



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione Culturale (LTLLM)

Tesina di Laurea

Writer, Woman, Other
A Comparative Study of Trinh T. Minh-
ha and Bernardine Evaristo

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Anno Accademico 2024 / 2025

Abstract

The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze and compare the similarities found in two books: *Woman Native Other* (1989) by Trinh T. Minh-ha, and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo, published 30 years apart.

The theoretical lenses that will be used for this comparative study are *intersectionality* and *postcolonialism*, and they will be briefly explained in the introduction.

This paper will present Trinh T. Minh-ha and Bernardine Evaristo lives as women of color, and how this has impacted their literary works.

Specifically, this thesis wants to examine how both writers criticize derogatory terms like “other”, their rejection of Western literary norms, and their effort to imagine new ways of narrating identity, belonging, and difference beyond colonial and patriarchal categories.

Table of contents

Introduction	p. 5
1. An overview of Trinh T. Minh-ha's life and work	p. 9
1.1. Growing up during the war and the impact on her work	
1.2. Filmography and the triple bind of women	p.14
2. An overview of Bernardine Evaristo's life and work	p. 19
2.1. African diaspora and growing up in the UK as a Black woman	
2.2. The importance of theatre in Evaristo's life	p. 22
3. <i>Woman Native Other</i> and <i>Girl Woman Other</i>: a comparison	p. 29
3.1. Through the intersectional lens	
3.2. Through the postcolonial lens	
Conclusion	p. 41
Reference List	p. 43
Summary in Italian	p. 45

Introduction

This work aims to explore the re-signification given to the term *Woman* and the critique aimed at the concept of *otherness*, through the lens of intersectionality and postcolonialism, in the works *Woman Native Other* (1989) by Trinh T. Minh-ha and *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo.

In this introduction, I will be briefly explaining the theoretical lenses that will be deployed for the analysis of the two works. The first lens is “*intersectionality*”: it is a term that was coined quite recently, in 1989, by the American civil right activist Kimberlé Crenshaw. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, “*intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage*”. This intersecting and overlapping of various forms such as gender, sex, race, class is usually conveyed as oppressing, but recently, it has also been given a positive connotation. Crenshaw developed this idea during a court case, during which she had to defend black women who had not been hired by a company. She chose this word to convey a metaphor of a traffic intersection in a junction, when various lines, i.e. aspects of life (race, gender, class) combine, overlap and intersect. It became an articulation of an awareness that was already present among black women writers. In fact, if we refer to literary texts concerning intersectionality, but not mentioning it explicitly, we can cite Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs presents one of the first intersectional ideas of identity, and as she states

“*Slavery is bad for men; but it is far more terrible for women*”.¹

This simple quote shows the awareness of an oppression that was both race and gender specific: enslaved black women were racially oppressed and sexually exploited. A double oppression, in this specific case, was suffered; Jacobs, while describing her hiding for 7 years (during which she was able to carve a hole in the retreat to watch over her children and community) also inspired later black women to view the “loophole of retreat” as the ability of black women to resist in front of the intersectional /double oppression, and to build resistance and hope during hard times.

¹ Harriet, Jacobs “Another Link to Life” in *Incidents in the life of a slave girl* (Boston: published for the author, 1861), 86

The second “lens” that will be used is postcolonialism, which refers to the aftermath of the Western colonization, and “[...]can also be used to describe the concurrent project to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of imperialism”².

Postcolonialism refers to the end of domination by European empires. Postcolonial literature concerns texts coming from former colonies in the Caribbeans, Africa and India. Postcolonial writers, having lived in colonized countries, aim to celebrate their own cultural identities, to reclaim them from the colonizers, in order to build a national literature. This can be challenging, as these writers search for their country’s pre-colonized heritage to express themselves: this often results in rejecting and resisting Western literary norms and embodying alternative models. Postcolonial theory started to develop in the 70s, and *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said is considered to be a crucial work in the study field. In his book, Said refers to the term “orientalism”, as a “(...) Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 3). In other words, the West was (is) constantly perpetuating in its narrative problematic stereotypes and power dynamics to construct a specific image of the Orient. Trinh. T. Minh-ha, having grown up during the Vietnam War, has been repudiating Western vision and mentality, by giving for example more importance on oral tradition rather than the written one. Bernardine Evaristo also refers to postcolonialism in her work, in an attempt to re-shape Black British identities. Over the last few years, many Black scholars have been challenging and giving new meaning, not only to intersectionality, but also to the concept of “otherness”. Of all the labels given to marginalized groups, and in particular women of colour, “other” has arguably been the most used label to maintain gender and racial hegemonies. In the works this thesis will be presenting, the Other has been highly criticized and refused, as it is a concept created to submit and annihilate.

The first chapter provides an overview of Trinh T. Minh-ha early life in Vietnam and how the conflict she lived through has impacted her art and the way she expresses herself. The chapter will then delve into the so-called *triple bind of women*, a concept explored by Minh-ha in her book *Woman Native Other*.

The second chapter describes Bernardine Evaristo’s growing up as a Black British woman in a country that did not consider her as a British citizen. Evaristo was

² Britannica, “Postcolonialism”, for deeper insight consult the Britannica online dictionary

one of the founders of the “Theatre of Black Women”, the first black women’s theatre company in Britain, and the importance of theatre has in the book *Girl Woman Other* will be described.

The third and last chapter will present the strategies and themes the two writers have in common in the two works presented in the previous pages: both Minh-ha and Evaristo have dealt with intersectionality and postcolonialism in their writings. They both distance themselves from a Eurocentric point of view and from the concept of *Other*.

1 An overview of Trinh T. Minh-ha's life and work

1.1. Growing up during the war

The history of Vietnam is complex. Before the unfortunately well-known Vietnam war, that took place between 1955 and 1975, another conflict had taken place in those territories: the Indochina War, or Anti-French Resistance War. Trinh T. Minh-ha's life is closely intertwined with these two conflicts, as she was born in 1952, right during the first Indochina war, and left the country in the early 1970s, some years before the end of the Vietnam War.

The term “Indochina” refers the French colonial empire and to the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.



Image 1: Map showing the division of “Indochina”

In the 1940s, a liberation movement called “Viet Minh” arose, led by Ho Chi Minh: it was made up of nationalists coming from different social classes wanting to gain independence from French colonial rule. In 1945, a somewhat independence was declared by the leader Ho Chi Minh: France did not want to lose its colony, it wanted to reassert its control over their “possession”, so that a series of conflict spread out and they lasted from November 1946 until July 1954. The United States, which were led by President Truman, maintained a neutral position in the first three years; but after the communist North Korea had invaded the South, the USA grew afraid of the influence the communism could have on the Vieth Minh, and they decided to increase their involvement in the conflict by sending “advisors”. According to the US, the communism, especially the USSR one, should be contained by any means and not spread around with a domino

effect: this theory, also known as the “domino theory”³, suggests that fragile nations situated next to communist ones, without help would fall one after one, like dominoes to communist aggression. In 1950, the MAAG, i.e. the Military Assistance Advisory Group was founded as a means to help the French with war strategies.

The Viet Minh liberation movement intensified and increased their activities in the territories. In 1950, the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was established within Vietnam to assist the French with war strategy. Nevertheless, France suffered devastating defeats against the Viet Minh led by the General Vo Nguyen Gap and surrendered at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954. The Geneva conference held in 1954 had the purpose to negotiate terms related to the recent Korean War and Indochina War. For what concerned Vietnam, the main point was to secure a peaceful transition into independence: a temporary division into North and South was agreed until the next elections programmed for the year 1956. North Vietnam, or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was to be governed by the Vieth Minh while South Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, by former Nguyen dynasty emperor Bao Dai, together with the Prime Minister Ngo Diinh Diem.



Image 2: two main opponents during the Vietnam War

³ American foreign policy after World War II was based on the goal of containing Communism and the assumptions of the so-called "domino theory"—if one country fell to Communism, the surrounding countries would fall, like dominoes.

Dividing the country into a communist part, situated in the North, and a non-communist part in the South, was one of the reasons the second Indochina war, more commonly known as the Vietnam War started. This conflict lasted until the fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975.

Trinh T. Minh-ha was born in 1952 in Hanoi, the city where the first battle of the Indochina war occurred some years prior. After the Geneva accords of 1954, her father was forced by the French administration to move to the South, and her whole family migrated to Saigon. The year of 1954 was the first wave of displacement she lived, though she was still an infant. One year later, on November 1st, 1955, the second Indochina conflict began. It started out as a civil war: in the North, the Viet Minh wanted to unite the southern part of the country under their communist leader Ho Chi Minh. In the South, many were unhappy under the leadership of the Prime Minister Ngo Dien Minh, and wanted their country unified with the communist North. An insurrection started by a resistance guerrilla group, the Viet Cong, who were later supported by the North Vietnamese to overthrow the southern government.

In her piece *Far Away, From Home: The Comma between* taken from her book *Elsewhere, within here* (2011) Minh-ha looks back on her early childhood spent right in the middle of two wars. She compares the different silence she first felt once she moved to the United States, to the soundtrack of her early life, mostly made of eerie silences interrupted by firing bullets, and exploding rockets. In the first pages, in the section titled *Sleepless silence* she recalls one of the war tactics of attacking during the night:

As the saying goes, “The enemy attacks at night”. This held true for people on both sides of the old north-south divide in Vietnam, but in the southern territories where I was then-, I was born in Hanoi and grew up in Saigon-the situation was particularly intense, for example, in 1968 and in the years after. The South faced intensive fighting, marked by the Tet Offensive, which saw a massive attack by Communist forces catch the city and its densely populated environs by surprise on New Year’s Eve. (Minh-ha 2011, 11-12)

On New Year’s Eve of 1968, the Viet Cong orchestrated a sophisticated plan, called later the Tet (=Lunar new Year) Offensive: a series of simultaneous attacks throughout South Vietnam, targeting major cities including Saigon, where Trinh T. Minh-ha was living. Even though the offensive was not completely successful, it certainly succeeded in changing most of the US public opinion on the war, making them suspicious of what they had been told until that moment of the conflict and its alleged

near end. Graphic images and reports showed the real brutality of the war, revealing the true face of it: many Americans were disgusted and began to doubt their country's involvement in a war where it was now unclear who the "bad guys" were. Trinh T. Minh-ha was sixteen years old when the offensive took place, and she explains how she and her family survived during that time period:

It was the time when we were surviving on plain rice and water, with 24-hour curfews, often with no electricity, nothing to barter for food and barely any sleep. As our house was located next to the national police quarter, we were inevitably living in *wait* for heavy, unpredictable mortar and rocket fire attacks, spending endless nights packed together in between sandbags in our small bathroom. (Minh-ha 2011, 11-12)

She then goes on to explain the agonizing wait for something to happen, and how the silence brought everyone and everything to a halt, because it meant only one thing:

Steep silence usually signaled the imminence of an explosion. Whenever it appeared, the heart pounded in recognition, and we would stop dead in our activities- in the midst of a conversation, and even of quiet thinking. The whole body was an ear, and my ear, trained to the sounds of war, was always on the alert for that split second of silence before the blast of rockets, which would be followed by the crackle of small-arm fire or the wail of sirens and the shouts of cries of afflicted witnesses. That ear needed some time to adjust to the sounds and silences of peace. (Minh-ha 2011, 12)

The last sentence refers to the time when Trinh T- Minh-ha moved to the United States to pursue her studies. She had written from Vietnam to many universities abroad and she was accepted at Wilmington College, Ohio. She then was awarded a scholarship at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she studied Music composition and French literature. Afterwards, she was an exchange student in Paris, where she taught English in a high school while at the same time studied ethnomusicology at La Sorbonne. In 1975, she experienced her second wave of displacement: she was still studying in Paris, when the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, fell, and she had to return to the United States to join her parents, who had escaped Vietnam and arrived as refugees. The two waves of displacements Minh-ha experienced, the first in 1954 and the second in 1975, deeply influenced her engagement with postcolonialism, feminism and intersectional theories and themes; subsequently, she began to investigate themes of transnational identity and to critique of Western narratives that portray negatively the "Other", especially the way American

mainstream media represented the war and their “enemies”. All these are central to her filmmaking and works as a writer.

Displacement and the consequent search for one’s own identity have been recurrent themes in Minh-ha’s work. She is, technically speaking, a *Việt kiều*, i.e. an “Overseas Vietnamese”, but in reality, through her art, she challenges the structured categorization and its rigidity, opting for a more fluid representation and identity.

In 1990, one year after *Woman Native Other* had been published, and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* had come out, the British writer and filmmaker Pratibha Parmar interviewed Trinh T.Minh-ha in Berkeley, California, about “(...) cultural hybridization and decentred realities, fragmented selves and multiple identities, marginal voices and languages of rupture”. Within the interview, cultural hybridity and marginalized voices are brought up, and when it comes to the question of identity, Parmar asks “So how would you look at questions of identity-as a woman, as a woman of colour, as a writer or as a film-maker?”⁴. Minh-ha’s answers that “if it is a point of redeparture for those of us whose ethnicity and gender were historically debased, then identity remains necessary as a political/personal strategy of survival and resistance” (Pratibha 1990, 72-73). Because of years of colonization, many cultures have been historically marginalised and degraded, so the identity and the self-definition of those who had been subjugated has become an act of survival and resistance. To survive and to resist against those who have been categorized negatively the “others” is an important political and personal act. She then goes on with the answer by stating:

The reflexive question asked (...), is no longer: *who* am I? but *when, where, how* am I? (...)
Here the notion of displacement is also a place of identity: there is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of colour and the writer; there are instead, diverse recognitions of self through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity. (Pratibha 1990, 73)

Once again, she refuses a rigid category and the traditional questions such as *who am I?* and opts instead for *when, where, how am I?* suggesting identity as something non-rigid, that moves in time and space. Displacement, in this case, is not considered negative, but is rather seen as a place where identity is constructed, not lost

⁴ Parmar, Pratibha, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. “Woman, Native, Other.” (*Feminist Review*, no. 36, 1990), 65-74 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395110>.

or confused. It is unfinished, because is fragmented and intersectional, especially in her case, where different intersections of identity come together and coexist.

1.2. *Filmography and the triple bind of women*

In a 1993 discussion at the University of Otago, New Zealand, after the screening of Minh-ha's film *Shoot for the Contents*, the filmmaker pointed out that:

It has been very important for marginalised people to claim the right to self-representation; needless to say this is an absolutely necessary fight. But what we need now is to carry out work that offers at least two movements at the same time: one claiming the right to self-representation and the other dealing with the politics of representation thereby refusing the boundaries or the limits that are being imposed on our activities.⁵

The two movements she refers to in her answer are central to her work, both in her films and in her writings. Claiming the right to self-representation can be considered a form of resistance against those who have been representing marginalized people and have also spoken in their place. But how to resist these acts of superiority? By fighting and resisting. Resistance can have various forms, both in visual arts and literary arts. In Trinh T. Minh-ha's works, one of the most common form of resistance is rejecting Western narratives, which usually consider themselves superior and hence have a prejudiced eye towards other cultures. As she asks in her book *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), which will be discussed in the last chapter:

Have you ever attended a white man's presentation (often also ours) on a "native" society, be he a photographer, a filmmaker, a choreographer, a musician, a speaker, or a writer? It is as if, unvaryingly, every single look, gesture, or utterance has been stained with anthropological discourse, the only discourse in power when it is a question of the (native) Other. (Minh-ha 1989, 56)

This anthropological discourse, which in films translates into the *ethnographic gaze*⁶ can be often problematic, as the gaze is usually hegemonic and has a sense of superiority towards the community that is being filmed. The ethnographic gaze in films shapes how a specific culture is observed and represented. This representation is not neutral, as there are many choices, (camera work, framing, editing, ecc) concerning how to represent the culture being filmed: the final product has been shaped by a dominant, eurocentric gaze, highly criticizing the "other". Trinh T. Minh-ha, in her filmography, and

⁵ *Strategies of Displacement for Women, Natives, and their Others: Intra-views with Trinh T. minh-ha* Women's Studies Journal, 1994, 10:1, 24

⁶ The way an ethnographer observes and interprets people and their cultures by deploying methods and theories coming from the anthropological discipline.

particularly in her films *Reassemblage* (1982) *Surname Viet Given Name* (1989) and *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015) completely disassembles the ethnographic gaze, and subsequently the western narratives, by using various cinematic techniques.

Reassemblage is a visual study on women living in rural Senegal. It is considered one of the foundational works in postcolonial feminist film theory, because it fights the western media representation of African women and their cultures. Usually, as stated in the previous paragraph, the Western media deployed a colonizing gaze when filming documentaries about “other” cultures, and portrayed these as exotic and primitive. To reject this problematic narrative, in *Reassemblage*, Minh-ha uses various techniques: she doesn’t follow a chronological time order, the voice-over is fragmented and not linear, as the overall editing of the film. American politician Laura Thielen commented on this film that

With uncanny eloquence, *Reassemblage* distills sounds and images of Senegalese villagers and their surroundings to reconsider the premises and methods of ethnographic filmmaking. By disjunctive editing and a probing narration this ‘documentary’ strikingly counterpoints the authoritative stance typical of the National Geographic approach.⁷ (Thielen 1984, 4-5)

The film is centered about the Senegalese women and their life experiences, and does not approach them with an *authoritative stance* portraying them as mere objects, victims or symbols, but instead shows their complexities and facets. What Minh-ha wants is “I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby”⁸. Her refusal to speak *about* is her taking an anti-ethnographic approach to what she is filming and representing: she only wants to speak *nearby*, instead of generalizing and imposing specific meanings as the authoritative and ethnographic gaze usually does, she places herself as an observer who does not restrict the subject shown into a strict category, an already defined label. The visual montage of this film is made by short and fragmented shots, the audio sometimes does not match the image, and Minh-ha’s voice can be heard sometimes: in doing so, the director deconstructs the traditional montage of a documentary, and allows her audience to think, reflect, and form their

⁷ Laura, Thielen “Women in Film” *Cinezine*, October 1984: 4-5

⁸ Spoken words in her debut film *Reassemblage*, 1982

own opinions on the subject portrayed, rather than receiving a prefixed ethnographic gaze.

Surname Viet Given Name Nam, a film of 1989, explores the role of Vietnamese women in past and contemporary society. In an interview that took place in 2017 in London, philosopher Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier discusses Minh-ha's filmography. Minh-ha states that "*Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, as you can tell from the title, concerns the naming of a country. It has to do with gender and national identity, as well as the politics of naming, translating and interviewing"⁹. In the film, five Vietnamese women living in the United States, through a series of interviews, recount their troubled lives, the difficulties they faced in their homecountry during the war, and then their experiences as immigrants in the US. Already these various voices, disrupted by archival footage and other sequences, challenge traditional filmmaking. Apparently, the film is simply a collage of various interviews, but later, it is revealed that the women interviewed are non-professional actors who had been interpreting the words of other Vietnamese women. The viewer, who is used to Western documentaries claiming to be as truthful and objective as possible, is challenged by this film, because it forces to question what is the reality, who is speaking and if what they are saying is true or not.

In *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015), a combination of footage from 1995 and 2012, Minh-ha explore Vietnam's legacy on contemporary society by portraying two myths: the first one explaining that Vietnam was formed after two fighting dragons had fallen into the South China Sea; the second, Vietnamese people were born because of a union of a dragon and a fairy. About this film, she says she "(...) didn't want any war footage because as soon as you have 'Vietnam' in a film, people would expect to see these kind of images, and when these are not there, they feel somewhat lost, as if Vietnam as a war is the only way they could relate to the country." She wants her homecountry to be not immediately associated to the war, as if it were the only event occurred there, but to the vietnamese ancient history and culture. On this matter, i.e. the portrayal of her country on the mainstream media, she comments that

⁹Trinh T. Minh-ha and Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier, *Interview: Forgetting Vietnam*, *Radical Philosophy* 2.03, 2018 78-79

(...)most of the films made on the war in Vietnam show you the horrors of war mainly through what constitutes the sensational in cinema. So: explosions, bombings, killings, bodies, buildings and environment being burned, mutilated and blasted; violent, bloody scenes with wounds oozing open (blood as depicted in mainstream films is cheap), and then suffering that is strident – noisy, and loud. Such a depiction of war amply exploited on screen for spectacular effect is something that I do not want at all to have in my films. Showing brutality has its journalistic function, but violence for violence's sake is how the media continue to desensitise human suffering and distress, as well as how the entertainment industry claims to serve a consumer society steeped in violent media. And then you have the other kinds of films evolving from this war, of which you really have to ask: Whose interest does it serve? For most of the time what's covertly at stake are American interests. Whether their politics is liberal or conservative, mainstream films made in the name of the war in Vietnam speak to one side of the war and contribute to sustaining American hegemony. (Minh-ha and Mercier, 82)

Through her filmography, she wants to defeat this kind of representation that is useful only to America.

These were some of the acts of resistance within her filmography, but for what concerns the literary arts, I will discuss briefly her book *Woman, Native, Other*, published in 1989. In this groundbreaking book, countless ways she fights dominant western literary norms can be found.

One of this is through the lens of the concept of the *triple bind of women*, explored in the first chapter and throughout the whole book.

In the first pages she writes:

(...) no matter what position she decides to take, she will sooner or later find herself driven into situations where she is made to feel she must choose from among three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first? Where does she play her loyalties? (Minh-ha 1989, 6)

“She is made to feel she must choose” is an important sentence, because it conveys the fact that this is not a choice a woman can make, but an imposition, she is forced to, she must. An imposition given by intersecting systems of race, gender, and identity within the dominant vision of the world and its prefixed literary norms.

She continues:

On the other hand, she often finds herself at odds with language, which partakes in the white-male-is-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations. (Minh-ha 1989, 6)

The *white-male-is-norm* ideology has been for too long referred to as the one and only normality. This ideology fuels the power relations in the world, seeing the white male on top of the pyramid, while the rest, who do not belong to the “norm”, are found

below. These problematic relations need to be deconstructed, also via literature and the power words hold. to be deconstructed. In this specific case, from the position Trinh T. Minh-ha holds experiencing the “triple bind “, she writes against constricting women into only one specific label, and rather opts for a more fluid identity, that does not need to be labelled. Women should not be labelled because they have so many different roles to play within a lifetime, that there would never be enough labels that would compress them all into a single and rigid one. She dismantles the idea of a traditional identity, by presenting a fragmented and multiple identity, and conveys it with her words, but also through the fragmented composition of the book. This specific aspect will be explored in the last chapter of this thesis, where Minh-ha’s rejection of western traditional literary norms will be compared to Evaristo’s.

2 An overview of Bernardine Evaristo's life and work

2.1. African diaspora and growing up in the UK as a Black woman

As indicated on the DePaul University website, the general definition of diaspora is “(...) a dispersion of people, language, or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place, to scatter, to displace, to live in separated communities”; while the “African diaspora is the voluntary and involuntary movement of Africans and their descendants to various parts of the world during the modern and pre-modern periods”¹⁰. Shana L. Redmond, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York, has been a contributor of one of the various essays contained in the book *Keywords for African American Studies* (2018); in her own essay *Diaspora* she explains that “within Black studies literatures, diaspora is mobilized as a method in pursuit of collectives whose stories and cultures were/are otherwise hidden or forcibly taken as part of the development of Western epistemes (formal and informal) and the violences of *chattel slavery*¹¹”. This section will be focusing on African diaspora, specifically in the British context through a historic lens, from the Roman empire (AD 43 to 5th century) until the *Windrush Generation*, of which Evaristo's father was part of. This will be explained to better grasp Evaristo's view of the world, having grown up in a country that did not recognize/accept her as a citizen, despite the fact that Black people have lived in the United Kingdom since Roman times. Bernardine Evaristo, the first Black woman and Black British person to win the Booker Prize in 2019, during the podcast *Transition on the Wire*, conversing with another Black British writer, Sarah Ladipo Manyika, affirms that

Not enough people are informed about the Black presence in Britain. All Americans are aware of the 400+ year history of Africans who were enslaved, whereas Black British history goes back a couple of thousand years, and even today people are unaware of it.¹² (Manyika and Evaristo 2024, 105)

¹⁰ DePaul University, “Defining Diaspora “

¹¹ Chattel slavery refers to the kind of slavery that treats slave as items of property, i.e. chattel, having no rights whatsoever

¹² Sarah, Ladipo Manyika "One-Woman Show: A Conversation with Bernardine Evaristo." *Transition* 136, no. 1 (2024): 97-110. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2979/tra.00032>.

The podcast, hosted by Manyika, focuses on Black artists and their work. In this specific conversation, Manyika asks Evaristo about her youth in the UK, and themes such as the African diaspora and growing up in a white-dominated society arise. Evaristo's early life and the struggle of growing up in a racist country as a Black woman will be presented later on this chapter, because this first part will delve briefly into the history of Black people in the UK, to convey that their presence goes back to the Roman Empire, an idea that opposes the mainstream narration of having no Black British history outside of the transatlantic slave trade and the post-war migration, as Evaristo also tells while speaking about her book *The Emperor's Babe* (2000):

When the *Emperor's Babe* was published in 2000, it was quite revolutionary to create a black protagonist in Roman Britain although there was evidence of a legion of Moors stationed at Hadrian's Wall in 211 AD. But archaeologists disputed a black presence in Roman London in the absence of evidence-then the science caught up with me through DNA testing of Roman skeletons unearthed in London over a hundred years ago, some of which were now discovered to be of African origin. (Manyika, 2024, 105)

DNA testing of skeletal remains found in the United Kingdom prove there has been a presence of black people since the Roman Empire, dating back to almost 2000 years ago. One example is the "Ivory Bangle Lady", whose remains were found in 1901 in York, have been dated to the 4th century and highly likely to be of North African origin. She was found with various jewels, such as elephant ivory bracelets, hence the name given to her, and also pointing she belonged to the higher class of society. Some years prior, two pieces of written evidence show a unit of soldiers, the Aurelian Moors, in honour of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who were raised from African provinces and were then stationed at the fortress of Aballava, now Burgh by Sands, Cumbria, to guard the Hadrian's Wall, the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire. The first piece of evidence is a 4th century altar stone inscription, that was written by Flavius Vibianus, commander of the Aurelian Moors, to honor the god Jupiter, king of the gods according to Roman beliefs. The second piece of evidence is an administrative document, the *Notitia Dignitatum et administrationum omnium tam civilium quam militarium* (Latin for "List of all dignities and administration both civil and military) listing the administrative

organization of the Roman Empire and listing the commanding officers and regiments of the Roman Army, including the Aurelian Moors.

Fast forward of some centuries, in the 16th century, Black people began to settle in the United Kingdom because of the *transatlantic slave trade*¹³, despite the fact that the vast majority of enslaved people did not labor on British soil. Initially the main traffickers were Portugal and Spain, but by the end of the 17th century England dominated the trade. England alone trafficked an estimated 3.1. millions of Africans, of which 2.7 million survived the journey, and transported them to the Caribbeans and the colonies in America.



Image 3: the transatlantic trade and its triangular commerce

As this image shows, it was a triangular commerce, divided into three legs. The first leg was the exchange of goods from Europe to Africa, where goods were exchanged for enslaved people; the second leg, also known as the middle passage, where enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas to be sold; lastly, the third leg, the return to Europe with goods such as tobacco, sugar, grown by the slaves’ labor. Because of this trade, significant black communities formed mainly in port cities such as Bristol and Liverpool, and by the early 18th century, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Black people lived in Britain. The majority of them worked as servants, while a small number was able to become free

¹³ The transatlantic slave trade is a “triangular” trade that operated between the 16th and the 19th century, a commerce of people and goods involving Africa, Europe and the modern US.

and live an independent life. One of the turning points of the relationship between Britain and slavery was the 1781 Zong massacre. The ship crew realized their water supplies were running low, so they decided to throw over 130 enslaved African people overboard, in order to claim the insurance money on the people as cargo. When the news of the massacre reached the UK, the insurance company refused to pay the money, and the ship owners took them to discuss the case in court. Even though during the trial the ship owners weren't found guilty of murder, the case was brought to the attention of the British public by the *Sons of Africa*, an abolitionist organization that had been formed in those years by Africans living in Britain. Through this case, they were able to show the inhumanity of slavery, and their activism contributed to the achievement of the British Slave Act of 1807, which outlawed the purchase of enslaved people in Britain, and it took other 30 years to abolish slavery across the British Empire. *Sons of Africa*, now considered Britain's first black political organization, counted, among its founders, former slaves that decided to offer their first-person testimony of their horrific experiences. Another way to do it was through their own words, and experiences as former slaves. Olaudah Equiano was enslaved as a child and taken to the Caribbean. He was able to purchase his freedom, and once he arrived in England as a freedman, he became a part of the *Sons of Africa*, and was also a member of the radical-working class London Corresponding Society. He wrote his autobiography called *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). This became the first slave narrative to become an international bestseller and to raise consciousness of the atrocities of slavery. Two years before, in 1797, Ottobah Cugoano, another writer and abolitionist, also a freedman, published *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, where he called for the abolition of slavery and the freedom of all those that were still enslaved. As stated before, ca 30 years after the British Slave Act, the Slavery Abolition Act was passed in 1833, and it prohibited the slave trade in the British Empire. What many do not know, is that the British government, through the Slave Compensation Act of 1837, compensated the former slave owners for the loss of their "property". Because their properties could not be exploited anymore, the United Kingdom implemented the system of "indentured servitude" as a source of cheap labor similar to the one provided by enslaved Africans: indentured workers were deported from the Far East, the Southeast Asia and shipped mainly to the Caribbean.

The abolition of slavery meant a decline in the size of black population in Britain, and although now black people lived free from slavery¹⁴, they encountered racist attitudes, also fueled by the rise of *scientific racism*¹⁵. After the legal abolition of slavery, despite daily racism Black people in Britain faced, during the Victorian era many Black people gained fame, the composer and orchestra conductor Samuel Coleridge-Taylor for example, and his daughter Avril Coleridge-Taylor. But other two people worth mentioning for their unique stories are Aina, Sarah Forbes Bonetta and Mary Seacole. Aina, later named Sarah Forbes Bennetta was born in Nigeria, she was a Yoruba princess and when she lost her parents during a war with a nearby kingdom, and was then given to British diplomats as a gift for Queen Victoria in 1850. The queen raised her as her granddaughter, and Aina received protection and education, becoming a sort of celebrity at the time.

In 1853, the Crimean War between the UK and the Russian Empire broke out. Mary Seacole, a Jamaican-born nurse who later moved to the UK, wanted to help the soldiers, but was turned away by the British army. Nevertheless, she travelled to Crimea independently, and with her own funds, she set up a convalescent home for the soldiers. She is often outshined by her contemporary Florence Nightingale, but we know of her story because she was the first Black woman in Britain to write her autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, and is today considered a British heroine.

Another turning point in the relationship between Britain and Africa was the period called the *Scramble for Africa*, between the end of the 19th century until early 20th century. During this time, European countries fought to conquer as many states as possible in Africa, and by 1914, 90% of the African continent had been colonized. Consequently, when World War I broke out, millions of African soldiers fought and died on behalf of their colonizers (mostly British, French, Germans) not only on European soil, but also in the African continent, to defend the colonized territories.

After World War II, Britain was recruiting people from its former colonies to fill the labor shortage due to casualties. The British Nationality Act of 1948 handed people

¹⁴ Important to note is that it wasn't until 1965 that British Black people's civil liberties were decreed in the Race Relations Act.

¹⁵ Scientific racism developed in the 19th century to prove the distinction of humankind among different races; it perpetuated the idea of the superiority of white people and the inferiority of black people and rooted it in their biology.

who lived in the Commonwealth territories, the right to live and work in Britain. On the same year, the ship “HMT Empire Windrush” sailed from the Caribbeans collecting onboard more than 1,000 passengers from Jamaica, Trinidad, Bermuda and reached Tilbury, England on June 22, 1948. These travelers, and those who arrived later in Britain to seek employment, were named after the ship, and they are now referred to as the *Windrush Generation*¹⁶.

One year later, in 1949, Julius Taiwo Bayomi Evaristo, Bernardine Evaristo’s father, sailed from Nigeria to reach the “*Motherland*” aboard the ship Good Ship Empire. “The moment my father arrived in Britain as a young man, he was brutally striped of his self-image as an individual and had to assume an imposed identity”, writes her daughter Bernardine Evaristo on an online article published in 2021 on The Guardian website, “instead of being welcomed as a Son of the Empire, he encountered unfettered racism”¹⁷. Her father began to work in factories, and in 1954, at a Commonwealth dance in Central London, he met a white woman, Jacqueline Mary Brinkworth, who was studying to become a teacher. They fell in love and decided to get married: this decision was “(...) an act of resistance to racism in the 1950s-a black man and a white woman-and they went through hell from my mother’s side of the family to be together, as well as social opprobrium”-says their fourth (of eight) child Bernardine Evaristo. “I inherited my fighting spirit from them”¹⁸. The side on her mother’s family tried to stop what they saw as an abhorrent union, but they were determined to get married, and so they did, a small ceremony attended by English and Nigerian friends, and Evaristo’s grandmother was the only representative of the family. As mentioned previously in this chapter, the Race Relations Act was approved in the UK in 1965, almost a decade after their “scandalous” marriage: it was still legal, during Evaristo’s early life, to discriminate people based on the colour of their skin. Her mother eventually became an English schoolteacher, and her

¹⁶ “The Windrush Generation refers to individuals from Caribbean countries who migrated to the United Kingdom between 1948 and 1971, following an invitation from the UK for Commonwealth citizens to help rebuild the nation after World War II “ (Ebsco.com, 2023)

¹⁷ Evaristo, Bernardine, “Bernardine Evaristo on a childhood shaped by racism: ‘I was never going to give up’ “, *The Guardian*, 2021

¹⁸ Ladipo Manyika, Sarah “One-Woman Show: A conversation with Bernardine Evaristo” *Transition*, vol. 136 no.1, 2024, 97-110

father, after having worked in various factories, became the first Black councillor for the Greenwich borough, representing the Labour Party. “In the 1970s, my parents got involved in politics and I am inordinately proud of them for not only embodying love between the races but going one step further and flying the flag for equality”¹⁹

Bernardine Evaristo was born in 1959 in Eltham, and was raised in Woolwich, both located in South London. Because discriminating was still a legal activity for the most part of her youth, her family was targeted and received many racist attacks by their neighbours, who shouted racist slurs at them and also threw bricks through their windows. Her father, knowing those who had done it would not be faced with legal consequences, used to chase them and forced them to pay for the damage. In an article she wrote for *The Guardian* in 2021, she expresses what many must have felt while growing up: “As a child, you are profoundly affected by this level of hostility without being able to intellectualise or articulate it. You feel hated, even though you have done nothing to deserve it, and so you think there is something wrong with you, rather than something wrong with them.” Feeling hated, experiencing this kind of hostility and not being accepted at such a young age and not being able to understand the reason deeply impacted her. She continues:

The concept of “black British” was considered a contradiction in terms during my childhood. Brits didn’t recognise people of colour as fellow citizens, and they in turn often aligned themselves with their countries of origin. I never had a choice but to consider myself British. This was the country of my birth, my life, even if it was made clear to me that I didn’t really belong. Yet Nigeria was a faraway concept, a country about which I knew nothing.

Being African, and the combination of being Black and being British at the same time was considered a contradiction, and the “real” British citizens seemed to forget, or probably did ignore the long history of Black people living in the United Kingdom. This attitude affected many Black people, who internalized the racism they were constantly faced with and thought of themselves as not welcomed there. Evaristo then states she knew nothing about her father’s motherland because he never spoke about Nigeria, so she felt like a part of herself was missing and needed to be discovered. She gradually grew

¹⁹ Evaristo, Bernardine, “Bernardine Evaristo on a childhood shaped by racism: “I was never going to give up”, *The Guardian*, 2021

interest in African and Black history, and Africa became a myth for her: aged 19, she decided to visit the continent, and after she had been to Egypt, Madagascar, and Kenya, she decided to visit Nigeria, as she learned that family members were still living there:

I wondered if this country could be my home. I realised it couldn't. It is too different from Britain and, at the time, as an independent single woman, I could not have lived there. I felt I couldn't be at home there. But Nigeria has become a spiritual home. Through my writing, I explore the world of the African diaspora, mainly British, in the past, in the present, in the future, and also in my imagination. Since I was 19, this has been my creative project.

While still living in Britain, some years before visiting Nigeria and coming to see it as her spiritual home, she decided to pursue a career in the theatre.

2.2. *The importance of theatre in Evaristo's life*

Evaristo's family lived in relative poverty. Having eight children, there was not much time for the parents to bring them around and do many activities, as money needed to be saved. The local youth theatre was fortunately cheap enough for her family's economic status at the time, and once she entered that dimension, she felt welcomed and safe.

I felt I belonged, and with hindsight, I can see that the children who gravitated to the youth theatre and stayed there, were often the children who didn't really fit in elsewhere in society, for whatever reason. I was a Black girl, a biracial girl growing up in a white society. This was 1972. Britain was a deeply racist country (...) and the youth theatre was a place where I felt accepted and where I could express myself. (Manyika "Transition", 100)

In the deeply bigoted country that did not acknowledge her and her family as fellow citizens, she had finally found a safe space, and she decided to pursue her dream and become an actor. In 1982, she graduated from the Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance. After leaving college, while she was in her twenties, she co-founded, together with Patricia Hilaire and Paulette Randall, the theatre company *Theatre of Black Women*. It was groundbreaking, as it was the first black women's theatre company in Britain: their aim was to produce plays written by and about Black British women, at a time where mainstream media did not portray them, or if it did, it was done in a

stereotypical, hence problematic, way. During the 70s and 80s, a movement of theatre companies had begun to emerge, and

What these groups had in common was the desire to make the kind of theatre that would otherwise be absent from the theatre landscape and to situate black and asian experiences at the heart of their artistic practice. It was, of course, in reaction to a British theatre sector that rarely included people of colour and, if it did so, often as token or stereotypes. (...) ‘Theatre of Black Women’ did the job of spelling out our identity and our intentions. It was an uncompromising proclamation that was seen as an act of defiance. To us, it was an act of self determination and self-affirmation, a naming of ourselves in an alternative theatre culture that was predominantly white and male, or black and male, or white and female—all demographics that marginalised our presence. Our remit was to counteract the notorious lack of representation of black women in all areas and levels of theatre by being at the helm of our own creativity, from actors and playwrights through to artistic directors.²⁰ (Evaristo “Theatre of Black Women” 2020, 521-522)

Their main purpose was to create a space to express themselves through theatre, in their own terms. Within the company, Evaristo usually wrote one-woman shows and performed in them, and then “I eventually left performing behind and continued to write, initially poetry, until I started to publish books in 1994. So that was the trajectory to becoming a writer through theatre and performance”.

Aged 60, in 2019, Bernardine Evaristo won the Booker Prize (shared with Margaret Atwood) for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. She was the first Black woman to receive this prize, which changed her life suddenly, overnight, as she recalls in many interviews. “My career did change overnight after so long slogging it out in the shadows, or so it felt (...) The Booker Prize is a career-maker” -and more importantly- “I am now listened to in a different way, I am heard” (Manyika “Transition”, 101). After decades of writing, she was finally recognized globally, with the book being translated into more than 20 languages.

The book has 12 protagonists, a group of women, mainly black and British. The book is divided into four chapters, each one having three episodes of those characters who are connected directly or indirectly. The theatre plays a central role in the book, as it is the place where the stories and the protagonists intersect and intertwine, from the beginning to the end. The first chapter begins with Amma, a playwright and director whose new play “The Last Amazon of Dahomey” will open that night at the National

²⁰ Bernardine, Evaristo “Theatre of Black Women: A Personal Account”, *The Palgrave Handbook of the History of Women on Stage*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020 521-529

Theatre. Amma is currently in her fifties and has a daughter, Yazz. In the 80s, she met Dominique, a theatre manager and decided to found a theatre company together with her:

they decided they needed to start their own theatre company to
have careers as actors, because neither was prepared to betray their
politics to find jobs
or shut their mouths to keep them
it seemed obvious way forward
they scribbled ideas for names on hard toilet paper snaffled from
the loo
Bush Women Theatre Company best captures their intentions
they would be a voice in theatre when there was silence
black and Asian women's stories would get there
they would create theatre on their own terms
it became the company's motto
On Our Own Terms
Or Not At All. (Evaristo 2019, 13-14)

The description resonates with Evaristo's own life, and the founding of her own black women theatre company, that was presented at the beginning of this section. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, theatre holds a central role, it is a fundamental place to connect. In fact, at the end of the novel, a celebration of Amma's new play is thrown, and several characters attend the party: many did not know the others, even though connected indirectly throughout the novel, but there, in that precise moment, their lives finally intertwine.

3 *Woman Native Other* and *Girl, Woman, Other*: a comparison

With the life and literary background of the two authors, Trinh T. minh-ha and Bernardine Evaristo, presented in the two previous chapters, this thesis has now arrived to its central point: the comparison between two of their works, *Woman Native Other* and *Girl, Woman, Other*. As stated in the introduction, the aim is, ultimately, to explore, through the lens of intersectionality and postcolonialism, how the two writers distance themselves from a Western Eurocentric point of view and from a derogatory and annihilating concept of Other. People that are being labeled as others, i.e. those who do not fit in the white normativity, are often put in the margin of society, but to use the words of bell hooks²¹, globally renowned critic, feminist and writer:

Marginality is much more than a site of deprivation. In fact I was saying just the opposite: that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse (...) that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, is located in the margins. And one can only say no, speak to the voice of resistance, because there exists a counter language. (...) Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. ²² (hooks 1989, 21)

Arguably, both Minh-ha and Evaristo find themselves in the margins, but instead of feeling annihilated and oppressed because of the intersectional oppression given by race and gender they face, they produce counterarguments, they create new narratives, new norms, that go against the normalized and accepted western norms. The following sections will present some of the literary techniques the two authors employ.

3.1. Through the intersectional lens

Intersectionality, as already explained various times in this thesis, can be viewed as the intersection of structures of power such as race, class, gender that creates experiences of oppression. Before the term was created, early feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who is now considered a “proto-intersectionalist”²³, explained in her two *Vindications*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the*

²¹ bell hooks chose to write her name in lowercase to focus the attention on her work rather than on herself

²² hooks, bell “Choosing the margins as a space of radical openness”, *Framework*, no.36: 15-23. 1989

²³ Botting, E. “Wollstonecraft Contribution to Modern Political Philosophy” In *Feminist History and Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women’s Political Thought*, Springer: 355-358, 2019

Rights of Women (1792) how race, gender and class caused inequality and oppression in the society. She viewed these axes as social constructs, maintained by those in power:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of property, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives. (Wollstonecraft 1792, 19)

Wollstonecraft emphasizes the fact that these behaviours are passed from generation to generation, and teach women to be weak, pleasing and man-dependent: they are imposed and constructed by society, so they are not natural. Moving forward of some centuries, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality caused a major shift in the feminist literary world, because it pointed out that gender was not an isolated category of one's identity, but it intersected with other categories and hence created different forms of oppression.

But how does intersectionality intertwine with the works of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Bernardine Evaristo, specifically *Woman Native Other* and *Girl, Woman, Other*?

What immediately stands out is the similarity of the two titles, being slightly different for one word (*native, girl*) and for the use of punctuation. Both titles can be considered an intentional comment and critique on one's identity, societal (constructed) categorization and marginalization. Both using the word *Other* as the last one, to convey the marginalization forced by dominant groups upon women, especially those who do not fit the western norm, i.e. white, European, high middle class, etc. Often those women are reduced to "otherness", and the two writers explore the complex identity beyond being perceived simply as "others".

While Minh-ha doesn't use punctuation in her title, Evaristo does, but once opened her book, not many punctuation marks are to be found, and we can see it immediately, for example the first page begins as it follows:

Amma
Is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her
City, a few early morning barges cruise slowly by
To her left is the nautical-themed footbridge with its deck-like
Walkway and sailing mast pylons (...) (Evariso 2019, 1)

Within both works, the writers show how this categorization is unnatural, it has been constructed, man-made by those in power, the dominant group, as Minh-ha writes in her first lines of *Woman Native Other*:

The story never really begins nor ends, even though there is a beginning and an end to every story, just as there is a beginning and an end to every teller. One can date it back to the immemorial days when a group of mighty men attributed to itself a central, dominating position vis-à-vis other groups; overvalued its particularities and achievements; adopted a projective attitude towards those it classified among the out-groups; and wrapped itself up in its own thinking, interpreting the out-group through the in-group mode of reasoning while claiming to speak the minds of both the in-group and the out-group.²⁴

These words can be explained through an example, using the colonizers as the *in-groups* and the colonized as the *out-groups*, but can be also applied to modern society: the colonizers gave themselves an important role, to save those lost uncivilized souls by conquering them and forcing the superior (=European) culture onto them, without giving them the right to speak their minds, and instead “claiming to speak the minds of both the in-group and the out-group”. For centuries, marginalised communities, the “others” have been ignored, have been denied the right to express themselves freely. Both Minh-ha and Evaristo have spoken up: throughout their works, they deconstruct the dominant narrative, they overcome and problematize the term ‘other’ because they refuse to be defined by it, instead they seek to elaborate a more fluid identity, that is not being forced into a singular label.

Minh-ha, in the first chapter writes:

Neither black/red/yellow nor woman but poet or writer. For many of us, the question of priorities remains a crucial issue. Being merely “a writer” without doubt ensures one a status of far greater weight than being “a woman of colour who writes” ever does. Imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers. She who “happens to be” Third World member, a woman, and a writer is bound to go through the ordeal of exposing her work to the abuse of

²⁴ Trinh T., Minh-ha “The Story Began Long Ago...”, *Woman, Native, Other*, 1989

praises and criticisms that either ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes. (Minh-ha 1989, 6)

In this passage, Minh-ha criticizes how racial and gender axes can diminish one's art. Being able to present oneself as "merely a writer" is a privilege, as it implies legitimacy and universalization, while on the other side, if someone is labelled as a "woman of color who writes", then her work is immediately valued differently, and it is not read as unmarked and regarded as universal. Identity labels can discredit one's creative act, and it is unjust, as it happens in Evaristo's book, when Amma, one of the twelve protagonists, is criticized and discredited by her own daughter Yazz because her art focuses solely on identity. Amma is a theatre director and all of her pieces have been constructed around the experiences of black women. Yazz, being part of the modern generation, feels her identity to be more fluid:

nor is the child she raised to be a feminist calling herself one lately feminism is so herd-like, Yazz told her, to be honest, even being a woman is passé these days, we had a non-binary activist at uni called Morgan Malenga who opened my eyes, I reckon we're all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female, which are gendered performances anyway, which means your *women's* politics, Mumsy, will become redundant, and by the way, I'm humanitarian, which is on a much higher plane than feminism, do you even know what that is? (Evaristo, 39)

Yazz does not label herself as a feminist, and calls out her mother for following the movement *herd-like*, that is, following the crowd without thinking about it.²⁵ Yazz mocks her mother for being stuck in the past, "passé" and condemns her art for being focused only on black women, and her persona for limiting herself into prefixed labels, and not being fluid as she reckons "(...) we're all going to be non-binary in the future (...)".

These two examples show a similar path for what concerns identity: because being identified in certain ways (writer woman of colour, black theatre director) is filled with stereotypes, identity can be restrictive as it discredits and devalues one's art, as it is perceived by the mainstream public with lens full of stereotypes. The solution is to fight against these restrictions, and become free from all the fixed and imposed identity labels.

²⁵ Ohwovoriole Toketemu, "How Herd Mentality Explains Our Behavior" in *Verywellmind*, 2025

In Minh-ha's work, the writer often gives examples of the "I" not as a singular unit, but rather a fragmented one, in a section called "Infinite layers: I am not i can be you and me":

A critical difference from myself means that I am not i, am within and without i. I/i can be I or i, you and me both involved. We (with capital W) sometimes include(s), other time exclude(s) me. You and I are close, we intertwine; you may stand on the other side of the hill once in a while, but you may also be me, while remaining what you are and what I am not. (...)

I is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, (...) itself, *infinite layers*. (...) Whether I accept it or not, the natures of *I, i, you, s/he, We, we, they, and wo/man* constantly overlap. (...) Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak. (Minh-ha, 94)

Rigid categories tend to contain identities, but it is an impossible task. In the section "Ethnicity or womanhood: whose duality?" she further explores what it means to be a "woman":

Difference understood not as an irreducible quality but as a drifting apart within "woman" articulates upon the infinity of "woman" as entities of inseparable "I's" and "Not-I's". That shift (...) leads (...) to identity as points of re-departure of the critical process by which I have come to understand how the personal-the ethnic me, the female me-is political. Difference does not annul identity. It is beyond and alongside identity (...) for the choice many women of color feel obliged to make between ethnicity and womanhood: how can they? You never have/are one without the other. The idea of two illusorily separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or more precisely female), again, partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer. (Minh-ha, 104)

In the last part, she criticizes the problematic binary approach of western colonialism and identification systems (us vs them). Another example of intersectionality is conveyed through the structure of *Woman Native Other* which does not follow a linear path, but is instead fragmented, mirroring the complexity of one's identity. It is fragmented in the sense that it is not only a theoretical book, but can also be considered poetic and autobiographical: this plurality, arguably this genre fluidity disrupts the expectations and challenges the Western norms that rely on rigid divisions among literary genres and disciplines.

While in Evaristo's case, the reach to a more fluid identity can be seen not only in Yazz's critical words towards her mother, but also from the structure of the novel itself, where punctuation is rare, and in the way the twelve protagonists' lives intertwine.

Evaristo, when compared with Minh-ha's work, is interested more in the concept of gender fluidity, and she discusses it by having one character presenting as non-binary, Morgan/Megan.

Megan was part Ethiopian, part African-American, part Malawian and part English
which felt weird when you broke it down like that because essentially she was just a complete human being (Evaristo, 311)

Born with the name Megan, they recall that during their childhood they preferred wearing trousers, but their mother forced them to wear dresses. They did not like playing with Barbies, and were oppressed based on gender norms. Megan/Morgan always rebelled, because they did not feel comfortable within their body:

then her body started to show womanly curves womanly curves and it didn't feel right, it wasn't what she felt herself to be (Evaristo, 312)

Morgan, the name they decide to use, after leaving home, have become a writer, and they are invited as a guest speaker at Yazz's university. What Morgan states is worth mentioning, both during the lecture and when they encounter Yazz at the end of the lecture

talk about scary, standing rooted in the spotlight, confronted by rows of unsmiling students, all of them more educated than the person they've come to hear
Yazz, *that's* her name, was different, grinning with pre-approval
it felt like the rest were staring down at a circus freak
as if *they* weren't alien youngsters from the world of normal by the look of what was obviously the fashion there for girlie dresses
although Morgan suspected a few might progress to khakis, combat boots and tattoos to rival theirs by the time they graduated

I can only represent myself, Morgan said, warming up by forewarning the audience against their doubtless assumptions that all trans people are the same, I'm not a spokesperson for everyone or the leader of a transgender movement, merely an explainer of my own unique journey into being non-binary, more specifically, I consider myself to be in the gender-free category

Morgan made eye contact with the fresh-faced youngsters who made them feel, at twenty-seven, incredibly worldly-wise (Evaristo, 336)

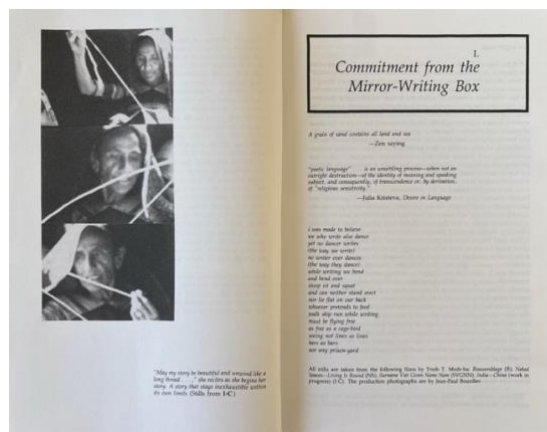
so this Yazz came rushing up at the end of the class to exclaim that the lecture (lecture?) was mind-blowing, and she was thinking of becoming non-binary as well, how *woke* was that? she said excitedly, like she was going to embark on a trendy new haircut
Morgan let the kid down gently
she needed to know that being trans wasn't about playacting an identity on a whim, it's about becoming your true self in spite of society's pressures to be otherwise, most people on the trans spectrum felt different from childhood, they said, trying not to sound too harsh as the audience filed slowly out of the room, (...) (Evaristo, 338)

Yazz is so confident in her progressive beliefs and values, but is criticised by Morgan for her performative and superficial wokeness. After this brief exchange, Yazz and Morgan will meet again at the end of the book, at the afterparty of *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, Yazz's mother new theatre play. Evaristo, in this work, uses the system intersectionality to explain the various forms of oppression felt by her characters, but also to intersect, intertwine their stories.

3.2. Through the postcolonial lens

Postcolonial literature began to emerge after World War II ended and the colonies around the world started to gain their independence. Postcolonial writers “explore themes of cultural hybridity, displacement, oppression, and resistance, offering alternative perspectives to those found in traditional Western literary canon.”²⁶ Trinh T. Minh-ha and Bernardine Evaristo repudiate Western literary norms, by creating their own canon. Once again, some similarities can be found in the two works: the own structure of their novels goes against the typical conventions. How?

Woman Native Other is made of poems, quotations, personal stories and stills from Minh-ha's filmography: the structure, which is fragmented, disrupts the reader's expectations, used to traditional academic texts in which only a rigid narrative can be found:

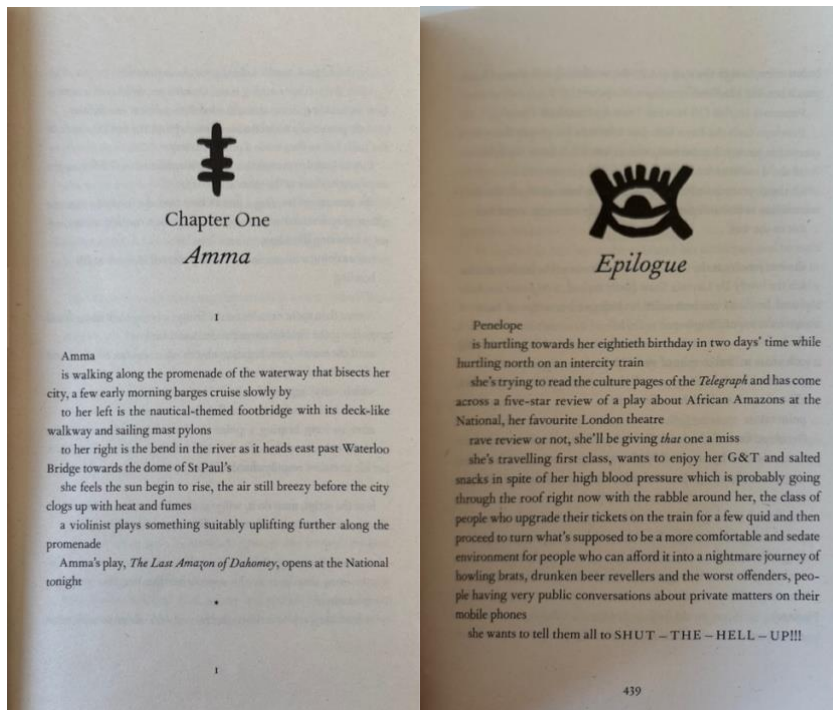


The picture shows the first pages of the book: on the left, stills from the film *India-China*; on the right, a Zen saying and a quote from Julia Kristeva *Desire in Language*

²⁶ Edwards, Justin D. “Postcolonial Literature: A Reader’s guide to essential criticism” in *Readers’ Guide to Essential Criticism*, Red Globe Press: 2008

(1980). This kind of layout forces the reader not to read passively, but instead to engage actively and to reflect on what is found on the page.

Bernardine Evaristo adopts similar stylistic choices as Trinh T. Minh-ha, in the sense that her book does not follow a rigid, prefixed structure, but instead opts for a poetic prose with rare signs of punctuation. The two authors, in creating their own style of writing, break academic and literary conventions: on one side, Minh-ha blends autobiographical anecdotes with critical essays, stills from her films with poetry; on the other, Evaristo takes inspiration from her own life, and blends together African symbology and wisdom with a unique poetic style. At the beginning of each chapter, Evaristo has chosen *Adinkra*²⁷ symbols to be at the top of the page:



²⁷ The Diaspora Collective, “The Adinkra symbols are not just decorative objects on fabric, buildings, or decor, but they convey ancient traditional wisdom about life, philosophical thoughts, and aspects of the environment. Many of the Adinkra symbols have meanings linked to proverbs and some symbols depict historical events, human behavior and attitudes, animal behavior, plant life, and objects' shapes. These Adinkra symbols were used on ceremonial clothing by royalty for important ceremonies such as funerals and special occasions but are now used more prominently on clothes, jewelry, home décor and were even featured on the costumes in Black Panther”

The title of each chapter begins with the name of the character whose story is going to be narrated, and a traditional Adinkra representing their personality and life experiences. The use of these symbols is connected to West African wisdom, but more specifically they connect within the larger experience of African Diaspora. Diaspora and postcolonialism are deeply interconnected, as they both deal with the aftermath, the effects of colonialism and slavery throughout the centuries.

Girl, Woman, Other counts diaspora as one of its central themes, because it has an everlasting effect on each character. If read as a postcolonial writing, the novel is employed as a form of resistance, resistance to the dominant narrative viewing diaspora as an identical experience. Evaristo, to resist this, presents a variety of different experiences, from various perspectives, either coming from those women who left their homelands (first-generation immigrants) to go to the UK, or from those women who were born in the UK as children of immigrants. They all deal with their diasporic identity, and explore their roots, either embracing them or rejecting them. Amma, whose mother is Afro-Guyanese and whose father is Indo-Guyanese fully embraces her roots, and applies them as a basis for her activism, fighting racism and patriarchy in the UK, and for her art, by deciding to represent solely Black women. In the opposite way, we find Shirley, Amma's older friend, who is the daughter of Windrush immigrants coming from the Caribbean: generation: she is much more conservative than Amma, she is a teacher and over the years, she gradually detaches herself from her roots. Her story demonstrates how, by embracing the politics of respectability²⁸ to succeed in a white-dominated/supremacist society is the cause internalized racism within oppressed people. These examples show Evaristo's desire in conveying the diaspora as a multi-faceted event, that differs for everyone and hence goes against the dominant narrative portraying the diaspora as an overall equal experience.

Minh-ha, writing within the framework of postcolonial writing as resistance, is more concerned with war and its legacy. Minh-ha is deeply connected with the Vietnam War and its legacy, whose lasting effects haunt individual and collective memory and culture. "To preserve is to pass on, not to keep for oneself" (Minh-ha, 134). To resist and debunk colonial narratives, one of the most powerful tools is narrating stories orally,

²⁸ A strategy of self-representation to society, usually embracing the values of the dominant population

storytelling and Minh-ha cites a quote by Leslie Marmon Silko, whose writing, based on oral tradition, kept alive the culture of the Laguna Pueblo²⁹:

I grew up with storytelling. My earliest memories are of my grandmother telling me stories while she watered the morning-glories in her yard. Her stories were about incidents from long ago, incidents which occurred before she was born but which she told as certainly as if she had been there. The chanting or telling of ancient stories to effect certain cures or protect from illness and harm have always been part of the Pueblo's curing ceremonies. I feel the power that the stories still have to bring us together, especially when there is loss and grief.

Stories have the power to connect people during but also after tragic times, they break the silence imposed by war. When a country is colonized, the attack is not only physical, but also epistemic: culture, traditions, language and representation are targeted. Minh-ha, to resist and debunk the epistemic violence which is prone to impose only one side of the war, puts her focus on storytelling. Especially in the fifth and last chapter, *Grandma's story*. The figure of the Grandma plays a central role in being the storyteller passing knowledge and memory from generation to generation within a population:

Storytelling as literature (narrative poetry) must then be truer than history. If we rely on history to tell us what happened at a specific time and place, we can rely on the story to tell us not only what might have happened, but also what is happening at an unspecified time and place. No wonder that in old tales storytellers are very often women, witches, and prophets. (...)

The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, it brings into life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and transmission. (120-121)

These paragraphs and the last chapter itself, challenge history and how it has been narrated through only one perspective: they prompt us to revalue those stories and voices that have been erased from the dominant narrative. They convey storytelling as a powerful vehicle to contrast the western narrative and preserve the culture that has been colonized and often destroyed. Storytelling becomes an act of memory, survival and resistance. The figure of the Grandmother is fundamental, as it shows the ability of preserving memory and knowledge that the "official" history either completely erases, or changes for their own purposes, i.e. to maintain hegemonic power. Minh-ha, once again,

²⁹ Federally recognised tribe in west-central New Mexico

weaves together images, poems, quotation and personal accounts connected with oral tradition, mirroring the rhythms of storytelling, that are fragmented and not linear.

Conclusion

As already stated at the very beginning, the purpose of this thesis was to compare, *Woman Native Other* by Trinh T. Minh-ha, and *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, with the aim of bringing out their common themes, using the lenses of intersectionality and postcolonialism.

I decided to present the lives and early works of the two authors, because I was interested in finding out, to understand how their early childhood shaped their thoughts, their activism and literary works.

The first chapter briefly explained the Vietnam war, and how it deeply affected the country. Minh-ha lived during those years and experienced displacement twice in a short span of time, in 1954 when her family was sent to South Vietnam, and in 1975, while studying in Paris. These two waves of displacement put her on the search for her identity and provoked her engagement with colonial and oppression themes.

The second chapter presents the history of the UK as a country that has had black people living there since the Roman Empire, to show the non-sense of Evaristo growing up in a racist country that did not include her at all and did not consider her as a proper citizen. These traumatic experiences at such an early age were the very basis for both of them to build consciousness around the oppression given by colonialism and intersectionality.

The third and last chapter intended to present and compare similar stylistic choices by the two authors, mainly reject western narrative norms.

Ultimately, the two authors create their own traditional writing, their own literary canon: the choices in structuring their works, fragmented and fluid, made of various voices, actively deconstruct the concept of *otherness*. These two specific works, but their whole literary production, offer many details worth reflecting on, especially in current times, with ongoing colonial wars and racism still very present.

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Summary in Italian

Questa tesi si propone di analizzare due opere *Woman Native Other* (1989) di Trinh T. Minh-ha, scrittrice vietnamita, e *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) di Bernardine Evaristo, scrittrice britannica. Lo scopo della comparazione, attraverso le lenti dell'intersezionalità e del postcolonialismo, di queste due opere è quello di trovare simili temi e tecniche letterarie che vanno contro le rigide norme occidentali.

Il primo capitolo descrive, nella prima parte, la complicata storia del Vietnam, dalla guerra detta “dell’Indocina”, o della “resistenza anti-francese”, fino alla più tristemente conosciuta, la guerra del Vietnam, o seconda guerra dell’Indocina. Negli anni '40 si era creato un movimento indipendentista, che voleva liberare il Vietnam dal controllo coloniale francese: una serie di guerriglie inizia nel territorio, e dureranno dal 1946 al 1954. Gli Stati Uniti non intervengono da subito, ma negli anni '50, timorosi dell'effetto “domino” del comunismo (se un territorio cedeva sotto il comunismo, i territori adiacenti sarebbero anch'essi caduti come “domino”) decidono di mandare un gruppo di aiuti strategici alle truppe francesi. Nel 1954, la Conferenza di Geneva negozia la divisione del territorio in due, per assicurarsi di una pacifica transizione verso l'indipendenza: a nord, la Repubblica Democratica del Vietnam, a sud, la Repubblica del Vietnam.

E' in questo clima turbolento che nasce Trinh T. Minh-ha, nel 1952. Ha solo due anni, quando la sua famiglia, originaria del Nord del Vietnam, è costretta dall'esercito francese a trasferirsi nel sud. E' il primo dislocamento che vive. Un anno dopo, nel 1955, scoppia il secondo conflitto dell’Indocina. Inizia come una guerra civile: il nord, sotto il comando del leader Ho Chi Minh vuole anettere il sud; nel sud, molti non erano soddisfatti sotto la guida del ministro Ngo Dinh Diem, e nasce un gruppo di guerriglia, i Viet Cong, che si alleeranno con il nord per poter far cadere il governo meridionale. Il capitolo presenta alcuni scritti dell'autrice in cui ricorda la sua infanzia, trascorsa nel mezzo di due guerre, e vissuto nel costante terrore, fatto di inquietanti silenzi, alternati ad esplosioni. Minh-ha vince una borsa di studio negli Stati Uniti, frequenta l'università dell'Illinois, dove studia Musica e Letteratura Francese. Nel 1975, mentre sta studiando alla Sorbonne di Parigi, la capitale del sud del Vietnam, Saigon, cade, ed è costretta a ritornare negli Stati Uniti, dove i suoi genitori erano arrivati come rifugiati. E' il secondo momento di dislocamento che vive, e ciò la influenza nel profondo: inizierà infatti a

relazionarsi con temi quali la ricerca della propria identità, il femminismo, postcolonialismo, e la critica di narrative eurocentriche, che sono solite presentare l'Altro negativamente. Questi temi sono centrali, nei suoi scritti e nei suoi film, in cui crea una propria norma, allontanandosi dal punto di vista eurocentrico.

Nel 1989 pubblica una delle sue opere più significative *Woman Native Other*, in cui rifiuta le norme tradizionali attraverso la sua struttura frammentata, non lineare: il contenuto, che spazia da elementi autobiografici a saggi critici, è unito a foto e poesie. Questa pluralità di elementi, questa fluidità, sconvolge le aspettative e sfida le norme occidentali, le cui rigide divisioni non permettono un dialogo tra generi letterari ed altre discipline.

Il secondo capitolo descrive invece, nella prima parte, la presenza storica delle persone nere in Gran Bretagna, che risale già all'epoca dell'Impero Romano. Bernardine Evaristo, in un'intervista con Sarah Ladipo Manyika, discute di come la storia britannica tradizionale spesso cancelli questa storica presenza: le prove archeologiche, tra cui "The Ivor Bangle Lady" (La donna dal bracciale d'avorio) e la truppa dei Mori di Aureliano ne confermano l'esistenza millenaria in Gran Bretagna. Nel capitolo viene ripercorsa brevemente la tratta transatlantica degli schiavi, sottolineando il ruolo centrale dell'impero britannico in essa: il traffico di milioni di esseri umani causa una conseguente crescita delle comunità nere, soprattutto in città portuali. Eventi come il massacro di Zong (1781), e il costante attivismo del gruppo *Sons of Africa*, di cui fanno parte gli scrittori Olaudah Equiano ed Ottobah Cugoana, portano all'abolizione della tratta degli schiavi (1807) ed all'abolizione della schiavitù (1833) in Gran Bretagna. Nel secondo dopoguerra, vi è una forte carenza di manodopera, e la Gran Bretagna chiama in aiuto i "figli" dell'impero. Dal Commonwealth arriveranno migliaia di lavoratori, pronti ad aiutare la "madrepatria": verranno soprannominati "Windrush Generation", generazione Windrush, dal nome della nave "Windrush" salpata dai Caraibi. Julius Evaristo, padre di Bernardine Evaristo, nel 1949 parte dalla Nigeria con la speranza di trovare maggiori opportunità economiche, e di essere accettato, ma dovette, come molti altri, subire costanti episodi di razzismo. Nel 1954 incontra Jacqueline Mary Brinkworth, una donna bianca. I due si innamorano, e, sfidando apertamente le norme sociali del tempo, si sposano. Evaristo descrive il loro matrimonio come un atto di resistenza, e li ammira, perché sa che da essi ha ereditato uno spirito combattivo.

Bernardine Evaristo nasce nel 1959 periodo in cui la discriminazione razziale era ancora legale. L'essere africana, e l'essere britannica erano considerati una contraddizione al tempo, e i ““veri”” cittadini britannici del tempo sembravano dimenticare, o probabilmente, ignorare, la lunga storia della presenza nel Regno Unito di persone provenienti dall'Africa. La sua infanzia è caratterizzata da frequenti episodi di razzismo, e si sentirà esclusa per molto tempo, fino a quando non troverà rifugio nel teatro. Si sente finalmente accettata e al sicuro. Dopo essersi laureata al Rose Brudford College of Theatre and Performance, decide di fondare una compagnia teatrale *Theatre of Black Women* (teatro delle donne nere), con l'intento di sfidare la mancanza di rappresentazione e le rappresentazioni stereotipate delle donne nere nel teatro. Questa compagnia, prima nel suo genere, diede pieno controllo creativo alle donne nere, dalla recitazione, alla scrittura, alla regia.

Il teatro è un elemento centrale nell'opera *Girl, Woman, Other*, pubblicata nel 2019, con la quale l'autrice otterrà il Booker Prize. Quest'opera presenta dodici personaggi interconnessi, per lo più donne britanniche afrodiscendenti: ogni capitolo ha come protagonista una di essi. Il teatro gioca un ruolo centrale, rispecchia il percorso personale dell'autrice, ed è il luogo da cui inizia e si conclude la narrazione. Amma, la prima protagonista, è una drammaturga, e il suo spettacolo sta per debuttare; nel finale, tutte le protagoniste si incontreranno al dopo-festa. La scrittura di quest'opera, come quella di Minh-ha, va contro i canoni tradizionali: la punteggiatura è scarsa, ed è da considerarsi come una poesia, più che prosa.

Il terzo e ultimo capitolo mette a confronto le due opere delle scrittrici: entrambe rifiutano le norme eurocentriche, e criticano il concetto dell'Altro, categoria di cui fanno parte tutti coloro che sono esclusi dalle narrative dominanti (bianchi, occidentali). Le opere sono state esaminate attraverso le lenti dell'intersezionalità e del postcolonialismo.

Nel contesto dell'intersezionalità, Minh-ha ed Evaristo sottolineano come le identità marginalizzate siano costrutti sociali, e siano stereotipate dalle narrative dominanti per poter mantenere il potere. Minh-ha, nella sua opera, rifiuta le etichette identitarie, e propone invece un'identità fluida e non costretta nelle rigide categorie. La sua scrittura frammentata rispecchia questo concetto di identità non lineare. Evaristo, invece, descrive diverse esperienze di persone afrodiscendenti, in uno stile poetico, che spesso omette la

punteggiatura e dona una lettura più fluida. Tra i personaggi vi è anche una persona non-binaria, Morgan/Megan.

Per quanto riguarda la lente postcoloniale, invece, entrambe sono capaci di creare una letteratura di resistenza, che va contro le norme letterarie occidentali. Minh-ha mescola, infatti, foto di suoi film, poesie, teorie ed elementi autobiografici. Evaristo invece utilizza una prosa poetica e simboli africani per strutturare i suoi capitoli.

In conclusione, la tesi vuole dimostrare come le due autrici abbiano creato un proprio canone letterario: le scelte stilistiche, frammentate e fluide, polifoniche, decostruiscono attivamente il concetto dell'Alterità.

Queste due opere nello specifico, ma anche tutta la loro produzione letteraria, offrono molti temi su cui riflettere.

