Fiction Unbound

Fiction Unbound:
Bernardine Evaristo

By

Şebnem Toplu

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To my husband and daughter with my love unbound

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This project has initially been inspired as a result of my encounter with Bernardine Evaristo at her conference on *Lara* in 2001, at Ege University, Izmir, Turkey. Since then I have included her works in my undergraduate and graduate multiculturalism courses both at Ege University in Izmir and Modena and Reggio Emilia University in Italy. My dear friend and colleague Dr. Giovanna Buonanno from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia suggested the idea of writing Evaristo's monograph and my previous Department Head, Prof. Dr. Günseli Sönmez İşçi, as my cherished everlasting advisor since my master's degree studies in 1990, has encouraged me for realising it, therefore, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to them principally. This book has also come to fruition through painstaking hard work, patience, wisdom, guidance and encouragement from my editor Dr. Laurence Raw to whom I am indebted. I am grateful also to my Department Head and Vice Dean Prof. Dr. Dilek Direnç for her support and kind understanding during the long period of time that this project has taken. I would also like to thank my Turkish and Italian students for many thought-provoking discussions during my lectures. Last but not least, I owe many thanks to my family who has always been very indulgent and supportive.

FOREWORD

DR. LAURENCE RAW

Born in Woolwich, south-east London, to an English mother and a Nigerian father, Bernardine Evaristo has quickly established herself as a leading writer on cross-cultural issues. To date she has written six books, including a verse novel *Lara* (1997), based on her family history with roots in Nigeria, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and Brazil. The novel was expanded and republished in a second edition in 2009. Her other works include a novella *Hello Mum* (2010) about teenage life on a South London estate; *Blonde Roots* (2008) a prose fiction about slavery; *Soul Tourists* (2005), a novel fusing poetry and prose fiction; *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), about an African-Caribbean girl growing up in Roman London nearly 2000 years ago and finally *Mr Loverman* (2013), an exploration of Britain's older Caribbean community.

Şebnem Toplu's ground-breaking study of Evaristo's work looks at all her major works, from *Lara* to *Hello Mum*. Each chapter focuses on a particular novel, combining a close analysis of the author's technique with a penetrating understanding of Evaristo's basic themes underlying all her work. From this book we learn that Evaristo is not simply interested in "multicultural" issues; to label them as such is to overlook her achievement as a novelist. Toplu shows instead how Evaristo combines apparently disparate elements–for example, historical research with late-twentieth century allusions in a narrative such as *The Emperor's Babe*–to show how African-Caribbeans have been coming to Britain for thousands of years. This deliberately disrupts the clichéd view of British history, which holds that immigration only became significant from the late 1940s onwards, when the government invited citizens from its former colonies to come and work in Britain. Toplu also shows how Evaristo's technique of combining past and present reveals that, in spite of successive initiatives from governments of all political persuasions, most African-Caribbean residents still experience problems of racism and discrimination from the white majority. In *Hello Mum*, for instance, Jerome, the protagonist, has to eke out an existence on one of the so-called "sink" estates, where the

prospects for social improvement are virtually nil. Oppression has become a way of life, even if it is mostly institutional today.

Yet Evaristo is not just interested in the African-Caribbean experience; Toplu's book shows how she tries to question those basic concepts–for example "Englishness" or "patriotism"–which lie at the heart of mainstream white culture in contemporary Britain. Toplu argues that Evaristo is interested in alternative constructions–not only of nationalism, but of other basic issues such as race, gender and class. Her books give the chance for hitherto marginalized characters–slaves, women, or victims of a patriarchal world–to tell their stories and postulate alternative views of the world they live in.

However this is not always an easy task. In *Soul Tourists*, for example, Toplu shows how the main characters find it difficult to come to terms with their respective pasts. In an attempt to maintain a façade of respectability, they have chosen to suppress them. However Evaristo believes that cultural understanding between races and cultures will only come about once everyone has the chance to come to terms with their respective pasts, however unpleasant they might be. Hence *Soul Tourists* becomes a novel of discovery; a quest not only to find an alternative place to live, but to discover alternative *ways* of living.

Above all, Toplu's book shows how Evaristo refuses to be pigeon-holed; she is not simply "a black British writer", but someone who focuses on the interconnectedness of society. To acknowledge one's identity in terms of race, gender and class, helps promote greater understanding between people. However, it is a sad fact of contemporary Britain that such understanding seldom takes place–witness the fate that befalls the teenage Jerome in *Hello Mum*. Toplu calls for readers to adopt a more enlightened approach, not only to issues of culture and identity, but to the work of Evaristo as a whole. It deserves to become a classic of contemporary literary criticism.

Laurence Raw
Başkent University, Ankara

Dr. Laurence Raw teaches at Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey. His recentbooks include *Exploring Turkish Cultures: Essays, Interviews and Reviews* (2011), *A View of the Turkish Stage* (2009), and *Adapting Nathaniel Hawthorne to the Screen* (2008), plus two co-edited collections *Redefining Adaptation Studies* and *The Pedagogy of Adaptation* (both 2010).

PART I:

CULTURAL HERITAGE

LARA (1997) AND *LARA* (2009) REVISITED

Beginning to Write

Born in London, to a Nigerian father and an English mother as the forth of eight siblings, Bernardine Evaristo was originally trained as an actress and worked in theatre. She was educated at Eltham Hill Girls Grammar School and the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama, and spent her teenage years at Greenwich Young People's Theatre. She lives in London with her husband.[1]

She is the author of six novels and one volume of poetry, a playwright and creative writing teacher, as well as a regular reviews and article contributor.[2] Her debut novel *Lara* was published in 1997 to widespread critical acclaim. She has won many awards for her works. To name a few, *Lara* won the EMMA Best Book of the Year Award in 1999, and it was also a "Book of the Year" for *The Daily Telegraph* and *The New Statesman*. *Lara* was followed by *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), which was chosen as one of the *Times*' "100 Best Books of the Decade", in November 2009. Evaristo wrote *Soul Tourists* in 2005, and *Blonde Roots* in 2008 (USA 2009), the latter was chosen as one of the Best Books of 2009 by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. *Lara* was revised and expanded in 2009 and followed by the novella *Hello Mum* (2010) and her most recent fiction *Mr Loverman* (2013).[3] *Blonde Roots, Soul Tourists*, *The Emperor's Babe* and *Lara* have together acquired *Books of the Year* honours nine times in British newspapers and magazines.[4]

Why does Evaristo write? She asks the same question to herself and sincerely elaborates in the essay "Writers on Writing" she wrote for *Crossing Borders New Writing from Africa* in 2005, as follows:

> Just what was it that turned me into the kind of person who wants to spend thousands upon thousands of hours sitting completely voluntarily at

my desk living in a world of make-believe, a career best suited to producing premature typist's bum, bingo wings and dowager's hump? I'll hazard a few guesses and trace some clues back to my childhood. For a start I loved reading because I had (and have) a low boredom threshold and my childhood was pretty boring, I did not have a special friend among any of my numerous siblings, so I did not enjoy hours of shared entertainment, and we kids weren't allowed out to play.

What else was there to do but read books that I could borrow free of charge from the local library? And through reading books I was introduced to the magic of fiction. I don't remember all the books I read but I do remember the experience of devouring them, the excitement of the long walk to Woolwich Library on a Saturday afternoon, roaming the dark wooden shelves in the hope of discovering something that would stimulate me, the librarian's stamp in my chosen object of desire, walking back home wondering if I was going to like it. I loved the way in which I found books so totally absorbing, the experience of losing myself in other countries, other periods, other people's lives and minds–rather like the process of writing books now.

I was also the fourth of eight children and they say a middle child is usually overlooked and spends his or her adulthood making up for it. I was neither in the blessed first batch nor in the cute youngest batch. Instead I was lumped in the middle: moody, awkward, sarcastic, independent. There are some major attention-seeking careers in the world such as music, acting and politics, and I have to admit that writing books which have my name on them has to belong in that category. What better way to make my mark than in print, a legacy that can last for aeons. A lifetime and beyond of getting noticed–the very thought!

The theatre also made me a writer. The one exception to my father's rule was the local stage centre, Greenwich Young People's Theatre, where I went religiously and happily every Friday for four years. The wonderful youth theatre became my escape from home and it was my introduction to the world of acting that I adored. (Notice me! Notice me!). Let's not forget that acting is about stepping into another person's shoes, the escaping of oneself, the creation of imaginary worlds (rather like writing, once again). I went on to attend drama school and it was there that I began writing for theatre, at first, poetry plays and then moved on to independent poems. When I graduated I was an actress for a short time but fell out of love with it, but the writing has never stopped. I had discovered what made me tick.

I also grew up in a home of dualities: my mother was white English, my father was black Nigerian; my mother was a die-hard Catholic (until she fell out of love with the hypocrisy of the church), my father was a Communist, for a while; my mother was a white collar worker=school teacher, my father was a blue collar worker=welder; I was of mixed-race in London at a time when it was neither common, discussed or understood. Our family stood out in what was then a very white part of London and at school I was, for most of the time, the rare black child. Surely the effect of

> all this duality and difference, these contrasts, polarities and contradictions subconsciously fed a desire to work out these aspects creatively. Never quite slotting into any social grouping, being a badge-bearing Outsider, but never quite understanding or articulating that this was the case, I escaped into my imagination, first through theatre and then through writing, that attempts, among other things (I hate to limit myself), to make sense of the contemporary and historical place of black people in our societies. (2005, n.p.)

Since writing these lines, Evaristo has continued to produce more fiction; namely *Blonde Roots* (2008), *Hello Mum* (2010) and *Mr Loverman* (2013) besides revising and reprinting *Lara* (2009). I am going to discuss her works in the linear order that they appeared in print, except for the revised *Lara* which will have a comparative stance with the first, and *Mr Loverman* will be elaborated in the next edition of this book.

Lara (1997)

> However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source.
> —*Yoruba proverb* (*Lara*)

As her epigram suggests, Bernardine Evaristo starts her writing career as a novelist searching for her paternal roots that evolves a semi-autobiographical novel in verse, *Lara*. That is, Evaristo starts with life-writing following the thread of her Nigerian father's lineage, in the effort of structuring her identity as a Nigerian-British multicultural woman: "Where are you from […] originally?" (65) she asks herself as her best-friend Sue asks Lara. Thereby, lightly touching on her maternal Irish background, but basically concentrating on her paternal side in search of her identity, in *Lara*, Evaristo covers 150 years of her roots: five generations of Yorubas enslaved in Brazil, free in Nigeria, and three generations of Irish Catholics uniting in England, "the Motherland".

Twelve years after its debut, *Lara* is expanded and revised by the author herself and published by another company in 2009. Evaristo has retained the original *Lara* except with some minor alterations, yet the expanded maternal lineage of both the Irish and German cultural backgrounds has somewhat changed the perception of her fiction from the discrimination of the black in the English society to an intolerance for the non-English, with the inclusion of the Irish and the German communities in London. Therefore this chapter relies more heavily on the revised *Lara* (2009) exploring the divergence in narration and its effect on the reader.

Regarding biculturalism or multiculturalism, Gerd Baumann states that "hyphenated identities are nothing new in England, a country which absorbed clannish Huguenot elites in the 1680s", moreover, long before the term "hyphenated identities" was ever conceived, "everyone in Britain was English but also British, British but also Scottish, Catholic-English or Jewish-British or London-Irish or Anglo-Welsh: the combinations are countless because they keep multiplying" (1999, 70). Yet, Lee writes that "hybridizations like 'Asian-British', 'Caribbean-British' or 'African-British'", which can be further particularised into "'Brixton-Jamaican', 'Cardiff-Bengali', 'Liverpool-Nigerian' […] carry their own internal dynamics of heterogeneity and […] tension" (1995, 2). On the other hand, in *Modern British Fiction 1950-2000*, Head maintains that in the postcolonial era, the question of identity and national affiliation has become complex especially starting in post-war Britain facing the challenges of the end of Empire and "the process of national redefinition it brings with it" (2002, 156). Therefore, from the literary perspective, "the novel has proved to be a fruitful site for investigating the hybridised cultural forms that might be produced in an evolving, and so *genuinely* multicultural Britain" (156) (emphasis original).

As for the significance of autobiographical writing for multicultural writers, in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Bernheimer points out that multicultural conjuncture leads certain authors to write which might be regarded as "narcissistic", yet it can be viewed more positively as complementary rather than hostile to a global broadening perspective; it is typically the story of the "traces of cultural otherness discovered within and of ambivalent interactions with otherness confronted without" (1995, 12). Ambivalence and vulnerability is poignant in Lara's quest for her identity in the search for her background, which also reflects Evaristo's attempt to reconcile with her alterity in the domain of multiculturalism (Toplu 2004, 2). In this vein, Connerton argues that the phenomenon of learning about the past is the crucial element in social history: "all beginnings contain an element of recollection", so it is impossible to make a new beginning without "the past recollection" because then the beginning has "nothing to hold on to; in all modes of experience we always base our particular experiences on a prior context in order to ensure that they are intelligible at all" (1989, 6). Thereby, Lara's quest starts with the quest of her paternal African heritage.

Lara, the Protagonist

The eponymous Lara is named Omilara, which in the Yoruba language meant "the family are like water" (*Lara* 1997, 43) and this perennial image of water signifies the family's and Lara's movement across the oceans. Lara is the fourth mixed-race child of Nigerian and British parents, Taiwo and Ellen da Costa, born in 1962 in Westmount Road, Eltham, London, with four more siblings to follow. As the prologue suggests, the narrative is weaved by the kaleidoscope of the ancestors' narrative voices. Tolulope–the scarred one, Lara's paternal great-grandmother voices her tragic story of slavery and rape reaching out from Brazil, 1844, darkly haunting Lara until she goes to Brazil in search of her ancestors, though ironically their existence is not recorded, since slaves were of no significance and a plenitude.

Right after the British Nationality Act of 1948, which confirmed the right of entry to Britain for the citizens of Empire who were deemed British subjects, Lara's Nigerian father Taiwo da Costa arrives from Lagos to Liverpool in 1949. One should also pinpoint that *Lara* was written a year before the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the "Windrush generation" of West Indian immigrants named after the SS *Empire Windrush*, which docked at Tilbury in 1948 carrying around 490 migrant Jamaicans and thus ensued as the symbol of post-war immigration.[5] Rob Pope notes that the "consequences of the British Empire" and subsequently the Commonwealth "came home (both literally and metaphorically)" from the late 1950s onwards and by 1990 around five million people from the former colonies had immigrated to the "motherland" in search of work and better life (1998, 135). However, Head maintains that in the 1991 census "the first to collect data on 'ethnic identity', just 5.5 per cent of Britain's total population was recorded as belonging to non-white ethnic groups" and that the racial tensions and hostilities that were manifest from the late 1960s onwards "were built on unfair perceptions of race that were sometimes worsened by government policy" (2002, 168).

Lara's mother Ellen is descended from Emma "of the O'Donoghue clan" (*Lara* 1997, 12) who in 1888 arrived in London from the southern Ireland garrison town of Birr with her daughter Mary Jane whose deceased father was of the British Army. Ellen's father Leslie is German descendent from his mother's side; however, it is not explicitly drawn. Thus exploring hybrid identities, *Lara* primarily focuses on Taiwo's disillusionment by racial discrimination and hostility in the English society in general and Ellen's mother Edith's strong objection to their marriage because of his colour. The father, Leslie remains silent on the matter and when Taiwo

and Ellen marry, Edith continues rejecting her son-in-law and the eight children they have except the first-born, who is white. Taiwo's only explicit remark on racism he is confronted with is, "in this country I am coloured. Back home I was just me" (4). Taiwo's hardship is not mentioned again and instead when Lara grows up and creates her missing paternal grandparents in her imagination and calls them "Daddy People", she is severely punished by her father who chooses to keep his background in the depths of his unconscious. The parents' efforts in silence about their heritage so that their children can better adapt to the host country is also a common trait in some of Andrea Levy's fiction which contrarily evokes curiosity and leads the protagonists to a journey for their ancestral homes in the search of their identity.[6] However, it is apparent in these works that the teenager protagonists should know where they come from, since their mixed heritage forms the basis of confrontation with racism in the society; thus Lara starts her quest in three continents, "plaiting together different strands of culture and ancestry" (McLeod 2004, 178).

Lara's Location in Multicultural Fiction

Giving examples from various writers, John McLeod in his *Postcolonial London Rewriting the Metropolis* reflects the optimistic view of multicultural London, coining it as "the millennial optimism". Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) written three years after *Lara*, was the book which McLeod believed offered a version of London "in which the depressingly familial social conflicts of the previous decades [were] no longer primarily determining the formation of character and fortunes of plot" (2004, 161). However, McLeod also states that together with David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar, Evaristo's work "offers alternative paths to Smith's familiar 'postimmigrant' style", since "the work of these three figures propels us at times to a more sobering contemplation of the city's enduring and emerging problems at the end of the twentieth century while simultaneously pointing to new possibilities and modes of transformation at the beginning of the new millennium" (162). McLeod constructs his idea of optimism considering the three "modes of imagining London's links to the world beyond" explored in *Lara*, which are for Taiwo and Ellen as "the centre of the Empire and a beacon of civilisation", for Lara as a young girl "a racialised city which designates certain citizens as black, demonises their blackness and questions their rights of abode" and finally the third mode, a "transcultural perception" (McLeod 2004, 179) of London as a "rainbow metropolis" (*Lara* 1997, 137) where "one culture [is] orchestrated by another" (139). On the contrary, I believe that when we consider Taiwo's

situation in post war London in 1949 and besides the general attitude the English society displays, Ellen's mother Edith's explicit hatred toward Taiwo's blackness, denotes to a racialised city and signifies nothing has much changed since then to 1970s when Lara is a young girl and a young woman in 1995. Therefore, journeying literally and figuratively to Nigeria and Brazil enables Lara to make a fresh start based on her social memory made intact, rather than society's positive attitude, for McLeod also refers to the writers' optimism, not yet the society's. As Ashcroft et al assert in *The Empire Writes Back*, "alterity implies alteration" (2003, 33), hence Lara, altering herself, is wrought like iron, by fighting against society's racial prejudices as a woman and by learning about the "emperor's disowned sons" (*Lara* 1997, 6) and daughters; her past. Lara's complex intercultural identity emerges stronger with what she has always felt like; she *is* English (Toplu 2004, 13) (emphasis original). Thus Lara's and also Evaristo's optimism in Britain is built upon a painful past that is also manifest in its expanded version in 2009 and focuses on a fortified identity rather than a positive development in the society, a "millennial optimism of the decade's end" (McLeod 2004, 179).

Gendusa argues that *Lara* (1997) "subversively intervenes within the traditional circuits via which British national identity is shaped, reproduced and transmitted" (2010, 93) and it is located in the "intersection area where feminist critique and (post-) colonial studies productively conflate" (93). In this vein, she points out that "the hermeneutic domain has been, at times, conflictual", on whether the analytic category of gender or that of race should be of prominence when analysing women's oppression (93), which in fact is revealed as double oppression for women. I believe that both categories share equal significance in the works of multicultural women writers such as Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith, Preethi Nair and Meera Syal along with Bernardine Evaristo. These writers utilise humour very effectively, though as a thin cover over the real problematic of gender and racial issues, neither surpassing the other. Their protagonists are women and the problematic that black men confront with is always limited to racial discrimination whereas women are oppressed both by patriarchy and racism. Mainly because the writers are both women and black, they focus on the problematic of being both, in their fiction. Evaristo's Lara is discriminated against as a young girl and a woman, when compared with what Taiwo goes through as an immigrant black man. That is, the immigrant father arrives in England at a young age with high hopes; he is disillusioned by racism, yet manages to marry a white English woman and accepting his situation settles down with children, admitting life as it is, burying his background in his unconscious. On the other hand, the

narration focuses on Lara's identity crisis because as a bicultural woman Lara can belong neither to black nor white society; it is revealed mainly in relationships, such as in the brief affair by her lover Josh who expects her to behave and even think as a Nigerian woman and leaves her when she does not. In Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (2000) likewise, her protagonist Faith also has to fight both racial and gender discrimination compared with her brother Carl. While Carl settles down with a mixed race girl-friend, Faith is betrayed by her white friends both male and female because of their attitude towards racism and her attachment to Simon, her white boyfriend, is easily destroyed when her white girl-friend Marion ousters her. Moreover, it is Faith who needs to go to Jamaica in order to overcome her identity crisis, not Carl who apparently never had such a dilemma. In the same parallel, briefly Zadie Smith's Irie in *White Teeth* (2000) is the only black character who has to leave England to subdue her pain in her identity crisis, whereas Magid and Millat can contentedly proceed with who they are, or in Nair's *A Hundred Shades of White* (2004) it is the mother Nalini who is betrayed by her Indian husband and left with two children to struggle for survival in England, a country where she cannot even speak the language.

Religion

Besides the issues of race and gender, the interesting stance of religion should not be overlooked. Lara has a Catholic inheritance both from her mother Ellen's Irish side and her father Taiwo's Nigerian-South American ancestors. Edith sends her daughter Ellen to a convent school, Maria Assumpta and Ellen as a result of her religious upbringing wants to marry the "Heavenly Bridegroom,/imbued from birth in the sanctity of the Catholic Church,/she worshipped Her Lord in daily prayer, did penance/for man's original sin and her inherent wickedness" (*Lara* 1997, 8). As part of the teachings of the convent, Ellen also desires to be a "teaching missionary enlightening the dark continent" (8), hence as an Assumpta virgin she buys "black babies from photographs" and pays for their upkeep because "they who were born in the southern/wild (she read) were bereft of light, though their souls/were white" (8). Evaristo's third person narrator ironically adds that Ellen's "Divine Lover came in the guise of Taiwo/and in His Vivacious Company her heart was elevated/by cherubims and seraphims who trilled sweetly in her ears/and she was thrilled to be in his Noble Presence" (8). Thus, "Soon, betrothal to The Son was replaced by devotion/to potential husband and dreams of a huge brood of/children so lots of souls could be saved in Heaven"(9). In this

vein, Ellen points out: "I wanted to help Africa but Africa was brought to me" (10). Ellen's religiosity continues in having her brood of eight children, which certainly is the cause of strain, fatigue and lower economic means for herself and her family. Evaristo leaves the issue of religion in her ironic attitude towards Ellen's religiosity as such and gives a last implication of Catholicism at the symbolic ritual of baptism in the act of Lara's bathing at the waterfall at Cachoera do Taruma. Before immersing herself in the Amazon River, though, she discovers a hilltop church and since it is Palm Sunday there is an Indian congregation singing "Catholic hymns hybridized by drums" (139), which denotes to the impurity of religion, therefore although Lara says "I am baptised" she ironically adds "resolve[d] to paint slavery out of me" (140). In this sense, Zygmunt Bauman maintains that in the early years of the modern era, "as Foucault reminded us, madmen were rounded up by the city authorities", loaded into a ship and sent to sea; "madmen stood for 'a dark disorder, a moving chaos' […] and the sea stood for water, which 'carries off, but does more: it purifies'" (1997, 5). Water purifies, or in other words pacifies Lara's rage symbolically baptizing her and she becomes reconciled with her past and her hybridity (Toplu 2004, 11). Thus, the implication of her Yoruba name and the signification of water as having a purifying effect reveal us that Evaristo does not signify Lara's Catholic religiosity, contrary to her mother's.

Lara (2009)

More than a decade later, *Lara* Evaristo's debut novel is rewritten, expanded "by a third" (*Lara* 2009, n.p.) and reprinted in 2009 with an added caption "the family is like water" and with "Marlon (Akinola)" added to dedication and the note signifying them as the "[i]nheritors of this history", denoting to the third generation of the lineage in England. When it first came out, *Lara* (1997) covered paternal genealogy and the maternal side did not reach beyond the grandparents. I believe it is quite rare for an author to revise and expand her own fiction, in Evaristo's case after twelve years, thereby, for the readers the first question that arises is why an author would feel the need to do that. As Evaristo has pointed out, the opportunity for revising arose by the interesting fact that *Lara* went out of print and the publisher Angela Royal Publishing did not exist anymore.[7] Subsequently, the text has been transferred to another publisher, Bloodaxe, and so it created the prospect of re-evaluating her life-writing, this time with a wider space for her maternal grandmother's extended Irish generation along with her maternal grandfather's German background,

therefore maintaining an equilibrium of the family line which has the consequence of introducing a more multicultural stance. In an interview with Karen McCarthy Woolf, Evaristo states that an Irish academic asked her why she had not written about the Irish side of her family and added this was surprising because of the significance Ireland's history of immigration and colonialism holds, she realised that she really had not "thought of it and was shocked because it seemed such and [*sic*] obvious thing to explore" (2010, n.p.). Hence, when Bloodaxe agrees to publish *Lara*, Evaristo takes it as a great opportunity to explore the Irish and German sides of her family history, too, pointing out that "[t]he end result is that the book is more balanced in terms of both sides of" her ancestry (Woolf 2010, n.p.). The book cover is also changed from an African mask to the photograph of a black man and a white woman in the 2009 edition, which also alludes to the addition in the fiction.[8] That is, whereas the mask uniquely signifies the African ancestry, the sepia photograph, which is of Evaristo's own parents, denotes to the balance of both ancestries in the revised version.[9]

The dilemma for the literary scholars though, is whether to discuss *Lara*(s) as the same book or as different texts. Since the primary *Lara* has been of interest to numerous literary scholars and the arguments have focused on racism, gender, discrimination and identity crisis, disclosing the added text, I will focus on the expanded *Lara* arguing that in fact the two novels are different, but complementary.[10]

A Novel-in-verse

Before proceeding with the theme, one should initially point out that as the backbone of both versions, the textual mode of *Lara* is a novel-in-verse. However, the original *Lara* was written in "'page length poems' with [...] an unplanned syllabic regularity" (Collins 2008, 1199). For its deviation from the contemporary "novelistic form of prose" by its verse format, in his article "Repositioning Narrative" Sauerberg maintains that "[i]n a perspective of literary history, the late-twentieth-century verse novel will no doubt be approached as a belated and more or less displaced manifestation of modes of writing extinct long ago" (2004, 439). Associating novels in verse with the epic tradition, Sauerberg states that their "contextualization in that tradition and their manner of relating to it will invite a frame of interpretive reference according to a well-established generic convention" (439). Yet, Evaristo hides her verse, since its verse mode is disclosed to the reader until the prologue is read (except for the index of first lines at the back of the book), and as for the new version, the

index of first lines and the division of chapters, which amount to twenty, is moved to the beginning of the book right after the epigraph of the Yoruba proverb, herewith it prepares the reader for a systematically formulated verse novel. Writing about the first version, Sauerberg also mentions that the short biographic note prefacing Evaristo's text, which is: "*Lara* is her first full-length work of fiction" (n.p.), "concludes without revealing mode of discourse" (Sauerberg 2004, 457). The new version repeats the guise more subtly on the first page indicating that *Blonde Roots* (2008) "was her first prose novel" and that she has also published "three cross-genre novels" (*Soul Tourists* and *The Emperor's Babe*) among which *Lara* is mentioned as the third. However, what Evaristo reveals as her purpose in writing verse fiction is slightly different:

> My novel-in-verse *Lara* (1997) was originally a prose novel that I began in 1991**,** and worked on for three years producing two hundred pages of fiction, about two-thirds of a novel. I had never written prose before so I was grappling with the form and found the end result very dissatisfying. My background was originally in writing for theatre, except my plays were written in verse. Then I left theatre behind and became a poet. I felt that what I loved about writing was embedded in poetry such as linguistic inventiveness, imagistic freedom and the craft of concision and capturing the essence of something as well as paying attention to rhythm and sound. My prose, however, was plain, flat, almost devoid of imagery and rambling. It had no life. I then threw the manuscript (literally) into a bin and started re-working *Lara* as poetry. Once I did this I found that I was able to tell the story using language that brought it alive. It became, in the end, a novel-in-verse of 150 pages which spanned 150 years, three continents, and seven generations of my family history. (Collins 2008, 1199)

In the revised *Lara*, on the other hand the page length poems are transformed into couplets for which Evaristo remarks that it is because she has a "fondness with couplets" and adds she "feels very comfortable with that form" and that she "did break up the text into couplets so that the dense, textured poetry has more space to breathe" (Woolf 2010, n.p.). Sauerberg, though, discussing Evaristo's choice of verse for *Lara* specifies that verse "lends substantiality to words in themselves, whereas the prose of realist fiction tries to create an illusion of getting to the facts 'behind' language" (2004, 459). By this means, Sauerberg concludes that Evaristo's verse novel is written "from the vantage point of verbal density, as it were, rendering any fixed meanings insecure, as they dissolve into a wealth of interacting signifiers, with the five beats of the lines as the sole point of stable verbal orientation" (460). Discussing Evaristo among other verse

novelists, Vikram Seth, Derek Walcott, Craig Raine and Anthony Burgess, Sauerberg concludes that these writers do not share any desire to "re-establish modern epic", however, what they share is "a postmodern audience of a very heterogeneous nature" (460). He contends that to postmodern audience the novel is "just one form among many in a very large information, entertainment, and infotainment market" (460). The mainstream realist novel's presentation of narrative is "increasingly taken over by the visual media" and "widely distributed poetry is a matter of lyrics for mass-marketed popular music" (2004, 460). Therefore, Sauerberg suggests that the chance for the verse novel should be seen in the perspective of new narrative art forms emerging, new combination modalities available among the media and complex audience segmentations in constant flux (461). Of the three "explanations" of the verse novel, as "rudimentary epic, as metafictional experiment, or as aesthetic 'regrouping'", Sauerberg writes that "in response to new synaesthetic formations, the last-mentioned has the advantage of being able to appeal directly to an audience not necessarily familiar with literary history, as required for the first two, but then highly aware of contemporary media forms" (461). Similarly, the verse novel "especially when performed, combines narrative drive with musical dynamics, a combination found in shorter durations in pop-music ballads" (461). Thus, the verse novels, "engage with their subjects in ways that construct their implied readers as hovering somewhat uncertainly between an appreciation of the monological narratives of traditional epic poetry and the dialogical narratives of the carnivalesque novel" (461) and so incorporate Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981, 323). Consequently, although Evaristo chooses to employ verse to her fiction as to her artistic talent, for Sauerberg employing the verse format for purposes of narrative fiction "goes against the grain of contemporary generic awareness [...] as renewed stimulus to both emotions and intellect" (461-2), to which Evaristo states in parallel that her novel does not carry a traditional structure at all and that verse novel genre provided her "freedom to explore ways of telling the story outside the parameters of the conventional novel format" (Woolf 2010, n.p.). Conversely, although writing a verse novel brings about some hindrance for a wider acknowledgement of the text, Evaristo remarks that:

> People used to say that if only I'd written it as a prose novel it would reach a wider audience but it is what it is-although it was originally a prose novel that I worked on for three years before spending another two years re-writing it as verse. Lara has quite some history–starting off as a conventional novel, ending up as a verse novel and then being given a third life, if you like, with a new form and additional material. I'd like to hear it

> on the radio and various producers have submitted it to BBC Radio over the years but it never gets accepted. They think it will be too complicated for the reader to follow. (Woolf 2010, n.p.)

Considering the novel as "the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted", Bakhtin states that "[t]he generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic [flexible] possibilities" (1981, 321). As for the contemporary conception of genre, McKeon argues that the poststructuralist critique of genre may be regarded as the most recent version of a "disenchantment with the 'system of genres'" that began in the early modern period, accordingly the modern disenchantment with genre is "coextensive with the modern valorization of free innovation as such" (2000, 3).

The Family Tree

The expanded version also exposes a significantly large da Costa family tree, of which from the proportional view-point, the mother's maternal Irish ancestors extend to seven generations while the paternal Nigerian side extends to five, although the timeline covers only about a few decades more. Woolf points out that it is "almost as if the structure of the novel is as family tree. That's how it is visually. You can hang different branches from that tree and watch them grow" (2010, n.p.). As to Woolf's question to how she has integrated these new characters into the existing text, Evaristo maintains that

> [i]t wasn't too difficult because at the beginning of the book I have a character called Taiwo based on my father–a Nigerian man coming to Britain in the late 1940s who meets my white English mother called Ellen in the book. I explore her history of growing up in England in the 1930s and 40s and the book also explores her mother's story of growing up in London as a woman of Irish parentage at the turn of the 20th Century. The new characters, who are Irish and German, are on my mother's side of the family, so I was able to slot in the new sections at the beginning of the book without altering the existing text too much. (Woolf 2010, n.p.)

The practical reason for having a family tree is to illustrate the relationships among family members for the readers to peruse. Similar to Evaristo, Andrea Levy in *Fruit of the Lemon* (2000) has got two family trees, at the beginning and the end of her fiction: the former revealing the nuclear family in London and the latter, the completed family tree with Jamaican ancestors. The question which arises then is why would an author engage with genealogy in such detailed sense? For Nietzsche, the

meanings of "history" are always reflections of power (Morrison 2003, 16). As transformations of power relations take place, "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again interpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it" (McGowan 1991, 77-8). Thus, for Nietzsche, "the entire history of a 'thing', an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations", therefore genealogy is concerned with tracing "the history of meaning's production" (McGowan 1991, 78), which for the writer arises as an ontological tool for (semi-)/ autobiography.

On the other hand, Cuder-Domínguez remarks that Evaristo's "reconfiguration of Englishness goes beyond a mere inclusion of the (post)colonial, or even beyond a historical glance on their presence in London", that is, she strikes "at the very heart of the middle-class, heterosexual, patriarchal values that have persisted to this day in the English identity, suggest[ing] that the class struggle is as prominent as the racial one, and ultimately [she] demystif[ies] the construction of whiteness as an ideal to strive for" (2004, 188). Therefore, while uncovering her past with the eponymous Lara, Evaristo goes beyond racism especially in her rewritten *Lara*, by adding the genealogy of her mother's side, transforming racism against the black, towards the white, i.e. the Irish and Germans, unravelling discrimination as the target for all non-English.

As for the physical reality of the text, with the new version, *Lara* is divided into two parts and the fourteen chapters have become twenty, so they have become equally divided as ten chapters for each part. The prologue which focused on the timeline 1844, instead of the obscured location, bears the location, Brazil 1849 and Tolulope, the owner of the voice is renamed as Severina. The naming of locations continues throughout all the chapters, bearing the significance of inner and outer territories; dislocated in location. Polyvocality in discourse concordantly bears a different prominence for the author rather than the readers,[11]

> I [Evaristo] love writing in the first person, capturing voice, conveying character. In fact all my subsequent books have utilized the first person narrator, whether poetry or prose, so it was very familiar. That said, with each character there's always the challenge to bring them to life. How to put flesh on an ancestor? How to make them living, breathing sentient beings? For example, how would Louis the German speak in the mid 1800s? How could I convey the cadences and syntax of his speech convincingly without going overboard? How far could I go in writing broken English phonetically? (Woolf 2010, n.p.)

Thus, polyvocality of the text follows up the same order of Tolulope/Severina followed by Taiwo, since the implication of the Yoruba heritage attains its significance for both versions, nonetheless, the poetic format has become couplets and the confusion Ellen's voice creates by the end of Chapter One is cleared out by the title which bears her name. After the similar introduction to "Baby Ellen" at Chapter Two, the diversion to the main text starts where firstly Ellen's mother's name is changed into Peggy (and their last name from Burt to Brinkworth) and that she is voiced by narrating her dreams about her only daughter, Ellen. Her thoughts actually expose her emphasis on becoming a perfect "English" middle class family with impeccable manners, language and education, besides a "spotless home" (*Lara* 2009, 28). In the first version, a third person narration gives Edith O'Donoghue's family history, of the Irish grandmother Emma running away from Southern Ireland to London with her daughter Mary Jane whose deceased father was Sergeant Robbins of the British Army. This lineage becomes a major separation point in the "*Lara* revisited" where the story which covers about three pages is deleted and later on takes a complete form independently; going back to several generations, hence refashioning the story. Thereby, the Peggy of the new version introduces her husband and while introducing her husband Leslie Wilkening, Peggy retains Edith's explanation of Leslie's maternal German heritage, yet the ironic comment is added as of the English father's side being "uncouth with no table manners" (29), which is a slight hint of Peggy's middleclass superiority over the English working class. The name of Leslie's sister is also changed from Phoebe to Vera and Dora's future German Jew husband's name from Heini to Jacob. Although the writer of this book supposed the change arose because of a true-to-life approach from Evaristo's part, the author explained that the changes in names have taken place because of artistic concerns.[12] In this vein, Tolulope was changed because as slaves were given new names she would not have a Yoruba name, thus the Brazilian name Severina replaces it along with its poetic agreement: "Severina- the scarred one". As for the change in the grandmother's name from Edith to Peggy, the similarity to the daughter's name Ellen has been one of the reasons besides its poetic harmony. Apart from Phoebe's conversion to Vera for poetic accord, Heini became Jacob for the sake of a more appropriate and common Jewish name.

The now renewed character, the grandmother Margaret Peggy Robbins' story starts in 1911 at "Little Italy", London, with the lineage to Peggy's grandmother Emma's story starting in Birr, Ireland, 1849, who was born in the "frozen wasteland of winter" (31), out of wedlock, to her dying mother's arms and raised by her grandmother Caitlin. By the time

Emma was born, the Great Hunger was ebbing after four years, killing a million people (31). Britain is personified as

> Britannia, the Protestant Conqueror "who'd long ago
> throttled Catholic Hibernia between her two
>
> mammoth hands and stamped it to the ground,
> did little to help, inventing scapegoats instead.
>
> *Ireland is a human swinery, an abomination,*
> *A black howling Babel of superstitious savages*- (31) (emphasis original)

In this manner, Evaristo sets the scene for Lara's maternal ancestry for her grandmother Peggy's grandmother Emma, in a surrounding of a "damp cottage" (31), winter and starvation along with the pain of losing family members, for Emma's grandmother Caitlin has lost her husband to typhus and her five daughters to the Hunger. Yet, Evaristo's sarcasm is evident in the way she narrates that Caitlin lost her only son Lorcan to the "exodus to find work overseas" (31), ended up living in London, which is more painful to Caitlin than death, since she makes her granddaughter Emma swear on the Holy Bible that she will never abandon Ireland. Caitlin also mentions the colonisation of their native language-Gaelic-and the deprivation of their right to Home Rule, accusing Cromwell. Caitlin's father, Turlough was one of the rebels against the English rule and so was deported to prison in Australia in 1798. Caitlin dies when Emma is still young, wishing for her country's liberty. Her Uncle Lorcan comes to take Emma to London to raise her with his family, but having sworn for remaining in Ireland, she becomes the scullery maid in Lord Harrington's house. Ironically, though, although Emma refuses Lorcan's invitation to London, she falls in love with the English Private Henry Robbins, who fights with the Fenians. When she realises that she is pregnant, they marry and as a result, her Uncle Lorcan disowns her. As for the first negative aspect of this marriage, Emma is forbidden to speak in her native language Gaelic with her daughter Mary Jane. Finally, at the age of thirty one, Emma commits her "second cardinal sin" (40), they move to London, which is portrayed as a horrible location with "septic streets" "flea-infested windowless dungeon houses" and the robbers, ruffians and "harlots" as cohabitants (41), betraying her grandmother, betrayed by her husband, she can never go back home, her husband keeps in and out of jail, starts drinking, hating his wife. Ironically, living in a figurative hell Emma believes she will "burn in hell" (46). It is Mary Jane who becomes a dress-maker that enables her to earn her living. When she wants to marry

Sebastian, a glassblower, her mother Emma objects saying he is not Irish and her daughter retorts by saying "[n]either is your husband" (48). Eventually, Henry dies and Emma who survives him becomes blind. She never accepts her English son-in-law, although with a hint Evaristo points out that it is him who buys her books to be read, also revealing his altruism, for the poor would not dare to buy books from book-stores. Emma dies "knitting and cursing her daughter" (51).

Mary Jane and Sebastian have eight children and Lara's grandmother Peggy is the eldest. They are poor and following her mother Emma, Mary Jane blames Sebastian for their poverty. Peggy helps her mother by cleaning the house and looking after her siblings and sewing, yet eventually by marrying Leslie she has a better life as a middle class woman. Therefore, except for the fact that what Caitlin goes through discloses the atrocities of the colonial period in Ireland, Evaristo does not unveil discrimination towards the Irish; what the family goes through by Emma's arrival in England is a common denominator for the poor.

Caitlin's Catholic religiosity, on the other hand, gradually weakens primarily by Emma's abjuration to her oath by leaving Ireland. However, she gets punished for that by suffering intensely in poverty, and by the time Mary Jane grows up, Heaven becomes embodied for her as "one of those big houses up at the Angel" (48), a capitalist dream. Her husband, Sebastian, a glassblower, cannot fulfil her dream and she blames him for not being rich (51). Among her eight children, her dream is accomplished by her daughter Peggy, instead. She marries Leslie, a "Master Dairyman" (29) pointing out to her mother that she "won't end up in pokey rooms/sharing your neighbour's washing line and smelly toilet" (53). Peggy "invested in the future" the narrator remarks, "the past-a pit to fall down", her Grandmother Emma Robbins remains as "an apparition […] muttering in a language only she could understand" (30). One may deduce that Emma's betrayal of her oath to her grandmother Caitlin by leaving Ireland and marrying an Englishman causes suffering for generations. By Peggy, religiosity is restored by middle class comfort and values, such as living in a nice house and sending her daughter Ellen to St. Joseph's Convent to have a proper religious education. Ellen grows up "a real lady with her bows and ruffles./Her manners are impeccable, she minds her Ps and Qs […] she's not common" (28). Nonetheless, ironically it results in her meeting Taiwo at the Catholic Overseas Club dance and the much antagonised marriage for Peggy who blurts out "Marry in red, wish you were dead!" (96). Ellen and Taiwo's union produces eight biracial children. One may assume, in a way, covering many generations, Caitlin's curse takes effect on Peggy as well.

As for Peggy's husband Leslie, the dairy-man, he is introduced by a narrative voice revealing that his father is English, William Brinkworth, and her mother, German. He is a quiet man whose only fantasy is riding his horse as if he is the "legendary hero Hopalong Cassidy" (76), riding the "dangerous Texas to Kansas cattle drive" (77). Yet, as soon as Leslie gains his narrative voice he reveals his wife's contempt for himself saying "[s]he thinks the Brinkworths are as common as muck" (78) or "too low class" (80) and since he cannot dare to retort, he shares his thought with the readers: "[w]ell, this one hands over his pay packet every week" (78), for he renders that she is "for-mee-da-bla" and that he had "never/dare raise" (78) his voice to her. Contrary to Peggy's dominating character, he defines himself and his daughter as walking on "eggshells". He believes Peggy is a beauty, yet her religiosity bothers him because he wishes "she'd leave God outside the bedroom" (79). Hence for Leslie, discrimination is revealed on the Irish-British to German-British axis.

Leslie's German maternal grandfather Louis arrives in London in 1860. The situation is incongruously equivalent to Taiwo's almost a hundred years later: no money in the pocket, filled with hope, yet cold and appalling living conditions meet them, nevertheless, both Louis and Taiwo are fighters and overcome deplorable conditions. Louis is saved by the Asylum for the Houseless Poor and with the help of a German seaman there, who advises him to stick to his own kind and become a member of The German Society of Benevolence. Hence, after some time, Louis is employed at a German sugar bakery. In Taiwo's case there is no society to give him a helping hand, yet he also sticks to his own kind to survive, in which his cousin Sam plays a primary role. However, although the sugar bakery is run by a German master, Louis works under terrible conditions, so after two years, at the age of twenty he leaves that job, becomes a rich baker in a decade, and marries an English girl, Gladys. They have nine children of which two die, and one of their daughters, Caroline, marries William Brinkworth; they are Leslie's parents. The promising picture of happiness and affluence starts getting gradually distorted in 1914 when England declares war on Germany.

What is disclosed by Evaristo's narration here is a feature of English society that is least mentioned in multicultural fiction. Although a "Naturalised Citizen", the "locals" start crossing the road at Louis' approach, in the belief that he is one of the "Kaiser's despised spies" (90), and despite the fact that they have been his neighbours for over fifty years, the assaults increase with the inscription on his shutters "GO HOME FILTHY HUN!" and the curse of "Traitor!". As a result, his business closes and ironically, although he sides with the English, because the