

The Stream Never Forgets Its Source: Themes explored in *Lara* (1997) by Bernardine Evaristo

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Black British literature is a relatively new arrival in the British literary mainstream market. Bernardine Evaristo's acclaimed novel in verse *Lara* (1997) gives a fresh insight into the racial issues of contemporary United Kingdom through exploring several themes and through tickling stereotypes and myths that have long been taken for granted.

Evaristo employs themes that she shares with other black British writers such as Samuel Selvon, E. R. Braithwaite, Buchi Emecheta, Zadie Smith, or Courttia Newland.¹ Three scholars have so far defined the thematic traditions in black British literature. Cesar and Sharon Meraz identify the following topics: childhood, old age, return to the West Indies (it is possible to generalize this topic as return to one's mother country), history, and negations of post independence West Indies (Ramey 2002). Lauri Ramey adds to the above mentioned a few more categories: family, cultural history and memory, political events, music and song, alienation and otherness, freedom, and especially a concern for 'giving voice' (Meraz and Meraz 2000).

Evaristo touches most of the above-mentioned themes. *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.'² The proverb foreshadows one of the leitmotifs. Figuratively speaking, the plot flows into many places but its main stream gathers and unites its confluences. The novel focuses in turn on individual members of a mixed-race family in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though not in chronological order. 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). The baobab seed, as will be shown later, becomes a symbol for the African roots of Lara's family.

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. The British believe and have been taught that the Isles have always been inhabited by white nations and that the coloured ‘invaded’ it and have not originally belonged to their culture. 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. Taiwo is used as an example for the feeling of many ‘invited’ not only from Africa but also from the Caribbean. What Evaristo alludes to are not only the British broadcasts to the colonies or ex-colonies, but more importantly the arrival of the ship *Empire Windrush* in 1948 bringing 492 people from the Caribbean, Jamaicans to be precise, who were given this chance by the Nationality Act of 1948 passed by the British Parliament.³ With this novel Evaristo tries to show the stereotypes and prejudices from the point of view of ‘new comers’ and wants to break them down through plunging into their core and revealing their false premises and beliefs.

The theme of alienation and otherness gets a new dimension when Taiwo meets and falls in love with a white girl named Ellen. She wanted to be a nun ‘a White Sister, a teaching missionary enlightening the dark continent, [...] for they who were born in the southern wild (she read) were bereft of light, though their souls were white’ (8). She has only a second hand experience with the black people. However, in line with the white British belief, she is convinced that what the black people need most is to adopt white religion and rules. Only in this way can they be ‘saved’.

After she meets Taiwo, her eyes open. 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 (Kenough 2002). Due to their relationship retrospective excursions into the family histories of the respective partners are undertaken. Especially the theme of their childhood as a formative period of one’s personality is explored. Family bonds are considered essential and are greatly valued. Here Evaristo interweaves a number of themes together: otherness and alienation is counterbalanced with the theme of family and childhood. Yet, the family histories show that once you dig in them, things get complicated. Ellen’s family seemed to be a typically white British family. However, the family history turns out to have foreign roots as well. Some traces go back to low white classes in Ireland, but also to Germany.

What both black and white people in Britain share are various aspirations, such as marrying into a higher class, or providing a good education for children. These should secure them good and pleasurable life. Edith, the mother of Ellen, typifies a prejudiced white mother. She believes that Ellen’s dating a black boy would dishonour the whole family. She is all alarmed and agitated: ‘Oh! He’s not too dark, is he? [...] A native from a colony! Good Lord! So he *is* dark! Have you no sense of morals!’ (29) She builds an alienation barrier because of judging Taiwo’s physical otherness. She is also worried about the rumours that will spread immediately: ‘Gossiping locals are incensed. A nigger! A darkie! is whispered over hedges, over counters, at mass. An African, cannibal, savage, monkey, heathen, a thing from outer space. Goodness Gracious No! [...] For the love of God, whatever has possessed the girl! Has she no shame, no modesty. A dark one, they mutter. Dark! Dark! Dark! [...] It’s scandalous, it

is! Bring the girl to her sense. Think of the poor children, half breeds, mongrels. [...] For the love of God someone help her see the light' (33). All of them, Edith, Ellen and Taiwo have to learn how to live and accept each other's colour of skin and culture without prejudice: Taiwo says, 'She [Edith] judges me but she does not know me. [...] She does not see me [...] only a coloured' (35-37). Edith is epitomizing a typical attitude of the society to coloured people. Taiwo characterizes the white British xenophobia: 'These British think they are so superior to coloureds, [...] to me they are cardboard people with chessboard minds' (39). The older and the younger generation perceive racial issues differently. Therefore, Ellen does not understand the arguments of her mother: 'Why such fuss because of colour? [...] She'd [Edith] never even met a coloured person' (36). The only unprejudiced person, who prefers character to colour of skin, is Ellen's father, Leslie: 'I don't care where you come from, just look after my Ellen' (37). Taiwo and Ellen get married to the spite of those people who call her 'white whore' (77). They believe that the hostility of the society would change if they prove that they can create a traditional family and that they take their relationship seriously.

Out of the marriage of Ellen and Taiwo, Omilara, or Lara, as they call her, is born. As a child of mixed parentage, she is endowed with very vivid imagination. Her name Lara denotes: 'the family are like water' (43). Here Evaristo returns to her Yoruba metaphor about a stream that never forgets its source. The destiny has dispersed Taiwo's family members into different parts of the world, but the stream brings them back, at least in their recollection, to their place of origin. Through the wanderings of Lara's imagination and through her narrative voice, the culture of her mother is compared to the culture her father's people. When Taiwo's mother dies, he realizes that he is all alone in hostile British environment. In addition, Taiwo is tired of prejudice and of incessant fighting against it: 'Life is a boxing ring with no referee, judge or prize. How I tire of defending my right to exist on these great British isles. How I ache with invisible bruises. How I long to saunter casually down the road without tensing my stomach muscles, ready for foes' (49). He desperately longs for freedom. However, it occurs to Taiwo only now that '[he] must return prosperous or be ashamed. You can't go to Europe and return a poor man' (57). Returning without a status, good diploma, and money would disgrace him in his native country. Finally, he finds refuge in his native belief: 'When the roots of a tree die [as his did with the deaths of all closest relatives], the seeds are reborn. My children are my seed, this is [i.e. Britain] home now' (57). By this thought, Taiwo acknowledges Britishness and adopts it as his own, although he still feels that he does not fully belong to that society.

Not only Taiwo, but also Lara suffers from otherness. She realizes at school that she is different which alienates her from some of her classmates. 'Well, it was bloody embarrassing having a black dad. In the showers at school I began to notice my difference. [...] I wanted to be invisible. I wanted to be noticed' (70). Metaphorically speaking, her turning invisible, thus hiding the colour of her skin, should give more relevance to her personal qualities, for which she wants to be noticed. Ellen wants to soothe her: 'Look, Lara, your looks come and go but your personality stays for life [...]', but Lara knows that appearance is what defines her in the eyes of others: 'Crap! it was what you looked like that mattered and I was repulsive with dark skin and wiry hair' (71). Later, she tries to oppose the stereotypes and prejudice by claiming that she is not as low on the social ladder as some may think since she comes from a mixed race parentage: 'I'm not black. I'm half-case, actually' (74). Although she may not realize it, her mixed-race origin marginalizes her in the society even more; she is neither purely white, nor purely black. Beatrice, from a mixed-race family and Lara's relative, tells Lara the truth: 'They don't care whether your mother's white, green or orange with purple spots, you're a nigger to them, lovey, or a nigra as I like to say' (74). She tries to make Lara aware of the cultural and racial history by giving her an example of the race riots in the twenties: 'Do you think they stopped to ask them if they were half-caste! 'Oh excuse me sir, just before I kick

your head in, is your mother white?’ (75) Beatrice teaches Lara lessons in political history in order to explain the current attitude of the white people towards the black. She even has to tell Lara that there were slaves in Britain. Lara was ignorant of this fact. She is alarmed that Britain should have had slaves; she cannot imagine that such a civilised country could have exercised slave trade and could have used slaves for labour on the British soil. Evaristo alludes here to some, for a long time omitted, chapters in British history: e.g. the slave trade and various race riots in the twentieth century. She places her protagonists in the various centres of black settlement, such as Liverpool, which she calls ‘the biggest slave port in England [at one time and] the apartheid state of Great Britain’ (75). By the choice of her setting and characters, Evaristo elegantly attempts to fill some of the so far blank spots in British history books.

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. Taiwo tells her about his Yoruba tribe in Nigeria and about his native place called Lagos. More importantly, Lara learns that due to the slave trade her grandfather returned to Lagos from Brazil. The reader is reminded of the traditional slave trade triangle: Africa, South America, and Europe. Lara has a burning desire to see Lagos and inhale the atmosphere there.

Lara serves as a bridge between both families of her parents. When she was born, Edith reconciled with the idea of having coloured grandchildren. When Edith dies, Lara surprisingly has a vision of Taiwo’s dead mother urging her to: ‘Bring him home, [...] Bring him home’ (101). She could not get over ‘losing him to England’ (57). Taiwo’s mother is calling her lost son and he answers the calling. He has not been to Lagos, ‘[to] this place he called home’ (103) for 44 years. Not only Taiwo but also Lara questions her identity there. They call her ‘oyinbo’, i.e. whitey. She ponders: ‘This is the land of my father, she mused. I wonder if I could belong’ (104). She finds herself in a strange position: she stands out in England as well as in Nigeria. In both places, they consider her different and in both places they judge primarily by the colour of her skin. Similarly, Taiwo does not fit seamlessly to this place anymore. He has very mixed feelings: ‘A strange fire ignites Taiwo, [...] He must find his childhood house, it is urgent, suddenly. [...] It is here! His castle of love, of memories. The past swamps him like a drowning man’ (105).

Overwhelmed by Lagos, Lara is in a mystical dream guided in Lagos by Taiwo’s mother, Zenobia. Lara is transposed in time from 1993 to 1931. Back then, Lagos belonged to the British. The time and narrative voice change again. A voice is given to Taiwo’s grandfather who was a slave in Brazil. In 1839 he recalls that: ‘[I] always [lived] in the shadow of fear. [...] No link to the outside world, cut off in time, losing time, I felt my whole lifetime would be spent killing sugar cane’ (121). The slavery of this grandfather is subconsciously compared to the modern day slavery: the coloured inhabitants of the British islands live in the constant shadow of fear that they would be insulted by the white. They sense their isolation in the society—they arrived in a new country and they are not encouraged to assimilate. Therefore, they created their own black colonies, or one may even say ghettos, within the white towns.

The theme of freedom has several levels. For Taiwo’s tribe, the symbol of freedom is manifested in the baobab tree. When his grandfather’s father died in Brazil, grandfather ‘planted the seed of a baobab tree over his buried body, watched it grasp at life over years that gave [him] manhood. [He] resolved to one day plant the seed from Pai’s bone-fed tree in the old country, his mother’s home across the ocean’ (125). Therefore, when Taiwo’s grandfather was granted freedom, he made advantage of an offer and sailed back to Africa, expecting that life there would take a new and better quality. He wanted to return to his roots: both to the native soil as well as to the religion of his forefathers. He also wanted to take his son,

Gregorio, with him, in spite of the fact that Gregorio's Brazilian mother would never leave the country and would be hysterical about their departure. He let the son decide.

“Gregorio, my son, you are of the Yoruba tribe. Your forefathers came here as slaves many years ago. I have saved enough money to cross the Atlantic. Will you travel with me and live truly as a free human or will you always be underdog to the white man in Brazil.” He replied, clear-eyed and sure, “I will sail with you, Baba.” I cried. The year, eighteen seventy-five—we went home. (129)

This return to Africa could be compared to the modern colonization in reverse.⁴ Instead of staying in the colonized country, they go to their mother country. Although he at first felt ‘like an uprooted seed, in time [his] roots took hold’ (130). When Taiwo dreamed of going to the United Kingdom, he said: ‘Great Britain. The United Kingdom. The Motherland’ (132).

Lara finally in 1995 goes physically to Brazil to explore the place of her family's origin. She goes to the Amazon rain forest, she sails through it on a boat. There, out in the wilderness, she ‘become[s] [her] parents, [her] ancestors, [her] gods’ (139). She also realizes that ‘the past is gone, the future means transformation’ (139). Taiwo underwent a similar process when he arrived in Britain, he had to forget his past in order to survive. Finally she baptised herself in the waters of the Amazon river and decides to ‘paint slavery out of [her]’ (140), but to keep the African roots within her like ‘an embryo’ (140). She goes ‘back to London, across international time zones, step[s] out of Heathrow and into [her] future’ (140).

To sum up, upon the dominant theme of alienation and otherness, other themes such as black traditions, family history, or racial issues spiced with prejudice are projected. White British xenophobia constantly reminds the coloured characters of their otherness. It also ignites their awareness of their own origin and makes them compare the values appreciated by white and black cultures. Especially 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.

Endnotes

¹ Samuel Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) describes the experience of coming to London from the Caribbean; Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) pictures a Nigerian single mother living in London. Zadie Smith's most critically acclaimed novel *White Teeth* (2000) focuses on multicultural London. Courttia Newland in his novels *The Scholar* (1998) and *Society Within* (2000) exploits the possibilities of a hybrid language that is called Black English.

² Yoruba is a tribe of approximately ten million people living in southwestern Nigeria and Benin.

³ The Nationality Act of 1948 ‘offered colonial subjects British citizenship and the opportunity to stay in Great Britain as long as they wished’ (see Kenough 2002).

⁴ The term ‘colonization in reverse’ was coined by the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett. It denotes ‘the influx of formerly colonized peoples into the urban centres, such as London’ in the United Kingdom (see Kenough 2002).

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