



Social Justice and Activism in Contemporary Black British Literature: A Comparative Study of *Girl, Woman, Other* and *The Fortune Men*

Lect. Dr Savannah H. Khalil

Iraqi Ministry of Education

Directorate of Education Baghdad / Rusafa II

ABSTRACT

Social justice and activism are critically examined in the context of contemporary Black British literature, with a comparative analysis of Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and Nadifa Mohamed's *The Fortune Men* (2021). The present study shows how Evaristo's polyphonic narrative, spanning several generations of Black British women, foregrounds resilience and the intersectional struggles against systemic oppression. At the same time, Mohamed's historical novel gives voice to the silenced Mahmood Mattan, a seaman from Somalia who was wrongfully sentenced in Cardiff and executed in the 1950s. Using frameworks such as postcolonial feminism, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and the concept of narrative justice (Ricoeur, 2004), this study proposes that these novels engage in literary activism, in which the silenced voices of the marginalised persons become sites of resistance and remembrance. The analysis reveals how the two literary works converge in their activist stages, exposing racial inequalities and suggesting resilience, despite the different narrative strategies of polyphonic contemporaneity and historical reconstruction employed by Evaristo and Mohamed, respectively. So, the current study will make a significant contribution to Black British literature, for it underscores the activist form of storytelling and situates these novels as essential engagements in Britain's political and cultural discourse on race, identity and about justice.

Keywords: Activism, Black British literature, intersectionality, social justice, systemic racism.

العدالة الاجتماعية والنشاط (السياسي والحقوقى) في الأدب البريطاني الأسود المعاصر
(أدب يصف معاناة ذوي الاصول الأفريقيه) : دراسة مقارنة بين روايه "فتاه , إمراه , أخرى" و
رواية " رجال الثروة"

م.د. صفانه حاتم خليل الشمري

وزارة التربية العراقية - مديرية تربية بغداد/الرصافة الثانية

المختص

يُتم تناول موضوع العدالة الاجتماعية والنشاط السياسي/الحقوقى في الورقة البحثية الحالية، بوصفها محورين نقديين في سياق الأدب البريطاني الأسود المعاصر (أدب لمؤلفين من اصول أفريقيه) ، من خلال تحليل مقارنة لرواية الكاتبة الروائية برناردين إيفاريسو تحت عنوان (و روايه الكاتبة الروائية ناظيفا محمد Girl, Woman, Other (2019) . الدراسة الحالية تسعى الى ان تكشف عن كيف إن السرد The Fortune Men (2021) متعدد الأصوات لدى إيفاريسو، الممتد عبر عدة أجيال من النساء



البريطانيات السود، يبرز ذلك الصمود والتقاطعات المعقدة للنضالات ضد أشكال القهر البيوي.. وفي المقابل، تمنح الرواية التاريخية لمحمد صوتاً (بطل الرواية) محمود مطن، البحار الصومالي الذي أدين ظمناً في مدينة كارديف وأعدم في خمسينيات القرن العشرين. وبالاستناد الى جملة أطر نظرية، تتضمن نظريته النسوية ما بعد الاستعمار، ومفهوم التقاطعية كما صاغته الناقدة الأميركية المشهورة في مجالها و كذلك مفهوم العدالة السردية لدى الفيلسوف الفرنسي (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989)، وعلى هذا الأساس فإن الدراسة الحالية تقترح إن هاتين الروائيتين Paul Ricoeur (2004) محور البحث تمارسان نوعاً من النشاط الأدبي، حيث تتحول الأصوات المهمشة والمقصاة إلى فضاءات للمقاومة واستعادة الذاكرة. وتظهر الدراسة أن العاملين الأدبيين يلتقيان في بعدهما النضالي من خلال كشفهما عن اللامساواة العرقية واقتراحهما لأشكال متعددة من الصمود، رغم اختلاف الاستراتيجيات السردية المعتمدة؛ إذ توظف إيفاريسكو التعدد الصوتي المعاصر، بينما تعتمد محمد على إعادة البناء التاريخي. لذا، ستساهم الدراسة الحالية بشكل كبير في الأدب البريطاني الأسود، لأنها تؤكد على الشكل النضالي لسرد القصص وتضع هذه الروايات كمشاركات أساسية في الخطاب السياسي والثقافي البريطاني حول العرق والهوية والعدالة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النشاط ، الأدب البريطاني الأسود، التقاطعية، العدالة الاجتماعية، العنصرية المنهجية

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Black British literature has become a very vital space for rethinking the social order and challenging systemic racism. When the term “black British literature” became current in the 1970s, it was designed to describe writing by authors based in Britain but with origins in former British colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It was at that time a political rather than a purely racial label, pointing to a common experience of postcolonial migration, alienation, and discrimination, combined with an oblique yet potentially subversive assertion of attachment to Britain. However, this term now conventionally refers to authors of African and Caribbean descent (Ledent, 2009, p. 18).

Following global movements such as Black Lives Matter, which is part of a new wave of anti-racism protests that began in 2020 after George Floyd, an African American man, died whilst in police custody the day before, the Black Lives Matter protests against his death and the treatment of Black citizens by the police more generally were held in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Demonstrations spread to other parts of the world, including the UK, Spain, Italy, and Australia, to demand justice for George Floyd and to draw attention to racial injustice worldwide (Dray, 2021, para. 2).

These movements intensified debates about racial inequality in Britain. Writers are viewed as “cultural workers engaged in resistance” as hooks (1994) describes them (p. 210). Within this context, Bernardine Evaristo and Nadifa Mohamed emerge among the most prominent, vigorous voices, effectively producing significant work. Their novels, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and *The Fortune Men*



(2021), earned them a place on the Booker Prize shortlist, indicating that storytelling can be a form of activism rather than just entertainment.

Tracing the interconnected lives of twelve characters, mostly Black British women, who encounter intersecting oppressions of gender, race, sexuality, and class, *Girl, Woman, Other* seeks to bask in the sun of rebelliousness by refusing traditional punctuation. Reynolds (2021) writes that this is “a refusal of the imposed grammar of Britishness” (p. 322), suggesting a polyphonic celebration of diverse Black voices instead. As one of the characters says, “the past is inside us, it’s who we are” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 234), reinforcing the notion that collective memory and resilience fuel activism across the ages and generations.

In contrast, Mohamed’s novel *The Fortune Men* retells a historical injustice: the plot centres on the real-life case of a Somali sailor, Mahmood Hussein Mattan, who was wrongly accused and executed for murder in 1950s Cardiff (Godara & Yadav, 2025, para. 4). With *The Fortune Men*, Nadifa Mohamed takes her place among the growing crop of British artists and writers of colour, including Reni Eddo-Lodge, Steve McQueen and Jay Bernard, committed to correctively shining a light on recent British history (Donkor, 2021, para.4).

Set in 1952 among the “tumbledown” docks, milk bars and lodging houses of Cardiff’s multiracial Tiger Bay, *The Fortune Men* is Mohamed’s third book. It novelises the real events surrounding the wrongful imprisonment and execution of Mahmood Mattan, a Somali seaman and father of three young boys, who was the last man to be hanged in Cardiff prison. Fabricated evidence, false witness testimonies and institutionally racist policing led to him being found guilty of the murder of a shopkeeper (Rogers, 2021, pp. 108-110).

Promoting archival rigour and literary reconstruction, the author seeks to resurrect a voice muffled by institutionalised racism. As Smith states (2022), “the novel restores the dignity to Mattan’s life by confronting the racist machinery that condemned him” (p. 84). In this novel, literature constitutes a form of historical reparation that counters what Ricoeur (2004) calls “the erasure of memory” (p. 89). The significance of studying these literary works together lies in their complementary approaches to activism. While Evaristo situates activism in the multiplicity of contemporary voices, Mohamed locates it in the act of historical remembrance (Yadav et al., 2024). One addresses the lived present, the other the silenced past; both, however, expose the structural inequalities that shape Black British existence. The present study argues that the novels exemplify two critical strategies of Black British literary activism: one of them is Evaristo’s polyphonic resilience, and the other is Mohamed’s narrative justice.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While Black British literature is gaining attention as both a cultural and a political intervention, comparatively little scholarship considers the activist potential of



present-day narratives. Most critical interventions analyse either *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Evaristo or *The Fortune Men* (2021) by Mohamed in isolation, focusing on polyphonic narration or historical reconstruction, and neglecting a systematic examination of their interaction in the pursuit of social justice. Thus, a scholarly gap remains at the intersection of racial critique, narrative form, and activism in Black British literature, a gap that has yet to receive adequate attention. There are specific references to how Evaristo's novel foregrounds contemporary Black British women, conveying the intertwined axes of oppression that Crenshaw (1989) calls intersectionality, the complicated effects of class, race and gender. According to Adebayo (2020), the polyphonic structure of Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* facilitates the articulation of diverse experiences that emphasise community resilience as a form of resistance (p. 112). However, critical focus has been on how this multiplicity of narrative forms functions as activism rather than mere representation. For example, such characters offer compelling instances set against systemic oppressions in employment, education, and gender violence, but few studies interrogate how these narrative strategies actively engage with these structures (Reynolds, 2021, p. 324).

Similarly, Mohamed seeks to mobilise a historical miscarriage of justice, yet her work is often reduced to historical narration rather than direct intervention in contemporary systemic racism. Smith (2022) observed that Mohamed "reclaims erased voices and interrogates the machinery of institutional injustice" (p. 84). It is thus urgent to examine how such historical reimagination resonates with contemporary readerships and serves as a literary catalyst for social awareness. By comparing a present-oriented polyphonic story with a historically bound reconstruction, a comparative critical study of such a pair will uncover the full spectrum of literary activism in Black British literature.

Furthermore, both texts demonstrate the structural mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequality in Britain. *The Fortune Men* reveals legal and institutionalised forms of racism, while *Girl, Woman, Other* focuses more on everyday microaggressions and the systemic ways of marginalising people across economic, social, and cultural lines (Evaristo, 2019; Mohamed, 2021). Therefore, the issue is not the absence of representation of Black experiences but rather the absence of a critical understanding of how narrative strategies serve as activist interventions. In this way, this study aims to address this gap and provide a framework for understanding the various forms of literary activism that are present deeply in contemporary Black British literature.

This research, therefore, grapples with a set of central issues concerning the narrative strategies considered viable for establishing social critique and promoting activism within modern Black British literature, and with how Evaristo's polyphonic narrative in *Girl, Woman, Other* functions as a site of literary activism



for intersectional consciousness and collective resilience. In parallel, the research also investigates Mohamed's historical fiction in her novel *The Fortune Men* as a form of narrative justice that challenges institutional erasures and uncovers systemic racism. Between these two approaches, the present research aims to highlight how different narrative forms draw readers' attention to critical engagement, sharpen social critique, and promote activism in postcolonial literary discourse.

By answering these questions, the study contributes to Black British literary scholarship and enriches the theoretical understanding of literature for social justice, demonstrating how both contemporary and historical stories can function as mechanisms of resistance and resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A deep critical analysis of contemporary Black British literature has recognised its capacity to examine systemic oppression and pursue social justice goals. In this context, Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) as well as Nadifa Mohamed's novel *The Fortune Men* (2021) are particularly prominent. Although both works have received critical praise, analyses often either focus on their formal narrative techniques or fail to connect them to the socio-historical themes they explore. This review, therefore, critically examines these novels and situates them within broader current discourses on Black British literary activism, intersectionality, and historical reclamation.

Polyphony and Intersectionality in *Girl, Woman, Other*

The novel's polyphonic form has been a recognised theme in Evaristo's literary works, particularly in *Girl, Woman, Other*, which intertwines twelve stories across generations, social locations and sexualities. The narrative seeks to gather and stitch together fragmented lives into one shared quilt of collective memory, suggesting that multiplicity itself instigates resistance (Sánchez-Palencia, 2022, pp. 316-330). This style focuses on the interrelation between the personal struggle as well as social struggle and agrees with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory, highlighting the intersecting and compounding nature of systemic oppression when gender, race, sexuality and class are fatal issues.

Reynolds (2021) further states that these stylistic experiments, including ignoring punctuation rules, stand as deliberate rejections of Eurocentric literary norms: "Evaristo disrupts the grammatical order imposed by British literary traditions, echoing the disruption of social hierarchies her characters enact" (p. 325). With these very formal choices, Evaristo turns the narrative multiplicity into activism, seeking to give agency and visibility to suppressed and marginalised voices. For example, Yazz's character deeply shapes her identity as "both an inheritor of past struggles and an agent of present transformation" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 187), showing how the polyphonic structure intensifies collective resilience.



Furthermore, critics noted that Evaristo goes beyond portraying characters to deliver an overt social critique of intersectional identities. Smith and Carter (2020) illuminate the focus of the novel on systemic barriers in health care, employment, and education, arguing that the novel “foregrounds the quotidian mechanisms of oppression that often escape legislative scrutiny” (p. 54). Placing individuals’ narratives within wider socio-political contexts, the novel draws attention to the possibility of social awareness and moral intervention being achieved through literature.

Historical Retrieval and The Narrative of Justice in *The Fortune Men* by Mohamed

The Fortune Men, Nadifa Mohamed’s novel, also exposes systemic injustice, even when viewed through the lens of history. By depicting the trial and execution of Mahmood Mattan in Cardiff in 1952, the author provides what Ricoeur (2004) describes as narrative justice “the act of restoring moral and historical visibility to those silenced by institutional mechanisms” (p. 89). Smith (2022) notes that “Mohamed reclaims erased voices and interrogates the machinery of institutional injustice” (p. 84), suggesting that literary narratives can help address instances of historical erasure.

Here, the historical realism of the novel serves to show and document systemic racism within authorised institutions and to emphasise human suffering under structural oppression. In this respect, Mohamed (2021) said, “I tell his story to unmake the erasure, to assert that a single life matters” (p. 150). Intellectuals such as Okonkwo (2022) note this approach as one that connects literature with social activism, making the narrative serve both as a memorial and an ethical call (pp. 0-65). Moreover, by placing Mattan’s story deep within the wider postcolonial framework of Britain’s migrant communities, Mohamed underlines the continuing legacies of empire, immigration, and racial discrimination.

Comparative Activism in Both Form and Content

While Evaristo brings contemporary intersectional struggles to the forefront through a polyphonic framework, Mohamed reconstructs history, using it to condemn currents of institutional racism. Yet, both, in their function, are literary activist acts that extend the boundaries of Black British literature into socio-political involvement. As Jones (2019) states, literature exposes “structural inequalities in ways that policy documents and statistical analyses cannot, by humanising the abstract and giving voice to the marginalised (p. 21).

Evaristo’s narratives highlight everyday forms of resilience, representing how micro-level acts of resistance accrue to form collective consciousness and identity. For example, Amma’s reflections on community organising demonstrate that resistance need not be overtly political: “Small acts, daily persistence, that’s what changes the world” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 198). Mohamed, conversely, emphasises



historical accountability, exposing institutional abandonment that perpetuated injustice and asserting the ethical accountability of remembrance. Both approaches illustrate that activism can be present- and past-oriented, expanding the temporal and formal boundaries of literary engagement with social justice.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on contemporary Black British literature in recent years, several critical lacunae remain. The comparative study, therefore, remains largely unexplored, with very few analyses investigating how divergent narrative strategies—an instance being Evaristo's polyphonic contemporary form versus Mohamed's historical reconstruction—intersect and work towards a shared activist effect.

Moreover, critical attention has remained separate and apart from Evaristo's stylistic experimentation and from Mohamed's archival storytelling, thereby repressing the far more intriguing question of how narrative form, when engaged as such, can itself constitute activism. Another relative lack of exploration has been observed in the intersections between memory and resistance, with one concern being communal memory in Evaristo's fiction and historical reparation in Mohamed's narrative, and how these concerns feed into present-day Black British activism. In an attempt to fill this gap, this thesis makes an original contribution to the field by examining *Girl, Woman, Other* and *The Fortune Men* within a shared theoretical and activist framework, thereby laying bare the multiple avenues through which Black British writers resist the system.

Though scholars have written much about Bernardine Evaristo and Nadifa Mohamed, some clear gaps remain. But very few studies work together to show how the different storytelling styles they adapted can produce a shared activist voice. Also, a little focus on how form itself can act as a kind of resistance, or how memory, whether personal or historical, could shape that resistance. Looking more closely at these areas helps reveal how both authors challenge oppression in connected yet diverse ways.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research carries deep significance on three interrelated levels:

As for the theoretical significance, the present study contributes to the evolving discourse concerning literature as activism by integrating intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), postcolonial feminist critique and narrative justice (Ricoeur, 2004). Although these frameworks are often applied independently, this research paper synthesises them to examine how literary form itself can enact activism. By demonstrating that (Evaristo's) polyphonic multiplicity and (Mohamed's) historical reclamation are not merely aesthetic devices but activist strategies, the research expands theoretical debates about how literary texts resonate against oppressive systems.



In Black British literary research, there has been a tendency to focus either on contemporary works of identity negotiation or on historical fictions of diaspora and memory. The comparative analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and *The Fortune Men* (2021) tackles these domains, showing how different narrative strategies articulate complementary visions of justice. As Reynolds (2021) argues, “Evaristo’s radical experimentation destabilises the form of the British novel itself” (p. 324), while Smith (2022) emphasises Mohamed’s “commitment to historical repair” (p. 85). By examining both, the current study underscores the versatility of Black British writing in confronting systemic inequality.

Regarding its socio-cultural significance, this study extends beyond literary scholarship, engaging directly with contemporary debates on justice, immigration and racism in Britain. Mohamed’s narrative speaks to ongoing discussions about the failures of legal institutions and the disproportionate criminalisation of racialised communities. Evaristo’s novel, meanwhile, reflects the lived realities of contemporary Black British women, whose struggles echo in current debates on gender equality, cultural belonging, and social mobility. By highlighting these activist functions, the present study affirms the power of literature to mobilise sympathy and reinforce social consciousness. Together, these contributions emphasise that Black British literature is not only a cultural archive but also an active participant in Britain’s ongoing struggles for equity and justice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilises a multi-layered conceptual framework that draws on intersectionality and justice, as well as narrative and literary activism, offering a lens for analysing how literature functions as a site of resistance and social transformation.

Intersectionality (as in Crenshaw, 1989) emphasises how overlapping categories of class, race, gender, and sexuality produce compounded forms of oppression. In novels like *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo’s twelve protagonists embody these intersections. For example, Yazz negotiates both racialised and generational identity, whilst Amma grapples with sexism and homophobia within both Black and feminist communities (Evaristo, 2019, pp. 110–135). The concept enables a deep analysis of how Evaristo’s polyphonic tale foregrounds resilience not only as an individual achievement but also as a communal inheritance shaped by interlocking struggles.

Regarding narrative justice, as in Ricoeur (2004), Paul Ricoeur’s theory of memory and justice is particularly useful for analysing *The Fortune Men*, Mohamed’s novel. Narrative justice refers to the restoration of dignity and visibility through storytelling when formal institutions fail or deny. The protagonist, as an example, Mahmood Mattan’s wrongful conviction, represents institutional erasure. The writer’s novel counters this by reimagining his tale and granting him narrative



agency. As Mohamed (2021) herself writes: “I tell his story to unmake the erasure” (p. 150). By applying narrative justice, the current study interprets the novel not only as historical fiction but as a moral intervention against systemic racism in the British justice system.

As for **literary activism**, as in hooks’ (1994), she conceptualises cultural production as a form of activism, in which literature becomes a site for imagining resistance and articulating justice. This framework underscores how both Evaristo and Mohamed utilise narrative strategies to represent and oppose oppression. Literature, in this sense, becomes praxis: Evaristo through her radical reworking of form, and Mohamed through historical reparation.

Together, these three frameworks enable a comparative analysis that accounts for both the contemporary and historical dimensions of Black British activism. Intersectionality illuminates the lived, everyday struggles in Evaristo’s novel; narrative justice emphasises the reclamation of erased voices; literary activism bridges both, situating their texts within broader social movements. This conceptual framework places the narratives not merely as cultural products but as acts of confrontation, enabling a richer understanding of how Black British literature intervenes in discourses of justice, race, and resilience.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a **qualitative, interpretive approach** rooted in literary analysis. Since the aim is to examine how contemporary Black British novels engage with social justice and activism, the analysis is guided by close reading and thematic interpretation. According to Eagleton (2011), literary criticism involves revealing how texts perform an “ideological work, shaping the way we perceive social realities” (p. 42). Therefore, the research study goes beyond surface-level representation to analyse how form, language, and narrative strategies promote activism.

The primary texts, both Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and Nadifa Mohamed’s *The Fortune Men* (2021), are selected for that: they are Booker Prize–recognised, underscoring their cultural significance, also, they exemplify two conflicting yet complementary modes of literary activism: polyphonic contemporaneity (Evaristo) and historical reconstruction (Mohamed), lastly, the two novels represent a spectrum of Black British literary strategies to expose systemic oppression and envision resilience.

Regarding **the theoretical framework**, the analysis is guided by intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), to explore overlapping layers of oppression in Evaristo’s narrative. About **narrative Justice** (Ricoeur, 2004) is employed to examine Mohamed’s reclamation of silenced voices. **Literary activism**, as in hooks’ (1994), is applied to interpret literature as a cultural resistance and social



intervention site. These theoretical frameworks are employed comparatively to highlight how the two novels differ while efficiently articulating social justice.

As a **method of analysis**, the study employs a **deep close reading** to identify thematic patterns and formal strategies, focusing on three analytical dimensions, including the representation of oppression, to examine how gender inequality, systemic racism, and institutional injustice are portrayed. Also, **strategies of resistance and resilience** are tackled to analyse how characters negotiate oppression, both individually and collectively. Likewise, **form as activism** is studied to highlight how narrative structures (polyphony, historical reconstruction) function as political interventions.

Each novel, in this study, is analysed individually, followed by a comparative discussion to synthesise their activist strategies. Secondary sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and theoretical works, are combined to contextualise and substantiate the analysis.

The scope of the study is limited to two novels; though this enables depth, it restricts the breadth of Black British literature that could be included. Additionally, the study emphasises textual analysis rather than reception studies, meaning it does not empirically assess reader responses. However, by focusing on narrative strategies, this study highlights literature's potential activist functions, contributing to broader understandings of cultural resistance.

Critical Analysis

1. Polyphonic Resilience in *Girl, Woman, Other*

Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), a novel, is widely regarded as one of the most celebrated works in contemporary Black British literature and won the Booker Prize for its experimental form and unapologetic focus on Black British women's voices (Sarıkaya-Şen, 2021, pp. 303–315). The narrative comprises twelve interconnected stories that span generations, genders, and sexual orientations, weaving together a polyphonic chorus of lives often excluded from mainstream British literature. This chapter argues that Evaristo's narrative polyphony functions as an act of literary activism, foregrounding intersectional struggles while simultaneously emphasising resilience and collective solidarity.

Polyphony as Resistance

Evaristo's refusal to adhere to conventional punctuation and grammar is not merely stylistic experimentation but a deliberate political act. As Reynolds (2021) observes, "the disruption of grammatical order in Evaristo's prose enacts a refusal of the rigid boundaries of Britishness, just as her characters refuse to be contained by racial or gender stereotypes" (p. 325). The fragmented, flowing prose resists closure and finality, reflecting the multiplicity of experiences and histories that constitute the Black British condition.



For example, Amma's reflections on her life as a feminist playwright encapsulate this resistance: "She wants to make plays that make a difference, about people who weren't on stage before, people who are now in the audience watching themselves finally represented there" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 12). Here, Evaristo not only describes Amma's activist theatre but also mirrors her own narrative project: to put on the page those who have been historically erased. This alignment of content and form exemplifies how polyphony itself operates as a form of resistance, dismantling monolithic representations of Britishness and reconfiguring literature as an inclusive space.

Intersectionality and Multiplicity

The characters' stories exemplify Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, which concerns the overlapping oppressions of gender, race, class and sexuality. For instance, Shirley, as a Black schoolteacher, encounters both gendered expectations and racial prejudice within the education system. Her struggle to mentor students while navigating institutional racism illustrates the compounded oppressions faced by women of colour in professional spaces. As she laments: "They never see me as just a teacher, I'm always the Black teacher, always the other" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 156). This articulation underscores the double burden of gendered and racialised identity. By presenting Shirley's voice alongside those of Amma, Yazz, and other oppressed women, Evaristo demonstrates that systemic oppression is not uniform but differentiated across social spaces.

Each character's story intersects with others, underscoring that resilience is not an individual act but a collective inheritance shaped by overlapping struggles. This structure highlights the communal dimension of activism, in which survival and empowerment emerge from shared experiences and solidarity.

Generational Negotiations and Feminist Continuities

Among the novel's key activist dimensions is its focus on intergenerational negotiations. The younger characters, such as Yazz, often critique or reinterpret the older feminists' struggles, such as Amma's, reflecting tensions within feminist movements over time. Yazz dismisses her mother's activism as outdated, arguing that "her feminism is from another era, we're intersectional now" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 187). Yet, in voicing this critique, Yazz paradoxically demonstrates the continuity of feminist struggle, underscoring how each generation rearticulates activism in its own idiom.

This generational negotiation exemplifies what bell hooks (1994) calls "education as the practice of freedom" (p. 14), in which younger women learn from their predecessors' struggles while redefining their own terms of resistance. The novel

thus presents activism not as a static ideology but as an evolving discourse shaped by intergenerational dialogue.

Everyday Activism and the Representation Politics

Evaristo's activism extends beyond overtly political moments; it emerges in the everyday experiences of her novel's characters. For example, Carole's journey from a victim of sexual violence to an accomplished banker dramatises Black women's resilience in hostile environments. While her success does not erase trauma, it demonstrates survival as a form of resistance. As Carole reflects: "she's built her walls so high no one can climb them, no one can hurt her anymore" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 278). Though ambivalent, Carole's survival reflects the quiet yet powerful ways marginalised women navigate and endure systemic violence.

In this respect, Smith and Carter (2020) argue that "Evaristo's representation of ordinary Black British lives foregrounds the quotidian mechanisms of oppression that often escape legislative scrutiny" (p. 54). By depicting generational conflicts, microaggressions, and everyday struggles, Evaristo expands the scope of activism beyond collective protests to include survival strategies embedded in daily life. This broadens the definition of activism, aligning with the idea that resilience itself is a political act.

Regarding **activism in writing**, it is essential to emphasise that Evaristo's narrative form is inseparable from her activist project. The absence of full stops, the variability of transitions, and the multiplicity of voices reflect an aesthetic that resists containment. As Reynolds (2021) contends, "Evaristo rewrites the British novel into a hybrid space where marginalised voices dictate the terms of narrative" (p. 327). By reimagining the very structure of her novel, Evaristo enacts what Ricoeur (2004) calls the "politics of narrative memory" (p. 91), ensuring that voices historically excluded from British literature are permanently inscribed within its fabric.

Thus, *Girl, Woman, Other* exemplifies literary activism not only in its content but also in its very form. Its polyphonic narrative is a political intervention, foregrounding the voices of those long silenced and challenging recognition of their continuing resilience.

2. *The Fortune Men* reshapes historical reconstruction and narrative justice

Nadifa Mohamed's novel *The Fortune Men* (2021) is both a historical novel and an act of literary justice. Rooted in the real-life case of the protagonist, Mahmood Mattan, a Somali seaman wrongfully convicted and executed for murder in Cardiff in 1952, the novel reconstructs a silenced past and interrogates systemic racism across Britain's legal and social institutions. This section argues that Mohamed's tale enacts what Ricoeur (2004) terms **narrative justice** by restoring dignity and



visibility to a marginalised figure erased by history. Through historical reconstruction, the novelist transforms literature into a tool of activism, exposing the failures of institutional justice and challenging Britain's amnesia about racialised violence.

Historic Reconstruction as Ethical Imperative

At the novel's core, *The Fortune Men* is an act of historical reparation. Mohamed, the novelist, revisits archival material and reimagines the protagonist Mahmood Mattan's life, retrieving a story that official records have distorted or suppressed. As Mohamed (2021) herself clarifies in the novel's acknowledgements, "I wanted to tell his story to unmake the erasure, to insist that one life matters against the indifference of institutions" (p. 150). This framing positions the tale as an ethical act, to remember, to accept witness, and to contest the silencing mechanisms of history.

Okonkwo (2022) highlights this activist dimension, noting that Mohamed "intervenes in Britain's historical memory, restoring a voice to a man whose humanity was systematically stripped by the law" (p. 53). Unlike official documents that reduced Mattan to a criminal, Mohamed seeks to reconstruct him as a husband, a father, and a community member, thereby foregrounding his humanity against the backdrop of institutional indifference.

Narrative Justice and the Reclamation of Voice

Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative justice offers a productive framework for analysing Mohamed's project. Ricoeur (2004) argues that narrative can serve a reparative function by restoring visibility to those erased from official accounts (p. 89). In Mohamed's novel *The Fortune Men*, this justice manifests through the novel's access to Mattan's consciousness. By granting readers intimate access to his thoughts, Mohamed destabilises the state's attempt to define him solely by his criminal record. Consider Mattan's reflection as he awaits trial: "He is not the monster they paint him to be, but a man of stories, of oceans, of loves and mistakes. They do not see him, only what they need him to be" (Mohamed, 2021, p. 243).

Here, Mohamed exposes the gap between the justice system's reductive categories and the complexity of lived identity. The passage illustrates narrative justice in action: literature restores the subjective humanity denied by legal discourse. Smith (2022) observes that the novel "confronts the racist machinery that condemned Mattan while simultaneously offering readers a moral reckoning with Britain's colonial and postcolonial legacies" (p. 84). This dual function, historic recovery and moral critique, emphasises how Mohamed mobilises fiction as activism.

Systemic Racism and Institutional Critique

In addition to individual injustice, Mohamed's narrative exposes the structural dimensions of racism rooted in Britain's mid-20th-century institutions. The Cardiff docks society, portrayed as vibrant yet hazardous, becomes a microcosm of



Britain's racialised systems. Migrants are tolerated for their labour but excluded from institutional protection and a sense of belonging.

The trial scenes reveal the stark power asymmetry. The court, composed entirely of white officials, fails to recognise Mattan's humanity. The prosecution relies on racialised stereotypes to construct guilt, casting him as a threatening outsider. Mohamed dramatises this bias, she says: "They see his skin before his words, his strangeness before his innocence. The verdict was sealed long before the trial began" (Mohamed, 2021, p. 310).

This critique echoes contemporary arguments around systemic racism in Britain's legal and policing systems. Andrews (2021), in this regard, argues, "Britain's racial injustices are not aberrations but continuities, rooted in the structures of empire and carried into present institutions" (p. 102). The novelist's reconstruction of Mattan's trial represents this continuity, connecting past injustices to persistent systemic failures.

Countering Dehumanisation

Another significant characteristic of Mohamed's activist project is her concentration on Mattan's daily life. She depicts his interactions, his aspirations, and his vulnerabilities, thereby resisting the dehumanisation imposed by legal and media discourses. For instance, describing his relationship with his children, she writes: "He sings to them in Somali, half lullaby, half prayer, wrapping their nights in the safety he cannot find for himself" (Mohamed, 2021, p. 95).

Such an intimate portrayal restores dignity, presenting Mattan not as a faceless victim but as a fully realised human being with love, memory, and agency. Literature here enacts what hooks (1994) describes as "cultural work as resistance" (p. 210), offering alternative narratives that humanise and empower marginalised lives.

3. Comparative Analysis

The juxtaposition of Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and Nadifa Mohamed's *The Fortune Men* (2021) illuminates two distinct yet harmonising modes of literary activism in contemporary Black British literature. While Evaristo employs polyphony and formal experimentation so as to foreground intersectional struggles in the present, Mohamed utilises historical reconstruction to expose systemic racism of the past and its lasting effects. Together, these two novels exemplify how literature functions as a multifaceted site of resistance, operating simultaneously on temporal, formal, and ethical planes.

Oriented Activism Between the Past and the Present



Evaristo's activism is firmly situated in the **contemporary**, engaging with ongoing debates about race, gender, and sexuality in Britain. Her characters represent intersectional identities, dramatising the negotiation of multiple forms of oppression challenges simultaneously. For example, Yazz's generational critique and Amma's feminist theatre both exemplify how resistance changes across time within living societies (Evaristo, 2019, p. 187).

In contrast, Mohamed's novel reaches **backwards** to recover the silenced voice of Mahmood Mattan. By restructuring his wrongful execution, the novelist insists that Britain cannot move forward without facing its historical injustices. As she writes, "I tell his story to unmake the erasure" (Mohamed, 2021, p. 150).

The two novels thus engage different temporalities: Evaristo emphasises resilience in the present, while Mohamed memorialises injustice in the past. Yet both converge in the activist task of confronting systemic oppression.

Form as a Strong Site of Resistance

Form occurs as a crucial dimension of activism in both novels, albeit through divergent strategies. Evaristo disrupts conventional grammar and structure, crafting a fluid narrative that resists the rigid boundaries of the British literary tradition. As Reynolds (2021) argues, "her experimentation rewrites the British novel into a hybrid space where marginalised voices dictate the terms of narrative" (p. 327).

Mohamed, by contrast, adheres more closely to historical realism but reclaims imaginative authority where archives fall silent. Her fusion of fact and fiction destabilises the "closure" imposed by state records, offering instead what Ricoeur (2004) terms **narrative justice**, the restoration of dignity through storytelling (p. 89). Thus, while Evaristo redefines the **form** of the British novel, Mohamed reclaims the **content** of British history. Both demonstrate that form itself can be activism: one through disruption, the other through reclamation.

Resilience Modes

Despite these differences, both novels converge in their insistence that resilience is central to Black British survival. Evaristo highlights everyday persistence forms, such as Shirley's endurance within a racially hostile educational system, and Carole's experience of trauma (Evaristo, 2019, pp. 156–278). Mohamed, on the other hand, centres the dignity of resistance in memory, depicting Mattan's humanity as enduring despite institutional dehumanisation (Mohamed, 2021, p. 243).

Smith and Carter (2020) maintain that "Black British writing foregrounds resilience not as triumphalist survival but as collective endurance against systemic injustice" (p. 58). Read together, Evaristo and Mohamed embody this principle in different **complementary** registers: one through multiplicity and community in the present, the other through memorialising and justice-seeking in the past.

Towards a Literary Activism Unified Vision



The comparative lens reveals that Evaristo and Mohamed are not oppositional but complementary. Evaristo demonstrates how activism can emerge in the **everyday lives of contemporary Black women**, while Mohamed insists on the **ethical necessity of remembering historical injustices**. Together, they illustrate that Black British literature functions simultaneously as an activist praxis and as a cultural archive.

As hooks (1994) reminds us, “cultural work is political work” (p. 210). Both novels exemplify this assertion, converting narrative into activism, Evaristo by reimagining form, and Mohamed by reconstituting history. Their convergence lies in their commitment to justice, resilience, and the reclamation of voices that dominant British narratives have silenced.

CONCLUSION

The present study has explored how contemporary Black British literature engages with social justice and activism through Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and Nadifa Mohamed’s *The Fortune Men* (2021). While both novels differ in thematic content, time representation and form, they converge in their activist commitments: amplifying marginalised voices, exposing systemic oppression, and asserting resilience as a mode of survival.

Evaristo’s polyphonic structure disrupts conventions of the British novel, centring the intersectional experiences of Black British women. Her rejection of conventional punctuation and grammar symbolises a rejection of rigid social categories, while her diverse characters illustrate the layered oppressions of gender, class, race and sexuality. In doing so, she foregrounds what Crenshaw (1989) terms intersectionality and demonstrates that everyday survival and intergenerational dialogue constitute forms of activism.

Mohamed, in contrast, retrieves a silenced historical narrative. Through the reconstruction of the wrongful conviction and execution of Mahmood Mattan, she realises what Ricoeur (2004) calls narrative justice, restoring dignity and visibility to Mattan’s erased life. Her blending of archival material with fictional imagination reveals systemic racism within Britain’s legal and institutional frameworks, emphasising how the legacies of colonialism persist in post-war society.

When read comparatively, these two novels highlight how Black British literature operates across multiple activist registers: Evaristo engages with the present through intersectional representation and formal innovation, while Mohamed explores the past through historical memorialisation. Together, the two novelists demonstrate that literary activism is multifaceted, not monolithic, embracing both forward-looking visions of resilience and backwards-looking acts of memory. In this respect, hooks (1994) asserts, “cultural work is political work” (p. 210); the two novels exemplify this by transforming narrative into a form of praxis.



Thus, the significance of the present study lies in articulating how literature functions as a dynamic space of resistance, bridging past and present struggles and expanding the conceptual boundaries of activism. Rather than treating activism as external to literature, this study has shown that form, memory, and representation are themselves activist tools that enable literature to confront systemic inequality and inspire collective resilience.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerge for future studies. Among them is the expansion of the corpus of Black British activist literature; future research should go beyond Evaristo and Mohamed to include other Black British authors such as Caryl Phillips, Malorie Blackman and Andrea Levy. Examining a wider corpus would illuminate the various strategies through which Black British literary writing engages with activism, diaspora, and justice.

Or maybe include some **comparative transnational perspectives**, such as studies of Black British and African American or Afro-Caribbean texts, which could shed light on convergences and deviations in activist literary strategies across the diaspora. This would situate Black British literature within broader global struggles against systemic oppression and racism.

Future work might also study the **intersection of literature and public policy**, examining how policymaking intersects with literary activism, particularly in discussions about immigration, criminal justice and education in Britain. Literature's role in forming public discourse offers rich ground for interdisciplinary analysis.

REFERENCES

- -Adebayo, T. (2020). Polyphony and the Black British female voice in *Girl, Woman, Other*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 56(2), 110–125.
- -Andrews, K. (2021). *The new age of empire: How racism and colonialism still rule the world*. Allen Lane.
- -Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Donkor, M. (2021, May 28). *The Fortune Men by Nadifa Mohamed review – injustice exposed*. *The Guardian*.
- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/28/the-fortune-men-by-nadifa-mohamed-review-injustice-exposed>.
- Dray, S. (2021, March 18). *Black Lives Matter: New race inequalities commission and a London statue review*. House of Lords Library.
- <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/black-lives-matter-new-race-inequalities-commission-and-a-london-statue-review/>



- -Eagleton, T. (2011). *How to read literature*. Yale University Press.
- -Evaristo, B. (2019). *Girl, Woman, Other*. Hamish Hamilton.
- -Godara, A. & Yadav, P. (2025). Echoes of Past and Voices of Present:
 - Intergenerational Trauma and Collective Memory in “The Fortune Men”. *Open Cultural Studies*, 9(1), 20250066.
- <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2025-0066>.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- -Jones, A. (2019). Literature and institutional critique in modern Britain.
 - *Cultural Studies Review*, 12(1), 20–35.
- Ledent, B. (2009). Black British literature. In D. Birch (Ed.), *The Oxford companion to English literature* (7th ed., pp. 16–22).
 - Oxford University Press.
- -Mohamed, N. (2021). *The Fortune Men*. Viking.
- -Okonkwo, C. (2022). Remembering Mahmood Mattan: Nadifa Mohamed and the politics of historical fiction. *African Literature Today*, 40(1), 50–65.
- -Reynolds, J. (2021). Breaking the form: Experimentation in Bernardine Evaristo’s fiction. *Contemporary Literature*, 62(3), 315–338.
- -Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rogers, A. (2021). *The Fortune Men: Nadifa Mohamed* Penguin, London
 - 2021, hb, 384pp, £ 11.99 ISBN 9780241466940| www.penguin.co.uk.
- -Sánchez-Palencia, C. (2022). Feminist/queer/diasporic temporality in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019).
 - *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 29(2), 316-330.
- -Sarıkaya-Şen, M. (2021). Reconfiguring Feminism: Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*. *The European Legacy*, 26(3–4), 303–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2021.1898109>
- -Smith, J., & Carter, L. (2020). Everyday resilience and systemic oppression in Black British writing. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(4), 50–65.
- -Smith, L. (2022). Reclaiming unheard voices in British historical fiction.
 - *Historical Fiction Quarterly*, 8(1), 80–95.
- -Yadav, D. P., Saxena, D. S., Godara, M. A., Gokhru, D. S., Rani, D. N., & Choudhary, D. R. R. (2024). Revisiting Trauma and Recorrecting the Damage: A Study of Nadifa Mohamed’s ‘The Fortune Men’. *Available at SSRN 4971003*.