



Scuffle for Cultural Sustentation and Self-Exploration in *Girl, Women, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo

¹Hephzibah Packiamani, ²Dr. Sruthi. P

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract: Identity is a recognition one decides on to be known for, rather than what they are born with. The chosen novel for study is *Girl, Woman, Other*, authored by Bernardine Evaristo which exquisitely journeys the multifarious nature of recognition and the pursuit to be avowed for the lives they have created for themselves. The author weaves a rich tapestry of encounters that challenge traditional beliefs of belonging and selfhood shedding light on the wavering quest for identity through the interwoven plot of twelve Ebony British Women characters. The novel voiced for the African immigrants whose roots trace back to Ghana, Nigeria, Barbados, Malawi and Ethiopia, who have now settled down in America as three successful generations. The study focuses on the constant urge of the first generation to maintain their home culture and to carry it forward to the next generation who are half Americans and their hustle to survive in the society where they are constantly put under hostility and discrimination.

Keywords: Recognition, womanhood, culture, identity, eboni women, discrimination, mother.

Bernardine Evaristo's poignantly crafted *Girl, Woman, Other* stands out to be a ground-breaking novel that tapestries the lives of twelve fundamentally Ebony women characters, over various backgrounds and generations in contemporary Britain. The study explores themes like identity, race, gender, and entanglement of relationships through interwoven narrations. The plot is structured in a distinct way, where each chapter focuses on a different character or set of characters, unveiling their stories and how they cut through. The characters stretch from a queer playwright to a single mother, a grandmother and to a student each offering a clear-cut viewpoint of the social and cultural landscape of contemporary Britain. The book celebrates the lives of women at all their manifolds while alluring the readers to explore themes on identity, community, and resilience.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, emphasizing on individual's freedom, choice, experience and the inherent absurdity of life. Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are often viewed as pioneers in existentialism, they collectively contributed to the rich assortment of existentialist thought to literature as their works emphasized on an individual's faith, choices they make, and the importance of personal experience. Existentialism has positively impacted literature by challenging traditional narratives as its growth reflects an ongoing exploration for freedom, choice, and the quest for meaning.

This research paper in particular deals with women characters' quest for identity, and a constant urge to create a meaning for themselves in a world marked by societal constraints, expectations, and hierarchies where they are persistently being judged right from how they look to how they speak irrespective of what gender or sexuality they pertain to, will be analysed through an existentialist lens.

Existentialism foregrounds the thought that human beings are nominal to make choices on their own, given they face the aftermath of it. Having said that, the novel wrangles around different people fighting their way out to endure freedom at some point lately regarding their gender and sexual identities. In this novel, Amma's best friend, Dominique, is an old woman who faces the heights of societal expectations on what it takes to be an Ebony woman, a lover girl, a mother, and a feminist. Her diligent contribution to activism and feminism can be seen as an empirical act of liberation, in standing up for herself and for who she is inside out, in taking a stand against the typical white-dominated contemporary British society. Nonetheless, the choices she makes for her betterment also come with a certain detachment from her daughter Yazz, who identifies herself more privileged in adapting to the modern British etiquette than to be held back by home culture which makes her not fully comprehend the struggles Dominique had to face. This generational tension culminates in how identity shapes both liberation and constraints in shaping an individual's identity.

Dominique was born to Afro-Guyanese parents, being the oldest of the ten children, "Dominique guessed her own sexual preferences from puberty, wisely kept them to herself, unsure how her friends or family would react, not wanting to be a social outcast" (13) she continued to live covering up her identity as straight, she even got along with boys of her age

yet nothing worked in her favor and after a certain point she wanted to stand up for herself, she wanted to face the society by showing her real self to them rather than living suffocated under the mask she had been putting up since teen hood.

Being a young woman with a mindful thought to create a legacy for Ebony women, Dominique left for Britain to start her career in theatrical Arts. There she met Amma who later turns out to be best friend whom she “met in the eighties at an audition for a feature film set in a women’s prison (what else?) both were disillusioned at being put up for parts such as a slave, servant, prostitute, nanny or crim and still not getting the job” (12). The girls had a rough start as secondary artists doing odd roles in order to be a part of the script, and to make a decent living for themselves in a chauvinistic society which kept suppressing them though they were more talented than the so-called male actors.

Existentialism puts forth that there is no such thing called predefined essence of a person, nor a definition of who one is before showing up. Rather than having predefined resentments, individuals must be given a chance to define themselves through their choices and actions. This concept is central to the struggles of all the twelve characters in the novel hustling to create an identity and sustain in it reciliating from the traumas that were holding them back from progression.

Yazz, daughter of Amma and Ronald, an educated young Ebony woman is relatively privileged about her home culture yet occasionally questions the authenticity of her roots in a hustling British community and she comes across the constant generational drift with her mother and her friends. She always desired what it meant to have freedom in one choosing their personal and professional life rather than being forced to choose, just because they had to keep the legacy going or that they were bound to a stereotypical background that doesn't allow women to do what they wish to do and not being given enough space to voice out one’s opinion. Women are accustomed to do things on force rather than by choice, even in contemporary evolving Britain. If not being able to do things that one desires to do is termed bondage, then being forced to do things one does not desire is bondage too. “The Black women’s “we” speaks in sharp resistance to the ignorance of white feminism” (Abram). Her desire to state her identity is manifested by a constant balance between her personal objections and the constant expectations in a world she is in. She is also pressured by society and her mother. Her struggle to find the authentic sense of self she is amidst these peer pressures is an existential concern.

Yazz wants to be treated respectfully and accepted by people of Britain as one among them and tries to imbibe Britain's etiquette so that she feels included, yet is not ready to accept her mother for who she is. She thinks like a misogynist and is looking forward for a change in the society but is unwilling to accept the same in her very own home for her mother. “Yazz recently described her style as ‘a mad old woman look, Mum’, pleads with her to shop in Marks & Spencer like normal mothers, refuses to be spotted alongside her when they’re supposed to be walking down the street together” (10,11). Reluctantly Yazz shows up for her mother’s movie premiers and regrets it instantly looking at how she has dressed up forgetting about the struggle her mother would have faced to reach this height of fame, where she gets to wear what she like at her very own movie premiers in a chauvinistic society with constant hustle against ebony women taking a leap.

“Yazz knows full well that Amma will always be anything but normal, and as she’s in her fifties, she’s not old yet, although try telling that to a nineteen-year-old; in any case, ageing is nothing to be ashamed of especially when the entire human race is in it together although sometimes it seems that she alone among her friends wants to celebrate getting older because it’s such a privilege to not die prematurely” (11).

However Yazz knows from where she got her resilient nature, from the women who birthed and raised her, who is not like other normal mothers who live a normal life but a thick headed woman with strong will power and determined to achieve what she wants, creating history. She is just not able to bring herself to the fact that her mother is still stuck to her outdated fashion ethics calling it a style in this judgmental society and old school home culture. She doesn't want her mother to be the talk of town in a negative sense and strongly feels that her mother is unintentionally influencing her to become like her. Yazz feels like she is stuck between the parallels of having to preserve her home culture in this wavering British community and her constant urge to live her own life with her own principles and goals she has set for herself.

On the parallels we have Carole Williams, a successful career-driven Ebony woman, a more authentic character who strives to attain a renowned identity for her in a field she chose on her interest, despite her recurring traumatic past which she is still not overcome creating in her an aversion towards men and their thought process. The existential freedom that came with the identity she gained through her successful career gave her space to neglect certain societal norms of what it means to be a woman, yet is looked down at times for her looks and her race. She channels how her career choices have created a great impact on her sense of self and how the society defines her, showing constant negotiations between freedom and the societal roles imposed on her. She calls her career uplift as a big accomplishment and that her mother would be proud of her any day for.

“She will stride up to the client, shake his hand firmly (yet femininely), while looking him warmly (yet confidently) in the eye and smiling innocently, and delivering her name unto him with perfectly clipped Received Pronunciation, . . . and tries not to show it while she assumes control of the situation and the conversation” (111).

Despite being successful in her career while still holding one of the highest positions in the company, she still feels a sense of self doubt about getting judgmental looks from her clients. “She’s thinking he’d better not look at her as if she should be attached to a trolley bearing

flasks of coffee, assortments of teas (herbal, green, grey, Ceylon)” (111). Being a woman of professional ethics she has high standards on what she brings to the table. The narration also focuses on the state of mind of Carole, a mid teenager, who studied hard to prove herself to Mr. Smith her teacher, who at one point stopped supporting her as she shut down herself after the sexual harassment by her friend. “I’m not a victim, don’t ever treat me like a victim, my mother didn’t raise me to be a victim”(Evaristo). After hitting the rock bottom for close to two years straight she wanted to give it a good come back and worked hard educationally as she thought education was the only means that would help her get an identity in a contemporary hustling world that kept judging her constantly for her birth identity. Once she made it to University, she started feeling alienated in all ways possible. She felt she differed a lot from students there not just by race but also in a way they carried themselves. She started adapting their vocabulary and etiquette so that she would feel included. Since she felt far from them, she cries to her mother at a certain point and says that she wants to quit college to which her mother’s words of affirmation kindles in her a spirit of sportsmanship to not run away from situation, rather to face them and thrive through it.

“. . . lastly, did me and Papa come to this country for a better life only to see our daughter giving up on 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? you must go back to this university in January and stop thinking everybody hates you without giving them a chance, did you even ask them? did you go up to them and say, excuse me, do you hate me? you must find the people who will want to be your friends even if they are all white people there is someone for everyone in this world you must go back and fight the battles that are your British birthright, Carole, as a true Nigerian” (123,124).

Amma who has become a successful director, walks into the theater flaunting her own style. She remembers the days they used to cover up themselves completely so that they were not sent out from theater as if their attire is going to determine their standards. But now she is all comfortable with her own style and no one is confronting her about nor does she have any restrictions. This is not just about her attire but also the independence she has acquired over time through struggle to voice out her opinion and gain recognition in a field which was still profoundly renowned for men.

“Years ago she expected to be evicted as soon as she dared walk through its doors, a time when people really did wear their smartest clothes to go to the theatre and looked down their noses at those not in the proper attire she wants people to bring their curiosity to her plays, doesn’t give a damn what they wear, has her own sod-you style, anyway, which has evolved, it’s true, away from the clichéd denim dungarees, Che Guevara beret, PLO scarf and ever-present badge of two interlocked female symbols (talk about wearing your heart on your sleeve, girl) these days she wears silver or gold trainers in winter” (10).

The characters chosen for study from *Girl, Woman, Other* had the constant urge for identity, freedom, authenticity, and belonging. Be it Dominique’s struggle to define herself identified as a Black woman and feminist, the novel mirrors many core concerns of existentialism. “. . . many more women are reconfiguring feminism. . . grassroots activism is spreading like wildfire and millions of women are waking up to the possibility of taking ownership of our world as fully-entitled human beings” (Sarkar). This novel suggests that meaning can be created by every individual, provided it explores the difficulties in the evolution of self-creation in a world full of constant peer pressure. Through their struggles with race, gender, sexuality, and class, the characters must confront the burden of freedom and the anxiety of choice in a world that can often seem indifferent to their individual quests for authenticity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abram, Nicola. “‘being / Together’: Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* and the Black British Women’s Movement.” *OUP Academic*, Oxford University Press, 18 Sept. 2024, academic.oup.com/cww/article/doi/10.1093/cww/vpae018/7760194?login=false.
- [2] “Bernardine Evaristo Quotes (Author of *Girl, Woman, Other*).” *Goodreads*, Goodreads, www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/51051.Bernardine_Evaristo#:~:text=I'm%20not%20a%20victim,me%20to%20be%20a%20victim. Accessed 5 Oct. 2024.
- [3] Evaristo, Bernardine. *Girl, Woman, Other*. Penguin Books, 2020.
- [4] Sarkar, Sohel. “‘girl, Woman, Other’ Review: Navigating Identity, Difference & Togetherness.” *Medium*, Her Vision, 7 July 2020, medium.com/her-vision/bernardine-evaristos-brilliant-take-on-difference-in-the-2019-booker-winner-girl-woman-other-5b96113cbc5e.