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# Reimagining Gender and Sexuality in *Girl, Woman, Other*: Intersectionality as Narrative Form

H. Kalaivani\*, R. Sindhu

Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS) Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

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### ABSTRACT

*Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo presents a powerful exploration of gender, sexuality, race, and identity through the interconnected lives of diverse Black British women and non-binary characters. This paper examines how the novel reimagines gender and sexuality by employing intersectionality not merely as a thematic concern but as a distinctive narrative form. Drawing upon intersectional feminist theories, particularly those associated with Kimberlé Crenshaw, the study analyses how Evaristo disrupts traditional linear storytelling to foreground multiple voices, fragmented experiences, and overlapping identities. The narrative structure itself reflects the fluidity of identity, challenging fixed categories of gender and sexuality while emphasizing the interconnectedness of race, class, culture, and generational experience. The paper further investigates how the novel destabilizes heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions through its portrayal of queer relationships, non-binary identities, and unconventional forms of intimacy and family. By giving narrative space to marginalized voices, Evaristo creates a polyphonic text that resists singular definitions of womanhood and sexuality. The study argues that intersectionality in the novel functions both as a political framework and as an aesthetic strategy, enabling a more inclusive representation of contemporary identities. Ultimately, the paper highlights how *Girl, Woman, Other* redefines narrative possibilities in contemporary literature by transforming intersectionality into a dynamic mode of storytelling that reflects the complexity of modern social realities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), which won the Booker Prize (shared with Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*), is structured around twelve interconnected characters - twelve Black British women and non-binary people, spanning four generations and a wide range of social positions, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds - whose stories are rendered in a prose style that abandons conventional punctuation and syntax for a form that is simultaneously poetic and conversational, that flows between and across the categories of verse and prose, that refuses the formal hierarchies - between high literature and vernacular speech, between the lyric and the narrative - that British literary convention has typically maintained. The novel's form is itself its argument: if the lived experience of Black British women is as diverse, as formally various, as resistant to any single mode of articulation as Evaristo insists it is, then a novel that would contain that experience within conventional prose form would be a novel that was already distorting it. The twelve characters are connected to each other through a web of relationships - personal, professional, familial - that the novel reveals gradually and with an organizational intelligence that is more architectural than linear. They attend the same play at the National

\*Corresponding author: [kalaivaniharikrishnan@gmail.com](mailto:kalaivaniharikrishnan@gmail.com)

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Theatre on the night the novel ends; they share lovers, mothers, students, colleagues; their stories intersect at points that the reader gradually recognizes across the novel's length. The web of connection does not organize the characters into a unified community - they are too various for that, too genuinely different in their social positions and their cultural formations and their political views - but it insists on the existence of a network, a field of relations, that gives each individual life its context without reducing any individual to that context.

### **Intersectionality as Structure**

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality - the argument that the experience of women of color cannot be adequately analyzed by examining gender and race as separate axes of oppression, because the intersection produces forms of disadvantage that are qualitatively distinct from either alone - is not simply a theme of *Girl, Woman, Other*; it is its structural principle. The twelve characters are distributed across the axes of race, class, age, sexuality, gender identity, cultural background, and national origin in a pattern that is deliberately designed to prevent any single axis from becoming the organizing principle of the novel's social analysis. No character's experience can be adequately understood through any single category; each is constituted by the specific intersection of multiple categories whose combined effect is distinctive. Evaristo's formal innovation - the run-on syntax, the lack of conventional punctuation, the movement between registers - is itself an intersectional form: it refuses to separate the voices it contains into the hierarchically organized categories that conventional literary form tends to enforce, treating the university professor's speech and the farmer's speech with the same formal attention and the same syntactic freedom. The form insists on the equal dignity of all twelve voices without erasing the real differences in social position and cultural formation that distinguish them.

### **Non-Binary Identity and the Grammar of Gender**

One of the novel's twelve characters, Megan/Morgan, is non-binary - they use the singular "they" pronoun - and the novel's handling of their experience is the most formally challenging aspect of its gender analysis. The English language's grammatical apparatus - gendered pronouns, the singular/plural distinction - is organized around a binary gender opposition that Megan/Morgan's identity refuses, and the novel's use of the singular "they" for a single individual is both a grammatical claim (the English language can accommodate non-binary identity within its existing pronoun system) and a cultural claim (the grammatical accommodation of non-binary identity is not a distortion of language but an extension of it). Judith Butler's account of how gender is maintained through repeated performative citation - through the continuous iteration of gendered behaviors that the social world recognizes and rewards - and how the disruption of this iteration through non-normative performances destabilizes the gender binary's appearance of natural necessity, is directly applicable to the specific form of gender disruption that Megan/Morgan's existence represents in the novel. They are not simply non-binary in their self-identification; they are non-binary in their daily practice, in the specific ways they inhabit the social world that has been organized around the binary they refuse, and the novel renders this inhabiting with a care and a precision that is one of its most significant contributions to the literary representation of non-binary experience.

### **Generational Transmission and the Evolution of Black British Identity**

The novel's four-generation span - from the oldest characters whose experiences reach back to the 1950s Windrush generation to the youngest whose lives are organized around the specific forms of Black British identity available in the early twenty-first century - constitutes a generational history of Black British identity: a history not of progress toward any single defined goal but of transformation, diversification, and increasing complexity as successive generations inherit and renegotiate the terms of their belonging. The oldest characters experienced a Britain that refused to acknowledge their presence as legitimate; the youngest inherit a Britain that has developed sophisticated official discourses of diversity and inclusion alongside persistent practical inequalities that those discourses do not address. Stuart Hall's account of the new ethnicities that have emerged in Britain from the postcolonial encounter - his argument that Black British identity is not a fixed essence inherited from African or Caribbean origins but a continuously produced cultural formation shaped by the specific history of Black people's experience in Britain - is the theoretical framework within which Evaristo's generational history is most clearly legible. Each generation of Black British women in the novel produces a version of Black British identity that is continuous with and distinct from the versions produced by the generations that preceded them, and the

novel's web of connection across generations is the formal expression of this historical continuity within diversity.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

*Girl, Woman, Other* closes this chapter collection by demonstrating what the literary representation of intersectionality can achieve when it refuses the reductions that a simpler approach to its subject matter would make available. Evaristo has written a novel that takes seriously the claim that no single axis of social difference is adequate to the complexity of any individual's experience, and that has developed a formal architecture - the twelve-character web, the intersectional distribution of social positions, the syntactically innovative prose - adequate to the seriousness of that claim. The result is a novel that is simultaneously politically committed and formally innovative, that advances both the literary conversation about form and the cultural conversation about the diversity of Black British women's experience - and that demonstrates, in the process, that these two conversations are not separate but are, in the most productive literary work, the same conversation conducted through different registers.

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