

Inheritances of Identity: Shaping the Generational Diasporic Gap with Tangible Culture in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*.

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Abstract: This research paper examines the role of the material culture, such as artefacts, traditional garments and inherited spaces, in bridging the so-called diasporic gap in *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo. To the Africans who have migrated to Britain this rift is usually manifested in the form of an indifference between their past and the contemporary western lifestyle. One can observe the importance of physical things through the multilayered narrative by Evaristo in the process of recovery of the past which has been lost or transformed or even altered by the migratory experience. Objects such as traditional Nigerian textiles, family souvenirs, even the tangibility of the British landscape (such as the farm that Hattie is on) are examined in terms of how they can be used as memory anchors. These objects assist the characters in bargaining their identities with a touch, not just a group notion of the definition of home, but a more tangible sense of belongingness. In this paper, the researcher will examine the relationship between material culture and the Black British identity. It states that physical heritage can unite the generations of people together by making them feel the reality of silence of the past. Ultimately, Evaristo argues that collecting physical history is not merely a nostalgic exercise of the people who have traversed a lot; it is an assertive move of establishing continuity and self-identification when the world is no longer colonised.

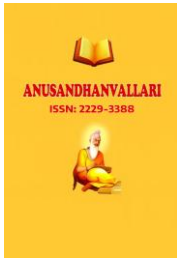
Key Words: Tangible Cultural Heritage, Diasporic Gap, Material Culture, Black British Identity, Cultural Continuity, Memory Anchors.

Introduction

In *Girl, Woman, other* by Bernardine Evaristo, the concept of home is not necessarily a comfortable place whereby people reside. Their history, their reminiscences and above all the things they carry with them fall together as fragments of a complex puzzle. There is a diasporic gap between the lives of Africans in Britain and their ancestral roots making them appear as though they are right there. Naturally, these stories of humans are not always found in books of history. However, it is hard to touch, put on, or even live in our cultural heritage, which teaches us more about one another.

Things are not mere props in the select novel, but rather are significant associations to a lost or stolen past, which Evaristo reads. Black people also tend to feel that their identity is a transient thing but objects such as jewellery that has managed to be handed down through generations and the sensation of traditional material makes the Black people feel rooted in a society where such a feeling is not always appreciated. The point in this story is that one has to be present to be seen gives rise to the fact that the character Amma considers it a powerful thing to be able to create one's own place and history (Evaristo 7). It is not simply that when the twelve main characters handle with their physical heritage, they are in touch with the past; it also allows them to be present. Based on the way Evaristo employs material culture to mend the cracks created by the displacement, this research paper will demonstrate that the real is the clue in rejoining the various sides of the self.

Background:



It is significant to understand the historical background of African diaspora in Britain in order to understand the ways in which the actual cultural heritage might serve to bridge the 'diasporic gap'. This was particularly difficult among the people of Caribbean and African origin who migrated during the Windrush period. They experienced a sense of sharp cultural disconnection in which families were physically disconnected with their ancestral nation, native language, and traditional social orders. When the population had to relocate, the most significant tangible evidence of the lives being lived away was physical things and material culture. This tension emerges in *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, and it demonstrates the Britain that is evolving and mixed and yet haunted by the legacies of colonialism. Her term, the diasporic gap, is used to describe the state of feeling in-between that of her twelve protagonists experience, most of the time feeling out of place with both their past and their present British environment. It is tangible heritage that defines as stubborn reality the inability of these identities to dissolve according to this study. There are so many voices in which Evaristo is narrated, yet it is these artefacts which unite the various Black British experience. Things such as the ancestral land owned by Hattie or the custom textiles owned by Bummi, as silent witnesses, retaliate against the displacement history. The context of this study however reveals that despite the possibility of altering the memories, the tangibility of the artefact gives one a good ground to reclaim pride and a sense of belonging forever.

Objective:

The crux of this paper is to investigate how physical material culture assists in the process of bridging the so-called diasporic gap in *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo. This paper considers the physical objects, clothes, and family houses where the protagonists of the novel reside to demonstrate that materiality and provides a feeling of rootedness that enables the migrant experience not to be too fragmented. The paper extends past regular glances at 'voice' to examine how the gathering of actual history, such as inheritance items and artificial art collections, allow the African diaspora in Britain to recuperate some of the overlooked stories and construct a robust and contemporary sense of identity with numerous facets.

Research methodology

This work employs a qualitative literary study that is based on material culture studies and post-colonial theory. The approach involves a critical analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, and truths of symbolic values of real-life objects and spaces. The research relies on textual analysis in order to discover memory sources such as textiles, land and records and examine their impact on the way individuals construct their identities. Also, an intersectional approach is applied to examine the interaction of the 'tangible' with race, gender, and generation. This two-whole approach allows one to examine the means of demonstrating cultural continuity by physical objects in the African diaspora with a premeditated approach.

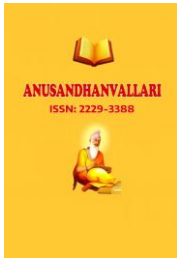
The novel *Girl, Woman, Other* demonstrates that most often, the gap between parents and children is greatest. Objects that are physical such as a picture, a dress, or a house allow young people, such as Yazz, to perceive the hardships and accomplishments of those who have preceded them. This is what Evaristo says about the character of Grace: "she knew that her ancestors were watching over her" (Evaristo, 134). It was a very rule-bound time of grace. The physical settings and things that have been abandoned in the physical was commonly triggered in this spiritual connection.

Literature Review

Much of the criticism concerning *Girl, Woman, Other* is over its fused fiction form and its exploration of overlap. Increasingly the scholarly literature demonstrates how Evaristo bases these complex identities on the real world.

The concept of material memory.

Scholars such as Pierre Nora have written a lot on lieux de memoire (places of memory). The scholar in the context of the work of Evaristo affirm that sites are usually portable objects to the Black British. Due to the colonial



history, most physical accomplishments of Africa were wiped out. That is why the diaspora is relying on the tangible fragments. The art, jewellery, and clothes worn by the people in the novel are the mnemonic devices used by the people. The refusal to disappear as characterized in research by post-colonial thinkers, as Bummi refuses to do (Evaristo 162), is not merely adhering to the tradition of her Nigerian childhood. This clinging of things acts like a bridge on the gap that migration leaves.

The Politics of Space and the Land as Heritage.

Most of the literary criticism regarding the diasporic gap revolves around the sense of friction between the city (London) and the country. The concept of Black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy states that the identity is dynamic and it evolves over time. However, Caryl Phillips and Susheila Nasta have also indicated that the notion of belonging implies having an interest in the location. The character Hattie is a significant aspect of *Girl, Woman, Other* to consider. Other individuals object to the term migrant due to her 90 years connection to the farmhouse in Northern England. Hattie is both an immigrant and an indigenous to the British landscape since she is the owner of the land, the most conspicuous of the heritage. This concrete grounded-ness contradicts the notion that the individual who has migrated is never a homeless person.

Recently, feminists have been reading Evaristo with the focus on the body as an actual vessel. The scholars state that the characters curate their appearance to display what their background is. The trend of using natural hair and donning African patterns in business in London is both considered as bridges in the difference between a Westernised popular life and a personal ancestral soul. According to the prism of identity, Evaristo says, it was about the power of the image (Evaristo 42). According to some, these women are reclaiming a tradition that used to be imposed upon them by other people by setting the limits of how they appear. Things in the diaspora do not simply represent the past; they would like to be part of the present.

What is demonstrated on this review, however, is a shift into the agency of the tangible. The very reason why the characters of Evaristo are so special is not what they lost on the journey across the "gap," but what they have constructed, purchased, and preserved. This study fills a gap in the research by examining both the physical and the mental features of these bridges.

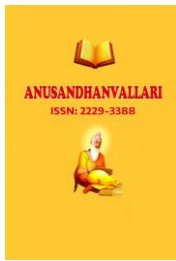
Main Discussion.

It is not only a diasporic gap between people. The time and the thought also have a gap. By *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo demonstrates that the words could not unite a grandmother with her granddaughter or a refugee with new home country; things may do it.

Heritage: clothes and the skin of clothes.

Bummi in *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo is one of the most captivating illustrations of how material culture and clothes, in particular, can make people of various backgrounds to comprehend and relate to one another. This distance is not the only issue that makes Bummi, a Nigerian immigrant who must deal with the class arrangements in London, a gap. It is a gulf of the woman she used to be in Nigeria (Well-educated, high-status woman) and the one she appears to be in Britain (A housekeeper). Her conservative dressing when viewed through the prism of the West serves as a kind of skin of tradition, a layer of physical appearance behind which she hides her identity.

The head tie and the wrapper are not only decorations in the life of Bummi, but as the experts refer to as these things mnemonic textiles are fabrics that bear a meaning and social status. It is not simply a form of clothing that Bummi wears in her traditional clothes, but it is a means of reclaiming her past. Evaristo discusses how the clothes have transformed her and how they are helping her to be taller in a world where she might prefer not to be noticed. As Bummi goes to a party, "transformed by the fabric, her stature elevated by the design of her head tie" (Evaristo



158). This design is something that makes one to believe that the clothes provide the character with a place to be when London is hostile or alien.

It should also be mentioned that this physical history also offers safeguarding against the cultural severance that most migrants face. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy speaks of the significance of creative culture to maintain connections across the ocean. There is a possibility that Bummi can voice herself through her crafts, which she can touch and feel. Scholar Susheila Nasta indicates that the home, which cannot be found in the house, is on the bodies of many women who have moved around a lot. This can be seen when Bummi considers her occupation as a cleaner as one that deprives her of her Nigerian identity. She also puts on traditional clothes in her private life thus relating her work to her family background. Evaristo describes this conflict among the Bummi when she writes that she “refused to let the grime of other people’s houses settle on her soul” (Evaristo,162). She has to rid herself of that grime by making her Nigerian silks and laces as innocent and white as they can be and carry her away to that tradition, that culture of value and tradition.

Another nonverbal way of communicating with the next generation is through the heritage in her skin. These traditional signs are initially embarrassing to her daughter Carole or too much but the clothing gives the Nigerian background an undisputed reality in the home in London. The clothes occupy space and have to be taken care of, washed, and folded in a specific manner. This renders the ancestral culture as part of their lives that cannot be changed under any circumstances. Ultimately, Evaristo demonstrates that diasporic gap is bridged when the individual rejects the flattening influence of movement by means of material culture. This is to ensure that the past always exists physically and hangs over the present.

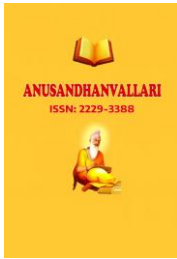
Farmhouse Land as a Physical Legacy.

Hattie is one of the powerful characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo who is the antithesis of the typical image of the rootless urban immigrant. The majority of the lead characters in this novel reside in the city of London, which is an urbanizing place, yet Hattie remains in a country house in Northern England. This farmhouse is not only a house, but also a tradition and a massive part of history, which makes people of various backgrounds unite as they know that they have the British land. The ninety years of Hattie in the land is a radical assertion of belonging to the Black diaspora, the history of which is usually characterized by movement and displacement.

The house is an imaginary living museum in that the history of the African diaspora has been built into the walls. According to Evaristo, the house is full of the clutter of centuries such as old furniture, photographs, and other objects that belonged to a family that expelled to move. The significance of this substance is that it demonstrates the presence of black people in Britain prior to the Windrush period. Experts such as Julian Agyeman have in their study on environmental racism focused on the fact that the English countryside is generally cultivated to represent only the white people. Hattie reclaims the landscape by surviving and remaining in possession of this rural land. She manages to bridge the diaspora divide by proving that home is not something far behind Africa or the Caribbean, but something on the English ground.

When they see Hattie, younger characters, such as Yazz, get to access tangible history that they do not get access to in novel. To the contemporary generations, the house serves as a bridge between the identity of the young generation, a bold and fast-moving one, and the survival of their forebears, which is a steady, slow process. According to Evaristo, the life of Hattie was a ‘monument to a life lived on one's own terms’ (Evaristo, 312). The house itself in this case is the monument, a solid and immovable object that endures the test of time.

Upon closer examination, the farmhouse can be seen as the tool of analysis of the human soul referred to by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. She experiences the dust of her ancestors in her house and this makes Hattie feel that she has continuity, something that being out of her home usually destroys. According to the story,



Hattie “felt the spirits of those who had gone before her in the creak of the floorboards” (Evaristo 325). The very fact that the spiritual and the material meet each other in this manner demonstrates that the true cultural heritage, such as the land, the rocks, and the wood of the house, is the most effective means to unite the people of other continents that have different backgrounds.

Art and Theatre Making New Tangible Heritage

Bernardine Evaristo modifies the concept of solid cultural history in *Girl, Woman, Other* where it is neither something that is passed on within families but something that is created by artistic activity. The figures such as Hattie and Bummi are the reliance on the things that they were given, whereas Amma Bonsu can be viewed as the creation of something new that can be considered a result of the tangible heritage. Being a Black woman on the fringes of Thatcherite Britain, the ‘diasporic gap’ is the act of denying the fact that she and others of her kind ever existed in the first place. Amma is choosing to fill in this gap and make the story that is not lasting, the stage, the costumes and the printed collection.

To Amma, the theatre materiality is her means of moving to the heart of the British society, which is on the periphery. At the beginning of her work her heritage was documented in the forms of such fragile artifacts of activism as flyers delivered by hand, radical theatre posters, and staging sets, which she made herself. These things were her sole ‘proof of existence in a world that would rather she was invisible’ (Evaristo 4). Other scholars such as Homi Bhabha have opined that the archival act is one of the ways through which the colonized subject establishes their position in post-colonial theory. Her museum of resistance is all the old reviews and play-bills which Amma has collected. They are not just papers; they are physical reminders of an unforgettable past.

The best aspect of the journey Amma makes is the one where she arrives at the National Theatre and discovers that her radical past is still alive in the grey concrete fortress of British establishment. The printed program with her name engraved in it has turned into a new family treasure. This transformation is an indication of the politics of representation, which happens when the Black person ceases to be an object of the white gaze and instead creates the world. On stage, Amma perceives the Black bodies “physicality of Black bodies taking up space” (Evaristo 12) which is an authentic rendering of a tradition that was previously concealed.

Evaristo appeals to Amma to make the argument that closing the diasporic gap is possible with the construction of a monument to our own experiences. And despite the fact that theatre is a transient art form, the scripts, photographs, and costumes that remain behind guarantee that the coming generation does not have to start completely afresh. At the culmination of the novel, Amma has created a bridge of stone and ink demonstrating that tradition is not merely something of the past but also something that one creates as we go forward. When the text relates her achievements, one can understand that her work is already a “solid legacy in a world of shifting sands” (Evaristo, 442).

Transition between Generations

The gap of the diaspora is the most evident in *Girl, Woman, Other* because of the difference between the children of the first-generation migrants and their children born in Britain. The lack of common language and other cultural values is the characteristic feature of this generational clash. Other individuals such as Bernardine Evaristo make use of a physical item hand-off that spans across generations as a form of connecting with people without uttering a word. To the younger generation, such as Yazz who is rebellious and who is certain in herself mentally, the physical legacy of her mother Amma initially appears as evidence of some long-lost radicalism. However, if one look further into the novel, the material possessions such as suitcases, old photographs, trinkets, cease being considered as clutter and come to be significant leads in uncovering some unknown history within the family.

Among all those things that symbolize this literal bridge, the suitcase is the most heart-touching. It is not only clothes in this physical ship, but also the weight of the first journey. When a daughter gazes at the petite and



scratched suitcase, which was brought by her mother in either Nigeria or Caribbean, she must confront the tangible reality of being transferred. It reminds her about the fact that her mother was a young helpless woman that had to cope with a cold, grey invitation to a new place. This is what is referred to as post memory by a scholar, Marianne Hirsch, and it implies that the past affects how they grow up since they are the generation after. This post memory is characterized by touch in the story by Evaristo. Objects such as gold or antique passports assist in sealing the 'gap' as they provide the spoken narratives with physical truth which words do not always possess.

Evaristo demonstrates that the youth might not share the same values as their parents, yet they can hardly disregard their bodily presence. These things transform the parent into a historical figure as the home figure. Yazz feels that her freedom is grounded on the concrete struggles of past generations when she examines the old prints and posters of her mother. According to Evaristo, these objects remind the girls about how they used to be "the women they were before they became mothers" (Evaristo, 40). It is through this awareness that is instigated by the material world that ensures that the diaspora is not a narrative of loss but a connectivity of life. The objects do not only tell the story; they also demonstrate that it happened. This bases, contemporary identity on the firm foundation of ancestral survival.

Conclusion

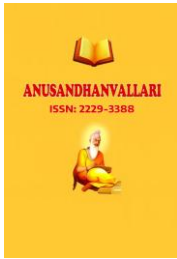
Girl, Woman, Other by Bernardine Evaristo demonstrates that the so-called diasporic gap is not an insoluble space, but it may be filled with the density and substance of a real cultural background through the lives of twelve women who happen to be connected with one another. As was revealed in this paper, the divide between the past of the ancestors and the present British life cannot be bridged using abstract concepts only. The real world should also be taken care of and maintained. Bummi textiles and their protective skin, Hattie farms and their radical permanence, Amma textiles and their posters of historical evidence, and the vessels of hope in the heirloom of the dead, all of this is primarily how cultures remain alive.

As Black British people use to explain, identity is a material project as depicted in the story of Evaristo. The items that were observed due to this research are memory anchors, which preserve history in a post-colonial society that tends to remain silent most of the time. When the characters relate to these actual things, they transform the process of being a migrant into multi-rootedness instead of rootlessness. Heritage is something alive and it can be worn, lived in and made as the examples below illustrate. At the end of the novel, it is evident that these actual bridges assist the main characters to reconcile their two selves, beyond the trauma of being displaced to a blissful synthesis of self.

Finally, Evaristo gives a positive account of the migration. She states that, despite the possibility of arguing with the past, and voices falling, the physical always remains as a tenacious and unavoidable mark of survival. The characters are establishing their present by holding on to the actual fragments of their past. This transforms the gap into a non-losing area but a good scenery of belonging. Giving the conclusion, the novel tells the readers that we are what we cling to because, "it's not about being a victim, it's about how you deal with it" (Evaristo, 328), and that the material world, permanently, is their means of coping, in these women.

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