

Love and Self-Discovery: The Journey of Sexuality in Bernardine Evaristo's *Mr Loverman*

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the extensive hardships faced by the gay character Barry, encompassing various dimensions, including physical, emotional, and societal aspects. Barry, a male individual hailing from the Caribbean, experiences the adverse effects of social stigma due to his sexual orientation. The primary tension of this novel is centred on the exploration of Barry's sexual orientation; his quest for love and self-discovery are prominent themes in this novel. Barry's reluctance to disclose his true sexual orientation is rooted in his fear of rejection and condemnation from his Caribbean community. Despite the fact that he has loved Morris since childhood, he has kept this a secret throughout his entire existence. Throughout his life, he has constantly lived with a fear of judgment by society; he has known his sexuality since childhood. However, he has chosen to conceal his identity from his family and acquaintances for an extended period of time, primarily due to prevailing societal and cultural norms and expectations. The central conflict of Barry hiding his sexuality in the novel can serve as a powerful and relatable theme, as it addresses issues related to identity, societal expectations, and personal growth.

Key words : *Identity and Self-Acceptance, societal expectation, sexuality, Identity crises, LGBTQ+ Representation.*

Mr Loverman, is Evaristo's seventh book and second prose novel, was awarded the publishing Triangle Ferro- Grumely Award for LGBTQ Fiction in 2015. This novel explores the themes of sexuality and identity with great depth and sensitivity, centering the narrative on the complex journey of the protagonist, Barrington Jedidiah Walker, also known as Barry or *Mr Loverman*. Barry is a confident and witty character who appears charming on the outside but hides his sexuality and internal struggles. He enjoys reading and often quotes phrases from Aristotle and Shakespeare when he speaks. He is the best raconteur, telling fascinating anecdotes from his life. Though he speaks in an intellectual manner, he lives with the burden of suppressed feelings and desires. This novel explores the difficulties Barry faces in understanding his sexual identity amidst societal expectations and cultural norms, delving into the complexities of sexuality.

This novel central conflict revolves around Barry's sexuality. He has known he is gay since his teenage years but has been hiding his sexuality from his family and friends for decades due to societal and cultural expectations. He grapples with feelings of guilt and shame about his hidden identity, which affects his marital relationships and his overall sense of self. Evaristo handles a very different plot line and switches back and forth between the past and the present. Additionally, each chapter has a distinct title that highlights the book and aids the reader in visualising the book. While exploring a multitude of themes, a central focus is unravelling Barry's complex sexuality. Though Bernardine Evaristo is a feminist, her thematic exploration of sexuality and the portrayal of Barry is unique compared to her other feminist books. In an interview with Ingrid von Rosenberg "On Gender, Sexuality, Feminism, Masculinity and Race" Bernardine Evaristo said,

Mr Loverman was directly addressing the issue of older black male homosexuality, but my protagonist Barrington isn't a New Man, a reconstructed male, in fact he's quite anti-feminist in a reactionary dinosaurish way. This is true to the character I created, a man of his time, generation and origins. As I write my characters into being they cannot be my puppets or mouthpieces for my politics. However, my politics informs my work at a deeper, less obvious level, where it needs to remain. Writing about the African diaspora is a political act in a society where so few of these books are published (*Hard Time* 2018).

Barry is a 74-year-old Caribbean man who marries Carmel, moves to London, and has two daughters, Maxine and Donna. He continues his relationship with his childhood companion, Morris, in a clandestine manner. Since childhood, Barry has been gay, but he has concealed his sexual orientation from society and married Carmel. Barry and Morris both have Caribbean ancestry. Morris is Barrington's best friend and his secret lover. Morris is more liberated and open-minded about his sexuality. He accepts his sexual identity, and his willingness to engage in a loving relationship with Barrington reflects a sense of self-acceptance that aligns with the values of the Gay Liberation Movement. Morris's character stands in contrast to Barrington, who is more conflicted and constrained by societal norms. Morris's comfortable existence as a gay man in London and his acceptance of his identity reflect the gradual shift in societal attitudes. Morris divorces his wife in order to live with Barry. Morris often empathizes with Barry's internal turmoil to accept his sexuality in front of this society. Morris is depicted as a caring, understanding, and non-judgmental person,

and his open acceptance of his own sexuality contrasts with Barry's struggles. Barry hides his sexuality for two main reasons. First, he wants to maintain the trust of his family. He worries that if he reveals his sexual orientation, it could strain his relationships with his loved ones. Secondly, he is afraid of facing societal judgment, which could lead to criticism or rejection.

Barry's marriage to Carmel is a complicated issue in this novel; they have been together for many years. While they have shared a life and raised children together, Barry's hidden homosexuality casts a shadow over their relationship. Carmel suspects Barry of infidelity, not realizing that the true nature of his infidelity is his struggle with his sexuality. Barry realizes his sexuality is different, but he procrastinates to telling his wife, which causes huge confusion in his married life. Carmel often views Barry as a womanizer. Barry is aware of his wife's skepticism and desires to communicate to her, "Dear, I ain't never slept with another women" (13). Barry never discloses anything about his character to Carmel, and she suffers more as a result of her inability to comprehend Barry's inner conflict. Carmel is portrayed as a strong and resilient woman. She has Caribbean roots like Barry and she belongs to the same diaspora community in London. Throughout the novel, Carmel's character is presented as a devoted wife and mother who have faced challenges with grace and determination. She is the only character who suffers more because of Barry's sexuality. As gay men, both Morris and Barry suffered in their marital lives. Morris's wife, Odette, discovered both Barry and Morris, while they were attempting a Kama Sutra position. Morris is terrified that Odette will reveal this incident to others, so he bribes her to conceal their sexuality. This exemplifies the painful experience of gay people who are faced with the dilemma of embracing their true sexuality. Even though Morris is a naturally tolerant person, he had difficulty silencing his wife. Morris divorced his wife as soon as possible, and he encouraged Barry to do the same. Morris and Barry both wish to convey their genuine love for one another and desire for a romantic relationship. Both confronted many challenges in expressing their true sexuality.

Evaristo explores how Barry's Caribbean cultural background influences his perception of homosexuality. Barry grew up in a cultural and historical context where homosexuality was often stigmatized and even criminalized. Barry is concerned about how society will judge him once his sexuality is exposed openly; this represents the real-world struggles of many LGBTQ+ people who are concerned about discrimination, prejudice, and marginalization. Barry's culture is ingrained in his consciousness; he often recalls the story of Horace Johnson, the most popular teacher at Barry's school, who hung himself once his homophobia became known to others. Morris frequently tells Barry that he should make a bold decision "why we acting backwards? It is legal. We are legal. Nobody goin' arrest us" (35). Barry's inner worry causes him to behave timid as he hesitates to reveal his true identity. In order to prove to this judgmental society that he is a normal person, Barry plays a dual identity game: publicly, he is married to Carmel, while privately; he is a gay man who spends time with Morris.

Barry is depicted as a complex character, as he experiences much frustration in his married life. However, his love for his children remains true and genuine. One day, he discovers that his daughter is in a relationship with a girl named Merle. Curious about this, Barry decides to inquire further. Merle openly shares that she identifies as a lesbian and takes great pride in her identity. She possesses unwavering positivity and courageously faces any criticism that comes her way. Barry is deeply impressed by the youthful generation's optimistic outlook and admires their ability to maintain such positivity on their sexuality. Barry said, "I really admire your courage. Most folk pretend they just the same as everybody else because they afraid of negative reaction. But you now, you stay true to who you are, and few from our community is brave enough to do that" (131). This statement reveals that Barry's has an inner feeling of fear about confronting this society; he admires Merle's bravery and accepts Merle's relationship with her daughter; this event causes him to reflect on the fact that younger people are more willing to reveal their identities than older people are; but this small incident makes him think a lot about his sexuality. However, as an older man, he persists in living a life that fails to provide him with any sense of fulfillment or contentment.

Barry's mental state is heavily impacted by repressed emotions, causing him to exhibit unpredictable behaviour towards his wife, Carmel, including instances of physical aggression. In these situations, we often feel compassion for Carmel. However, as the story unfolds, we learn that Barry is also tired of being trapped in the role of a victim. This dynamic creates a significant void in their marital relationship. Carmel also never takes any steps to understand her husband. Carmel has numerous friends; they've known each other since they were in Antigua. They're all quite pious, and one Sunday evening they were having a heated discussion about homophobia. They are so religious that they think homosexuality is wrong and should be illegal. They are quick to judge other people and their way of life. Carmel's friends appear to remain a constant reflection of Caribbean life and culture, despite having left Antigua many years ago. Even if they have shifted to their new surroundings, they carry some beliefs and prejudices from their original country. These are all the incidents that made Barry hide his true sexuality and love towards Morris. Barry represents many gay men who have similar fears like him. Barry is not a religious person, and he often condemns Carmel for going to church every Sunday. Barry believes religion fails to preach numerous sexualities in this society.

This novel examines the complexities of love, including forbidden love, societal expectations in relationships, and the impact of choices made for the sake of family and community. Barry is regarded as a supportive husband who cared for Carmel during her battle with postpartum depression, even though he is not treating her as wife. Furthermore, he fulfill his role as a responsible father, prioritizing his family's well-being. On one hand, Barry's affection for Morris is genuine,

so he desires to break free from his marriage and initiate a divorce from Carmel. As time passes, his internal struggles intensify. At the age of 74, he contemplates the years he has spent conforming to societal expectations and yearns for a future where he can prioritize his own happiness. However, he remains paralyzed by the fear of societal judgment upon discovering his sexuality. Barry often thinks “Why shouldn’t I live with Morris instead of sneaking around like a thief? I couldn’t do it. I could be brave. The whole point of a midlife crisis is to start living the life you want instead of tolerating the life you have” (36). This statement illustrates the psychological distress experienced by Barry as he struggles with the conflict between his personal well-being and the expectations imposed by society.

In a chapter *The Act of Metamorphosis* Barry shares his disapproval of the Gay Liberation Movement. In contrast, Morris demonstrates his open-mindedness by saying that individuals within the movement, taking so much effort to get civil rights and “they been educated the masses and getting us our freedom....should we decide to take it”(139). Morris tone is very accepting his own identity, and he said our sexuality of poofah comes under that group. Barry replay is that “I ain’t no homosexual, I am Barrysexual! I won’t have nobody sticking me in a box and labelling it” (138). Barry’s hesitate to call him as a homosexual man; his complex relationship with his own identity is reflected in his statement. He expressing his disdain for the Gay Liberation Movement, he used to believe that homosexuals are merely attention-seekers; this sparks the thoughts of Morris, who says that this liberation movement is about standing up for our rights; if you’re considering divorcing Carmel, this kind of liberation comes from them. Morris often teaches the broad spectrum of sexuality of the human race to Barry. Self- acceptance is a major problem in Barry’s life, he is homosexual, but his views are completely contrary to those of the liberation movement. Barry dislikes being labelled as belonging to a specific group.

Barry’s hesitance towards the movement might stem from a variety of reasons, such as his personal struggles with acceptance or his cultural background. Meanwhile, Morris’s response reflects a more progressive and accepting attitude, emphasizing the commonality of experiences among LGBTQ+ individuals, regardless of their involvement in the movement. The Gay Liberation Movement refers to a historical movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, advocating for the rights, visibility, and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. As an individual, Barry has successfully established a strong financial foundation, but he has not been able to attain personal pleasure in his life. Throughout the course of his life, Barry encountered numerous challenges related to his personal identity. However, enduring a prolonged period of concealing one’s true identity may also create feelings of insecurity and perplexity regarding one’s position within society, as well as one’s role and connections with others.

Barry is an educated fellow, but his mind often fluctuates when it comes to his sexuality journey. His self-discovery is very problematic, so he solely depends on Morris. Barry is aware of concealing his sexuality, particularly in his daughter’s presence. However, to his astonishment, his daughter Maxine informs him that she has been aware of his sexuality from the beginning and assures him that his homosexuality is accepted as a regular facet of life. Maxine is more progressive and accepts her father’s sexuality in a progressive way, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ issues. Her acceptance of her father’s sexuality and her willingness to engage in open conversations about his identity demonstrate her open-mindedness. As a feminist, she scolded Barry for not taking care of her mother properly, she said “I don’t trust men because you caused Mum pain all her married life. I’ve done therapy to know that subconsciously I don’t expect to end in a happy partnership because of you”(229). Receiving such opinions from her daughter made him feel guilty, and from the beginning, he strived to be a good father. But unconsciously, he has been a bad example for his children. Barry doesn’t have any courage to tell his daughter that he is going to divorce Carmel. This novel examines differences in perspective on sexuality and homosexuality throughout generations.

The coexistence of conservative ideas held by the elder generation and the more accepting attitudes of the younger generation, exemplified by Maxine’s acceptance of homosexuality, presents a nuanced perspective on the changing social dynamics. Danny, being the grandson of Barry, initially struggled to comprehend his grandfather’s sexual orientation. Barry asked him to leave the house after an argument. However, over time, Danny began to understand him better and eventually apologized. He said, “Hey, does this mean I’ve now got two granddads?”(302). This statement reveals that Danny accepts Morris as his own family. Evaristo’s makes a transformation in each character that helps them understand humans better when they grow. Barry is filled with joy when people begin to accept him as a gay man. This novel explores Barry’s experiences as an immigrant from Antigua living in London. It delves into the immigrant experience, the quest for belonging, and the cultural conflicts that arise when different generations hold varying values. At the age of 74, he carries a multitude of regrets in his mind, which prevent him from experiencing a deep sense of self-satisfaction and true happiness in his life.

Barry’s inner aspiration is to spend his remaining years alongside Morris, yet he remains passive, concealing his true sexuality and assuming the facade of an ordinary man. One day, Barry and Morris visited a gay pub in London to meet some friends of Maxine who were part of the LGBTQ+ community. Following an extensive conversation with them, Barry experienced a sense of relief witnessing their unabashed enjoyment of their own sexuality. Their lack of shame in expressing their identities openly in public left a profound impact on Barry. He accepts his homosexuality as a result of the experiences he has gained from others, and he is prepared to confront society as a gay man. Evaristo creates Barry with a great deal of psychological tension, but at last he understands himself and is prepared to stand against the social prejudice of gay men. These two gay men in the novel are confronted with the challenges of navigating societal

expectations, familial pressures, and cultural norms. Evaristo explores the conflicts that emerge when individuals strive to liberate themselves from societal limitations and pursue their own unique paths.

When Barry makes the decision to disclose everything to Carmel, however, Carmel becomes aware of Barry's sexuality through Morris's wife, Oddete. Initially, she experiences a state of shock, but eventually, she accepts the situation with greater generosity. Finally, with an open mindset, she meets Barry and expresses, "I spend fifty years of my life betrayed by you lie. My whole adult life been wasted"(305). So she said that she is going to divorce Barry. Barry is very happy because he feared much for Carmel, but she accepts Barry's mentality and is ready to move away from his life. In the beginning of *Mr Loverman*, Bernardine Evaristo quotes the James Baldwin line, Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced, At the conclusion of the novel, Barry was prepared to confront the circumstances, and he ultimately succeeded as a gay man. At last, he was free to live with his loved one, and his self-discovery gave him the fortitude to live without fear of judgement in a society. At the end of the novel, Barry is free to live with his love Morris, and he accepts his sexuality as natural. This novel is not only dealt the LGBT issue but rather about self-discovery within a domestic crisis made this novel so traditional.

Barry liberation from his situation gives a positive note to all gay men who read this novel, and this book is a good example for anyone who believes. Sexuality extends beyond the binary of men and women, encompassing a diverse spectrum that scientists continue to explore and discover, they are collectively referred to as LGBTQ+. This novel highlights the significance of self-discovery and the freedom that accompanies accepting and embracing one's true identity. Barrington's life is explored in depth through alternating past and present viewpoints, which shed light on the protagonist motivations and challenges. Evaristo's literary style mixes common vocabulary with deep observations. The usage of Caribbean English gives realism to the

Mr Loverman focuses on Barrington's process of self-discovery and the gradual liberation he experiences as he comes to terms with his true identity. Evaristo portrays Barry's sexual journey with authenticity, emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance and the freedom that comes with embracing one's sexuality. Throughout the novel, the passionate and forbidden romance between Barrington and Morris allows them to discover and embrace their true selves. Their love challenges societal norms and forces them to face many difficult situations in life. As they navigate the complexities of their relationship, Barrington and Morris gain a deeper understanding of their own sexuality, ultimately realizing that their love is not something to be ashamed of but rather a beautiful expression of their true selves. Similarly, Barrington's exploration of platonic love with his friends provides him with a sense of belonging and acceptance, enabling him to embrace his own identity and find the strength to be true to himself. Evaristo Develop conflicts between Barry and his family and friends as they become aware of his sexuality. Some may be accepting and supportive, while others may react negatively. These conflicts can provide opportunities for character growth and emotional depth.

Many gay men experience discrimination and stigmatization, which can lead to emotional distress and psychological harm. *Mr Loverman* is quite inspiring work for all the LGBTQ+ readers. Though Evaristo is an ardent feminist, she created Barry to create awareness in this society. Barry's self-discovery and self-acceptance give a positive outlook to all the readers. This novel thus suggests that love, in all its forms, has the power to shape and redefine our understanding of ourselves and our sexuality.

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