

Exploring the journey of Identity: The Auto-fictional Narrative in Evaristo's *Lara*

Mrs. P. Subashini¹, Dr. A. R. Uma²

Research Scholar PG & Research Department of English Saraswathi Narayanan College Perungudi, Madurai-625022.

Research Supervisor PG & Research Department of English Saraswathi Narayanan College Perungudi, Madurai-625022.

Abstract: This paper discusses the relationship between personal experiences and creative vision in *Lara* by Bernardine Evaristo. By blending the different styles of narratives, Evaristo transforms the traditional memoir to a new level, making it a self that is immersed in a rich and diverse history. The study explores the metaphorical concept of Roots and Routes, and the way in which both the biological and the physical and emotional paths of her ancestors by way of England, Nigeria, Ireland and Brazil shape her identity into becoming who she is. The analysis shows how Evaristo uses the verse-novel format to create a web of fragmented family memories, dating back to the Victorian era to the 1970s. The author introduces the notion that identity is not a fixed notion and that it is a continuous process through the lens of her ancestors, who were influenced by the movement and history. This novel demonstrates the way *Lara* can serve as a mentor to people investigating the mixed-race identities in a post-colonial society, which means that it is essential to be able to appreciate one's own heritage to embrace the future. The paper concludes that the storytelling method by Evaristo raises the individual memory experience to a larger study of identification and relationship.

Key Words: Auto-fiction, Verse-Novel, Ancestry, Hybridity, Displacement, Post-Colonial Identity

Introduction:

Self-identity is one of the central topics of the contemporary literature, and Bernardine Evaristo is among the only few authors demonstrating how difficult it can be. In her semi-autobiographical verse novel *Lara* (1997), Evaristo has ventured out of the conventions of biography. She generates a polychrono topic story, a story that has happened in more than one place at the same time. The novel is of a mixed-race girl *Lara* who is raised in the predominantly white parts of London and seeks to reconcile her various family backgrounds. According to Evaristo, a child of the diaspora does not have a single place of self; instead, it is disseminated along the pathways or routes his or her forebears traveled across the globe.

Writing autobiographies, Evaristo is able to leave silences in history. The critic, Dave Gunning once said that Evaristo can be found writing about how "the past is not a distant territory but something that is continually being re-negotiated in the present" (Gunning, 2010, 82). The narrative constructs a genealogical map that justifies the existence of *Lara* as it travels through the slave coast of 19th century Nigeria, to the potato fields of Ireland and to the punk scene of 1970s London. The novel presents the argument of the fact that self-development and identity is a creative and active process. *Lara* discovers a few pages later in the novel that "I was a child of the world, a daughter of the diaspora" (Evaristo, 2009, p. 151). The last stage of her journey has been achieved: she is not a dis-membered person anymore, but a connection between locations.

Background of the study:

The background of this study is also based on the shifting terrain of contemporary Black British writing that is increasingly shifting towards the excavation of hidden pasts by way of new forms. The idea that the Windrush story, often beginning with 1948 as of the Black British historical record, has deep roots and complex intersections



that extend hundreds of years and even more widely has been challenged by authors like Bernardine Evaristo since the end of the 2000s. The first release of *Lara* was in 1997, and the second was in 2009. It was authored at an opportune moment when writers began employing autobiographies to investigate the in-between places of mixed-race belonging. Evaristo herself claims that she wrote the book due to the fact that she wanted to fill the gaps in her family history. She replied that "explore the psychological and historical roots of [her] parents' heritage" (Evaristo, 2009, p. 7). In this literary tradition, personal struggle of the main character to fit in reflects the way the British culture is contending with what it means to be a British since the Empire. This study can place this work in its context by examining *Lara* as both a personal memoir and a critical response to the varying views of how the British Isles came to be as a phenomenon known as the historical amnesia.

Objective:

This paper aims to deconstruct the way in which Bernardine Evaristo employs the so-called verse-novel to estrange herself within the zone of intersection of history and individual identity. The core idea of the paper is to examine how auto-fiction can be employed as a subversive instrument to assist the author to bridge the gap between the factual history and the fictional history of the family. In a second sense it examines the strife between the concept of "Roots (fixed ancestral beginnings) and the concept of Routes (fluent flow of migration) by debating the way *Lara* is able to see herself change as the history of her family across continents unfolds. Lastly, the paper shall examine how the poetic construction employed by Evaristo made a voice of the distorted people, in British, Irish and Nigerian history, to recover their identities following the colonisation. The paper will demonstrate that the construction of self by *Lara* is an imaginative reaction to race and cultural simplification through assembling these various pieces.

Research Methodology:

Through close reading and qualitative literary analysis approach through the postcolonial theory, this paper will deconstruct various layers of identity in *Lara* by Bernardine Evaristo. Based on the theoretical view of Stuart Hall, the paper does not merely analyse cultural identity as a fixed essence, but rather a matter of becoming as well as being (Hall, 1990, 225). It is a valuable way of perceiving it to realize how the identity of the main character is constructed by ancestral movement instead of the fixed racial identities. The research process is divided into three steps. The former is a narrative reading of the verse-novel as a hybrid genre to consider how the poetic stanzas embody the fragmented nature of memory and heritage (Sethi, 2013, 54); the latter is a contextualisation as historical to relate the created story with actual historical phenomena such as the Nigerian slave trade and the Windrush era; and it is covered as well by thematic mapping guided largely by the rhizomatic identity of Deleuze and Guattari. This stratified method indicates that auto-fiction is able to effectively bridge the disjunction between historical knowledge and individual identification via considering the heritage of *Lara* as a non-linear system of associations throughout Nigeria, Ireland and Brazil.

Main Discussion:

How the formal elements of the verse novel serve as a mechanical and psychological instrument of retracing history will be discussed here. Bernardine Evaristo does not simply prefer writing poetry over prose, but it is a response to the so-called archival silence that envelops the histories of Black British and Irish immigrants. Conventional writing usually requires a solid and completed body of writing that narrates a story in a linear fashion. Instead, the verse novel employs the blank space on the page to demonstrate the omissions, traumas, and gaps in the history of African and Irish diaspora. Evaristo manages to achieve a commendable work of reflecting the aspects of the discontinuous yet allowed "fragmented nature of memory and heritage" (Sethi, 2013, 54) by using this hybrid form. This allows the story to breathe through the holes in the historical records.



The rhythm and cadence of the rhyme assist Lara in the process of remembering her family tree, which is broken in pieces. Unlike the solid, commanding lines of an ordinary novel, the stanzas of Evaristo resemble the pulse of her foremothers as they make people who used to be merely numbers in colonial novels become a human being. This rhythmical nature transforms the reading experience of the reader, where he/she does not merely pass information but participates in a routine. As the reader reads through the stanzas, he or she experiences the same historical ruptures as the main character. According to Evaristo, the identity of a mixed-race individual cannot be narrated in a single unbroken line since the concept of migration, slavery, and prejudice have over the years dishevelled such an identity.

The verse novel format also allows Evaristo to move through the points of view, between a slave ship of the 1800s and a terrace in London of the 1970s, without compromising the emotional essence of the narrative. The becoming of identity to Stuart Hall resembles this formal fluidity, in that, the self is continually being negotiated in relation to various moments and locations. In the case of Lara, the poem becomes a sort of a genealogical map where various roots are linked together by lines of verse. When Lara reflects on what she hears in the past, she declares that, 'their lives were the ink, and I am the paper' (Evaristo, 2009, 88). Through the verse novel as a mode of remembering, Evaristo demonstrates that it is solely poetry that can restore the feeling of self which is both historical and yet capable of being creative.

Deconstructing the roots (The Nigerian and Irish dialectic).

In this section, the researcher examines the way the fabric of the work involving the roots of Evaristo is established, using a complex conversation between two colonised communities; the Nigerian and the Irish. Ancestry is not presented in a fixed and idealised past in *Lara*. On the contrary, it is a historical site of suffering and fighting that causes the main character to be less British. Evaristo disrupts the so-called imperial gaze by granting her Nigerian ancestors and Irish grandmother first-person agency that typically views these two groups as inferior or erased.

The novel switches between the slave coast of Nigeria in the 18th century and the fields in Ireland in the Great Famine, and compares the two extremely different locations. They both are presented as the ancestors whose roots were deprived by the manner the British Empire operated. This dialectic plays a significant role in the inner struggle of Lara. She is in the in-between of the conqueror and the conquered (Evaristo, 2009, 112). In the tale of the father of Lara, Taiwo, e.g., his coming to London in 1949 is viewed as the collision of these roots with an unfriendly motherland. The British think that all he is a racist stereotype despite the fact that he has a long and a powerful Nigerian family. The Irish heritage of moving around and being poor is also something the Irish are known to have in their past, yet the Irish heritage constantly comes in handy by Lara being targeted by her white peers as someone who is not an authentic Englishman.

By juxtaposing these two histories, Evaristo employs the concept of identity as not a point in itself but as a matter of becoming by Stuart Hall who believed that identity is not an unalterable centre (Hall, 1990, 225). The way these two colonised souls get along is in the process of constructing herself by Lara. Lara does not make a choice between the two; she embraces the hybridity of her existence. Lara has her roots in Nigeria and Ireland, yet it is where they collide in London full of people in her busy routes that makes her different. Regarding the background of the main character, Evaristo remarks, "We are the ghosts who whisper in your blood, the map-makers of your skin" (Evaristo, 2009, 14). Overall, here the discussion reveals that the Self consists of fragments of other world histories, contravening the idea of a pure or a singular national identity.

The rhizomatic self: Becoming a global citizen

The last few of chapters in *Lara* shift the setting with the dismal slums of London and the vibrant sceneries of Brazil and Nigeria. It is here the process of searching after origins comes to an end and the discovery of a



rhizomatic self is achieved. This change is discussed by using the theory of the Rhizome put forward by Deleuze and Guattari. The Rhizome theory is the opposite of the conventional "arborescent" model of identity, in which identity is a tree, having one, deep root, and the network of horizontal and underground relationships. Lara suffers a lot since she fails to discover a single root that can hold her life together. Her journeys demonstrate how her identity can be described as a rhizome - it is not a beginning or an end, but rather it is always in the middle, with countless associations across the various languages, nations, and periods of time.

The climax of the quest of her ancestry is a great revelation that hits Lara in Brazil. She says in a culture that symbolizes the blend of cultures that she would have been afraid as a child, "I was a child of the world, a daughter of the diaspora" (Evaristo, 2009, 151). It is a very significant moment, as it makes her think differently about her so-called mixedness that it does not appear as a deficit of identity or being half of a thing, but rather as an excess of it. She realizes that she is not caught between two worlds, but is the bridge that unites the two worlds. She has traced 'Routes' across the Atlantic, along the Middle Passage and the route of the Irish emigrants. These 'Routes' do not give her a single real house, but an inner Home which is founded upon the perception that there are a great number of ways to be.

This understanding is congruent with becoming a global citizen. When Lara embraces her rhizomatic self, it is then that she breaks out of the strict boxes of Britishness or Nigerian ness. She has now a presence in the 'Black Atlantic'. It is necessary to emphasize that such global identity provides power to people. These final few pages continue, and the verse of Evaristo is enlarged and more flowing, as the mind of Lara is opening up. She is no longer seeking a pure ancestor to give an account of her skin colour; she understands that she is a legitimate aspect of world history that is still continuing to thrive. She eventually gets to her 'Home' in the movement, in the routes which allow her to view the world not as a bunch of pieces, but as a complete whole.

Autobiographies as a means to challenge Politics.

The final section of this discussion is how auto-fiction can be strategically applied as a method of combating political oppression. In the writing of *Lara*, Bernardine Evaristo employs the so-called historiographic metafiction by referring to it as a semi-autobiographical work. This form of writing recognizes the fact that history is narrative and not objective reality. One of the protagonists such as Lara and a writer such as Evaristo tend to regard traditional British history books as a privileged place, a location where the achievement and presence of Black and mixed-raced people is either forgotten or relegated to the periphery. Therefore, personal memoir entwined with fabricated words of ancestors is an extreme remedying way of reappropriating the archive. Evaristo claims that the personal imagination is not only a creative instrument within those moments of the official record when it is silent but it is also an indispensable instrument of restorative justice.

This Construction of the Self is politically controversial since it criticizes the concept of a homogenous, white British past. Evaristo makes people reconsider national identity by introducing a multiethnic family tree that extends to 150 years into the canon of the British literature. She explains how the family of Lara is not new to Britain; however, they have been there hundreds of years only to be concealed by the Empire. It is what it is stated in the study of auto-fiction that it permits the author to travel in the in-between spaces of what occurred and how they experienced it. In the case of Lara, political pushback implies not being a historical ghost. She would even make the missing links of history a living thing, 'missing links of history into a vivid, breathing presence' (Evaristo, 2009, 12).

The same opposition is extended to the individuals who determine what is acceptable of writing. Evaristo challenges the notion that some types of stories are the only ones that qualify as high art by featuring the quest of a mixed-race girl in a verse book to find out her ancestry. The paper allows an item to be both local (the London regions) and global (the Atlantic triangle). Ultimately, autobiographical sections of Lara are a manifestation on behalf of the marginalized; identity, they say, becomes a place to which every individual has a right to create their



own. This research finds that there is more than a mere narration through Lara and Evaristo. She also invents a memorial to a diasporic self that was being forgotten by the history. This demonstrates the fact that remembering is rebellious in itself.

Conclusion

Lara by Bernardine Evaristo is a quite significant novel, which addresses the issue of the so-called diasporic self to a much greater degree than the customary autobiographies to reveal a complex, transnational identity. As a researcher, my central argument in this paper is that Evaristo completes the gaps caused by colonial history by utilizing the power of the verse novel and the clever application of the auto-fiction. When one considers the quest of ancestry of Lara as explored by the main character, one can see that the journey of this character can be viewed through the prism of not only the concept of identity as formulated by Stuart Hall, but also the concept of the rhizome formulated by Deleuze and Guattari. Rather, she creates her identity based on the 'Routes' which connects her to her Nigerian, Irish and Brazilian ancestors. This transforms her history of traveling into an account of international belonging.

Finally, *Lara* is a literary and political act of defiance that establishes a permanent spot in the British canon of the multi-ethnic heritage. Evaristo demonstrates that the self is the object that is never once but becoming and to live in the complex contemporary world, one must inventively possess one's own distance. This paper has also examined the way people construct their identities that can be extended in the future by comparing Lara to later works of Evaristo, such as *Girl, Woman, and Other*, to observe how her polyphonic style evolved through a personal verse novel to a more generalized image of Black British life. By doing so, scholars will be able to get to know more about the role of Evaristo as one of the major contributors to the mapping of the multicultural mind of today.

Reference:

1. Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
2. Evaristo, Bernardine. *Lara*. Revised edition, Bloodaxe Books, 2009.
3. Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
4. Gunning, Dave. *Race and Antiracism in Modern British Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
5. Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 222-237.
6. Sethi, Anita. "The Hybridity of the Verse-Novel in Contemporary British Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945*, edited by David James, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 51-66.