Running In (and Out) the Family
Postcolonial Family Novels in Perspective

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Abstract The genre of the family novel can be identified in many postcolonial literary cultures. Initially, it was often read as an example of "national allegory" (Jameson 1986), thus considering family narrative in a tight relationship with postcolonial nation-building, but this theoretical framework has been later criticised from different perspectives, ranging from post-national to feminist critiques. Furthermore, the genre of the postcolonial family novel has been refashioned due to the emergence of diasporic narratives, leading to the diffusion of the "postcolonial fictions of adoption" (McLeod 2006). Nowadays, the high competition in the global literary market – namely, with family novels and sagas in the US literary market – drives this genre towards highly individualised, as well as hybridised, outcomes. While focusing, in particular, on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz and *Lara* ([1997] 2009) by Bernardine Evaristo, this survey of family novels across different literary traditions aims to show the intrinsic porosity, as well as the strenuous resistance, of the genre.

Keywords Postcolonial family novels. National allegory. African, South Asian and South American traditions. Diasporic narratives.

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1   Introduction

Before the postmodernist turn and the boom of literary pastiches and other forms of hybridised narratives, it was often argued that popular fiction (sci-fi, horror, crime, etc.) followed rigorous narrative standards – to the point that it was even defined as "formula fiction" (Cawelti 1976) – in order to meet the demands of the marketing and, above all, the "consumption" (e.g. Brown 2006) of literature; other literary genres (historical fictions, epistolary novels, novels of formation, family novels, etc.) were considered, instead, to be more prone to structural transformations, due to their tight relationship with the historical changes taking place in culture and society.

Such an opposition was also reflected by the distinction between 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' literature, which was aptly deconstructed by the cultural turn in humanities, and subsequently described as a tool for the establishment of specific social and political hierarchies within the cultural field (e.g. Levine 1988). Another example of this hierarchical conception of the cultural production – namely, of the literary canon – was retraced in the inferiorising or patronising treatment of non-European literary traditions in Europe, which was eventually overturned by the postcolonial turn.

Subsequently, both popular fiction and postcolonial literature gained a growing success in terms of audience and critical reception, to the point that, for instance, the suspicion that the boom in postcolonial literature could be mostly grounded on the marketing of the so-called 'postcolonial exotic' began to circulate. As Graham Huggan notoriously argued in his essay, *Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*:

> Exoticist spectacle, commodity fetishism and the aesthetics of de-contextualization are all at work, in different combinations and to varying degrees, in the production, transmission and consumption of postcolonial literary/cultural texts. (2001, 20)

Within this context, as deeply marked by the epistemological, cultural and political transformations taking place in the last decades, the analysis of a peculiar genre, such as the postcolonial family novel, shows that there has never been a real opposition between 'high-brow' and 'low-brow literature', or between European and non-European literary traditions, since all are affected in similar ways by historical, political, cultural and editorial phenomena.

Nevertheless, it has always been difficult to disentangle the reading of postcolonial family novels from previous misconceptions or prejudices. In fact, when it comes to the family novel as a genre, rather than as novels focusing on family as a theme (e.g. Visser, van den Heuvel-Disler 2005), it is not easy to assess its right location, due to

the lack of consensus about what a 'family novel' really is. Some formal features may be repeated across different texts and literary traditions (e.g. a complex constellation of characters covering multiple generations within one or more families, a wide temporal horizon, multiple narrators, etc.), but they are not exclusively related to 'family novels', as the existence of the 'family frame' (Hirsch 1997) can be retraced in a number of contiguous, if not overlapping, genres, such as the *Familienroman*/family romance, the family album novel, the *Bildungsroman*, or even the autobiographical memoir (including that *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje which is also recalled in the title of this article).

Instead of trying to better define its location – which has always been a challenging task, as shown by the absence of authentically formalist analyses, if not for Dennis Jonnes' now outmoded semiotic approach (1990) and few other exceptions – the analysis of postcolonial family novels has often been politically inflected (e.g. Chatterjee 2021), in the attempt, perhaps, to further dignify the field – with fewer references, on the other hand, to the interweaving of this genre with popular fiction, as well as to other aspects of this literary tradition, such as, for example, its relationship with the constitution and dynamics of the global literary market.

Whereas the (re)construction of a formalist taxonomy is beyond the scope of this paper, the attempt to put the history of the postcolonial family novel into perspective, including references to the literary market and to popular fiction, offers an insight of the genre which avoids telescoping political judgments on it – as happened with two theoretical frameworks which have been frequently applied to this kind of reading. In his essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), Fredric Jameson notoriously argued that in 'third-world literature', now known as 'postcolonial literature' (with a significant change not only in terminology, but also in the political perspectives cast upon it), it is always possible to retrace how

> *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* (69, emphasis in the original)

As can be easily argued, "the story of the private individual destiny" might well be imbricated in a family novel: Daniel Hartley has recently described this specific case within his reconsideration of the relationship of allegory and ideology in Jameson's oeuvre – starting from Jameson's recent and eponymous collection of essays (2019), where the 1986 essay about 'third-world literature' is aptly included – by relating allegory to four levels, among which the fourth is

the level of social reproduction: the realm of care work, domestic labour, the family, friendship, and work beyond the zone of commodification. (2021, 183-4)

The traditional association of the national allegory to the genre of the *Bildungsroman* – as promoted, among others, by Jed Esty (2011) and Tobias Boes (2012) – should be thus extended, from Jameson's perspective, to the "level of social production", thus including the 'family frame' which is suitable to the analysis of family novels.

In doing so, however, Jameson established a clear dichotomy between the cultural production of the First World (where the split between private and public sphere was thought to be irredeemable) and that of the Third World (where such a distinction was not clearly recognisable): this binary opposition led to several critiques of Jameson's approach in the field of Postcolonial Studies.

A specific emphasis was put on anti-nationalist and post-nationalist critiques, perhaps starting from Aijaz Ahmad's contention, in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) that Jameson's focus on national allegories was not as extensive as he argued it to be – "[O]ne knows of so many texts from one's part of the world which do not fit the description of 'national allegory'" (107) – and, above all, it corresponded with a thorough and politically naïve defense of postcolonial nationalism as "the necessary exclusively desirable ideology" (98) for the whole 'Third World'. As shown in the subsequent criticism which sought a rehabilitation of Jameson's position, Ahmad conflates nation and nationalism and "skips over the problematic of the 'national situation'" (Buchanan 2003, 73) – as related to the importance of the historical, political, economic and cultural processes of postcolonial nation-building – which could provide Jameson's approach with an "anti-imperialist edge" (Hartley 2021, 175) without making a pro-nationalist critic out of him.

Postcolonial feminist criticism, on the other hand, emphasised the analogy between the 'public/private' and the 'First World/Third World' dichotomies, as construed by Jameson – "Psychoanalysis (such as it is), for us. Anthropology (as, in Jameson, nationalism) for them", as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak put it (1999, 109) – leading to the diminishment of female perspectives in the refashioning of social and cultural norms, as well as legitimating, by means of literary criticism, the otherwise controversial importance of the 'fathers of the nation' of the anticolonial struggle (Booker, Daraiseh 2019, 209).

In view of this, it can be fairly argued that, despite its usefulness, Jameson's theoretical legacy is still controversial: it has aptly underlined the importance of national allegories, as they can be found, for instance, in postcolonial family novels; on the other hand, it exclusively focuses on the political implications of these allegories, thus overstating the importance of postcolonial nation-building (a historical moment which has been outdone, in the meantime, in many post-

colonial nations) over other political and cultural situations. It also lacks any insight into the importance of the female rewritings for these narratives, which are often male-centered.

While reversing Jameson's emphasis on the cultural and political importance of nation-building, a similar take – thus privileging the socio-cultural context over the analysis of the literary genre – can also be found in John McLeod's essay "Postcolonial Fictions of Adoption" (2006). According to McLeod, the postcolonial fictions of adoptions are strictly related to the postcolonial diasporas, as they seek to

> explore the assumptions, contradictions and cost of adoptive practices, and often purposefully mobilise narratives of adoption to challenge state-sanctioned filiative models of national, cultural and racial reproduction. (McLeod 2006, 48)

By analysing a group of diasporic Black British novels published in the 1990s and 2000s and set in postwar Britain, McLeod asserts that

> the figure of the adopted child – born to one set of parents but raised by another – has begun to emerge as a significant personage in such writing. (2006, 45)

This seems to indicate that the *Bildung* of the adopted child will be crucial to the analysis, thus making the postcolonial fictions of adoption converge towards a refashioning of the *Bildungsroman* genre. Being set in the diaspora, this kind of *Bildungsroman* does not only represent the recognition/misrecognition of societal norms in the coming-of-age process of an individual (Moretti 1987, 16), but it also focuses on the political and cultural situations – as rooted in a peculiar colonial/postcolonial history – of the societies involved in the upbringing of a diasporic subject.

As McLeod actually clarifies, however, the range of characters in the postcolonial fictions of adoption extends well beyond the individual figure of the adopted child: it includes, for instance, "lost children or dead parents, family split apart and never reunited" (51), re-assessing, therefore, the importance of the 'family frame' over individual characters.

In addition to this, the representation of adoption recalls what Edward Said wrote in his analysis of high Modernism – thus producing an interesting, though indirect, link between postcolonial family novels and 'high-brow' literature – in *The World, the Text and the Critic*:

> Childless couples, orphaned children, aborted childbirths, and unregenerately celibate men and women populate the world of high modernism with remarkable insistence, all of them suggesting the difficulties of filiation. (Said 1983, 17)

This produces a 'filiative/affiliative' dichotomy, in which Said clearly prefers the latter term, as biological ties are less relevant, to him, than political ties; consequently, he argues that

> the only [...] alternatives [to the difficulties of filiation] seemed to be provided by institutions, associations, and communities whose social existence was not in fact guaranteed by biology, but by affiliation. (19)

McLeod, however, attempts to overcome Said's mainly metaphorical use of these terms – which is rooted in his analysis of Modernist oeuvres, in which family novels are not specifically taken into account – by retracing the paradigm of affiliation as a concrete situation in the representation of postcolonial and diasporic adoption:

> It is interesting to pursue the surreptitious link which Said infers between affiliative models of identity, belonging and location, and representations of adoption. It is my claim that, certainly in the context of postcolonial fiction in and about Britain, writing about adopted children is a way of engaging critically with received filiative notions of race, nation and culture [...] The family has often been the site where legislative and divisive discourses of race and nation unhappily encounter loving and often brave human relations which reach subversively and threateningly across such divides. (2006, 46)

This "unhappy encounter of the discourses of race and nation" reverses the focus on the family as a microcosm of the nation adopted by Jameson, since the national frame is constantly questioned by the migration narratives in which postcolonial fictions of adoption are set. The same questioning has been later extended by McLeod to colonial history, as based on the mechanisms of "family-making and family-breaking" (2018, 207) – i.e. the reconfiguration of entire households, as mostly produced by transfer of children from poor and racially-marked families (often constituted by single mothers) to racially-unmarked and wealthier families – and eventually applied to a global and transcultural scenario in his book-length essay *Life Lines, Writing Transcultural Adoption* (2015).

Whereas politically-inflected analyses, such as Jameson and McLeod's, have always prevailed in the field of postcolonial family novels, little attention has been paid to the processes of inclusion/exclusion of the family novel in the global literary market, as well as to its constitutive interweaving with the genres of popular fiction.

As for the former, one of the most studied and controversial cases of the relationship of literary genres and currents with the global literary market – the planetary boom of 'magical realism' – can be

of a help in this analysis, since a sub-category of the family novel, such as the family saga, has always been a distinctive genre within this current, starting from Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967) and continuing to Isabel Allende's novels (1982, 1999, 2000) and beyond. In this regard, Jean Franco's early assertion that 'magical realism', in Latin American literature, has always been "little more than a brand name for exoticism" (1990, 204), can be easily linked to Graham Huggan's subsequent analysis of the *Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) as a whole. Later on, Christopher Warnes aptly recounted the history of the boom of magical realism until the 2010s in terms of its relationship to the economic side, acknowledging the fact that

> [e]ven the advertising industry has begun to take an interest in the term, though it long ago learned how to capitalise on magical realist visual techniques in its quest for ever more novel ways of marketing products. (2009, 1)

One of these marketing strategies is included by Warnes in the related footnote:

> In May 2002, a banner headline in *Newsweek International* offered the world the question, "Is Magical Realism Dead?". The story was taken up in Britain less than a week later by Robert McCrum in *The Observer* under the headline, "Has Magic Realism Run Its Course?". By contrast with these last rites, a company called Mag-Well recently advertised a new kind of fluid conditioning technology with the label 'magic realism'. (155)

This reference might seem a purely anecdotal one, but it clearly shows that, while the debate on the death of magical realism as a literary category was going on in different ways across the globe, the label was appropriated and used to market totally different products, in a sort of afterlife which, however, casts an interesting light on the marketability of 'magical realism' in its previous life in the literary field.

In the same period, however, the genre of the family saga travelled across different literary traditions, spreading across the postcolonial *koine*, as well as encountering the competition of the family saga as a distinctive genre of the American literary tradition. Historically rooted in the South of the United States (Stephens 1995), the American family saga was subsequently adopted by other writers, coming from different areas of the country and made into global mainstream literature in the early 2000s – curiously enough, roughly the same period for the crisis of the 'magical realism' label – with novels like Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002) and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010).

As recently shown by the international success of other family sagas – such as that of the Mandibles, written by Lionel Shriver (2016) and set in a near future (2029-47), where the US economy has collapsed – these novels reinstated the possibility of social and political analysis, focusing on the longstanding feature of the American family saga as "a microcosm of its times", revealing changes in identity, political beliefs, social roles and familial roles within "a consanguine family through history measured in generations, at least three" (Stephens 1995, 4). Even more recently, the claims of death for the American family saga, due to the disappearance of extended families in favour of nuclear families (Mims 2020), has shown that such a category has, indeed, an afterlife whose vitality can be retraced in TV series, whose clear antecedent can be found in the international success of the cinematic saga of *The Godfather* (1972, 1974, 1990).

This asynchronous coexistence and competition with the American family saga has ultimately brought the postcolonial family novels of the 21st century to diversify their 'offer', by extending well beyond the boundaries of the family saga and showing a greater degree of hybridisation with the genres of popular fiction. In such a context, the need to cast a retrospective look at the history of postcolonial family novels leads us to focus on two novels published more or less in the same period – *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Díaz and *Lara* (1997, 2009) by Bernardine Evaristo – which can easily be seen to anticipate the following and most recent trends in the genre. While the former appears to be based on the hybridisation of different genres, from both 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' literature, the latter resorts to the otherwise unusual form of the novel-in-verse: besides this apparent diversity, they both point at a specific stage in the history of the postcolonial family novel which might be useful to understand its contemporary developments.

2 The *Long* Wondrous Encounter of Family Novels and Popular Fiction

As regards *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this highly successful novel by the Dominican-born author Junot Díaz portrays the "coming of age story" (Pifano 2014, 1) of the eponymous protagonist by avoiding, at the same time, any easy identification with the traditional form of the *Bildungsroman*. The coming-of-age narrative concerning Oscar Wao is included in a larger frame, where the history of the De León-Cabral family, which the protagonist belongs to, is also recounted: whereas Oscar's story moves forward in time, the story of his family moves backwards, contributing to a non-linear, fragmented and multifarious narrative where more than one literary genre is actually involved.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao resorts to many different genres, ranging from the family novel to the sci-fi novel, including "the immigrant novel […], the secret history, the Latin American *novela del dictador*" (Miller 2011, 92) as well. As for the sci-fi genre, in particular, it contributes in different ways to flesh out the text: as a thematic feature – comic books, sci-fi movies and fantasy literature form both Oscar's nerd imagery and its refuge from the world – as intertextual source (with references to the Marvel Comics' *The Fantastic Four*, DC Comics' *Teen Titans*, Edgar Rice Burroughs' series of Martian novels, Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga, H.G. Wells, Robert E. Howard, Isaac Asimov, Octavia Butler, etc.) and as a source of metafictional layering:

> What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles? (Díaz 2007, 14)

This rhetorical question is asked by another character, Yunior, who is the main narrator in the text, also identifying himself with "the Watcher" (4), from Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* (1986-87); this question also leads to a sort of *mise en abyme*, in which the sci-fi text *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* works as a microcosm of Santo Domingo and the Antilles, without resorting, however, to the political subtext evoked by Fredric Jameson and relying, instead, on the formal features of a whole literary genre.

In addition, such a hybridised text does not allow the deployment of either conventional or 'magical' realism. The former cannot fully disentangle from the reality it portrays, which is particularly disappointing, for Díaz, from a political point of view. As the author notoriously said in an interview, while dealing with the representation of Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, as provided in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *La fiesta del chivo* (2000),

> Vargas Llosa's [*The Feast of the Goat*] is a great novel, but he speaks of our dictatorship as if it were Peru. And I, the son of a fascist, realised that he had not captured [our] reality. Maybe because [*The Feast of the Goat*] was too realistic. (Lambies 2013)

This need to go beyond an excessive and politically undermining realism also provides one of the main reasons behind the hybridisation of family novel and sci-fi novel in Díaz's own book (Barradas 2009, 106).

However, not only conventional realism, but also 'magical realism' is questioned in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. On the one hand, Yunior's previously quoted rhetorical question echoes Alejo Carpentier's words in the prologue of *El reino de este mundo* (1949): "But what is the entire history of [Latin] America if not a chronicle of *lo real maravilloso*?" ("Pero qué es la historia de América toda si-

no una crónica de lo real maravilloso?", 2007, 12). On the other hand, the novel by Junot Díaz also displays – by way of the same metafictional comments made by Yunior, for instance – that "consciously experimental strand", which is constantly "ironizing, relativising, and questioning" (Benito, Manzanas, Simal 2009, 113) 'magical realist' elements in the age of its crisis.

Perhaps the most striking element, in this sense, is the *fukú* affecting the De León-Cabral family. It is explained by Yunior as "generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically, the Curse and the Doom of the New World", which was first released with "the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola" (Díaz 2007, 14). The curse which is 'running in the family' is also 'running outside the family', marking both the colonial and postcolonial history of the Dominican Republic, and eventually leading to the establishment of Trujillo's dictatorship. In analogy to the curse of solitude running in the Buendía family in Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, this is an effective curse – due to supernatural, thus 'magical' forces – but it also involves important metaphorical implications, as it dramatises the ways in which ideology transfigures social reality (Erickson 2009). In this regard, the previous quotation actually reads as follows: "What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles? But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fukú?" (Díaz 2007, 6).

The representation of the *fukú*, however, does not show only its ideological underpinnings, as it also works on the narrative level. In particular, whereas the repetition of the curse adds to the cyclical time which is typical of family sagas, it also enables an opposite force, disrupting the unity of the narrative. In Yunior's words – "But the fukú ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents' days the fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in" (Díaz 2007, 11) – we can read between the lines how the *fukú* is, indeed, a ghost story coming from the past, haunting different members of the family, as well as the narratives of their lives. In this sense, the *fukú* is not only a cross-genre element, but it also adds to that metafictional side of the narrative – just as its sci-fi constituency – by opening it to skeptical questioning. This ghost story appears to have strong links with those gaps, commonly referred to as 'silences' within the narrative:

> So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here. (243)

The impossibility to recount a full family story, due to its complex temporality, as well as to its high level of fragmentation, leads to a

different political consideration than the ones implied by Jameson's or McLeod's theoretical frameworks: the aim is neither the reconstruction of a national allegory nor the identification of a specific sociological type, to be linked, for instance, to the Dominican diaspora in the US. Instead, as José David Saldívar has put it, this novel offers

> an alternative unit of analysis beyond the unit of the nation-state [which] allows [...] to think through the US and Eurocentric structures of hegemonic thought and representation that continue to dominate the globe today (2011, 133)

offering a glimpse of the colonial and postcolonial history of the today's globalised world in terms of 'transmodernity'. As suggested by Enrique Dussel, 'transmodernity' replaces the Eurocentric notion of 'postmodernity' by adding an "ethics of liberation" to it, thus

> overcoming of cynical managerial reason (planetary administration), of capitalism (as economic system), of liberalism (as political system), of Eurocentrism (as ideology), of machismo (in erotics), of the reign of the white race (in racism), of the destruction in nature (in ecology). (Dussel 1998, 19)

In other words, the trope of the curse – which is deployed as a 'movable gap' in order to re-open and add further complexity to the genre(s) of the narrative – exceeds the limit of its usage in 'magical realism', or in postcolonial family novels, blurring the boundaries of 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' literature, while also leading to a whole refashioning of colonial/postcolonial history and culture.

3 A Fictional Family Memoir, and in Verse! Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*

The subtitle of Bernardine Evaristo's novel-in-verse *Lara* (1997, 2009) is *The Family Is Like Water*, recalling an internal reference, made by the main character, Lara – "the family are like water" (Evaristo 1997, 43) – which is also a rephrasing (as well as a thematic adaptation to the family frame) of the Yoruba saying used as the epigraph to the book: "However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source". The transcultural legacy of Lara's family – expanding far beyond the binary opposition related to the mixed-race identity of the character – is also represented through the metaphor of the baobab tree in the first page, as its seeds are "planted, [...] carried over the ocean, [...], [and then] burst into life" (1).

The character of Lara, who is of mixed Nigerian and British heritage, is infused with elements which may recall Evaristo's own bi-

ography (with Evaristo's family also including Irish and Brazilian components), so this novel-in-verse may also be considered as a 'fictional family memoir', in the wake of Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, whose superficial belonging to the memoir genre does not exclude the presence of fictional aspects at all (Press 2018). In this regard, Bernardine Evaristo declared in an interview: "*Lara* was very much about excavating my family history"; at the same time, however, "it was about exploring an area of British history that I felt hadn't been covered hardly at all in literature in this country" (Hooper 2006, 4).

In fact, as Mark Stein has argued, Evaristo's *Lara* – together with Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) – mark a shift in British, as well as Black British, literary tradition. They both insist on two features of the diasporic narrative which might be considered as complementary to the "postcolonial fiction of adoption" subsequently analysed by McLeod, since they do not directly deal with adoptions, nor with a specific 'Black British' location. Instead, they are "*multilocated*" novels (Stein 2004, 58, emphasis in the original) – in which the impossibility of return, commonly associated with the diaspora, opens up to multiple departures and returns – involving transcultural and multi-generational families as well. This is particularly evident when looking at the second edition of *Lara*, where the introduction of the Irish character of Caitlin, who had lived in the 18th century, reinforces the autobiographical, as well as the transcultural, perspective over the narrative.

However, the latter remark also leads to an emphasis on the "radical generational conflict" (Stein 2004, 29) staged in these novels, by adding a further layer of spatio-temporal complexity to the "concurrent cultural conflict between a parental generation who migrated and the generation born in Britain" (xviii). Several other conflicts are at stake in the same novel, as can be appreciated in the following excerpt, where Lara's best friend of her childhood, Susie, misuses 'half-caste' while meaning 'mixed race' – thus adding an Indian reference to her already misplaced reference to Jamaica and implying that social and economic conflict which will come up again and again in the novel:

> Where' you from, La?" Susie suddenly asked
> One lunch break on the playing fields. "Woolwich."
> "No, silly, where are you from, y'know originally?"
> "If you really must know I was born in Eltham, actually."
> "My dad says you must be from Jamaica", Susie insisted.
> "I'm not Jamaican! I'm English!" "Then why are you coloured?"
> Lara's heart shuddered, she felt so humiliated, so angry.
> "Look, my father's Nigerian, my mother's English, alright?"
> "So you're half-caste!" Lara tore at the grass in silence.
> (Evaristo 1997, 113)

Given that generational gaps and conflicts have always been part of the structure of the *Bildungsroman* (Boes 2006, 231-2), thus showing its proximity to family novels, it might be argued as well that Evaristo and Levy's novels help to better assess and qualify something which has always been included in the history of these genres. Much like the importance of the 'coming-of-age narrative' in the novel by Junot Díaz, Evaristo and Levy's novels seem to be based on the refashioning of the *Bildungsroman* genre through the introduction of a large, often transcultural, family background and leading, in the case of Black British literature, to what Mark Stein has dubbed as "novels of transformation" (2004, 29). This transformation has a double meaning for Stein:

> [T]he black British reaches beyond the text [due to their] *performative function*. This means that the process of 'coming of age,' which is associated with the novel of formation, is here understood in a double sense On the one hand, on the thematic level, novels of transformation depict the process of growing up. On the other hand, these fictions are not only inscribed by the cultures they inhabit, they in turn mold those very cultures. Novels of transformation do not only deal with the protagonists' coming of age. They at once describe and purvey the transformation, the reformation, the repeated coming of age of British cultures under the influence of what I call 'outsiders within'. (36;emphasis in the original)

However, the performative function of this 'transformation' could be further qualified in relationship to literary genres. 'British cultures' can be transformed not only by mingling with 'exotic cultures' in a multicultural/transcultural scenario: they can also change in terms of cultural production itself and its internal dynamics. In the case of *Lara*, Bernardine Evaristo has often remarked that its writing process involved an important shift from prose to poetry, a cross-genre technique that she has often indulged in: "I've written plays that were poems, prose that became poetry, poems that became novels and now I've written a novel [*Soul Tourists*] which has all sorts of weird things in it" (Hooper 2006, 5).

Lara, in particular, combines the low marketability of poetry – as particularly evident within the Black British literary tradition (Courtman 2006, 62) – with the greater marketability of the 'transcultural' as a peculiar, diasporic version of the 'postcolonial exotic' (Huggan 2001). The parallel refashioning of the family novel/*Bildungsroman* as a 'novel of transformation' both from a formal and social perspective will open a path both for the postcolonial/diasporic family novel and, more specifically, for Evaristo's literary production – leading to the multifarious prose-poetic world included by Evaristo in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), endowed in 2019 with the Booker Prize, whose 'trans-

modern female geneloagies' (Sarikaya-Şen 2021) provide a thoroughly convincing rewriting of the male-centred model of the family novel suggested by Jameson.

4 Conclusions

Issued around the first decade of the twenty-first century, the novels by Junot Díaz and Bernardine Evaristo mark a turning point in the tradition of the postcolonial family novel, anticipating further developments and casting a new perspective on their literary antecedents. In both novels, the refashioning of the *Bildungsroman* genre cannot be achieved without a proper inclusion in the family frame, leading to 'coming-of-age narratives' or 'novels of transformation' which are full of social and political implications, both within and beyond the boundaries of their specific cultural traditions (i.e. the Dominican diaspora in the United States, or Black Britain, which can be both reframed, as we have seen, in terms of 'transmodernity').

Yet, this political reading does not correspond anymore with the political readings evoked by scholars such as Jameson or McLeod, or with the general conception of family novels as 'microcosm of a wider society' which was enforced, for example, by the American tradition of the family saga, which postcolonial family novels had to struggle against for their position in the global literary market. These implications should be read, instead, within the formal structure of these texts, considering, for example, the metafictional treatment of both sci-fi and 'magical realist' elements in the novel by Díaz, or the cross-genre poetics adopted by Bernardine Evaristo by resorting to the low marketability of genre such as the novel-in-verse.

These novels also opened the path for further developments, such as the growing hybridisation of the family novel with the genres of popular fiction (sci-fi, crime, horror, etc.). Countless would be the examples of such hybridised narratives in the postcolonial fiction of the last decade; suffice it to say that the literary reputation gained in the early 2000s by writers such as Junot Díaz and, more recently, by Bernardine Evaristo contributed a lot to this boom: it consolidated a trend which had already started, in the United States, by seminal figures such as the African American authors Octavia Butler and Tananarive Due, and it led, for example, to the phenomena of Afrofuturism – including a new diffusion of sci-fi/family novels in the Afrophone Novel, namely in Swahili and Shona (Rettová 2017) – or Chicanafuturism (Ramírez 2008). In all these traditions, the presence of family narratives works, just as in the case of the novel by Junot Díaz, to undermine and refashion stereotyped notions of 'realism' concerning the cultural histories of the postcolonial world, as well as of its diasporas. The idea that 'something is running in (and out) the fam-

ily' is also crucial, for example, to the interweaving of crime fiction and family novels, where the curse of solitude in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or the curse of *fukú* in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* gets translated into the haunting presence of a crime in a family history – giving birth to a peculiar current, the so-called 'postcolonial Gothic' (Holden 2009).

Another feature of these novels is the emphasis on the transcultural aspects of their narrative, to the point that 'transcultural' might be occasionally considered as a 'rebranding' for what Graham Huggan had termed as 'the postcolonial exotic'. This disentanglement of family stories from one specific ethnic group, nation or culture is also paralleled by the emphasis on female genealogies, as Evaristo started to do with *Lara* and continued to do with *Girl, Woman, Other*, which was awarded the Booker Prize in 2019. A similar formal choice and a similar recognition was achieved by Andrea Levy, with *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) opening the path for the success of *Small Island* (2004), which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

Whether part of a larger cultural movement, such as the Black British literary tradition, including Bernardine Evaristo and Andrea Levy, or producing single, ground-breaking novels, such as in the case of Junot Díaz, these writers have authored postcolonial family novels that show the intrinsic porosity (between what was formerly known as 'high-brow' versus 'low-brow' literature), as well as the strenuous resistance of the genre.

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