

# BLACK BRITISH IDENTITY IN KWAME KWEI ARMAH'S *ELMINA'S KITCHEN*

Yusri Fajar\*

**Abstrak:** Identitas orang-orang keturunan Afrika yang telah menjadi warga negara Inggris menjadi isu menarik sejak mereka menetap dan membentuk masyarakat diaspora (imigran yang masih mempertahankan budaya mereka) di Inggris. Konstruksi identitas dipengaruhi oleh berbagai hal seperti keluarga, gender, ras, sejarah, bahasa, tingkah laku dan keterlibatan dalam kehidupan sosial. Drama kontemporer orang-orang keturunan Afrika di Inggris adalah karya penting yang merepresentasikan identitas orang-orang Afrika dan menjadi media untuk menyuarakan aspirasi dan pemikiran mereka dalam masyarakat Inggris yang didominasi oleh orang-orang kulit putih. Drama berjudul "Dapur Elmina" (*Elmina's Kitchen*) karya Kwame Kwei Armah menggambarkan masyarakat keturunan Afrika dari Karibia di Inggris dan berbagai strategi mereka dalam beradaptasi dan bertahan hidup di Inggris. Sebagai kelompok minoritas, orang-orang keturunan Afrika ini bisa dikenali dari tradisi dan budaya mereka yang tercermin dari bahasa, bentuk kesenian, pakaian, kebiasaan, cara berpikir hingga tingkah laku. Lebih khusus lagi, identitas mereka bisa dilihat dari kebiasaan mereka melakukan kejahatan dan kekerasan. Artikel ini pertama akan menggambarkan masyarakat keturunan Afrika asal Karibia dan menghubungkannya dengan konstruksi identitas mereka secara umum. Kemudian, artikel ini akan menganalisis konstruksi identitas tokoh-tokoh keturunan Afrika di Inggris sebagaimana yang tercermin dalam drama "Dapur Elmina" (*Elmina's Kitchen*)

**Kata Kunci:** Identitas Orang-Orang Keturunan Afrika, Masyarakat Karibia, Kejahatan dan Kekerasan

## Introduction

This essay examines the construction of Black British identity in *Elmina's Kitchen*, a British contemporary play written by Kwame Kwei Armah, a well-known Black British playwright. Identity is a concept which is interwoven with the features of an individual, groups of people, nations, and cultures. In constructing identity, some entities such as family, gender, race, history, language, behaviour, and social involvement are taken into consideration. In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), Stuart Hall highlights how the formation of the identity is engulfed by the dialectics of the past historical experience and the upcoming occurrence.

Cultural identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essential past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. (1990:475)

The construction of identity thus involves hybrid entities connected to people's past and present experiences. It tends to become unstable because it is a subject to be transcended within the evolving history, culture

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\* Yusri Fajar adalah dosen Program Studi Sastra Inggris Universitas Brawijaya

and power. Therefore identity is not only engulfed by family and racial background but also by social environment where people interact with each other. Moreover Paul Gilroy postulates the double consciousness and cultural intermixture encountered by Blacks in Britain. He argues that Blacks in the West stand between African cultures which are seen as Blacks' authentic cultural background and Western modernity. He claims that the cultures of Britain's black citizens have been produced in a syncretic pattern which styles and forms represents the Caribbean continents, the United States, and Africa (1993: 1-5). Thus black British diasporas had been imbued with mixed cultures before they settled in Britain. The settlements of blacks and hybridity of course make the contemporary British society different from the British society before the migration occurred.

The term "Black British" denotes the Afro-Caribbean and Asian descendants in Britain (see Philips 2008:13; Innes 2007:5). Black British identity has become the intriguing issue in Britain since Black immigrants settled and created a diasporic community there. The black immigrants in Britain should negotiate their identities with the whites, and adapt to the British community which tends to posit them as 'the others'. The image of identity of the black immigrants has been saturated and stereotyped by some constructed characteristics, such as uneducated, uncivilized, inferior and even criminal.

Black British drama has been considered as the paramount literary work which represents Black British identity and becomes the means for Blacks to foreground their voices within the dominant white narratives and cultures. Peacock claims that Black dramatists have gradually obtained opportunities to express their ideas and voices in Britain, although they have been regarded by white majority to be outside mainstream culture (2008:48). In *Elmina's Kitchen* Armah strikingly delineates the Caribbean community in Britain and highlights the distinct ways of its members to survive in the British society. As a minority group, Black British descendants are imbued with the identity which is reflected through language, arts, clothes, customs, way of thinking and behavior. More specifically, the Black British identity in *Elmina's Kitchen* is also marked by the crime and violence.

The characters in *Elmina's Kitchen* represent different generations of Black British descents whose parents and ancestors are from Caribbean archipelago. The identity of the teenage Black British is profoundly reflected through the character named Ashley who tends to indulge with Black British youth culture, and who insists to join the gangster. Ashley's father, Deli, who runs his West Indies restaurant, attempts to protect Ashley from the Black British criminal life which is saturated by illegal drugs selling, violence and murder. Because of the different obsessions, Deli and Ashley undergo a conflict. Moreover, Digger, the leader of the Black British gangster makes Deli's life dreadful because Digger forces Deli to pay the "protection money" for the business safety and recruits Ashley as the member of the gangster. This essay, first of all, will scrutinize the Caribbean community in Britain as depicted by Armah in the play and relate it to the Black British identity in general. Then it will turn to examine the identity construction of the Black British characters in the play.

## Discussion

### Portrayal of Caribbean Community in Britain and Its relation to Black British Identity

In the prologue of the play Armah obviously describes the Caribbean community in Britain which has particular cultural characteristics. Afro-Caribbean descents in England are still saturated by African traditions. To quote the prologue of the play:

The stage is in darkness. A single spotlight slowly reveals a costumed man (Digger), standing absolutely still with a gurkel (a one-string *African guitar* famed for possessing the power to draw out spirits) in his hands. [...] The music starts. It is a slow lament-sounding concoction of American blues and *traditional African music* (EM,2003:3)

The African guitar, which is regarded as the unique and artistic product of the African culture, has a crucial function in constructing the cultural identity of Black migrants in Britain. This musical instrument serves to connect the Black British characters with the African continent where their ancestors dwell and create the African arts. The traditional African music, which is used to illustrate the Black British characters' action, moreover, can create the impression of the spectators on the Afro-Caribbean diasporic society. Accordingly, the formation of the Black British identity can be scrutinized not only through the dialogue between the characters but also through some devices, such as African musical instrument and music, which are employed by Armah. Furthermore the specific music genre narrated in this play is reggae: "Baygee changes to an old-time kinky reggae rhythm. Clifton instantly recognizes it. [...] (EM 2003:52). Here there are two Black British characters, Baygee and Clifton, who are very familiar with reggae which represents Afro-Caribbean culture. According to Giovanneti, reggae certainly has very profound roots in Jamaica, an island nation situated in the Caribbean Sea (2005: 211). Thus reggae in this case gives paramount contribution to the construction the identity of Black British characters.

The setting of the play, which is Hackney London, is also important to be drawn into focus in this analysis as it has been well-known for violence and crime which are carried out by Black British gangster. This kind of social environment of course affects the identity formation of the people living in it. Peacock states that the identity of Afro-Caribbean descendants in Britain, notably those who are young, is influenced by the gang and gun (2008:49). The violence and crime have become the dark side of Black British's life in Britain. Both the gang and gun potentially bring about virulent social conflict which can bear social disorder and cause the death of the member of the community. Violence and crimes can also make youth rude and have no respect to other people. Armah highlights this context by describing the setting of the play: "We are in Elmina's Kitchen, a one-notch-above tacky West Indian food takeaway restaurant in 'murder mile' Hackney" (EM 2003:3) (emphasis added). This except suggests the situation of Hackney which seems unsafe because the murders often occur there. Armah's depiction of this dangerous place in the very beginning of the play foregrounds the rest of the interlocking events in the play which are dominated by the crimes and violence.

Anastasia, the waitress in Elmina's Kitchen restaurant, reminds Deli about the above environment which makes people reluctant and frightened to visit the restaurant. Many people realize the bad behavior of Digger who is the member of Black British gangster in Hackney and who used to have a conversation with Deli inside the restaurant. As a consequence, people do not want to buy food there because they are afraid of becoming Digger's victims. To Quote Anastasia:

"You (Deli) supposed to clean up your environment, Deli. This restaurant stinks. People walk in here, they smell Digger and walk straight back out. I've seen it. But you, my friend, you're comfortable with the stench of the stench of death around you? (EM 2003: 43)

Anastasia suggests Deli to make the restaurant free from Digger's presence and criminal activities. This advice is plausible in relation to the effort to attract the customers to enjoy the food in the restaurant. Anastasia seems to reckon that Deli will obtain a success in his business if he can make the atmosphere of his restaurant and its surroundings conducive. Unfortunately, until the end of the play, Deli does not succeed in resisting to Digger's existence and exploitation. Digger, who is explicitly called as a "bad man" (EM 2003:4), remains powerful and has authority to control the community. The description of the Caribbean community depicted by Armah above significantly influences the construction of the identity of the characters.

### **A. Ashley and the Representation of Black British Youth's identity**

Ashley is the third generation of Afro-Caribbean migrant in England who insists to indulge in the Black youth culture and to oppose to the elder generation. His figure is depicted through the physical appearance, the clothes he wears, and the way he behaves, which vividly signify his identity. These features moreover reveals to which group he belongs and affiliates: "Ashley [...] hooded street clothes, headphones. He has his hair in two bunches. Trouser falling off the arse. Has no respect for anyone older than himself except for Digger" (EM 2003:10). Ashley's dresses and hairstyle transparently represent the casual trends and outward appearance of Afro-Caribbean youths in Britain who tends to waste time in outside the domestic space. Chohan argues that such youth culture signifies the status in the reclaimed cultural terrain in the street (1999:14). The "street culture" has become the attributes of Black British identity. Wood claims that "Black British cultural forms [...] have always engaged with the street, both as a site where non-white citizens go about their every day lives in Britain, and also as a place of communal and individual resistance (2006:105-106). However it is important to notice that the street culture in relation to Ashley's life is more related to the negative things as he insists to become acquainted with the member of the gangster like Digger and to be involved in crimes and violence. Ashley's respect to Digger suggests that he envies Digger's identity and is inspired by Digger's behavior and lifestyle. In contrast, Ashley considers his father as a conservative and unsuccessful man.

Ashley, who is basically expected to help his father who runs the West Indies restaurant, ironically seems indolent and prefers to gain his own hedonistic life by joining the gangster. Ashley's reluctance to deliver

the food to the customer, for instance, signals both his disrespect to Deli's command and his ignorance toward the way of how Deli tries to make his Black British family financially empowered through managing small business.

Ashley kisses his teeth, grabs the TV remote off the counter, changes the channel to MTV base and attempts to sit down

**Deli** What you sitting down for? Can't you see there's ting waiting here to get delievered? [...]

**Ashley** (nonchalantly) It's raining out there, you know! Give me a second to catch my breath (EM 2003:10) (Emphasis in original)

Ashley's nonchalant response to Deli's statement indicates his unsympathetic behavior and lack of social responsibility. He even does not want to espouse Deli's attempts to develop his West Indies restaurant in order to survive in England. Ashley's attitude makes Deli irritated so that the conflict between them comes into play. Ashley's utterance in refusing Deli's instruction to deliver the food to the customers is considered impolite and rude by Deli. Deli warns Ashley: "Who you (Ashley) talking to like that? Don't mek me have to lick you down you know! Your mouth too quick these days (EM 2003:11). It can be figured out that Deli basically expects Ashley to become a son who has respect to elder people.

Ashley has an eager desire to possess the expensive things, such as BMW and the name-brand clothes, through which he wishes to achieve high social status. Accordingly he refuses to support Deli's small business and prefers to join the gangster in order to earn much money. Ashley considers the status and success as two entities which can be only measured in material things. Ashley thinks that all he wants cannot be fulfilled by his father who does not have much money. Ashley declares to Digger that "[...] this shit (*the restaurant*) is all good for my dad, but me, I wanna do big tings with my life, bredren. [...]" (EM 2003: 29). This statement implies Ashley's intension to carry out activities which are more profitable and pleasurable. Willing to realize his ambitions, Ashley then decides to follow Digger's ways of life which are saturated by Black British crimes and violence.

The involvement of the Black British youth in the crime has been influenced by the financial problem, social environment, and lack of education. Deli's inability to fulfill Ashley's need results in Ashley's decision to involve in the gangster to obtain more money, status and reputation. As the member of a minority group in Britain, Ashley basically needs social acknowledgement from his peer group. Ashley believes that Digger who has powerful authority can help him. Ashley does not care anymore with the negative and dangerous effect of being a bad guy who commits depraved acts.

**Digger** (*cool*) And you wanna be a bad man? Go back to school, youth and learn. You can't just walk into this bad man t'ing, you gotta learn the who science of it. You step into that arena and you better be able to dance wid death til it mek you dizzy. You need to have thought about, have played wid and have learnt all of the possible terrible and torturous ways that death could arrive. And then ask yourself are you ready to do that and more to someone that you know. Have you done that, youth?

**Ashley** [...] I stepped to you, haven't I? (EM 2003:30)

As explained by Digger above, there is a big risk which the member of the gangster must encounter. Someone who wants to involve in the crime must have adequate knowledge of how to make its operation successful and must fathom the strategies to deal with the government apparatus such as the police. Accordingly, Digger asks whether Ashley has learned the "science" of becoming a criminal and whether Ashley has been ready for involving in such a cruel life. Ashley's answer profoundly indicates his commitment to join the gangster although he has not had skills yet. He relies on Digger's instruction and powerful roles. Thus Black British social environment affects Ashley's identity.

Willing to become a 'bad man' like Digger, Ashley rejects education. He believes that formal education cannot equip him with knowledge and skills which can make his dreams come true. He confidently conveys his disinterest to education: "I ain't got time for college" (EM 2003:63). Ashley's statement is to some extent ironic because it is widely perceived that college is a place for people to obtain academic experience, knowledge and degree which can lead them to a better future. More importantly college provides the students with a variety of skills which can sharpen their intellectuals. Nevertheless Ashley wants to achieve his ambitions quickly. Being acquainted with Digger and becoming the member of the gangster, Ashley has no motivation and time to continue his study. He becomes rude and has no esteem to elder generation, even to his own father. His rejection to education can be lucidly seen when he throws his college books to the bin (EM 2003:63). Thus he thinks that the books are not fruitful for him. Moreover his negative attitude toward educational institution implies his perspective that it neither guarantees his success nor fulfills his needs. To quote Ashley's statement to Deli: "Forget this. College does not fit into the plan I have for my life. You want to keep selling your little plantain burgers, good luck to you, may you always be happy. Me, I'm a man" (EM 2003:63). Ashley not only refuses to go to college but also underestimates Deli.

### **B. Deli's Identity: Resistance to Violence and Struggle for the Betterment**

In contrast to Ashley who is totally inspired and affected by Digger's ways of life, Deli obviously resists to Digger and the gangster. Deli intends to construct 'new' identity by carrying out the activities which do not break the law. As postulated by Stuart Hall, identity is a negotiated process which is fluid and changeable (1996:7). Deli negotiates his past and present identities and insists to transgress the negative stereotypical of Black British people in Hackney which is imbued with crimes and violence. Instead of legitimizing and following Digger and Ashley's criminal affairs, Deli decides to manage the legal business and to create the comfortable environment. He cannot stand living in a bad and unsafe community: "I don't want to live like this Ashley, It ain't fun. [...] I'm trying, I'm trying to change shit around here" (EM 2003: 64-65). However, it is worth noticing that the crime which has been the integral part of the Black British culture still haunts Deli's life. It is evident that Deli ever involved in the crime and was sent in a jail. As a consequence it is uneasy for Deli to construct his identity as a good man. However Deli strives to create a good image and redefine his identity. Accordingly he insists to relinquish crimes and disavows his awful past life.

He lucidly shows his resistance to the crime by strongly rejecting to discuss the criminal stuffs with Digger.

**Deli** Digger don't pollute up my vibes wid dem talk dey!

**Digger** .....Pollutee!? Deli, you went to prison for GBH, on three men and their dogs. How de fuck I gonna pollute you?

**Deli** (*losing it a little*) A restaurant is not the place to discuss fucking murder. (EM 2003:47)

In this dialogue Deli attempts to make the situation of the restaurant salubrious by suggesting Digger to eschew talking about murder and crime. Deli's warning is plausible and logical indeed because the customers will become irritated and fearful if they hear such awful talk. The reputation of the restaurant will be also ruined if the customers know that its owner has committed to do the crimes. In turn, Deli will loose the trust from his customers if he does not resist the crimes.

Deli's identity formation is furthermore engulfed by his intension to protect Ashley from violence and crimes. Deli tries to become a good model for Ashley and always encourages Ashley to become a good son. Having intension to extricate himself and Ashley from the bad influence and exploitation of the gangster, Deli becomes more confrontational toward Digger. Deli is warns Digger to stay away from his life and to not recruit Ashley as the gangster member: "How much dirty youth out there you (Digger) you gonna recruit, you gonna take my son? I don't want you anywhere near anything of mine again, Digger. My son, myself, my shop" (EM 2003:81). Here it is profound that Deli considers Digger as a trouble maker and a dangerous threat for his family. As the influential member of the gangster, Digger can potentially make Ashley and Deli's lives miserable. Therefore Deli decides to confront Digger.

As a central protagonist in the play who valiantly resists violence and crimes, Deli serves to deliver the important message—which is addressed to the Black British people—that involving in the crime can result in the tragic life. The death of Ashley because of the gunshot at the end of the play proves that the consequence of involving in the gangster and crime is really saddening. What happens to Deli also haunts Kwame Kwei Armah, the author of the play. As a Black British playwright who has sons, Armah is also afraid of their involvement in the crime. In a certain interview Armah confesses that he wrote *Elmina's Kitchen* as therapy for his eldest son (Hattenstone 2003, cited in Blandford 2007:109). Apart from this confession, it is worth noticing that the struggle of Deli for making Ashley away from criminality indicates Deli's resistance toward the Black British culture of violence. He insists to challenge the crime and violence carried out by Black British criminals.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the formation of Black British identity in *Elmina's Kitchen* is affected by the African ancestral heritage, youth culture, and Black British social environment. The social environment, which influences the Black British identity, is saturated by violence, murder, and crimes which are executed by the Black British gangster. The response of the characters in the play toward that society is different from each other. Ashley who has

huge ambitions to achieve a high social status through expensive material possession perpetuates that uncomfortable environment by joining the gangster and supporting a bad man named Digger. Moreover Ashley's clothes, obsession and rude behavior represent the Black British youth culture. On the contrary, Deli, Ashley's father, intends to resist to such environment and culture, albeit his past experience in the crime involvement. He strives to develop his small restaurant and protects Ashley from criminality and rude behavior. Deli's straight confrontation with Digger shows his bravery to take a dangerous risk in his life. This also indicates Deli's attempt to redefine his identity.

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