



Black British Literature: Quest for Identity in the works of Bernardine Evaristo

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Abstract: *The essence of 'Black British Literature' which became current in the 1970s and was designed to describe the writing of authors based in Britain but with origins in former British colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It was at that time a political rather than a purely racial label, pointing to a common experience of postcolonial migration, alienation and discrimination, combined with an oblique yet potentially subversive assertion of attachment to Britain. This explains why writers of Asian origin such as Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, both of Indian heritage or even Kazuo Ishiguro with roots in Japan, were in the 1980s and 1990s un-problematically included in a wide ranging category which also involved artists more obviously 'black' like Ben Okri, born in Nigeria, or Linton Kwesi Johnson, born in Jamaica. However, the term has lost some of its early scope, and now conventionally refers to authors of African and Caribbean descent.*

Key words: *Black British Literature, Asia, Africa and Caribbean, Fiction, Bernadine Evaristo, Lara.*

This Research Paper concerns with the essence of 'Black British Literature' which became current in the 1970s and was designed to describe the writing of authors based in Britain but with origins in former British colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It was at that time a political rather than a purely racial label, pointing to a common experience of postcolonial migration, alienation and discrimination, combined with an oblique yet potentially subversive assertion of attachment to Britain. This explains why writers of Asian origin such as Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, both of Indian heritage or even Kazuo Ishiguro with roots in Japan, were in the 1980s and 1990s un-problematically included in a wide ranging category which also involved artists more obviously 'black' like Ben Okri, born in Nigeria, or Linton Kwesi Johnson, born in Jamaica. However, the term has lost some of its early scope, and now conventionally refers to authors of African and Caribbean descent. Writers with Asian roots are today often subsumed under the 'British Asian or Asian British' banner.

It is often assumed that 'Black British Literature' refers to a literary tradition which developed only after the Second World War, in the wake of the arrival of the empire Windrush, the ship that in 1948 brought Jamaican immigrants to London and was therefore assumed to be the starting point of the black presence in Britain. It may be convenient to give a literary tradition such a starting point, but it should not be forgotten that there had been a sizeable body of texts pre-dating the work of pioneer figures like Samuel Selvon or George Lamming, two writers from the Caribbean who started to publish after their arrival in London in 1950, and had a major impact on the subsequent generations of writers coming from the former empire. An exclusive focus on this post-war period obliterates black contributions to British literature from earlier generations, such as Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative (1789)*, or Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands (1857)*.

Similarly, the role played in the 1930s by literary figures like C.L.R. James from Trinidad or Una Marson from Jamaica, who both spent a part of their lives in England and actively participated in intellectual debates in English radical circles, should not be underestimated. 'Black British Literature' viewed as a time limited phenomenon attached to post war migration to England, some of whom are of mixed parentage, like Anglo-Jamaican Zadie Smith or Anglo- Nigerian Diana Evans, and whose allegiance might for these reasons be more domestic than was the case for their predecessors. It will become difficult to view 'Black British Literature' as marked only by displacement and migration, as its



representatives are increasingly, born and bred Britons, more interested in the here and now than in their ancestral culture.

‘Black British Literature’ is often thought to be located in fiction, the most popular and the most publicized contemporary genre, or in poetry, especially when it is performative, for this form is usually associated with artists coming from cultures with a strong oral tradition like, many African societies and those of the Caribbean. It is true that most of the best performance poets in Britain today are from the black community. Famous names include John Agard, Patience Agbabi, Lemn Sissay, Benjamin Zephaniah. Interestingly, ‘Black British’ writing is rarely associated by the general reader with non-fiction, especially essay writing. However, many ‘Black British’ writers, most of who are university graduates have used non fictional forms to explore their ambiguous sense of belonging to Britain. Examples include, George Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Caryl Phillip’s *The European Tribe* (1987), Mike Phillip’s *London Crossings: A Biography of Black Britain* (2001).

‘Black British’ writing is characterized by its variety and originality, qualities which have contributed to the invigorating effect it has had on English literature. It has played a decisive role in the thematic and formal renewal of a variety of literary traditions. It would be impossible to pin down a typical ‘Black British’ fiction, a genre which displays notable versatility. However, there are clearly recurrent preoccupations in ‘Black British’ fictional writing which are part of its specificity, such as a keen interest in history, often combined with a special concern for ‘otherness’, not only racial, but also sexual and sometimes religious. These themes obviously have their origin in the writers’ attempts to come to terms with their own complex cultural background and with their identity as individuals who do belong to Britain yet have been made to feel that they are not fully part of it. These novels are timely reminders of a painful episode in history which was long left uncharted, not to say obliterated, though it was the source of much of Britain’s wealth and could to some extent be seen as establishing the black presence on British territory. They also establish a link between the exploitation of the past and continuing discrimination, racial or economic in the present. Black writers have been at the forefront of unraveling the economic and psychological relationships at the heart of the Empire. The earliest examples from Olaudah Equiano to Ignatius Sancho in the 18th century have been about the recovery of self, through autobiographical narratives. Their books, as well as being campaign tracts against slavery, also sought to declare through a first person insistence, their own humanity, against the abuses of Empire.

This paper is an attempt to study Black British writing in the works of one of the contemporary Black British writers, Bernardine Evaristo. Evaristo was born in London to an English mother and a Nigerian father. The fourth of eight siblings, she was raised in Woolwich, South London, and originally trained as an actress and worked in theatre. She is the author of two critically acclaimed novels in verse: *Lara* (1997), which traces the roots of a mixed-race English-Nigerian-Brazilian-Irish Family over 150 years, three continents and seven generations; and *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), the ground breaking tragic comic story of Zuleika, a girl of Sudanese parents, who grows up in Roman London 1800 years ago and who has an affair with the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus. Her novel in verse, *Soul Tourists* (2005) is about a car journey across Europe starring a mismatched couple, Stanley and Jessie, with cameo appearances en route from ghosts of colour from European history such as Pushkin, Alessandro de Medici and Mary Seacole. Her novel *Blonde Roots* was published in 2008 and in 2010, she wrote the Quick Reads novella, *Hello Mum*. Her latest novel, *Mr. Loverman* (2014), is about a 74 year old Caribbean London man who is closet homosexual.

Evaristo’s works of fiction as well as non-fiction explore the aspects of the African Diaspora. She notably experiments with form and narrative perspectives, often merging the past with the present, fiction with poetry, factual with the speculative. The works of such contemporary writers present emerging issues such as Post-colonialism, LGBT Fiction, new perspectives of Diaspora studies, hybridity of culture and so on, because they borrowed the thoughts and ideas prevailing in contemporary literature all around the world even including the third world literatures. When the British writing was at stake after the Second World War and the ethnic British confined themselves from empire to welfare state, these Black British women writers raised the issues based upon resistance and resilience prevailing in contemporary times. The neo-millennial generation of Black British writers is less embattled than their post-colonial parents on account of (m)otheringness. They are now re-writing Britain’s literary history as well as drafting its future.

Lara (1997), her first verse novel was a critical success and reached a number of short lists for literary prizes, winning the EMMA Best Novel Award in 1999. Blending lyrical poetry and fictional prose, fact and fantasy, history and myth, Evaristo’s exuberant debut defies easy or singular definition. Set in the 1970s, it tells the story of a young girl growing up in the white London suburb of Woolwich. However, the novel is not as historically or geographically limited as such an account suggests. Lara’s journey of self-discovery, as she becomes increasingly aware of her racial difference, is also a journey that takes her to three continents: Africa (Nigeria), Latin America (Brazil) and Europe (Turkey, France, Spain). Lara travels across nations and generations in narrating the life of its protagonist, whose ancestry is Nigerian, Brazilian, English and Irish. In handling this complex genealogy the narrative travels across time and space, transcending



the confines of suburban life. It is basically a powerful semi-autobiographical novel in verse based on Bernardine Evaristo's own childhood and family history. The eponymous Lara is a mixed race girl. Her father is Nigerian and her mother, Ellen a white British. They marry in the 1950s despite of fierce opposition from Ellen's family and have eight children.

The novel travels back over 150 years, seven generations and three continents of Lara's ancestry. It is the story of Irish Catholics leaving generations of rural hardships behind and ascending to a rigid middle class in England; of German immigrants escaping poverty and seeking to build a new life in 19th century London and of proud Yoruba enslaved in Brazil, free in colonial Nigeria and hopeful in post-war London. Lara sets off with an excursion into cultural history and memory of the black people. The book is introduced by a Yoruba proverb, "**However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source.**" As the layers of the family history are uncovered, the reader listens to a number of narrative voices and is taken to different continents: we start in Europe, go to Africa, cross over to South America and finish in Europe again. The prologue of the book offers another metaphor for the dispersion and reunion of the family, namely the metaphor of a baobab tree whose seed is, "**planted, [...] carried over the ocean, [and which] burst[s] into life**" (Evaristo 1997: 1). Already the first chapter, set in 1949, alludes to one of the dominant themes: to alienation and otherness. The first out of a variety of narrative voices is that of Taiwo, a Nigerian, who managed to pursue his studies in Britain. His idea of Britain is based solely on the views proposed in the programs of British Broadcasting House. The adoption of these ideas traps him immediately into white British way of thinking. After hearing slogans such as, "**London calling the Empire! Calling the Empire! Come in Nigeria!**" he imagined that his journey to Britain would be comparable to "**riding whale to paradise!**" (3). He believed that his arrival and stay would be one of welcome, success and eventually proud return. However, Taiwo in a number of letters home conveys a gradual recognition of the uptight society in Britain which, on the one hand, invites you but which, on the other hand, does not want to assimilate colonial cultures. Taiwo realizes that quite soon: "**this country is like fisherman's bait, Mama. It attracts, you bite, than you are trapped**" (4).

The theme of alienation and otherness involves racial tension. Taiwo senses it: "**Mama, in this country I am coloured. Back home I was just me**" (4). The society pushes him into a predefined space and role. He personifies a victim of British stereotypes. Taiwo even has to abandon his native name because: "**an African name closes doors**" (5), not only figuratively but also physically as nobody would accept blacks as tenants. Thus he finds himself in an awkward position: though invited, he is pushed to the very edge of the society. The theme of alienation and otherness gets a new dimension when Taiwo meets and falls in love with a white girl named Ellen. Out of the marriage of Ellen and Taiwo, Omilara, or Lara, as they call her, is born. As a child of mixed parentage, Lara is endowed with very vivid imagination. Her name Lara denotes: "**the family are like water**" (43). The theme of race leads to an exploration of prejudice. Evaristo lets Lara investigate the roots of her family in order to make her understand what her origin is truly like, regardless of the commonly shared opinions about black people. Kneough comments:

"The society is hostile to them and their relationship creates scandal, especially among the white who consider it inappropriate if not impossible to approve of a mixed-race relationship. The white class-bound society seems to forget that only about fifty years ago such a relationship and marriage was considered less harmful than a marriage outside class." (Kneough, 2000)

The black or mixed-race characters in Lara are constantly searching for a voice of their own in order to express their feelings about their roots, traditions, and about their longing for freedom. Although they are in Britain incessantly reminded of otherness, they try to overcome the alienation from the white people by cherishing the richness of their culture and by concentrating on future rather than on the past. Lara explores the life of those people who leaves one country in search of a better and peaceful life elsewhere, but who end up struggling to be accepted even as they lay the foundations for their children and future generations.

After winning the Arts Council Award in 2000, Evaristo went on to publish *The Emperor's Babe* (2001). Like *Lara*, this witty novel evokes a range of disparate voices, histories and landscapes. Set in London in 211 A.D., the text centers upon the life of Zuleika, the daughter of Sudanese migrants. *The Emperor's Babe* uses this life cleverly to recover the neglected early history of the Black experience in Britain. This past, which historians like Peter Fryer have traced back to Roman times, is brought to life in Evaristo's wonderfully inventive verse novel. The ancient Londinium evoked within its pages is no utopian space, but an uneven, divided landscape in which racial, gender and class conflict prevail. The novel does not simply excavate a hidden past that is "over and done with", it gestures forward to the contemporary city and the current problems associated with urban life in Britain. Evaristo's stylish, early experimental fictions promise much. This is a writer who is pushing not just the boundaries of contemporary British writing, but of what it means to be 'British'.



Employing the same narrative verse style that served her so well in her debut, *Lara*, Black British writer Evaristo travels back in time to tell the story of Zuleika, a libidinous but frustrated Sudanese woman who comes of age in a Roman-conquered London. Spotted at the age of 11 by rich Roman senator Lucius Aurelius Felix, “*a man thrice my age and thrice my girth*”, she lands in the lap of luxury when a wedding quickly takes place. But Felix’s lack of libido soon turns the marriage into a prison, and when he begins to travel, jazzy teenager Zuleika hits the social scene in the urban maze that is Londinium and receives some flattering attention from a visiting Roman emperor, Septimus Severus. The two begin a brief but torrid affair until Evaristo wraps up her thin plot by sending Severus off to war as Felix returns to find that the entire community knows about the affair. Plot problems aside, most of this is an excuse for Evaristo to stretch her poetic muscles as she creates a beautiful, passionate African-cum-Roman woman as seen through the imagination of a highly liberated and sexual 21st century poet. Despite the occasional burst of purple verse, she succeeds admirably in bringing a difficult and treacherous conceit to fruition, liberally indulging in irreverent asides, vivid vernacular speech and clever puns. The generally high quality of the poetry overshadows the failure of the book to develop into a genuine, full-fledged novel. This is a vividly imagined albeit distinctly modern look at a woman’s role in Roman times by a talented writer with a fertile mind and a playful spirit.

Evaristo’s style of writing marks her as both a British and a Post-colonial writer. Her novels raise crucial questions around what it means to be ‘here’. Her novel *Blonde Roots*, published in 2008, is a satire that inverts the history of the transatlantic slave trade and replaces it with a universe where Africans enslave Europeans. The Atlantic slave trade or transatlantic slave trade took place across the Atlantic Ocean from the 15th through the 19th centuries. The vast majority of those who were enslaved and transported to the New world, mainly on the triangular trade route and its Middle Passage, were Africans from the central and western parts of the continent who had been sold by other West Africans to Western European slave traders (with a small minority being captured directly by the slave traders in coastal raids), and brought to the Americas. The South Atlantic and Caribbean economic system centered on producing commodity crops, making goods and clothing to sell in Europe, and increasing the number of African slaves brought to the New World. This was crucial to those western European countries which, in the late 17th and 18th centuries, were vying with each other to create overseas empires.

The Portuguese were the first to engage in the New World slave trade in the 16th century. Between 1418 and the 1470s, the Portuguese launched a series of exploratory expeditions that remapped the oceans south of Portugal, charting new territories that one explorer described as “oceans where none have ever sailed before.” In 1526, the Portuguese completed the first transatlantic slave voyage from Africa to the Americas, and other countries soon followed. Ship owners regarded the slaves as cargo to be transported to the Americas as quickly and cheaply as possible, there to be sold to labour in coffee, tobacco, cocoa, sugar and cotton plantations, gold and silver mines, rice fields, construction industry, cutting timber for ships, in skilled labour, and as domestic servants. The first Africans imported to the English colonies were classified as “indentured servants”, like workers coming from England, and also as “apprentices for life”. By the middle of the 17th century, slavery had hardened as a racial caste; they and their offspring were legally the property of their owners, and children born to slave mothers were slaves. As property, the people were considered merchandise or units of labour, and were sold at markets with other goods and services.

The major Atlantic slave trading nations, ordered by trade volume were: the Portuguese, the British, the French, the Spanish, and the Dutch Empire. Several had established outposts on the African coast where they purchased slaves from local African leaders. These slaves were managed by a factor which was established on or near the coast to expedite the shipping of slaves to the New World. Slaves were kept in a factory while awaiting shipment. Current estimates are that about 12 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic, although the number purchased by the traders is considerably higher, as the passage had a high death rate. Near the beginning of the nineteenth century, various governments acted to ban the trade, although illegal smuggling still occurred. In the early twenty-first century, several governments issued apologies for the transatlantic slave trade.

In an article of the Journal of Postcolonial Writing, Katherine Burkitt analyses the text *Blonde Roots* by Evaristo and writes:

“The text is premised on an ironic racial reversal of the Atlantic slave trade. As such, this single moment in international history is mobilized, brought into different contexts and demonstrated to be inherently malleable. In addition, Evaristo makes a critical engagement with the slave narrative form and highlights its limited and limiting nature. *Blonde Roots* is self-consciously full of narrators and narratives and contradicts any sense of a fixed historical vision of Atlantic slavery. Evaristo’s novel mindfully disrupts this history in order to demonstrate the myriad ways in which the Atlantic slave trade is relevant to a contemporary context. Although *Blonde Roots* retains Atlantic slavery as its central moment, it is a radical re-vision of its familiar history, and the texts which narrate it. Through these



distortions Evaristo's novel paradoxically demonstrates both the unreliability of the historical event and the shockwaves that still resound from it, and calls into question easy constructions of black British identities that are based upon the history of Atlantic slavery." (Katherine Burkitt)

This novel of Evaristo won the Orange Youth Panel Award and Big Red Read Award. Chinua Achebe (novelist) and Wole Soyinka (playwright and poet), are post-colonial writers of the age as well.

Similarly, Evaristo took a completely new emerging topic of discussion of her age and that is, gay literature, in her sixth book *Mr. Loverman* published in 2014. Known for her lyricism, wit and unflinching view of modern Britain, Evaristo here presents Barrington Jedidiah Walker, a wisecracking, rum-and-Coke-swigging West Indian transplant who navigates London's Hackney borough as he sorts through this particular conundrum. Barrington is in his mid 70s and gay, though a lifetime of fear and shame has kept him from outwardly identifying with the types of men those around him call poofstahs, homos, bullers, antimen, batty boys, pansies and the like. Barrington who is married to the Bible-toting Pentecostalist Carmel, all the while maintain a secret affair with Morris de la Roux, whom he has loved since they were teenagers in Antigua. Finally, after 50 years in a dead-end marriage, Barrington decided that it is time to ask for a divorce and move on with Morris. The problem is, he still is not sure if he is ready to come out, to "*jump into the great abyss of social alienation*", as he puts it. Whether he can muster the strength to do so is the question that drives the story.

The novel opens in May 2010, but Evaristo quickly backtracks to critical moments from the past, both in London and Antigua, that relate to Barrington's current dilemma. "*This is what happens when 75 percent of your life is in the past*", Barrington notes, "*Each step forward triggers a step backward.*" Evaristo is more than adept at these shifts, not only in Barrington's perspective but also in Carmel's, enlarging tenfold the dimensions of Barrington's predicament by intertwining historical and contemporary issues of race, immigration, generational divides, neighborhood gentrification, sibling rivalries, social progress, social disillusionment and, most directly African-Caribbean sexuality.

This is rich territory, dense and Evaristo clearly knows her subjects. So much is said, so much ground covered so quickly, that one might easily get lost in the interwoven threads if not for Evaristo's confident control of the language, her vibrant use of humor, rhythm and poetry, and the realistic mix of Caribbean patois with both street and the Queen's English helping to fix characters in the reader's mind. Yet there are occasional passages in which the prose feels forced, notably with secondary characters like Barrington's daughters, the dowdy social worker Donna and the shallow stylist Maxine, whose descriptions and dialogue often seem inflated to overcompensate for their lack of subtlety. (Maxine calling her friends "my gay boys" feels not just trite but cringe-worthy). Moreover, one could expect or long for greater complexity in Barrington and Morris's relationship, in their communication with each other, a few gestures towards the graceful hint at hidden intricacies Evaristo provides at the end of the book. Meanwhile, as Barrington cajoles and drinks and struggles and makes desperate mistakes along the way to figuring out if he is capable of living openly as the man he has secretly been all of his life, we are reminded that he cannot see himself as others do, certainly not as his wife and daughters see him or even as the community around him does. We are forced to consider the nature of his fears, both real and imagined, and how they have pressed him to lead a double life, stalling countless possibilities for happiness and causing himself and others so much pain.

During the 1990s, Bernardine Evaristo emerged as one of the Britain's most talented, innovative and successful contemporary writers. Born in London and of mixed European and African parentage, Evaristo's background has proved an important resource within her fictional writing. The self-consciously hybrid stance she takes in her work has invited comparison with the new generation of British-born, Black British writers like Andrea Levy, Jackie Kay and Hanif Kureishi who, in the words of Caryl Phillips, feel 'both of and not of' this country. Evaristo's writing is clearly energized by her own plural, diasporic heritage which marks her as both a British and Post-colonial writer. For Evaristo to be 'Black' and 'British' is not a contradiction. Her narratives raise crucial questions around what it means to be 'here', producing post-national landscapes in which Britain appears as the crossroads for a series of global movements and migrations. Her fiction makes clear the fact that it is no longer, and more importantly never was, possible to return to a pure, white, Anglo-Saxon Britain prior to immigration.

If Evaristo's writing is notable for the extent to which it transgresses the boundaries of the nation, then it is just as remarkable for the extent to which it challenges the traditional boundaries of literary genre. Her early writing includes the play, '*Moving Through*', which was performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs and a collection of poetry, *Island of Abraham* (1994). However, her more recent work combines in striking and intricate ways the genres of drama, poetry and prose, collapsing the boundaries between them to create what might be described as novels in verse. Bernardine has also written for theatre, radio, Print-media and for a multi-media collaboration *Cityscapes* with saxophonist Andy Sheppard and pianist Joanna Mac Gregor for the City of London Festival in 2003.



She has undertaken over 50 international writers' tours since 1997, ranging from one-night readings to three month teaching residencies. She has been a Visiting Professor at Bernard College/Columbia University in New York, Writer in Residence at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, and Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia. She also represented Britain, with the novelist Glenn Patterson, on *Literatureexpress Europa 2000*, which took 105 European writers through 11 European countries over six weeks by train, travelling from Portugal to Berlin via Belgium, the Baltic and Russia.

The formal disruption typical of 'Black British' fiction goes well beyond vocabulary and grammar. It concerns the shape of the narrative itself, as well as the way the text often fundamentally transgresses generic or other conventions. 'Black British' fictions tend to display a fragmented narrative, developing the innovative models of modernism in order to express the discontinuity and the ambiguity at the heart of the 'Black British' condition, but also reflecting the post-imperial nation. Significantly, some of these novels travel in time and space and are almost epic in scope, like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), which sweeps over the history of India, or Caryl Phillip's *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which brings together the Holocaust and the predicament of black people in the West. This tendency to cross narrative and other boundaries sometimes accompanies a fundamental questioning of the novel as a genre. Bernardine Evaristo's works offer a striking illustration of this. Her first novel, *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) are both written in verse, a hybrid form which matches the identity of her protagonists, Lara of mixed Nigerian and British descent and Zuleika, a girl of Sudanese origin living in Roman London. Evaristo's more recent book, *Soul Tourists* (2005) is again stylistically bold. Comprising verse sections as well as many passages in prose (including letters, lists, and other types of documents), this unclassifiable book follows the European tour of two protagonists who come across the ghosts of significant African figures in European history, such as Shakespeare's *Dark Lady* or the *Chevalier de Saint George*.

Although the questions of identity and freedom still haunt the literature produced by Black Britons, the wider diversity of writers has ensured that, as in the *Famished Road* and the *Satanic Verses*, the styles, forms and issues tackled are increasingly broader. The 1990s also saw the contours of black identity become more complicated, less black and white. Gender issues and different notions of sexuality are now part and parcel of the matrix. Where the autobiographical narrative (which so far has carried the weight of the literature) worked for exploring various tensions, other genres allow different explorations of other complex nuisances. The new generation of writers, are moving away from the limitations of the biographical narrative into many different varieties of genre fiction in order to capture this new complexity.

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