

Reimagining Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in Contemporary English Literature: Queer, Non-Binary, and Intersectional Narrative Strategies

Krishna Kumar Dhar Dubey

Research Scholar

Department of English, Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribag, Jharkhand, India.

Abstract:

Contemporary English-language literature has become a crucial site for rethinking gender, sexuality, and identity amid shifting social vocabularies and intensified debates about embodiment, belonging, and recognition. Recent fiction foregrounds queer, trans, and non-binary lives not only through representation but also through formal innovation—polyphony, epistolary address, fragmented temporality, speculative estrangement, and genre-mixing—techniques that disrupt patriarchal and heteronormative narrative logics. Guided by feminist and queer theoretical lineages (gender performativity, anti-binary critique, and intersectionality), this paper examines how selected contemporary texts stage identity as relational, contested, and historically situated rather than stable or essential. Through close, theory-informed reading of four influential case studies—Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*, Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Torrey Peters’ *Detransition, Baby*, and Akwaeke Emezi’s writing on gendered being—this study argues that contemporary literature “reimagines” identity by (i) shifting from disclosure narratives to structural critiques of power, (ii) rendering gender as lived practice and social negotiation, and (iii) using narrative form itself as a mode of resistance. The paper concludes that contemporary English literature performs cultural work: it expands interpretive frameworks for gender/sexual diversity while simultaneously questioning the limits of identity categories and the institutional conditions that make some lives more “legible” than others.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Queer Theory, Identity, Contemporary Literature, Feminism, Intersectionality, Trans Studies, Narrative Form.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary English literature, gender and sexuality are increasingly narrated as processes rather than as fixed attributes—formed through social relations, cultural scripts, and uneven structures of power. This shift parallels broader public discourses where non-binary and non-monosexual categories have gained visibility, particularly among younger cohorts, complicating older binary frameworks of gender and sexuality. [PMC](#)

Yet literature does more than “mirror” social change. It can contest the very terms through which gender and sexuality become intelligible. In queer and feminist traditions, “queer” often names a refusal of stable categorization and an anti-binary impulse that challenges hegemonic structures. [Cambridge University Press & Assessment+1](#) Contemporary writers extend this refusal into form: through hybrid genres, polyphonic narration, and the deliberate destabilization of linear identity arcs.

This paper investigates how contemporary English literature reimagines gender, sexuality, and identity in response to evolving cultural discourses. It focuses on the interplay between (a) representational politics (who appears on the page, and under what conditions of legibility), and (b) formal politics (how narrative strategies themselves critique or dismantle patriarchal and heteronormative hierarchies).

Research questions

1. How do contemporary English-language literary texts represent gender/sexual identities as fluid, relational, and historically conditioned?
2. What narrative strategies are used to resist patriarchal and heteronormative power hierarchies?
3. How does intersectionality reshape the literary imagination of gender and sexuality—particularly at the level of form (polyphony, voice, time, genre)?

Scope and rationale

The study uses close reading of four high-impact case studies frequently discussed in contemporary scholarship: Evaristo (polyphony and intersectional Britain), Vuong (epistolary address, queer memory, migration), Peters (trans kinship, normativity, and life-course narratives), and Emezi (non-binary being and metaphysical/ontological challenges to Western gender logics). Supporting scholarship includes peer-reviewed articles and special-issue interventions in queer/feminist studies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on three overlapping frameworks: feminist theory, queer theory, and intersectionality.

2.1 Gender performativity and the critique of essence

A foundational feminist-queer premise is that gender is not merely a natural fact but is produced through repeated social acts, norms, and interpretations—what later scholarship discusses via performativity. While this paper does not attempt an exhaustive genealogy, it relies on this approach to understand why contemporary texts often present gender as something *done*, *read*, *contested*, and *revised* over time rather than as something simply *revealed*.

2.2 Queer theory and anti-binary thinking

Queer theory, as mapped in reference resources such as Oxford Bibliographies, is historically associated with resisting codified identity categories and interrogating normative power. [Oxford Bibliographies](#) In performance-oriented accounts, to embrace “queer” frequently means resisting binaries and refusing the demand that identity be stabilized for institutional comfort. [Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#) Contemporary literature often operationalizes this resistance not only thematically but also structurally—through narration that rejects closure or singular truth.

2.3 Intersectionality as method

Intersectionality emphasizes that identity is never only “gender” or only “sexuality” but is lived through race, class, migration, disability, religion, and other coordinates of power. Recent feminist/queer scholarship continues to extend intersectionality into new contexts and methods, including formal and narratological approaches. [OUP Academic+2DSpace+2](#)

This paper treats intersectionality not as a checklist of identities but as a reading practice attentive to how narrative voice, characterization, and plot distribute vulnerability, recognition, and agency.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This is a qualitative literary study using **theory-informed close reading**. Textual analysis focuses on (i) narrative voice and focalization, (ii) time and memory structures, (iii) genre and form, and (iv) scenes of institutional contact (family, state, medicine, school, labor).

3.2 Selection of texts (case-study logic)

- **Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other***: recognized for polyphonic form and intersectional mapping of Black British lives. [OUP Academic](#)
- **Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous***: widely analyzed for epistolary narration, queer memory, and migration/imperial histories. [MDPI+1](#)
- **Torrey Peters, *Detransition, Baby***: central to recent debates on trans kinship, normativity, and gendered life courses; analyzed in contemporary feminist literary criticism. [ScienceDirect](#)

- **Akwaeke Emezi's work (incl. *Freshwater*):** examined in trans/queer religious and postcolonial frames; scholarship highlights its challenge to Western binaries of selfhood and gendered being. [Duke University Press+1](#)

These texts are “contemporary” in cultural impact and scholarly uptake, and they foreground gender/sexuality not as subplot but as structuring logic.

3.3 Data and analysis procedure

1. Identify key identity scenes (self-naming, misrecognition, intimacy, family negotiation).
2. Map narrative strategies (voice, time, genre, fragmentation).
3. Interpret how strategies redistribute power: what becomes speakable, visible, or livable.
4. Situate readings in recent peer-reviewed scholarship.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES THAT REIMAGINE IDENTITY

4.1 Polyphony and intersectional “presence” in *Girl, Woman, Other*

Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* is frequently discussed as a formal intervention: a chorus of voices that refuses a single representative story of “womanhood” or “Black British identity.” Recent scholarship argues the novel affirms presence and diversity (“we are here”) through its compositional structure and character-networking, which prevents identity from collapsing into a single axis. [OUP Academic](#)

How polyphony works politically:

- **Decentralization of authority:** No one voice is positioned as the stable “truth” about gender, sexuality, race, or class.
- **Distributed intersectionality:** The reader experiences identity as shaped by multiple institutions—education, art worlds, labor markets, migration histories—rather than as private psychology alone.
- **Coalitional imagination:** The narrative invites relational understandings of identity (who is allowed safety, who is rendered disposable, who gets heard).

This polyphony matters for gender and sexuality because it refuses the classic developmental arc in which a protagonist “discovers who they are” and then achieves narrative closure. Instead, identities remain contingent and socially negotiated; the novel's form becomes an ethics of plurality.

Reimagining gender:

Rather than offering a single feminist frame, the novel stages tensions among feminisms—generational, classed, racialized—thereby reframing “gender” as a contested field of politics. This aligns with intersectional reading practices documented in recent academic engagement with the text. [UniPub+1](#)

4.2 Epistolary address, queer memory, and historical fracture in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Vuong's novel is regularly analyzed for how form (letters to an illiterate mother) produces a relational self rather than an autonomous one. An MDPI *Arts* article emphasizes the novel's work of reweaving histories broken by imperialism, forced migration, and assimilation pressures, framing narration as survival practice. [MDPI](#) A very recent article (published days ago) also highlights its non-linear structure and the way queer subjectivity emerges through fractured time and memory work. [Taylor & Francis Online](#)

Key strategy: “queer temporality” through non-linearity

The novel's non-linear movement unsettles the “progress narrative” often expected of minority identity stories (trauma → disclosure → acceptance). Instead, identity is built through returns, gaps, and re-encounters—suggesting that sexuality and selfhood are neither purely private nor cleanly developmental.

Key strategy: intimacy as translation and mis-translation

The epistolary form performs intimacy under constraint: the mother cannot read; the son writes anyway. This structure dramatizes the limits of recognition and the asymmetries of language, education, and generational trauma. It also reframes queer identity not as a solitary “truth” but as a communication problem shaped by history, family, and power.

Reimagining sexuality:

Sexuality here is not reducible to desire alone; it is entangled with violence, labor, racism, and belonging. Scholarship on the novel's queer survival and memory-work supports reading sexuality as historically produced rather than merely personal. [MDPI+1](#)

4.3 Trans kinship, life-course disruption, and critique of normativity in *Detransition, Baby*

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship reads Peters' novel through feminist literary analysis of trans aging and "queer life courses," centering how gender norms shape what futures appear possible. [ScienceDirect](#) Instead of staging trans identity as a linear transition story, the novel complicates kinship, reproduction, and care—showing how normativity structures both cis and trans expectations.

Key strategy: the “messy middle” instead of identity resolution

The novel resists clean moral sorting and resists closure. Rather than concluding with a stabilized identity category, it asks what kinds of families, intimacies, and obligations can exist when gender is not treated as destiny.

Key strategy: social reproduction as a gender problem

By framing pregnancy, parenting, and partnership as contested terrains, the novel shifts from “Who am I?” to “What structures make certain lives livable?”—a question aligned with contemporary feminist concerns cited in the scholarship itself. [ScienceDirect](#)

Intersectional narratology (emerging direction):

Recent academic work explicitly frames the novel through “intersectional narratological analysis,” indicating a methodological trend: intersectionality is increasingly treated as a *formal* question (who gets voice, whose time counts, whose desires are narratable). [DSpace](#)

4.4 Beyond Western binaries of selfhood: Emezi, ontological plurality, and gendered being

Scholarship on Akwaeke Emezi emphasizes how their writing challenges Western binaries through metaphysical and postcolonial frameworks. A Duke University Press article (QTR) examines Emezi's writing in relation to trans-religious/trans-human questions, foregrounding how identity categories become unstable when “selfhood” is not assumed to be singular. [Duke University Press](#) African Studies Quarterly work on *Freshwater* also highlights the novel's engagement with ogbanje and alternative ontologies of being, which complicate Euro-American gender models. asq.africa.ufl.edu

Key strategy: ontological destabilization

Where some contemporary texts destabilize gender at the level of social role, Emezi's writing often destabilizes the very idea of a unitary self. This is significant for gender and sexuality studies because it reframes identity not only as performance but as plural being—producing a critique of the assumption that identity must be coherent to be legitimate.

Key strategy: genre adjacency (spiritual memoir, speculative realism, mythic structure)

By drawing on spiritual and metaphysical registers, the narrative refuses the secular-liberal demand that gender be explained purely through individual psychology or biomedical narratives. This expands “identity politics” beyond recognition frameworks, turning the question toward epistemology: *what counts as knowledge of the self?*

5. DISCUSSION: WHAT “REIMAGINING” MEANS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Across these case studies, “reimagining” gender, sexuality, and identity involves three linked moves.

5.1 From representation to critique of legibility

These texts do not only add queer/non-binary characters; they interrogate the social conditions under which such identities become readable. This is particularly clear where institutions (family, nation, medicine, publishing markets) demand coherent narratives. Contemporary queer/feminist scholarship continues to push beyond queer theory's earlier limits toward place-based, relational, and kinship-centered frameworks. [Taylor & Francis Online](#)

5.2 Identity as relational and historically burdened

Vuong shows identity as written through imperial histories and migration; Evaristo shows identity as distributed across class and race; Peters shows identity shaped by normative life-course expectations;

Emezi shows identity destabilized by competing ontologies of the self. Together, they resist the neoliberal simplification of identity into personal “branding.”

5.3 Form as politics

- **Polyphony** (Evaristo) becomes an ethics of plurality.
- **Epistolary non-linearity** (Vuong) becomes a practice of survival and memory. [MDPI+1](#)
- **Narrative refusal of closure** (Peters) challenges respectability and the demand for “resolved” trans stories. [ScienceDirect](#)
- **Ontological multiplicity** (Emezi) expands gender discourse beyond Western epistemic frames. [Duke University Press+1](#)

In this sense, contemporary English literature reimagines identity by making narrative structure itself a site where binaries are broken.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

1. **For literary studies:** encourages evaluating identity not only at the level of theme but also at the level of narrative architecture (voice/time/genre).
2. **For gender and sexuality studies:** demonstrates how literary texts test the limits of prevailing frameworks (e.g., “recognition,” “authenticity,” “coherence”) through formal experimentation.
3. **For intersectionality research:** supports a growing move toward intersectionality as narratological method, not merely sociological description. [DSpace+1](#)

7. CONCLUSION

Contemporary English literature reimagines gender, sexuality, and identity by refusing binary logics and challenging the institutional demand that identity be coherent, stable, and legible. Through polyphonic structures, epistolary fracture, life-course disruption, and ontological plurality, contemporary texts transform identity from a private truth into a socially mediated negotiation—shaped by race, class, migration, and normative power. The case studies analyzed here show that narrative form is not a neutral container for identity politics; it is one of literature’s most powerful tools for critique.

Future research directions

- Larger corpus studies combining close reading with digital humanities methods (topic modeling of gendered discourse; voice distribution metrics).
- Comparative studies of Anglophone texts across regions (UK, US, Caribbean, Africa, South Asia) to track how postcolonial conditions reshape queer/non-binary narration.
- Studies on publishing/ecosystems and how market expectations influence which queer stories gain visibility.

REFERENCES:

1. Abram, N. (2024). Being / together: Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* and the politics of presence. *Contemporary Women’s Writing*. [OUP Academic](#)
2. Benjamin, E. M. (2025). Stability and change in gender identity and sexual orientation identities among young people. *[Journal article in PMC]*. [PMC](#)
3. Green, A. (2025). Introduction to special issue: Lesbian and queer generations. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. [Taylor & Francis Online](#)
4. Haring, N. (2024). Trans aging in Torrey Peters’ *Detransition, Baby* (2021). *Women’s Studies International Forum*. [ScienceDirect](#)
5. Henderson, A. (2024). Non-binary narration: The potential of point of view in young adult novels with genderqueer characters. *[Deakin University OJS article]*. [Deakin University OJS](#)
6. Krishnan, S. (2024). Afterword: Queering beyond queer theory. *Gender, Place & Culture*. [Taylor & Francis Online](#)
7. Magaqa, T. (2021). Decolonising queer sexualities: Reading Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* and alternative ontologies of being. *African Studies Quarterly*. asq.africa.ufl.edu

8. Mukherjee, S. J. (2025). Understanding representation in young adult literature and identity formation. *[Taylor & Francis journal article]*. [Taylor & Francis Online](#)
9. Oxford Bibliographies. (2024). Queer theory. *Oxford Bibliographies*. [Oxford Bibliographies](#)
10. Soler i Arjona, S. (2024). “To live is a matter of time”: Memory, survival and queer narration in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. *Arts*, 13(2), 41. [MDPI](#)
11. Todd, J. (2025). Exploring young trans and non-binary people’s strategies of resilience and identity. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*. [Taylor & Francis Online](#)
12. Vuong-focused recent article (2025). “I’m not telling you a story so much as a shipwreck”: Narrative form and queer subjectivity in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. *[Taylor & Francis journal article]*. [Taylor & Francis Online](#)
13. Queer theory chapter (Cambridge). (2009). Queer theory. In *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*. Cambridge University Press. [Cambridge University Press & Assessment](#)
14. Duke University Press (QTR). (2024). Transgender, trans-human, trans-religious: Reading Akwaeke Emezi. *[QTR article]*. [Duke University Press](#)
15. Women, Gender & Research. (2024). Call for papers: Special issue on intersectionality. [Tidsskrift](#)