivity started to blow: there is no returning to the motherland, even less to a mythical past.

I intend specifically to explore the way in which Emecheta negotiates her attempt at fictionalising a ‘return to roots’ that eventually ends with the character ‘returning to his diasporic’ location. Emecheta’s anti-essentialist perspective is akin to the one held in some African-American fictions (for instance, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*), in which, as Vernon Reid suggests, “[I]f anything is essentialized, it is the condition of the in-between, the condition of the boundary” (178). Here I understand boundary as the space where characters negotiate – rather than assume an unproblematic – connection to roots. The narrative voice in *The New Tribe* adopts a similar tone to what Kathie Birat finds in Phillips’s theorisations of the past in his travel and fiction writing: “re-examination of the past,” she notes, “will not be based on a simplistic desire to recover lost roots” (64).

In *The New Tribe*, the journey to Africa shakes free from and offers a rhetorical twist to the notion of return as the journey home eventually takes an opposite direction: from Africa back to the diaspora. This narrative twist seems to put forward the author’s awareness of the contemporaneous implications of the notion of home. This idea is illustrated in the novel as Chester prepares to leave England. The trip to Africa as a quest for lost roots does not equate to a permanent shift of location. Chester intends his journey to Nigeria (and the ancient

kingdom of Benin more specifically) to be one of self-examination: a process of identity re-negotiation undertaken by re-visiting the past. As he agrees on the passport swap with Jimoh, Chester explains that he anticipates returning to England: “I always wanted to see Africa, I just don’t want to lose my job here” (*New Tribe* 112). If one can speak of Chester’s returning, then, ‘home’ would be based in England rather than Africa. As Wendy W. Walters argues, “we can read contemporary diasporic literature as shifting from the concept of origin as the site of Return to the concept of the Diaspora itself as a home to which the writer [or his/her character] experiencing racial exclusion might return” (xiii). Emecheta's novel falls within this paradigm, even though she can speak of ‘home’ when going to either Nigeria or England, as she writes out of the diasporic condition she shares with many other displaced people around the world, whether within African boundaries – I have in mind the recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa in May 2008 – or in the West. Her presentation of Chester’s voyage allows her reader to dwell on the character’s encounter with history instead of wondering whether the character intends to ‘return’ or not. (This argument will be clarified as I will explore the boundaries that prevent an actual return to Africa in the next section).

The notion of return to Africa is impeded and denied by one important aspect, additional to the absence of family ties: the impossibility of retracing the historical path to original African locations. History and commonsense show that the slave ships did not leave tracks on the way to the new world (see Phillips, *Crossing* 237), which makes it impossible for Africans of the diaspora to find their way back to the ancestral land. When they try, the routes taken are often “fraught with insurmountable obstacles” (Gysin 183). In the novel, Chester faces a similar difficulty when he tries to reconnect with his past. The narrator symbolically presents this difficulty through a description of the traffic system in Nigeria, instead of the indescribable sea routes: “In the mad swirl of traffic, with so much hectic life rushing past the window,” Chester wonders how he will “find his kingdom in such a vast and chaotic country” (*New Tribe* 119). This chaotic “swirl” of “routes” reminds us of the “traffic” in slaves and particularly of Equiano’s *Narratives*, in which the author evokes the impossibility, experienced by him as an infant, of retracing his way to his mother’s village while he was still being herded to the African coast: even before embarking on the Middle Passage Equiano could not go back. Other obstacles that fictionalise the impossibility of return for those in the diaspora are represented by the roadblocks Chester encounters along his route: “Chester started noticing the number of roadblocks at which they had to stop for police inspection” (*New Tribe* 121).

To emphasise this idea of the impossibility of return, the novelist establishes a contrast between the contemporary diaspora's and the historical diaspora's links to Africa through Jimoh, who writes to Chester to share his future plans: "God has helped me too, and the money is enough to build the family home. Now I can go home ... and care for my wife and son" (*New Tribe* 148). While this episode might appear simplistic and even Afro-centric with regard to the contemporary migratory direction of South-to-North, it however has the value of attesting that it is relatively simple to theorise that the notion of actual return to Africa applies in praxis to those of the contemporary diaspora who still have family to return to or actual land to claim. Emecheta herself, though established in England, still has family in Nigeria and can pinpoint where to land on journeying 'home' to Africa. Such is the case in *The New Tribe* when Jimoh, after meeting his expectations of making enough money in the United Kingdom to enable him to build a church and a house for his family in Nigeria, is able to return 'home'. Whereas there is no evidence in the text suggesting that Africa is the exclusive possession or possessor of Africans, it clearly claims that circumstances and experience establish what is home for whom. Chester will return to England and Jimoh to Nigeria.

In Nigeria, Chester learns painfully that the kingdom of his dreams never existed, at least not in Africa. This experience accords Chester the tools with which to re-negotiate his diasporic identity by teaching him that the lost kingdom represents the attainment of the knowledge of his past, and that it is not necessarily located in Africa. He thus comes to understand the metaphoric nature of the lost kingdom, admitting after the mission fails that "[h]e no longer felt isolated and adrift, his head had cleared" (*New Tribe* 148). His spirit is lifted up on his way back to England after acknowledging that even though he did not find his kingdom – which never existed – he still felt at "home" in Africa (*New Tribe* 145). The feeling of being-at-home in England and being part of the Arlington family is, however, only possible after his trip to Africa. Thus this historical trip to Africa is an important one because it eases him of the burden of not knowing. As Okafor notes of Chester's trip to Africa:

Through it all, Chester emerges as a more complex personality that is endowed with self-confidence... It is true that he returns to England, which is one of the major diasporic sites, but he has been branded with the love of his ancestral homeland and healthy understanding of his own identity. Thus, he returns to his diasporic location not as a member of the new Black British Tribe but as a British African. (129)

Okafor usefully notes that Chester is not disillusioned by the contrasting realities between England and Nigeria. However, I differ from his description of Chester's new self, which is enmeshed in internal contradictions. Chester's "complex personality" is indeed what makes him "a member of the new Black British Tribe" since he becomes "a British African" *and* a "Black British". Furthermore, if we hold that essentialism should not be based on race (Cooper 22), the connection of blackness to Africa works in the novel as gesture toward recovering history. The fact that Chester was not born in Africa does not annihilate his feeling of connection with the ancestors' land (his mother being Nigerian and his father, as he discovers on returning to England, African-American). The ending of the novel and Okafor's reading of it differs from 'separatist' theorists who define the idea of return as being conceptually unproductive.

If, as I have attempted to demonstrate, we cannot speak of returning to the roots, the voyage itself should not too readily be discarded as atavistic. While Phillips's trip to Ghana, as represented in *The Atlantic Sound*, "is not a return home but rather an exploration of the impossibility of seeing Africa as the centre of cultural gravity for people separated by centuries of experience in other worlds" (Birat 64), the trip undertaken in *The New Tribe* is neither a "return home" nor the displacement of Africa as a "centre of cultural gravity" for the diaspora. *The New Tribe* points out that Chester's trip to Africa is what enables him to adopt his diasporic identity as a member of a "new tribe" in which Africa does not take centre stage, but remains a significant historical presence. Chester's mythical kingdom becomes an ideal place which is nowhere to be found, but which demands, however, that he summon an "imaginative balance between [past and present]" not by "resist[ing] a bondage to either of them," as Okpewho might argue (*Myth* 156), but rather by adopting a position of liminality which, as in the case for Emecheta herself, enables the subject to feel rooted on both sides of the "river".

3.3 – Africa: Land of Traumatic Memory and Fixation in Time

The New Tribe deconstructs metaphors of return, but not the journey per se. When Chester reaches the coast of Africa, he warmly welcomes the difference he perceives from his birth-country and the sense of community that he imagines to be based on a shared racial identity:

After Liverpool and Tilbury, Freetown and Takoradi were a revelation. [...] Above all, he was struck by the fact that everywhere he went he saw only black people [...]. Arriving at the Lagos Marina, therefore, Chester was already filled with a sense of homecoming. (*New Tribe* 115)

In contrast to England where “he has been the lone black in a sea of white faces” (*New Tribe* 115), he immediately feels part of this immense community. However, soon after setting foot on ancestral land, Chester’s journey becomes an ordeal, as he experiences both climatic and cultural shock: “he had started to feel faint, and black spots were dancing before his eyes. As he sat down, they cleared, and he realised it was the heat. He had never felt anything like it” (*New Tribe* 118). Chester is also shocked by the state of the roads as the driver, Karimu (Jimoh’s brother), “avoided pot-holes” while driving and by the recurrent images of poverty in the habitat: “From what he could see on his way, it was another dusty, ramshackle city, with shacks built of lumber-yard scraps and rusty corrugated iron sheets” (*New Tribe* 121), notwithstanding the fact that he is well accommodated in the ramshackle home of his hosts.

Chester’s feeling of homecoming on arrival in Africa contrasts with Phillips’s as represented in *The Atlantic Sound*. Chester is living out his fantasy of return, whereas Phillips knows his ‘home’ is England. However, even Phillips, on arrival in Africa, could not help giving in to the ‘motherly’ embrace of the continent. Driving from the airport in Ghana, he says: “[t]hrough the open window of the car the warm wind” personified as a maternal figure “strokes my face” (*Atlantic* 95). Chester’s experience is different in that the decision to travel was implanted in his subconscious by Ginny’s story; when images of pre-modernity drawn from the “colonial library” resurface, these carry seeds of disillusionment.

The concept of the “colonial library” that I employ in this thesis was coined by V.Y. Mudimbe, who argues that European imperialist discourse created a gnosis on/for Africa in which African societies are viewed as primitive. Regarding this gnosis, Mudimbe points out in *The Invention of Africa* that it is “the *episteme* [order of knowledge] of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that invented the concept of a static and prehistoric tradition” (189).

Buchi Emecheta fictionalises this concept in *The New Tribe* when Ginny decides to create a history for Chester from the material that she finds in her English library. Ginny's idea of Africa is represented in her providing a visual account of Nigerian traditional life: "On the cover she painted green banana trees, and tall, graceful palms, surrounding a mud-walled compound" (8). Within this compound live a king, his twelve wives and his subjects. Since the king needs a son, he summons a traditional practitioner to use his magical powers. The latter prepares a stew in which he throws a seed. The wife who eats the seed is supposedly the one who will bear the prince. Ultimately, it is Mpulasi, the one perpetually "left out" (*New Tribe* 43), who munches the seed. Pausing on the description of the compound, we find that the imagery is consistent with what Mudimbe calls the painting "of an exotic picture that creates a cultural difference ... thanks to an accumulation of accidental differences, namely nakedness, blackness, curly hair, bracelets, and strings of pearls" (9). In the novel, these visual images limn Chester's dream kingdom.

Compared to the scenes in his dream, Chester finds the reality of Africa disturbing. When Karimu drives Chester to the first palace they visit in search of his kingdom, he encounters the first defeat of his quest. He thinks that everything will reveal itself as he saw it in his dream. Disappointment awaits him: "Chester knew better than to expect something like Buckingham Palace, but he was not prepared for what he found. A broken road sign pointed them towards the palace and the museum". However, as "they came to the outer wall of the palace, Chester had a moment of recognition *because of the images in his dream*" (*New Tribe* 125-6; emphasis added). But this recognition is shown to be false; this is not the compound he was looking for. Whereas the character expects an Africa frozen in time awaiting his return, the text shows otherwise. This argument can further be clarified if we consider that the folktale refers to a period in a distant past. Although not centred on trans-Atlantic slavery, *The New Tribe* opens a window onto the effects it had and continues to have on contemporary diasporic and African lives. This shows not only in Chester's search for his lost village, but also in the spatio-temporal setting of his dream kingdom, which is located in the pre-modern past and in a part of Africa that was among the major sites of traffic in slaves: the kingdom of Benin.

The thematic of the frozen past is demonstrated in Hartman's non-fictional book, *Lose Your Mother*, which is less about returning to roots than about reliving and bearing witness to the slave trade. She argues that: "[t]he slave trade loomed larger for me than any memory of a glorious African past" (42). *The New Tribe* touches upon this traumatic theme when Chester trespasses and enters the royal chamber of the Oba of Benin. This happens when Chester and

Karimu wait for the Oba's son to be summoned. Chester becomes impatient and decides, uninvited, to explore the interior of the palace. This intrusion raises the alert and the "next instant, the two muscular men advanced and took him by the arms. Tall and strong as he was, Chester felt their iron grip and did not attempt to struggle" (*New Tribe* 129). After calm is restored, Karimu, his guide on the quest, could not help but chime in: "'I hope they no wan sacrifice us again...'" Chester had the distinct impression of having lost touch with reality, when a cultured voice spoke behind" (*New Tribe* 129). This quote serves two purposes. On the one hand, the introduction of the "cultured voice" breaks the narrative's link from pre-modernity, since the past participle used as an adjective can only evoke a Western-educated African. On the other hand, the pronominal object "us" evokes the bringing together of past and present in addressing two types of slavery: the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the intra-African slave trade.¹⁴

Diasporic literatures attempting to fictionalise the reverse Middle Passage more often than not fall into the pit of the slave narrative (for instance Phillips' *Crossing the River*, Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Alex Haley's *Roots*, to cite only a few). *Crossing the River* specifically spatio-temporally freezes Africa as the father who regrets selling off his children and is still looking out from the shore, two hundred and fifty years later. Narrative of slavery seems to have resisted the play of time and history. Whereas this thematic recurrence contributes to "historical awareness" (Birat 66) and the conceptualization of slave descent identity, it has the effect of fixing both the characters of fiction and their authors in time: at the traumatic moment of the slave trade. In response to this fixation, Stuart Hall usefully cautions: "We must not collude with the West which, precisely, 'normalizes...Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the 'primitive, unchanging past'" (qtd. in Halloran 2). By evoking both the iterability of slavery, as well as the intra-African institution of slavery, *The New Tribe* avoids such fixations.

Even as reality deconstructs the shaky foundations of his dream, a confused Chester proceeds to yet another compound in search of his kingdom: the palace of the Oba of Chamala, in which area the folktale describing his kingdom is supposedly recognised as belonging. The text confronts in clearer terms the construction of Africa as pre-modern when Chester arrives at this palace. While observing "[w]omen peering out from the huts, and from

¹⁴ Malupe Olaogun's essay, "Slavery and Etiological Discourses in the Writing of Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Buchi Emecheta" provides further enlightenment further on the slave trade internal to Africa.

nearby came the sounds of children at play, *almost a re-enactment of his dream*" (TNT 136; emphasis added), Chester is disillusioned and "surprised to hear that [the young Oba of Chamala] spoke with an American accent" (137). Once again, then, the novel places Africa in a contemporaneous transcultural context, thus, unfixing Africa from pre-modernity. Whereas this palace resembles more closely the images of his dream than the first, Chester again learns that he is at the wrong compound. After offering a meal to Chester and Karimu before sending them on their way again, the Oba of Chamala follows them in his car and tries to kill them because he thinks Chester is rich. It is, however, he who dies in the process as the car crashes. Shivering as a result of having narrowly escaped death, Karimu comments ironically: "Now Mister Chester, you don't see your kingdom proper!" (*New Tribe* 141). This comment marks the end of Chester's quest and the revelation of it as a sham.

The New Tribe proposes that resistance to essentialism sometimes has less to do with the concept per se than with the way in which relationships are negotiated. Karimu's words uttered at the first palace – "I hope they no wan sacrifice us again" – accords with Phillips's view that the new Afro-essentialist project is unsustainable as Africans, according to him, cannot address members of the historical diaspora as "brothers", because they are "the same 'brothers' they [Africans] helped sell into slavery" (*Atlantic* 114). Yet, by having Karimu, the African, call Chester "my brother", while articulating his concerns about being sacrificed by the Oba, Emecheta achieves a double purpose: she marks her disagreement with Phillip's transference of responsibility for the trans-Atlantic slavery onto contemporary Africans while condemning the enterprise of slavery as a whole.

For Emecheta, slavery in her part of Africa is not frozen in the past, nor is it necessarily a product of the Middle Passage. Her novel *The Slave Girl* is a "tribute to her [own] mother" (Olaogun 184) who was sold by her brother so that "he could use the money to buy [...] silk head and ties for his coming-of-age party" (Emecheta, *Head* 3) – for the same reasons Africans sold other Africans into the Atlantic slave trade. Contrary to Hartman's claim that "Africans did not sell their brothers and sisters into slavery", that "They sold strangers: those outside the web of kin and clan relationships" (5), Emecheta's oeuvre insists that brothers did indeed sell brothers – or sisters – not mere strangers, into slavery. As the narrator of Emecheta's *Gwendolene* notes, "slavery ... separated brother from brother" (100). Emecheta's oeuvre thus argues against the trend of the 'separatist' that produces two types of blacks in relation to the slave trade: the victims (the historical diaspora) and the perpetrators (native Africans), and which fixes Africa in a mythical, pre-modern past.

3.4 – Feminism and the Trope of Return

If the notion of return has been shown to take centre stage in the literatures and debates engaging Africa and its diaspora, it is, however, marked as notably problematic when viewed through the lens of gender. What Brenda Cooper describes as “[t]he big quest, the symbolic gesture, the Return to Africa” has often been understood as a “male” enterprise and engaged by male authors (Cooper 30). Emecheta, as Cooper notes, grapples with this quest “on gender grounds” (Cooper 23). In this respect, Emecheta echoes Alice Walker who has “explored both the Middle Passage and its mirror image, the quest for Africa ... from a [gendered] angle and aesthetics” (Junker 144). The irony in the case of *The New Tribe* is that the project of returning to Africa is encouraged by a female character – Ginny – through the story of origins she wrote for Chester. This section will engage the following questions: who does returning favour among the contemporary African diaspora? What place do female characters occupy in the project and how do they negotiate the return? What does feminist analysis add to the notion of return? I will attempt to answer these questions by analysing Chester’s life story as invented by his adoptive mother and by glancing into the lives of three female figures in *The New Tribe* (Esther, Jo and Mowunmi) and, as an additional reference, at the eponymous heroine of Emecheta’s earlier novel *Kehinde*.

I explore the gendered deconstruction of the notion of return using Ginny’s story as point of departure. In Ginny’s story, women play the role of African mothers, as canals for carrying the pre-established destinies of their sons. Although they are invested with the biological role of conceivers, their importance is limited to their possible fulfilment of men’s desires for sons. The feminist agenda of the novel rails against these concepts of natural roles; in the process, the narrative inscribing Chester’s story becomes a negation of metaphors of return, which are seen to sustain women’s subjugation under patriarchy. Cooper emphasises that Emecheta’s writing about this return of the lost son is in itself “transgressive” (31), as Emecheta appropriates and re-tells this patriarchal fantasy in an ironic mode.

In *Kehinde*, Emecheta theorises about the unproductiveness of women’s return to Africa as wives. When Kehinde follows her husband to Nigeria, she painfully learns as she leaves England that the trip gradually strips her of the relative freedom she had gained as a woman in Britain. Although she knows what “bowing down to tradition” entails, Kehinde’s mind and body will not just give way: “Here”, she wonders, “women were supposed to stick together and a wife to give her husband room enough to be a man” (*Kehinde* 89). Kehinde appears in

many respects like Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* who “clings to the hope of attaining happiness in marriage” (Sougou 43). But in the end, she leaves her husband in Nigeria and flies back to England, where she sighs in relief, breathing in her regained liberty as a mother and a woman

In *The New Tribe* Emecheta draws a portrait of traditional African wives as their roles are re-enacted in England. The fictional female figure through whom she undertakes this enquiry is Jo, the “new wife” Ugwu brings from Nigeria at the demand of his family when he goes visiting. Arriving in England, she initially plays the role of submissive wife. The text satirises this situation in this choral enumeration: “She cooked, cleaned, and ironed, and seemed to take it for granted that it was her job” (*New Tribe* 98). In Nigeria it is Jimoh’s wife, Mowunmi, who performs the putative female duties. Mowunmi appears largely erased by the male presence when she is not the sole performer of domestic duties: she “appeared with a plastic bucket of water for [Chester’s] bath” (122-3); she “brought boiled yams and vegetables” (*New Tribe* 123). Through the representation of these two women, the author criticises male attitudes that conceive of domestic duties as natural roles for women. According to Ifi Amadiune, however, if such roles are constructed by established, social gender categorizations the reality is that “sex [does not always] correspond to gender” (21). In Nigeria, Chester’s gendered expectations are also sometimes subverted. For instance, he is embarrassed and stunned when, as Mowunmi comes to fetch him at the dock, she “hoisted one of Chester’s bags onto her head” insisting, “It’s not heavy” (*New Tribe* 117).

Emecheta thus presents gender roles as potentially dynamic. With the example of Mowunmi in Nigeria and Jo in England, she evokes the theme of the wife and mother operating under male dominance. However, she departs from this notion of women’s powerlessness in *The New Tribe* by introducing Mowunmi who, although a devoted wife, juggles both domestic roles and religious leadership as the priestess of her husband’s church. When she appears before him “in a flowing white gown”, Chester is amazed “as the quiet spoken Mowunmi was transformed before his eyes into a spiritual leader” (*New Tribe* 134). Amadiune explains that Igbo Nigerians distinguish between “sexual division of labour and gender relation” (21). What she means here is that in this traditional community religious, political, and even economic leadership were spheres also accessible to women.

Across her oeuvre, then, Emecheta critiques aspects of African patriarchy while insisting that journeying to Africa is not exclusively inimical to black women, especially when the character’s journey is not viewed in terms of returning. However, gendered metaphors

attached to the notion of return are shown to screen African women's everyday presence in society. The absence of Chester's biological mother in his quest reveals Emecheta's quarrel with the theme of return on "gender grounds". In Chester's mind, his mother does not exist: her real identity is deleted, not only in, but also by, the tale. Indeed, when he learns of the circumstances of his adoption, Chester performs what Rhonda Cobham calls (in "Problems of Gender and History in *Things Fall Apart*") "selective incorporation" (172). Chester dismisses the knowledge of Catherine Mba as his birth mother and chooses to believe in the metaphoric 'reality' of the story that his dreams convey. The real mother's absence inversely emphasises the latter's metaphorical presence. As Elleke Boehmer suggests, while "symbolically [the mother] is ranged above the men" in metaphors of national imagining, "in reality she is kept below them" (233). In a sense, Emecheta satirizes the tendency that values metaphors in national and continental imagining over the realities that preside over the identities of diasporic people, and African women. If, as Boehmer argues, "image[s] of the mother invit[e] connotations of origins" (232), and considering that Catherine Mba figures nowhere during the account of the trip to Nigeria, we can read this erasure as a disruption of the project and notion of return to a putative origin or cultural essence.

The author, as a migrant writer, uses fiction as a means to produce spaces in which she and those of her kind strive to deal with their displacement. Yet, as Wendy W. Walters articulates, while diasporic writers "use fiction to perform their varied and multiple claims to home, [...] their texts also importantly perform a 'rhetoric of refusal'" (xxv). What Chester's "multiply mediated" story (Cooper 23) affirms is the value of creatively re-imagining concepts such as home through re-visitations of the continent of origin. What it refuses are the social and symbolic roles into which women are fixed in and by the rhetoric of return.

Emecheta seems to valorise the role of the mother, but does not excuse the ideology that subordinates women – by elevating them symbolically – in the name of a putative postcolonial nationalist or Pan-Africanist narrative (Biodun 194). The negation of the figure of Catherine Mba in the novel becomes a means of dissociating actual mothers from the metaphors of motherhood and motherland to which they are attached. When he returns to England and learns that his biological mother has made her appearance to claim him, Chester is not impressed. Instead, he immediately asks after his biological father: "Did she tell you who my father was?" (*New Tribe* 151). By revealing Chester's lack of interest in the re-appearance of his mother, the text achieves a catharsis whereby the realisation that there was never a lost kingdom to claim (now concretised by the information that his biological father

was African-American, rather than an African king) shifts the focus back on to the young man's real life. In the process, the narrator tears apart the myths that have thus far governed the trajectory of Chester's life.

I read *The New Tribe*, which represents a male-centred quest, as parody (see Cooper 31) of phallogentrism. The failure of Chester's quest thus serves as a counter-discourse responding to patriarchal tropes engaging and advancing the concept of return. Chester's futile attempt to claim the lost kingdom seems to be the key to understanding the author's re-imagining of the myth of return. The novel makes it clear that Chester's journey to Nigeria is unproductive in the sense that it does not meet his expectations: he does not find his kingdom. Whereas the novel does not mean to invalidate the existence of the folktale on which Ginny based her story, it obviously downplays and deconstructs the gender categories it inscribes.

Boehmer decries the tropes of Africa encoded in the male-centred quest, which seem to benefit only 'sons' instead of 'daughters' of Africa. She argues that, in nationalist narratives (or, in this case, diasporic narratives of return to Africa), the woman always has something to lose (232-234). It is no accident, then, that Emecheta paradoxically chooses Chester rather than, say, Esther as the character who has to conduct the quest. One cannot but notice the pun in the choice of names and gender designation. Esther reminds us of the biblical character who saves her people from a massacre orchestrated by her enemies, whereas Chester fails at his quest. In both the Bible and in the novel, Esther succeeds – it is she who rescues Chester and returns him to the reality of his life in England. The parody of this "male drama" (Boehmer 233) is further evident when it is read alongside Saidiya Hartman's historical account of the Kingdom of Benin. Hartman reveals that the differential value placed on 'sons' and 'daughters' ensured that it was generally only girls and young women who were dispatched into diasporic locations: "[m]ost of those taken from Benin were girls and women between the ages of ten and twenty. The *oba* (king) of Benin had restricted the sale of men and boys and eventually prohibited it" (63).

The status of women returning to or negotiating gender roles in African societies, and the ways in which the narrative of return is imagined through gendered tropes, is underpinned by constructions of Africa and tradition. Obioma Naemeka pertinently critiques a diasporic Africanist trend that "focus[es] on the idea of Africa rather than the reality of Africa", while she similarly castigates international women's studies programmes for "foregrounding of the notion of the African woman rather than the reality of the African woman" (364). The reality of Africa, as Emecheta shows, is that women can and do have access to power, such as is the

case with Mowunmi Emecheta's novel thus speaks to and offers ways of imagining Africa that challenge the tropes which marginalize the status of African women under the guise of nationalist or Pan-Africanist diasporic constructions of 'home', or under the mantle of a universal feminism practiced in 'women's studies' (as critiqued by Nnaemeka); both, she shows, have their discursive and imaginative origins in the "colonial library" which Ginny enters in order to invent Africa. As Cooper points out, metaphors of motherland and notions of return are "stubborn and inherited imperial ways of using certain kinds of symbols and metaphors, especially those relating to imagining the African continent and gender" (20).

Emecheta makes it clear that in contemporary diasporic returns, female characters (such as Kehinde) are most likely to regret the journey, which appeals largely to characters who rely on 'tradition' to establish themselves back 'home', and who brush away African modernity. However, the text suggests that this construct is untenable given the reality of contemporary Africa. By reading the two narratives – both Ginny's and Emecheta's – in conversation, it becomes clear that Emecheta is deconstructing the connotation of tradition, stripping it of its pre-modern, timeless attributes. Tradition is ultimately shown to refer to contemporary cultural practices encompassing retentions that have survived through time to the present, while being adapted in ongoing and dynamic negotiations of inherited gender identities.

Chapter 4 – Conclusion

I chose to analyse *A Distant Shore* alongside *The New Tribe* because the two novels share common concerns such as the re-visiting of the Middle Passage of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Caryl Phillips and Buchi Emecheta address the re-negotiation of identity in novel ways, not only excavating their character's lived and imagined pasts but also in featuring England as the final place where these negotiations occur. The most compelling contrast between the two texts lies in the trajectories of their narratives: Phillips's Gabriel flees Africa to land in England, while Emecheta sends Chester on a visit to Nigeria. The directions of their journeys open up a range of responses to the questions that this thesis asks concerning the re-visiting of history and the re-negotiation of identity in diasporic writings of Africa.

A Distant Shore features a world in which characters' lives are set adrift. Their individual histories and experiences constitute the conditions of Gabriel/Solomon's and Dorothy's exile (be it internal exile, in the case of Dorothy, or external exile, in the case of Gabriel/Solomon). As the novel demonstrates, their respective idiosyncrasies and representative status become labels through which the society at large, representative of the dominant English national discourse, brands them as outsiders.

To Dorothy, Stoneleigh initially represents her idea of refuge; but it turns out to be her place of exile. Similarly, Gabriel's flight from his unnamed country to England figures as his desperate search for a place of reprieve, yet this hope of Solomon's is dashed upon the rocks of Stoneleigh. The novel reads allegorically in its presentation of the search for asylum. As Benedict Ledent puts it: "While [the topography of the new development] roots the village in the real, it also demands to be read figuratively, as if Stoneleigh stood for England as a whole, or even for the world in miniature" ("Of" 157). If the conditions of exile and asylum are engaged within the specific paradigm suggested by Gabriel's presence in England as an African asylum-seeker, Dorothy's parallel search for asylum within her country of origin suggests a broader encoding of asylum. For Phillips, asylum becomes metonymic of the human condition wherein one is rendered unwelcome as soon as you fail to meet the conservative criteria of the dominant discourse (see Phillips, *New World*). While painting a bleak picture of English society, *A Distant Shore* seeks to expand possibilities for individuals to find 'homes' for themselves that do not entrap them in nationalistic, cultural or racial categories. Phillips counsels displaced persons not to be anxious about not having any

concrete sense of home because, as he notes in his conversation with Paula Goldman:

[i]t's when we hang on to these artificial strict, and narrow, definitions of ourselves—then I think we're in for real problems. *Serious* problems, because as we see in the Middle East, as we see in Ireland, as we see in Rwanda, as we see all over the world...As soon as we let something as stupid and superficial as complexion, or what God you happen to worship, or what day you happen to worship—as soon as you let that be the defining factor of who you are, to the exclusion of your capacity to love—you're in big trouble (“Home, Blood, and Belonging” 122; emphasis in orig.)

It is Phillips's belief that, through the capacity to love who they are and where they happen to be, displaced people have in them the potential to make home anywhere in the world. However, there is a concession to this somewhat optimistic message, as Phillips concedes: Gabriel's murder shows the extent at which individual plans can sometimes be thwarted by the social circumstances in which 'others' happen to find themselves.

On the other hand, in *The New Tribe* Emecheta tells of Chester journeying to Africa with a view to returning to England. Even as she pledges to the importance of Nigerian Igbo traditions, and the key role they have played in her literary career,¹⁵ Emecheta selects what in these traditions is productive for her as an individual woman, mother, and writer; she rejects, in particular, the patriarchal gender categorisations that are ascribed to 'tradition'.

While valuing Africa and aspects of Igbo tradition, then, Emecheta does not encourage a wholesale return to roots. Instead, *The New Tribe* parodies that project. The novel shows that the word 'return' is untenable; rather than seeking to 'go back', it prioritises the journey. The space that opens up in the text between Ginny's narrative of Chester's origins as the prince of a lost kingdom and Chester's own experiences in Africa after journeying there foregrounds this distinction and the critique that Emecheta is making. By confronting fiction with reality, myth with fact, and English experience with African experience, in other words, by deconstructing metaphors with lived experience, Emecheta succeeds in fictionally deconstructing the myth of return.

Emecheta does not write about return, rather she writes, as Walters puts it, against a “vision of home” in which the “yearning of ... male characters replay a patriarchal vision of the homeland that is ultimately injurious to postcolonial women” (Walters 109). As shown in

¹⁵ See for instance her comments in “Feminism with small ‘f’”, where she says of her writing: “I am simply doing what my Big Mother was doing for free about thirty years ago” (552).

this thesis, Chester's unsuccessful quest – enacted through the trope of return – constitutes a mockery of postcolonial patriarchal visions.

At the same time, Emecheta seems to believe in the importance of finding out about one's roots. Her presentation of Chester's trip to Africa is thus not similar to the ways the journey is portrayed by some diasporic writers who end their stories in suspension, leaving the reader unable to establish whether the quest has been successful or not (Gysin 183). Julie Holmes notes in "Just an Igbo woman" that, as a postcolonial first generation diasporic woman writer living in England, Emecheta "has never forgotten her roots" and pays frequent visits to her natal Nigeria "to confront the changing traditional culture". Emecheta explains: "I keep my two worlds, my two cultures" (in Holmes). Emecheta's sense of identity and home, then, is not retrograde; rather it is dynamic and is inscribed with the project of refuting essentialist patriarchal agendas and their attachment to the symbolism of pre-colonial cultures that are, in turn, shown to be fabulous constructs enshrined in the "colonial library".

Comparing Phillips's and Emecheta's reimagining of slavery, we find a definite distinction between their approaches. Emecheta identifies and lays blame on the perpetrators who profited from the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The story of Chester and Karimu's near death experience establishes responsibilities, especially when Karimu answers to Chester's concern: "But na the leaders de rob well, well, not the poor people". This is a point Saidiya Hartman emphasises, arguing that those sold to slave traffickers were the "commoners". Thus she wonders about the Africa that members of the diaspora are supposed to return to: "[w]as it the Africa of royals and great states or the Africa of disposable commoners?" (30). As Chester journeys with Karimu, and as the two of them fend off the Oba's attack on their lives that is committed, as in the slaving past, in search of self-enrichment, he is redirected away from the fantasies of royal origins and great states that sustain return narratives and toward new everyday solidarities with African commoners. Emecheta's Afro-centric efforts to render the texture of everyday life in Africa and to explore the conditions for diasporic connection thus paradoxically sustain the refusal of Africa as "site of return" (Walters xiii).

Some of the challenges of returning to Africa and forging connections with Africans are revealed in Phillips's travelogue, *The Atlantic Sound*, and Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (both of which generically foreground the value of the journey rather than the moment of arrival). Each encounter xenophobic comments during their separate visits to Ghana. Phillips is baffled by the attitude of an African intellectual, Dr Mohamed Ben Abdallah, who shows unconditional reverence for pre-colonial Africa. Dr Abdallah, a member of the committee of

the Panafest – a cultural festival to advance the ideas of Pan-Africanism and the development of the African continent – designates Phillips as a stranger in his comment about the slave forts: “For us, they do not mean the same thing as they do for you people” (*Atlantic* 118). Earlier in the discussion Phillips had asked him about the importance he ascribes to the past. Wary of the brutal commodifications of persons that took place in the past Dr Abdallah vaunts, and which have rendered him a “stranger”, Phillips questions this impulse to return: “Are you sure, I ask, that there is virtue in going back to retrieve it? Dr Abdallah is sure: ‘The African past is the key to our future’” (116). Mindful of the schism that has opened up between the diaspora and the continent of origin, Phillips emphasises, on travelling to Ghana: “... *I am not going home*” (*Atlantic Sound* 98; emphasis in orig.). Hartman recognises the same impossibility. Like Phillips, she also reproduces conversations with Africans that cast her out of a kinship relation with Africans. Thus she conveys her consternation with the attitude displayed by an African researcher, who calls her “My friend from the diaspora”: “‘My friend from the diaspora,’ was how Akan addressed me, in contrast to the rest of the group whom he called his brothers and sisters from the continent [as if] the Africa in my hyphenated African-American identity had [no]thing to do with their Africa” (215).

Re-visiting history in the wake of a traumatic past is a complicated enterprise. Emecheta and Phillips both reflect on this in the dreams of Gabriel and Chester in which, in both instances, the face of the mother is obscured. Both use these as emblematic textual moments to shift the focus of the characters from the past and redirect them towards the present as the site for re-negotiating identity. Emecheta succeeds in transcending the kind of essentialist discourse that results in separatism, and which Phillips and Hartman both flounder upon in their trans-Atlantic journeys. The bond she creates between Chester and Jimoh is cross-cultural, cross-national, and cross-Atlantic. Their friendship appears in contrast to the encounter Phillips stages between Emmanuel and Gabriel in London, where Emmanuel bases his claim to brotherhood on bonds of place and race, and then uses it to cheat and rob Gabriel. Both Emecheta and Phillips thus endorse stepping over the boundaries of blood and race in order to attain a “new world order” in which individuals would be able to form a “new tribe”. They demand that their host/home societies acknowledge that “England has changed” and that it is high time the “new tribe” was recognised as the new collective comprising English nationality. As Phillips puts it, “the old labels don’t fit [any more]” (in Goldman 116).

While sharing common concerns, their fictions – with their different trajectories and varying degrees of resolution – reveal their divergent self-locations. Phillips claims that his

spiritual home is located in the mid-Atlantic (Phillips in Jaggi 2). Emecheta's "new home" is England, but she does not reject Nigeria, while critiquing aspects of its gender politics as well as of its chaotic socio-economic and political situation. Instead, Emecheta locates herself at the boundaries of and in both England and Nigeria. Even though the lives of both central characters – Gabriel/Solomon and Chester – end in diasporic locations, a marked difference underpins their fates as, respectively, African immigrant and Black British returnee. Phillips, as a writer of the historical diaspora, brings Gabriel's attempts to make home in England to a violent end. Prior to his death, Gabriel reclaims his identity as the "son of an [African] elder" and refuses to have his "blood drawn like a slave's", thus emphasising his male Africanity and distinguishing himself from descendents of the historical diaspora. In the end, Solomon remains in the limbo of never fully leaving his African country and never reaching his place of asylum. Each of these two locations can be no more than a distant shore. Conversely, Emecheta, as a member of the contemporary diaspora who revels in her liminal identity, sends her character, Chester, back to England. The final scenes show him enriched by his visit to Africa while the horizons of his future open up to him.

In conclusion, it needs to be said that more scholarship needs to be undertaken on the ambivalent relationship between Africa and its diaspora, and on the nature of contemporary multiculturalism in diasporic locations. This mini thesis can only claim to have opened up the canvas on which to paint the complex negotiations that haunt this subject. I intend to pursue this line of enquiry in my doctoral studies, and hope to be able to elicit further insights on it in my forthcoming research.

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