



Celebrating Womanhood & Sexuality In Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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Abstract

Since humankind entered the modern age, racial discrimination and gender inequality has been a major issue all around the world. It is not to say that this issue was not present before, but it is now being addressed more than ever. Women are voicing their concerns against sexual harassment, gender inequality, and a lot many issues. In earlier times, during plays or dramas, female characters were played by men; they were forced to always hide behind veils, or in a more abstract sense, behind men. Women were confined to household chores, taking care of children and their husbands while men had the privilege to do almost anything. With time, women started to raise their voices against the injustices done to them. And this is how feminism, probably slowly yet effectively, has come to existence in our world. It became a revolution that changed not only how people think but also, how they perceived women. For a very long time, feminism has been thought to be synonymous to man-hating, people thought that this movement existed to present men as pure evil and women as angels, but we need to understand that the motive of this movement is not to promote hatred for men but to give women equal rights as men. Feminism is all about support, women supporting one another, men supporting women, women supporting men, and also men supporting men.

Keywords: Bernardine Evaristo, Girl, Woman, Other, Feminism, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Relationship, Racial Discrimination.

Introduction

The novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, is a story of twelve very different women but of similar descent i.e.; African or Nigerian. The women in the book, Amma, Yazz, Dominique, Carole, Bummi, LaTisha, Shirley, Winsome, Penelope, Megan/Morgan, Hattie, and Grace; are all linked to one another. The story revolves around the lives of these women. In one of her interviews, Evaristo explains: “It’s an experimental novel where each woman has her own space, and that’s what’s so important. I think the form is very important because they’re not short stories, it is a single novel. Everybody is interconnected and interrelated.” (de Leon, 2019). The women are connected on a deeper level, more than blood relations, and have their own story to tell. The stories mould into one another almost invisibly, never losing their uniqueness. For instance, Amma’s friend Shirley is one of the godparents of Yazz [Amma’s daughter] and also Carole’s ‘annoying’ yet dedicated school teacher. Megan/Morgan is Hattie’s

granddaughter and a transgender role model for Yazz. Simple relationships of people with other people are represented beautifully throughout the novel. "Girl, Woman, Other is about 12 primarily black women who fight deep-seated prejudice and racism, who learn to develop their own brand of feminism, and wear their otherness with pride. People who are "proud of their multiracial social circles and bloodlines".' ("Feminism needs tectonic plates to shift, not a trendy make-over": On Booker-winning 'Girl, Woman, Other')

Evaristo, in *Girl, Woman, Other* talks of women and how their lives are affected in patriarchal societies. Women are often oppressed and in so many cases, they do not complain against it. Amma, in the book, recalls about her mother "I can tell Mum's unfulfilled now we've all left home because she spends her time either cleaning it or redecorating it she's never complained about her lot, or argued with him, a sure sign she's oppressed" (Evaristo 11). One would wonder why gender inequality is still there in the 21st century, which is clearly and very easily understood by Dominique's statement: "she demanded to know why the male parts in Shakespeare couldn't be played by women" (Evaristo, 8)

And to her surprise, Dominique was told by the Principal that she was there in the school to become an actor, not a politician.

Girl, Woman, Other is written a bit differently from the traditional style of novel-writing. There is less and less use of full-stop which shows flow of lines into one another, continuing the idea as a whole. There is fluidity but also interconnectivity in sentences. Also, Evaristo has combined poetry and prose in her book, the lines written like poetry but can be understood as prose. It has been clearly stated in the article, "Poetry is invading the fiction shelves – and we should celebrate":

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* is written in a hybrid form that merges poetry and prose. Whilst never condensing language to the extent a poem might go to, the style involves uncapitalised beginnings to sentences and an absence of full stops. Evaristo uses these devices to propel her narrative forward, drawing on the rhythms of thought, speech and patois. At moments in the text, she introduces lineation, breaking the prose into poetic lines which draw the reader to a shift in a character's consciousness, and focus the eye on individual words which are seen to be more fully loaded than they could ever be when they are interlinked inside conventional sentences. ('Poetry is invading the fiction shelves – and we should celebrate')

In the book, Evaristo writes,

"the feeling of being
unmoored
unwanted
unloved
undone
ano
one." (Evaristo 284)

Same-sex relationships are an important part of the novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*. Evaristo has shown both, the fear of coming out and then the feeling of home after acceptance. In the novel, Amma shares, "he doesn't know I'm a

dyke, are you kidding? Mum told me not to tell him. It was hard enough telling her" (Evaristo 12). People are yet to come to terms with these concepts, as a character Winsome recalls, "when Amma came out as lesbian as a teenager, Winsome was worried the poor child's life would be blighted, and feared Shirley would catch the bug and be resigned to a life of misery too" (Evaristo 250). Amma is a bold character in the book, she is vocal about her choices and preferences in women and relationships. She does not let any woman to stay with her for long but in some relationships, she felt as if "it was the closest she'd come to making love to herself it was another coming home" (Evaristo 13). While Dominique decides to be in a live-in relation with a woman named Nzinga, she tells Amma, "I've fallen in love for the first time in my life with the most wonderful woman I've ever met, who desires me from a position of inner strength" (Evaristo 80).

Evaristo spent some years identifying herself as a lesbian but then she married a man named David Shannon. "I had a period of about 10 years where I lived as a lesbian, and that was my identity, ... I used to go on lesbian marches and I used to go clubbing and I had lots of relationships." (Bernardine Evaristo: Living as a Lesbian Made Me Stronger) The aftermath or the lasting influence of this period can be seen in her various works. Even though she has been written about lesbian and transgender relationships from the beginning of her career, this period is believed to have helped her sharpen her knives as a writer and an activist. "'I was very much part of this counter-cultural, black feminist, say, or black womanist community, where we were just nurturing each other, as well as fighting each other and falling out, of course.' The experience, she now believes, has left her stronger." (Bernardine Evaristo: Living as a Lesbian Made Me Stronger) Apart from spreading awareness on LGBTQI+, Evaristo has also written on sex which is considered quite immoral conventionally. In her works, she writes about sex not in obscene way but as an important factor in life. It is aptly stated that:

Sex is an important component of her fiction. She writes about it with all the earnestness and rawness it demands and her descriptions are stark and satirical. Her characters are not clear-headed about their sexual orientations, but they do confront their sexualities head-on when they come face to face with it and those conflicts produce myriad outcomes that redefine their existences as men, women, fathers, mothers, political animals, activists, and so on. ("Bernardine Evaristo's World of Fiction" n.pag)

Another similar but quite different term in the book is, transgender. Transgender is a term related to people who have different gender identities than those assigned to them at birth. For instance, when a person born with female body, identifies as a male, physically, sexually, and mentally, this person can be called transgender. "Transgender people are diverse in their gender identities (the way you feel on the inside), gender expressions (the way you dress and act), and sexual orientations (the people you're attracted to)." (Transgender Identities n.pag). In the book, Megan was born as a girl but throughout her childhood, she was confused as she did not feel feminine, "except it felt wrong, even at a young age, something in her realized that her prettiness was supposed to make her complaint" (Evaristo 308). Still trying to figure out her gender identity, "she wondered if she should really have been born a man because she sure as hell didn't feel like a woman" (Evaristo 317). During her coming to terms with being a transgender, she met Bibi, a transsexual woman. She started liking Bibi while they communicated online. "Bibi had been a man and was now a woman... and Megan was a woman who wondered if she should have been born a man, who attracted to a woman who'd once been a man, who was now saying gender was full of misguided expectations anyway, even though she had herself transitioned from male to female." (Evaristo 321) Bibi told her

all about being a trans person and helped throughout the journey of becoming Morgan from Megan. For Morgan/Megan, it was like getting a new life, she needed to know that “being trans wasn’t about playacting an identity on a whim, it’s about becoming your true self in spite of society’s pressure to be otherwise, most people on the trans spectrum felt different from childhood.” (Evaristo 338) In a movie dealing with same issue, *The Danish Girl*, the protagonist Einar develops an alter-ego named Lili, and starts feeling more feminine from an early age but could only understand it later when his wife asked him to pose as a female model for one of her paintings. He realizes that he is not Einar but Lili in reality, and tells his wife, “This is not my body, I have to let it go.” (*The Danish Girl*-Global Trailer). He decides to have a gender reassignment surgery, and after the surgery when asked about how she (Lili) feels, she answers, “Entirely myself.” (*The Danish Girl*-Global Trailer)

Racial discrimination is generally used when one treats people of a certain race, differently and segregates them from the general population. According to Wikipedia, “Racial discrimination is any discrimination against any individual on the basis of their skin color, or racial or ethnic origin. Individuals can discriminate by refusing to do business with, socialize with, or share resources with people of a certain group.” (Wikipedia) For a very long time, Black people were and still are discriminated by people all over the world for their colour or race. As Nelson Mandela said, “Racism is a blight on the human conscience. The idea that any people can be inferior to another, to the point where those who consider themselves superior define and treat the rest as subhuman, denies the humanity even of those who elevate themselves to the status of gods.” (Nelson Mandela)

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the author presses on this issue rather subtly. Evaristo has presented the issue through the different female characters in the story. Racial discrimination has affected so many lives till date, but women have been facing more discrimination than men, due to gender inequality. In the novel, a character named Winnie and her children were treated poorly as they were immigrants and Black. As Winnie recalls, “I heard people cuss at me... I was served last in whatever shop I went into, even when I was first in the queue... I was the one to find a dead rat on our doorstep... I was the one to live with GO HOME daubed in white paint on our front door” (Evaristo 263). And when her daughter, Shirley, started going to primary school, she was bullied for her colour, “she too came home crying at being called Sooty” (Evaristo 265). The author has tried to show the present situation of Black immigrants in powerful countries like the USA or the UK. In some places, Africans are still treated as inferior and are discriminated upon even after more than 150 years of abolition of slavery. In another instance from the novel, a Nigerian woman, Bummi, explaining to her daughter the importance of being educated and having stable job, says “did me and Papa come to this country for a better life only to see our daughter giving up her opportunities and end up distributing paper hand towels for tips in nightclub toilets or concert venues, as is the fate of too many of our countrywomen?” (Evaristo 133). In one of the stories when a Nigerian couple comes to Penzance, a small town in the UK, they are not welcomed by the native people, “who were these two monkey people arriving on their likkle island?” (Evaristo 261) and when they tried to find shelter they were told right away, “you can’t sleep here because your colour will come off on the sheets” (Evaristo 261)

Conclusion

Bernardine Evaristo became the first black woman to have been awarded with the Booker Prize, and this has become possible in 2019 after almost 50 years since it was first started. She can rightfully be considered a torch-bearer for black community, especially for black women around the world. She has been incessantly writing about

her roots and culture, which is evident in all her books and she is also one of the prominent writers of Black British literature. Her works are fictional yet they present a very honest image of society and culture. *Girl, Woman, Other* is the story of contemporary world, it is about modern-day relationships; lesbian relationships, mother-daughter relationships, familial relationships, relationship with ourselves and so on. In her conversation with The Voice, she said, "... people tend to look at the big social issues, they may say I'm writing about racism even when I'm not. Or sexuality or class, and that's sometimes thrown into the mix of my works, but actually, I think family is a thread that runs throughout all of my books." (Honest, candid, Bernardine Evaristo opens up on 'This Cultural Life').

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