Girl, Woman, Other

By Bernardine Evaristo

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Bernardine Evaristo's eighth novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, was published to critical acclaim in 2019. That year, it shared the Man Booker Prize with Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* in the first double-win since the rules of the prize were changed to prevent two novels from winning in 1992 (Flood 2019: para. 2 of 17). This came in the same year that the four Turner Prize nominees requested that the judging panel split the prize between them. This perhaps suggests a shift towards a less hierarchical evaluation of literature and art and away from 'a bygone binary age of winners and losers' (Gompertz 2019: para. 5 of 5). After Evaristo's joint win with Atwood, Shaun Ley, a reporter for the BBC, described the winners as 'Margaret Atwood and another author' (O'Connor 2019: para. 1 of 6). Evaristo remarked that the BBC had 'quickly and casually […] removed my name from history' (Evaristo 2019) in a thoughtless slight towards the first ever black, female winner of the Booker Prize. This makes startlingly clear the need for novels such as Evaristo's which are deeply involved in the representation of black females and non-binary individuals. In a 2020 report on diversity in the publishing industry by Goldsmiths University, Evaristo remarks that there has been a 'huge absence of the voices of people of colour in literature' (Evaristo 2020: 4). Ley's callous oversight not only elides Evaristo's achievement, but contributes to a lack of visibility of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) people as publishers, readers, and writers which the very success of *Girl, Woman, Other* opposes. Evaristo's portrayal of twelve unmistakably individual but connected characters aims to represent the wealth of black women in the UK whose voices are similarly underrepresented.

Structured in four chapters of three

sections each with a final section bringing most of the voices from the novel together, *Girl, Woman, Other* is a rich tapestry of portraits, each triptych a representation of the ties that bind people together. The novel is framed by the opening night of *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* at the National Theatre, a play written and directed by Amma Bonsu, the narrator of the novel's opening section. Amma's nervous walk through London and the play's afterparty function as a framing device bringing together twelve disparate voices which combine to create a dynamic portrait of black British womanhood. The 'free-flowing, prose poetry style […] dubbed "fusion-fiction"' (Tepper and Evaristo 2019: para. 2 of 14) which Evaristo utilises in many of her novels mixes the fluidity of stylistic devices. This provides a sense of connection from one chapter to the next which mirrors how the characters themselves are linked together. *Girl, Woman, Other*'s strength is in its moving and skillful character portraiture. Evaristo's characters are from completely different walks of life: Amma and her best friend Dominique are radical lesbian feminist playwrights, while Amma's childhood friend Shirley is a 'boring heterosexual suburban schoolteacher' (425). Shirley's gifted student Carole goes on to be the vice president of a bank in London while her classmate LaTisha has three children and works in a supermarket. These characters are all connected, though some more than others, as some 'simply visit the same theatre on the same night, or argue with each other on Twitter' (Frazer-Carroll 2019: para. 2 of 11). The result is a striking set of character studies which, facilitated through the structural framing of Amma's play, provides an ode to coincidence, connectedness, and personal relationships.

Girl, Woman, Other is impressive in its scope, a project whose wide range of starkly different voices calls attention to the inability to define black womanhood homogeneously. Grace and Hattie's experiences as black women on a farm in Northumbria in the 1900s differ starkly from Yazz, whose privileged upbringing amongst a liberal intellectual elite in London has given her the confidence to use her unique voice. The result, however, is that the novel's breadth sometimes comes at the expense of depth. After the initial chapter, there is little more to learn about Amma, Yazz, or Dominique; the reader is left to await their return until they come together in the novel's final chapter. Evaristo never delves into the relationship between Yazz and Dominique in any depth, nor allows any of the simmering resentment between Shirley and Dominique to come to the surface. Somewhat unsatisfyingly, Shirley never finds out about Winsome's relationship with her husband. Similarly, while Carole and LaTisha are friends at school, there is no meeting between them after their paths diverge; LaTisha does not attend the play, and her story is left dangling like a loose thread by the end of her section. There is a missed opportunity to delve into Bummi's attraction to women after her second marriage, much as the chance to look deeper into Freddy and Carole's relationship is missed. Indeed, there is little resolution for anyone but Hattie and Penelope. Their meeting in the epilogue resolves decades of wondering and makes clear Evaristo's inclusion of Penelope's — seemingly only very peripherally connected — chapter

earlier in the novel. Even Amma's success is left in doubt as she mourns that her night at the National may have been the 'pinnacle of my career' (434).

Evaristo's novel is a masterclass in weaving a polyvocal tapestry of contemporary black Britain. Its only drawback is that Evaristo's characters are so compelling, and often so subtly connected, that the reader finishes the novel wishing they knew more about them. This is, however, perhaps not the ultimate purpose of Evaristo's work, as she aims to show the reader a series of snapshots rather than spelling out the meaning of each relationship depicted. The sheer range of Evaristo's work is unmistakably a symptom of the intersectional feminism advocated by the novel. Amma and Dominique's radical black feminism is based on Evaristo's early career when, for a ten-year period before she began writing novels, she lived as a radical black lesbian theatre company director. Evaristo acknowledges that, at this point of her life, she was 'very angry as a woman' (Thorpe 2020: para. 2 of 13). Indeed, it asks pressing questions about feminism, gender, sexuality, and race. *Girl, Woman, Other* does not make any attempt to shy away from uncomfortable conversations, and deals with them with Evaristo's characteristic dark humour, evident from earlier works such as *Blonde Roots* (2009), in which a European slave is branded with the initials of her African master, K.K.K. The most striking example of this in *Girl, Woman, Other* comes from Morgan, a non-binary Twitter activist whose journey to wokeness is one laden with missteps. Morgan's girlfriend, Bibi, herself transgender, has no problem with indelicately correcting their mistakes, stating that she will 'hit the next person who confuses transsexual with transgender, I swear!' (318). Indeed, Morgan and Hattie's sections provide important contributions to fluid gender identities — Morgan's identification as agender is an inherent denial of binary gender categories, and advocates not just for crossing boundaries, but for the possibility of erasing them entirely. These questions come to a head as Dominique talks about her feminist arts festival specifically for 'women-born-women as opposed to women-born-men' (437). In response to the festival, Morgan, aided by her million followers, starts a twitter campaign 'severely damaging [Dominique's] reputation' (ibid.). Morgan's argument amounts to a questioning of how intersectional Dominique's feminism is and why it has not expanded conceptually to include trans women. This intersectional stance is voiced — albeit somewhat parodically — by Yazz, who asserts that Amma's '*women's* politics […] will become redundant, and by the way, I'm humanitarian, which is on a much higher plane than feminism' (39).

Girl, Woman, Other is, then, a novel of our times which aims to highlight women who are 'the kind of character that [haven't] really appeared in fiction at

all' (Tepper and Evaristo 2019: para. 6 of 14). Reflective of contemporary political and cultural discourse surrounding racial and gender identity, Evaristo's work is a sorely needed contribution to the literary representation of black women and non-binary individuals whom, as Evaristo opines, are underrepresented in literature and the publishing industry. Unlike Amma, Evaristo does not take her win as a measure of having sold out — but rather, as an opportunity to achieve change from within the upper echelons of prize-winning authors. Evaristo states that she has 'not compromised [her] politics or [her] creativity' (Thorpe 2020: para. 8 of 13) in winning the Booker Prize; the unapologetic, sometimes uncomfortable, and often funny language structured by her unique style of prose poetry exemplifies this. Evaristo's work is, however, often uncomfortable by necessity; there is no hope of moving forward unless we address that which continues to hold us back. With *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo has made herself a household name which it would be foolish to forget.

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