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A Study of Bernardine Evaristo's Prize-  
Winning Novel *Girl, Woman, Other*

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DEPARTAMENT D'ESTUDIS ANGLÉSOS I ALEMANYS

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to both study the main themes of the prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* and to prove why it is culturally relevant in our contemporary social context. I will begin by contextualizing the novel into the author's artistic biography and determining how it relates to her previous work. Secondly, I intend to approach three of the main themes of the novel from a theoretical perspective. In this section, I expect to explore the concepts of racism, privilege and intersectional feminism to familiarize the reader with the main themes of the novel and to contribute to its broader analysis. Thirdly, I intend to analyse Evaristo's writing by discussing the structure, the prose and the language of the novel. In order to perform the critical analysis, I will apply the theoretical tools to the novel by providing examples that confirm the theory. Finally, the last section is aimed to settle the book into its broader social and political moment to determine how it contributes and connects to the narrative of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*Girl, Woman, Other* is a free-flowing, deeply humane and polyphonic novel about the black female experience in modern-day Britain. It is a story of womanhood, identity and the struggles of being a black woman trying to survive in a dominant white culture. Through the voices of twelve women and a timeline that spans a hundred years, we discover the lives of twelve women who are essentially human beings with flaws and contradictions that are exposed to the reader with a masterful sense of humour. Although some of the characters share some characteristics, their diverse experiences are determined by their age, class, sexuality, academic background, relationships and their own sense of identity.

This is the eighth novel written by Bernardine Evaristo and in 2019 it led her to be the first black woman to win the Booker Prize. Jacob Ross, an acclaimed poet, journalist, and novelist described Evaristo as one of the most important voices in contemporary British literature. Furthermore, the novelist, academic and women's rights activist Elif Shafak claimed that Evaristo is one of those writers who should be read by everyone. Bernardine defines herself as an experimental writer who likes to focus on both the form and content of her work. Her main goal when writing is to find original and unconventional ways of telling stories that have not yet been told. She is interested in disrupting the reader's expectations and breaking the rules and conventions of writing. She has always been seeking the representation of marginalized voices and the discussion of race, gender, sexuality and class in her work. These topics can be clearly seen as the main themes in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

The moment I saw that *Girl, Woman, Other* was in the list of topics I was truly astonished because I had previously purchased the novel for my birthday and I was genuinely excited to read it. That is why I instantly decided that I needed to choose this topic and I was delighted when I was assigned to do it. I had heard wonderful reviews about this novel and I was aware that it had won important awards. Since I had been meaning to read it for a long time, I saw this as a great opportunity to finally do so. Since the readers and critics wrote nothing but great reviews, I was afraid that my expectations would be too high and that I would not love it as much as I had hoped. However, once I started reading it I realized that Bernardine Evaristo had written a brilliant novel that would completely exceed my expectations.

*Girl, Woman, Other* is an impressive novel with a feminist narrative, poetic prose and an unconventional structure. The novel does not follow a linear narrative and it is composed of a mosaic that explores the complexities of black British womanhood through the lives of the twelve women. There is a chorus of voices aged nineteen to ninety-three with different world-views that sometimes contradict and clash with each other to uncover the heterogeneity of the society. Each of the four chapters deals with three particular women who are related to each other in some way or another. The twelve characters are presented to the reader through multiple perspectives. Their complex personalities are not only revealed by their own sense of identity. Each character is also exceptionally presented through the lenses of the other women. This extra layer of description allows the reader to see how they are perceived by the world and it creates a very rich depiction of a multi-faceted human being.

It is not only a book about the experience of black womanhood in Britain. It is a book that shows the importance of having diverse voices in literature and how the reader can relate to human experiences that differ from their own ones. It is a book that explores important themes such as intersectional feminism, class, race, gender, sexuality. Bernardine Evaristo is a talented author that has always been known for her innovative and impactful work. She has been described as an author who is "pushing and questioning the boundaries and definitions of gender, blackness and post-colonial ideas" (Hooper, 2006) and this novel is undoubtedly another example of her talent.

My main goal with this dissertation is to analyse the novel by exploring three of its main themes. I have chosen to focus on racism, privilege and intersectional feminism because I was particularly interested in them and they are present throughout the whole novel and in her previous novels too. Moreover, I believe that the concepts I have chosen are culturally relevant and that a theoretical approach will contribute to a wider interpretation of the novel.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is structured into three main sections. The first section is the exposition of the theoretical framework using critical works that will provide the theoretical basis for my analysis. This first section is intended to familiarize the reader with the concepts of racism, privilege and intersectional feminism. Firstly, I will explore the concept of racism with Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. The author in her book argues that becoming aware of Britain's colonial past is essential to understanding how racism operates in this country. Secondly, I intend to explain how privilege works through Roxane Gay's essays in *Bad Feminist*. The author explains the importance of acknowledging our own privileges and the dangers of engaging in privilege games. Lastly, I will discuss the concept of intersectionality through the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw, the professor who coined the term. And I will explain why it is necessary to approach feminism from an intersectional lens.

In the second section, I will apply the theory to the novel to perform the critical analysis. I will use the theoretical tools to provide examples from the book that relate to the theory. Moreover, I will discuss Evaristo's writing by talking about the structure, the prose and the language of the text. The last section is used to set the book into the broader social and political moment. To see how this novel speaks of this current moment in British history and to determine how this contributes and connects to the narrative of the Black Lives Matter Movement. And moreover, how it explains the importance of having a good representation of diversity in literature.

### III. ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHY OF BERNARDINE EVARISTO

Bernardine Evaristo is a novelist, a professor of creative writing and a literary activist. She has been professionally involved in the arts for nearly forty years and she is known for her experimental writing and her representation of minorities. She is a member of the Royal Society of Literature and the first black writer to win the Booker Prize. For decades, she has been an activist and an advocate to end racial discrimination and has fought for the inclusion and the representation of people of colour in the publishing industry. She is the author of eight books with a range of genres such as novel, poetry, drama, versed fiction, short fiction, essays, literary criticism and adapted projects for radio.

In the Oxford Union interview (2020), Evaristo declared that she was first introduced to the arts when she entered a community theatre arts course in the eighties. Years later she went to drama school where she was exclusively surrounded by empowered political women who inspired her to be a strong and powerful woman. This experience shaped her as a young artist and established her as a writer when she was encouraged to write her own plays. In 1982, when she had left drama school, she founded *Theatre Black Women*. It was the first black women's theatre company in the United Kingdom. For six years, they wrote, produced and performed their own plays before deciding to disband. She then focused on building a life for herself that supported her creative career and she managed to do so by becoming an academic. In 1994, she had her first book published and became a writer of books.

Bernardine Evaristo has been a literary activist for twenty-five years. The author has declared that her creative writing and her activist work are both fueled by her wish for a more egalitarian society and her belief that there should be equal opportunities for everyone (The Oxford Union, 2020). When she had already published two books, she realized that there was a huge lack of diversity in the publishing industry. To see a change in society, she developed projects and schemes that facilitated the inclusion of marginalized voices and as a result corrected the output imbalance.

As a writer, Evaristo is moved by her interest in the African diaspora, the representation of marginalized voices and her will to explore her own heritage. As she explained in the *Callaloo* interview (2008), her work is driven by her interest in exploring the cultural heritage of her DNA. This can be seen in *Lara*, her first semi-autobiographical novel. She explored her own heritage as a child of an inter-racial marriage through her travels to Nigeria and Brazil. The connection between Africa and Europe throughout history is widely explored in *Soul Tourists* and *The Emperor's Babe*. The latter is a novel about the presence of African people in Roman Britain. In an interview with the writer Merle Collins, Evaristo declared: "this novel is a direct challenge to Britain's misguided sense of its own history and identity" (Collins, 2008). In *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo distanced herself from the conventional narratives and wrote an unpredictable take on the transatlantic slave trade. She inverted the racial component and created a world where Africans were the ones who enslaved Europeans. This innovative approach allowed readers to avoid the immediate emotional response and to take a deeper journey into the consequences and implications of slavery, by being offered a fresh approach.

Since the publication of *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo has been the winner of many awards and has received many nominations. Among many prizes, she has won Fiction Book of the Year and Author of the Year at the 2020 British Book Awards. She also won the Indie Book Award for Fiction, the Gold Medal of Honorary Patronage and was recognized by Barack Obama as one of the top books of 2019. Moreover, she has been the first black British writer to be on the top of the UK paperback fiction charts for five weeks. But winning the Booker Prize has been a major event for her professional career. It has also served as a breakthrough and has allowed her to reach new readers outside of the strict gender and racial divide of her readership. In the Oxford Union interview, Bernardine said: "It was incredibly gratifying to see that perceived barrier, of enjoying a work of literature, had disappeared and people were engaging with these characters" (Oxford Union, 2020). This prize has allowed readers who would not have read this book before, to become familiar with voices that differ very much from their own. It has managed to bring an experimental novel about twelve black British women, with a strong queer element and progressive political views, to readers from Middle England.

Evaristo's plan for the future is to keep developing her own career while bringing up other writers with her. Bernardine said that winning a major prize and having wonderful sales figures is not an indicator of society's change. Evaristo alleged that "individual success does not necessarily mean that the whole demographic is also being brought forward, and that is why I believe in community and I do activism" (Oxford Union, 2020).

## IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### RACISM

Learning about Black British history is essential to understand how racism works in Britain. The concept of racism is one of the main themes in *Girl, Woman, Other*. The novel explores the lives of twelve characters who face systemic discrimination and oppression for the colour of their skin. They have to survive in a racist system that traces its origin back to the past. Reni Eddo-Loge, in her book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, claims that is not possible to talk about racism without addressing Britain's colonial history. One might think that slavery was an atrocious chapter of history that happened in the past and that it bears no longer consequences in the present. However, this could not be farther away from reality. Slavery's impact was so big that it is still a very determinant factor in our society. It affected so many people's lives that it shaped the root of today's prejudices and behaviours towards minorities.

Slavery functioned, for a period of 270 years, as a British institution that gained profit from a system of constant brutality and violence towards thousands of enslaved people. This system of oppression and white supremacy was so powerful that it became established in the foundations of the British society. After the abolition, it became quite clear that the damage was too substantial to be undone. The prejudices towards the black community were so deep-rooted that they seemed irreversible. It was quite challenging to shift Britain's perception of enslaved African people since they had been seen for such a long time as commodities with no freedom.

The United States was not the only country that was involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Britain also took advantage of slave labour and it was Liverpool's slave port that became widely known for being responsible for 75% of slave trading in Europe (Tibbles, 2000). The author Eddo-Lodge argues that Britain wanted to build an empire but the society was not ready for the consequences that would come from the colonization. Britain was not ready for the responsibilities that came with becoming a multicultural globalized country and black people were the ones who suffered the terrible consequences (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

When someone makes a racist comment or demonizes immigrants for coming to England, they are making prejudiced assumptions that are biased and come from a narrow point of view. People express their hate towards immigrants while ignoring Britain's colonialist past and their right to be there. For instance, once the First World War was over, several black soldiers who risked their lives to fight for Britain decided to stay in the country. Consequently, racist people who did not accept the growing black communities committed horrible hate crimes. Black people were lynched and suffered endless discrimination for the colour of their skin. There was a week in particular where street violent attacks escalated and the government started to worry about the terrible outcome. However, in 1919, the only solution that the government offered was to send back to their home countries a total amount of six hundred black people (*Demobilisation in Britain, 1918–20*, n.d.). Sadly, the only solution they could offer was to repatriate the victims to avoid punishing the oppressors.

After the Second World War, Britain's black population rose again due to a shortage of labourers. The government encouraged African and Caribbean immigrants to come to Britain to help restore the post-war country. The 492 immigrants that came from the Caribbeans are known as The Windrush Generation because they were named after the ship that brought them to Britain (English Heritage, n.d.). And yet again, once the black population started growing in Britain, violent attacks and race hate crimes increased as well. As the author Reni Eddo-Lodge claimed, the labour of black and brown people became essential for the success of Britain in both wars, but in exchange, the black community received backlash and extreme rejection in the succeeding decades (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

Black people have always suffered the consequences of living in a racist and intolerant society. White supremacist and far-right politics have done nothing but to strengthen the system of structural racism and the socioeconomic inequalities that already existed. The persistent police brutality and the systemic racism in the criminal justice system evidence that black people are still unfairly being targeted as criminals and violent people. Research (Morris, 2015), proved that black people are seventeen times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people. This evidences that Britain is still uncomfortable with race difference. To deconstruct racist structures we must have a deeper look at history and acknowledge that our institutions have racist foundations that discriminate systematically (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 82). Furthermore, we must deconstruct our racist biases and acknowledge our privileges to move forward as a society.

## PRIVILEGE

In the last decades, the word *privilege* has been more present than ever in the public discourse. We can find discussions about privilege on social media almost every day. Roxane Gay in her book *Bad Feminist* describes privilege as "a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favour" (Gay, 2014, p.16). She states that the journey of accepting and realizing all the different privileges that one has is very difficult. Nevertheless, acknowledging one's privileges as a person who is also oppressed in a system is essential. Roxane Gay (2014) explained that since she is a woman, a person of colour and a child of immigrant parents she felt ashamed when she realized how much privilege she had even though her life was not easy. It was very challenging to realize that even though her life was not as simple as other people's lives, she was privileged because of her upper-middle-class upbringing.

Accepting that one is privileged seems to be a quite challenging task. For instance, when a white man is confronted with their privilege they usually respond defensively. They usually say that it is not their fault to be privileged. However, it would be much easier to give an empathic response and simply accept that they are actually benefiting from certain privileges (Gay, 2014, p.17). People tend to get overwhelmed and do not know how to respond when the only response required is to acknowledge it and move on. Gay states that "the acknowledgement of my privilege is not a denial of the ways I have been and am marginalized, the ways I have suffered" (Gay, 2014, p.17). Accepting one's privileges does not mean that one's life is easy and completely privileged, but it means that there are fewer barriers to overcome.

Roxane Gay (2014) argues that the problem comes when people discuss privilege incessantly and with an empty purpose. The word loses its meaning once people use it too much. The author claims that playing the "Game of Privilege" can be very harmful. This game consists of comparing people from different demographics and discussing who would win the battle of privilege. For instance, who is more privileged; a wealthy black woman or a working-class white man? The author points to the risks of performing these kinds of games that have no purpose other than to sabotage the cause.

Roxane Gay (2014) insists that playing "Oppression Olympics" and accusing people of their unchecked privileges is a counterproductive approach. The discussions must come from the encouragement of the acknowledgement of one's advantages rather than from condemnation and criticism. Every individual has the right to speak from their own experiences and their individual truths. Nevertheless, acknowledging all the ways in which they benefit from the system is a great start. One of the most interesting observations that Roxane (2014) makes is that privilege is a relative and contextual phenomenon. It is actually impossible to find people in developed countries that do not hold any kind of privilege. People who identify themselves as oppressed in social media actually have the privilege of having access to the internet and to technology. And even though they are privileged in that aspect of their lives it does not mean that they do not have the right to express how they are oppressed in other ways. Furthermore, Roxane suggests that we must find improved and effective ways to discuss the inequalities of our world.

## INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

Roxane Gay in her book *Bad Feminist* (2014), wrote that she felt white feminism was avoiding the issues that women of colour have to face. She assures that the repercussions of years of postcolonialism, the status of women of colour in the Third World and the racist prejudices they face, seem to be ignored by the mainstream feminist movement. She declared that “such willful disinterest in incorporating the issues and concerns of black women into the mainstream feminist project, makes me disinclined to own the feminist label until it embraces people like me” (Gay, 2014, p. 308). Undoubtedly, black women face different challenges than white women. Therefore, a feminism that only focuses on the problems that middle-class white women face will not be representative of women outside of that demographic.

The term *intersectionality* was coined in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. It was created to describe how different individual characteristics such as gender, class and race intersect and overlap with each other (Coaston, 2019). Crenshaw has been an advocate for equality and civil rights for more than thirty years. And her work is focused on the concept of critical race theory. In her study *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* (1989), she discussed three legal cases that involved both racial and sex discrimination. Crenshaw defended that the court failed to comprehend the bigger scope of discrimination. She argued that the law does not realise that discrimination can be construed by more than one factor: “The law seemed to forget that black women are both black and female, and thus subject to discrimination on the basis of both race, gender, and often, a combination of the two” (Coaston, 2019).

For instance, a white woman and a black woman might both experience sexism but only one of them will also suffer oppression and discrimination on the basis of their race. That is why Crenshaw (1989) argued that treating a black woman solely as a woman or as a black person individually, will only continue to ignore the specific challenge that black women have to face as a group. As for the purpose of the creation of the term, she said: "Intersectionality was a prism to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that weren't being appreciated by the courts" (Crenshaw, 1989). Women of colour do not only face the challenges that come from being a woman, yet they also have to deal with racism and discrimination for the colour of their skin.

Approaching feminism through an intersectional perspective demands an acknowledgement of the different systems of discrimination and oppression that have contributed to the creation of disadvantages for some women: "Long histories of violence and systematic discrimination have created deep inequities that disadvantage some from the outset" (UN Women, 2020). Black women, disabled women, trans women and queer women must be included in the feminist discourse. Women face different circumstances and feminism must fight for the rights of all of them. Crenshaw in a recent interview with Time (2020) explained that racial inequality is not an individual factor, frequently it overlaps with inequalities based on class, gender and sexuality. On top of that, inequality has many shapes and forms and it can manifest in many different ways so we must strive for a feminist movement that puts all women's fights at the front.

## V. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

### STRUCTURE, PROSE AND LANGUAGE

Most narratives have a linear effect but Bernardine Evaristo has chosen a very unique structure. The novel is created with a mosaic structure that is aimed to decentralize the centre of power from the book. There is a chorus of voices that evidences how reality is created through a multiplicity of points of view. The narrative power is shared by a chorus of twelve characters whose voices and life stories intertwine throughout the novel. Moreover, there is a lack of a main character since all of them have the same importance in the novel. Even though it has a mosaic structure, it does not feel fragmented because Evaristo's masterful writing has managed to make it feel cohesive to the reader. She has done that by adding a circular structure to the story. *Girl, Woman, Other* begins with Amma, a successful theatre director whose play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* opens at the National Theater. Many of the other characters are attending the opening night and as the novel proceeds, we discover who they are. The ending of the novel gives the whole story a sense of closure because the reader sees the characters interacting with each other on Amma's opening night.

Another aspect of Evaristo's brilliant writing is the multiplicity of voices and the unique representation of each one of them. She has managed to create a wide representation of voices and it becomes clear that each character is unique. She has accomplished the creation of a whole cast of characters of various class, age and backgrounds. And what

is more, she has succeeded in imagining how each of them talks and she has been able to portray it to the readers.

Bernardine Evaristo's writing challenges the normal conventions of writing. Moreover, her disregard for the conventional punctuation style is a complete statement. For instance, she never punctuates her sentences with full stops and this style choice has allowed her to create a free-flowing prose that looks like a poem. She has aimed to represent non-standard voices by creating characters that speak in non-standard dialects. She brilliantly uses non-standard spelling to represent Caribbean speech. Therefore, it forces the reader to mentally recognise that non-standard English exists and that it can be as eloquent as the standard version. Since most novels are written in standard white English, Bernardine has questioned that privilege by representing marginalised voices in her novel.

The novel is divided into four chapters and each one deals with three different characters. The sets of three characters have clear and obvious links with each other. But at the same time, they are linked to the other characters in more subtle ways. The first chapter is about Amma, her daughter Yazz and her friend Dominique. The second chapter is about Carole, her mother Bummi and her school friend LaTisha. The third is about Shirley, who is a friend of Amma. Winsome, who is Shirley's mother and Penelope who was Shirley's colleague. Finally, the last chapter deals with Morgan who is a non-binary activist, their great-grandmother Hattie and Hattie's mother, Grace.

*Girl, Woman, Other* has been created as narrative embroidery. The author has managed to talk about twelve different stories without feeling fragmented. The reader has the sense that every narrative line is somehow connected with a masterful technique. To prevent the novel from feeling fragmented, there are constant strings that intertwine the different lives of the characters. The author has used thematic connections and a parallel structure that makes the novel feel cohesive. For instance, each character deals with three characters. And what is more, there is always a mother-daughter relationship. These parallel structures connect the separate narrative arcs and help create the brilliant story that Bernardine Evaristo has produced.

#### RACSIM AS A THEME

*Girl, Woman, Other* is a novel about the lives of twelve black women who experience discrimination and oppression as they try to navigate their existence in a system of white privilege. Undoubtedly, racism is one of the main themes in Evaristo's novel. These characters face oppression and discrimination in many different ways. They are exposed to people's bias and prejudices and they encounter many difficulties that they have to overcome. The different characters have different relationships with their race and culture. While some of the characters are more involved with performing activism and fighting for what they believe, others do not engage with such activism as much.

Amma and Dominique are the first two characters that are presented in the novel. They have always been outspoken activists who fight for what they believe is right. When

they started in theatre, they would boycott shows that were offensive to them. Amma and Dominique were both interested in theatre but they felt excluded from the theatre community for being black. They were considered to be too radical to join the mainstream space and were forced to remain on the margins of society for decades. The two friends met in the eighties at an audition where they encountered the first evidence of racism. Amma and Dominique were only offered roles that were discriminating and that perpetuated racial stereotypes: “They both were disillusioned at being put up for parts such as a slave, servant, prostitute, nanny or crim. And still not getting the job” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 6). They were unfairly only allowed to play parts that represented a stereotypical and narrow depiction of black womanhood.

When they were young they were already politicized and they would call out racist directors who made them feel uncomfortable. That being the case, there was a director from another play who told Amma that her African hips and thighs were "perfect slave material" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 6). That is only another of the many examples where Amma had to hear a racist comment and was forced to walk away from an audition. After those incidents, the two friends decide to create a theatre company to represent the voices that are oppressed and silenced. This can be seen as an autobiographical hint of the author's life since Bernardine also founded her own theatre company to tell stories of Black and Asian women.

In the second chapter of the novel, the author introduces a new character called Carole. In this chapter, the reader understands the experience of a black woman who is in a high business job position. She is a daughter of Nigerian immigrants and she comes from a very poor background. Since she was very young she was quite ambitious and wanted to succeed academically to leave her past behind. She works at a bank and she faces many obstacles for being both black and a woman in a position of power. She has to deal with misogyny and racial prejudices every day. For instance, people do not expect her to be in a high position because she is a black woman; “she is used to clients and new colleagues looking past her to the person they are clearly expecting to meet“ (Evaristo, 2019, p.117). She also talks about how painful it is when people are surprised at a black woman being professional: “she can’t help remembering all the little hurts, the business associates who compliment her on being so articulate, unable to hide the surprise in their voices” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 118). It is traumatic for her to see that her colleagues have many prejudices and that she has to pretend not to be offended by them and smile.

Moreover, she talks about the privilege of white business people who take for granted their right to be respected. She does not have that privilege and it hurts her when she is targeted as a criminal suspect at airports. She hates being pulled over at airports when she is wearing a suit and suitcase, but the other business people do not. They always assume that she might have drugs and it is a very traumatic experience for her.

Another instance of the systemic racism that characters face is in Bummi's chapter. She is Carole's mum and she is from Nigeria. She had to raise her daughter alone because

her husband died. Moreover, Bummi had a very hard life in Nigeria but her mother did everything she could to give her child an education and a better life: “Mama would rather go without food than have her miss a single class” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 162). Bummi loved maths and she eventually got a university degree. Her husband was also an educated man and he wanted to move to England to have a better life. Little did they know that even though they were highly educated people they would suffer discrimination and be seen as black immigrants. “She did not know that her first-class degree from a Third World country would mean nothing in her new country” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 167). Bummi was clearly upset because people would see only her as a cleaner and not as an educated woman.

They had dreamt of having a better life migrating to England but they faced an enormous rejection: “She and Augustine had been trapped in a despair that had paralysed their ability to snap out of it, devastated by the weight of a rejection that had not been part of their dreams of migration” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 170). Bummi's chapter is a revindication to all those other immigrants who left their countries because they dreamt of a better life and better opportunities, but they received discrimination and rejection instead.

## PRIVILEGE AS A THEME

There is a chapter in *Girl, Woman, Other* where the author Bernardine references Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*. The third part of the first chapter of the book is centred on the youngest character, Yazz. She is Amma's daughter and she raised her with freedom and with an open-minded education. She was encouraged to speak her mind in order to blossom into a powerful feminist woman. Yazz is described as a confident, intelligent and mature teenager who always challenges her mother's opinions. She has many opinions herself and activism is a big part of her identity, that is why she wants to become a journalist.

Yazz has a group of friends at university with whom she likes to discuss everything about this world that makes her angry. Waris is a Muslim Somali girl who wears a hijab as a political statement about her Muslim identity. Nenet is from Egypt and her family were diplomats who left Egypt before the revolution. Nenet comes from a very wealthy family but she is unaware of where the money comes from. Courtney is the last girl who joins the group. She is the only white girl in the group and they point out to her that she will now be seen as a white woman who hangs out with brown girls and consequently she will lose a bit of her privilege. After she joins the group, Yazz condescendingly encourages Courtney to check her privilege. And they engage in a really interesting discussion about privilege.

Courtney is a white girl but she argues that she is less privileged because she comes from a poor community. She claims that Yazz is more privileged because even though

she is black, she is the daughter of a professor and a well-known theatre director. Yazz responds that she is black "which makes me more oppressed than anyone who isn't, except Waris who is the most oppressed" (Evaristo, 2019, p.66). Yazz argues that Waris is the most oppressed of the group because she is black, Muslim, female, poor and wears a hijab. Courtney cleverly replied that "Roxane Gay warned against the idea of playing 'privilege Olympics' and wrote in *Bad Feminist* that privilege is relative and contextual" (Evaristo, 2019, p.66). She then gives examples to argue her point to Yazz. She proves her statement by showing the uselessness of playing privilege games. She encourages Yazz to question if a severely disabled person would be more privileged than a Syrian refugee who has been tortured. Yazz is really impressed by her response and she is really surprised that Courtney has read a book by Roxane Gay.

Later in that chapter, Yazz becomes aware of Nenet's privilege because she discovers that Nenet pays a retired academic for her essays. Yazz wonders "if their friendship would overcome Nenet's cheating on top of her extreme privilege" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 72). She remembers her conversation with Courtney and at that moment she finally understands that privilege is actually about context and circumstance. She realises that privilege is much more complicated than she thought and that it has many layers to it.

The question of white privilege and white-passing is also discussed in this novel. The second character that appears in the fourth chapter is Hattie. She is a strong old woman who has been taking care of the family farm since she was young. She has two children who are now adults and they both married white people. There is a moment in the

chapter where she reflects upon their grandchildren identifying as non-black people. "Her grandchildren all look more white than black because Sonny and Ada Mae married white people. None of them identifies as black and she suspects they pass as white" (Evaristo, 2019, p.349). She thinks that it would be very upsetting for her husband if he was still around. She suspects that her grandchildren pass as white people but it does not upset her because she knows how hard it is to survive in a white world if you are a black person: "She doesn't mind, whatever works for them and if they can get away with it, good luck to them, why fear the burden of colour to hold you back?" (Evaristo, 2019, p.350). She is aware that their life would be more difficult if they identified as black people and she understands their decision because they are simply trying to use their passing privilege to make their lives a little bit easier.

#### INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM AS A THEME

Bernardine Evaristo has written a homage to black womanhood and her dedication to the novel is a statement of her intentions: "For the sisters & the sistas & the sistahs & the sistren & the women & the womxn & the wimmin" (Evaristo, 2019). The concept of intersectionality is a distinctive element of Evaristo's writing because her feminist prose transcends race, gender and class. All the individual characters come from different backgrounds and consequently, they face their own particular challenges in the story. The novel can be described as an intersectional work because it explores womanhood and race while also uncovering how sexuality, gender and activism affects their experiences. The feminist undertone in Evaristo's writing distances itself from a white

middle-class feminist approach. It is not only focused on sexist obstacles that a woman might face but also those that come from class, race, sexuality and their own identities.

*Girl, Woman, Other* is the perfect novel to talk about intersectional feminism because it evidences that different women face different oppressions and prejudices. Yazz is the youngest character in Evaristo's novel. She has grown up in multicultural London and has been raised by her feminist and progressive mother. With this character, Evaristo explores the disadvantages she experiences for being a Black woman. She reflects upon the lack of equal opportunities for non-white people and the endless marginalization of minority groups. There is an instance of that in Dominique's chapter. As I previously mentioned, she is Amma's friend and she was also involved in theatre. Dominique was accepted into an orthodox drama school and she was the only student who was not white. She was a very politicized student who would challenge the directors on any injustice. She challenged the director because she did not understand why the male parts in Shakespeare could not be played by women and black woman especially. No other woman stood by her side and everyone stayed silent when she denounced it.

When Amma moved to London, she went to her first black women's group to share their experiences as black women. They discussed issues of black feminism, sisterhood, their racist experiences and the consequences of white feminism. "She listened as they debated what it meant to be a black woman. What it meant to be a feminist when white feminist organizations made them feel unwelcome" (Evaristo, 2019, p.13). They shared how it felt to hear racist slugs when they walked on the streets and how it felt to be

beaten up by racists. Some shared how it felt to see men opening doors for white women, but not for them. They felt relieved to relate to each other experiences and made them feel less alone and she discovered that they all shared experiences

Penelope is a character that evidences the blindness of white feminism towards people of colour's oppressions. Although feminism is important to her, she is not interested in approaching the issues from an intersectional perspective. She was introduced to the movement by the book *The Feminine Mystique* and she became aware that women were perceived as the caretakers and the nurturing role and that it was really unfair to be the only one who had to choose between her professional career and her family. "It blew her mind to hear how America's educated housewives were supposed to be satisfied with their roles as mothers and homemakers, but who were, in reality, simmering with a discontent they were not allowed to express" (Evaristo, 2019, p.288). She wanted to become a teacher but once she had a baby, she was the one who had to give up her professional career to stay at home. It makes her angry to see that her husband's only responsibility is his work, meanwhile, she has to take care of everything else. While she became aware of the oppression women face, she ignored that people face more different obstacles due to their unique situation. Feminism was important for her but not from an intersectional perspective. We can see that when she talks about how the students of her school who come from a lower economical class as "At first she'd enjoyed teaching the disadvantaged children of the area whose parents had an intergenerational history of paying taxes in this country, even though she knew most of them wouldn't go on to great things" (Evaristo, 2019, p.297).

Moreover, when her school became more inclusive and multicultural she described it as “In the space of a decade the school went from predominantly English children of the working classes to a multicultural zoo of kids coming from countries where there weren’t even words for please and thank you” (Evaristo, 2019, p.298). It becomes evident that Penelope resents teaching students who do not come from elite backgrounds and does not realise her internalized classism. She seems to ignore the obstacles that immigrants and poor people have and only focuses on the oppression of middle-class women. Consequently evidencing that society needs to hear all women's voices and if feminism is focused on white middle-class women, voices that are outside of this demographic will be silenced.

## VI. SETTING THE BOOK INTO THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

### BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

In the last couple of years, there has been a lot of consciousness-raising about the presence and contributions of black people in Britain and this book is a perfect contribution to it. The Black Lives Matter Movement has been part of a huge historical moment both in the US and in the UK. Even if the movement emerged after the book was written and prized, it is the perfect book for this moment in history. However, this can only be seen from the present time, because Bernardine Evaristo wrote this book long before the movement emerged.

Although the focus of racism has always been centred in the US, in the last couple of years there has been a lot of change in Britain too. Britain is shedding light on its racist foundations and is becoming aware of the systemic racism that is still present in the country. Therefore, Britain has also been forced to reflect upon its own multicultural heritage has made space for diversity and has become aware of how important it is to give a voice to those people who have been silenced for such a long time. Britain has slowly become aware of its racist structures and this novel is undoubtedly a contribution to raising the awareness of the country.

The Black Lives Matter Movement has also contributed to the success of Evaristo's novel: "I didn't, however, expect for Evaristo's writing to become as culturally relevant as the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement has caused it to be" (Moody, 2020). Black people have been fighting to have their voice heard and finally people are becoming more interested in what black authors have to say. Evaristo's book has come in the perfect moment because people have slowly become more interested in what a black woman has written. "Evaristo gives Britain's minority groups active and accessible voices that have otherwise historically been denied or misshaped in literature" (Moody, 2020).

The correct representation of diversity has become one of the seventeen sustainable development goals of UNESCO. Europe has finally recognised how important it is to have diverse voices represented in media and culture. There is pressure in society to evidence diversity and to make it visible. Activists are demanding to occupy spaces that were not accessible for them before and consequently The British Establishment is responding slowly to this demand and we can see a change in society.

Activists are pressing Britain to reflect upon its multicultural heritage and to honor and respect it. One of the reasons for winning the prize is because it is a book that speaks of this moment. For years, black artists have been demanding their rights to occupy mainstream spaces. Artists have been pressing to have their places on the National Theater or to appear as presenters in the TV. Amma has spent many years on the margins of society until the British Establishment became interested in what they considered too radical before.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Bernardine Evaristo has written a culturally relevant novel that has been internationally acclaimed because of its masterful portrayal of black womanhood. The unique voices and the various identities of the different characters evidence that there is not a universal way of being a black woman in modern Britain. Additionally, this novel manages to explore how race contributes to the various obstacles that women from marginalized groups face in their daily lives. *Girl, Woman, Other* is an ambitious novel that tackles many issues that we face as a society.

In this dissertation, I have analysed how the concepts of race, privilege and intersectional feminism are present throughout the novel and how they are connected to Evaristo's previous work. On the one hand, approaching said concepts from a theoretical perspective has allowed me to appreciate layers of meaning that were unknown in the first reading of the novel. And on the other hand, it has served the purpose of familiarizing the readers with the main themes of the novel before delving into the critical analysis.

Exploring Britain's colonial past and its relations with slavery has allowed me to understand how the characters live under a system of discrimination and oppression that traces its origin back to the past. Moreover, I have been able to demonstrate how harmful our racist biases are and that we must do everything in our power to deconstruct our prejudices. I have also explored how privilege has become more present in the public discourse and the dangers of engaging in harmful privilege games. Discussing

the concept of intersectionality has proved that black women face different challenges than white women. Fighting for equality must not only focus on gender inequalities, but rather on all different forms of oppression in order to guarantee equal rights for all individuals. And finally, setting the novel into the social and political context has demonstrated why it is relevant at this particular time in history and how it relates to the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Although I am quite satisfied with the analysis of the novel within the three main themes that I chose, there is much more to be discussed about it. *Girl, Woman, Other* is such an ambitious novel that tackles many issues that we face as a society. Many of those themes were really interesting to me but I decided that it would be best to explore a few rather than going through all of them superficially. So in order to perform the critical analysis, I had to narrow down my selection of themes to only three. I chose to explore how racism, privilege and intersectional feminism are present in this particular novel because they were the most interesting to me and are the recurring theme in Evaristo's previous works.

So if I were to continue studying this novel I would add to my theoretical framework the themes of class, sexuality, gender, identity, motherhood and politics because they are really important issues that were also present throughout the novel and they are themes that fit into the overall work of Bernardine Evaristo.

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