International Journal of Literature and Arts Studies

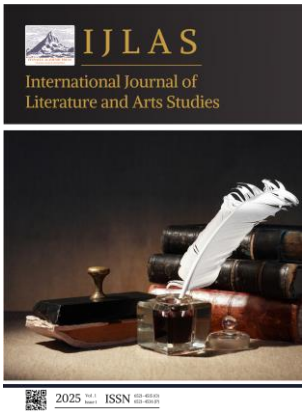
Vol. 2 No. 1 2026

Article **Open Access**

A Study on the Multiple Identities of Black Women in *Girl, Woman, Other* from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

Lilin Deng [1,*]

[1] College of International Languages and Cultures, Hohai University, Nanjing, China
* Correspondence: Lilin Deng, College of International Languages and Cultures, Hohai University, Nanjing, China



Received: 31 December 2025
Revised: 21 February 2026
Accepted: 06 March 2026
Published: 10 March 2026

Abstract: This comprehensive paper investigates Bernardine Evaristo's 2019 novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, through the critical lens of postcolonial feminism, exploring the complex, multifaceted identity constructions of Black British women. Operating at the intersection of postmodern literature and postcolonial critique, the text subverts essentialist master narratives by deploying a highly innovative "fusion fiction" form that reflects the polyphonic realities of its twelve protagonists. By systematically mapping the characters' trajectories against the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, this study elucidates how marginalized subjects navigate the triple oppression of race, gender, and class. The analysis reveals that the systemic disenfranchisement experienced by these women, ranging from workplace invisibility and reproductive trauma to domestic abuse and existential displacement, does not culminate in passive victimhood. Instead, these sites of historical subjugation are actively transd into productive spaces for resistance, mutual alliance, and socio-economic empowerment. The paper argues that Evaristo's structural and thematic architecture dismantles monolithic representations of the diaspora, asserting that authentic postcolonial identity is an inherently fluid, continuous negotiation. Through entrepreneurship, artistic creation, and intersectional solidarity, the protagonists forge deeply resilient, hybrid subjectivities, transforming their marginality into a profound genesis of cultural and personal self-determination.

Keywords: *Girl, Woman, Other*; postcolonial feminism; identity; Black British women

1. Introduction

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* maps the sociopolitical realities of twelve predominantly Black British women across different generations and social strata [1]. While existing scholarship frequently addresses the novel's stylistic polyphony, further inquiry is required regarding how its characters actively negotiate systemic disenfranchisement through "Third Space" hybridity. Against the backdrop of a multicultural yet structurally prejudiced Britain, this text interrogates the intersection of race, gender, and class. Consequently, this study poses the following research question: How do the protagonists in *Girl, Woman, Other* subvert the triple oppression of race, gender, and class to construct fluid, resistant identities within a postcolonial feminist framework? By engaging with postcolonial feminist perspective and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial paradigms, this paper analyzes the mechanisms through which marginalized subjects transform historical subjugation into productive sites for contemporary self-determination.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Girl, Woman, Other

Girl, Woman, Other by Bernardine Evaristo is the winner of the 2019 Booker Prize. It moves through different eras, from the Windrush generation to contemporary days, providing a rich tapestry of life in the UK that is often overlooked in traditional literature.

In the book, life journeys of 12 female protagonists in different chapters do not develop separately but interact and overlap with each other. Sánchez-Palencia referred to them as "time abjects", who "do not fit within chrono normative paradigms" and "create alliances among nonnormative groups" [1]. These women are not merely victims; their "wounds" or stigmas become sites of resistance [2]. The text emphasizes intersectionality as a complex ontology that moves beyond simple "additive models" of oppression [3]. It seeks to explain how power, ideology, and identity intersect to maintain inequality. Recent research has placed the novel within socio-political history, showing that it is rooted in the collective writing practices and political ideals of the black women's movement in Britain in 1970s and 1980s. Abram argued that *Girl, Woman, Other* calls for a collective "we" while presenting the diversity of Black lives in Britain, realizing the Black feminist political principle of "speaking out" [4].

2.2. Postcolonial Feminism

Early postcolonial theory primarily focused on deconstructing imperialist knowledge and cultural hegemony. Edward Said laid the theoretical foundation for this field, profoundly revealing how the West utilized discursive power to construct the East as a backward and subordinate "Other," thereby rationalizing colonial rule [5]. However, this early postcolonial theory was predominantly male-dominated and centered on macro-level nation-building, exhibiting a significant blind spot [6].

Postcolonial feminism emerged as a critical reaction to this early male-dominated framework. This theory is uniquely characterized by its dual critique: it criticizes not only colonial powers but also "the hegemonic power established by indigenous men after the Empire" [7]. Throughout this developmental trajectory, the academic works of several core scholars represent critical evolutionary milestones. Mohanty critiqued Western feminism for simplifying Third World women into a "singular monolithic subject," ignoring their internal diversity [8]. Spivak introduced the concept of epistemic violence, arguing that under the dual forces of imperialism and indigenous patriarchy, subaltern women are silenced and lose their subjectivity [9].

Postcolonial theory evolved from a macro-level deconstruction of Eurocentrism to a micro-level critique of intersectional oppression [10]. Contemporary postcolonial feminism calls for abandoning singular narratives of oppression, shifting instead to a concrete, historical examination of the "intersectionality of gender, class, race, caste and religion, and sexuality" to reconstruct the authentic realities of marginalized women globally [11].

2.3. Postcolonial Identity

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* fundamentally reorients the conceptualization of cultural identity. Central to his framework is "hybridity," referring to the emergence of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization [12,13]. Rather than a simple blending of cultures, Bhabha posits hybridity as a subversive mechanism that disrupts essentialist narratives, rendering the colonial subject "less than one and double" [12]. This disruption occurs within the "Third Space of enunciation," a spatial and temporal realm where the negotiation of incommensurable cultural differences takes place [14]. Bhabha asserts that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, invalidating hierarchical claims to cultural purity or originality [12].

Within this Third Space, identity ceases to be a static essence and is instead characterized by profound fluidity. Bhabha rejects the notion of fixed origins, locating identity on the "borderlines" of the present through an iterative and interstitial process. Identity is thus constantly negotiated, demonstrating that communities are not stable entities with clear boundaries [15]. This fluidity empowers the colonized to subvert dominant discourses through mechanisms like mimicry, functioning as an "affect" that is both a "mode of appropriation and of resistance" [12].

Furthermore, Bhabha grounds this theoretical abstraction in the "affective experience of social marginality". He contends that marginality is not merely a condition of lack or a negative ontology; rather, it provides a "conflictual yet productive space" from which counter-hegemonic strategies of emancipation emerge. The most enduring lessons for living and thinking, therefore, arise from those who have suffered subjugation and diaspora.

While highly influential across disciplines like education and translation studies, Bhabha's framework faces scholarly critique [16]. Contemporary reviews argue that his theories rely too heavily on discursive analysis, frequently demonstrating a lack of concern for the political and economic exploitation that characterizes global neocolonialism. Despite these critiques, his vocabulary remains an essential theoretical tool for analyzing the complex, fluid nature of postcolonial cultural identity [17].

3. Identities of Black Women in Britain

3.1. The Triple Oppression of Race, Gender and Class

3.1.1. Residual Shadows: The Infiltration of Racial Discrimination

Racism, as an enduring legacy of Western colonialism, not only stratified society during the colonial era but continues to permeate the cultural consciousness of the post-colonial world. Despite the socioeconomic success achieved by some individuals of color, entrenched discrimination frequently precludes the attainment of full social equity [18]. This phenomenon is illustrated by Shirley, one of the narrative's twelve Black protagonists. Although she possessed professional stability as a teacher at Peckham High School, she remained subject to racial profiling, observing that "women clutch their bags nervously when they pass her in the street or she sits next to them on the bus, when she's never stolen so much as a penny from her mother's purse" [19]. This external prejudice inflicts profound psychological distress: Shirley "tries not to succumb to the paranoia that comes from thinking every negative reaction is due to her skin colour" [19]. Her heightened vigilance and internalization of this bias exemplify the capacity of racism to erode individual self-identity.

3.1.2. Invisible Barriers: The Control of Patriarchal Discourse Over Women's Identity

The categorization of women as perpetual supporters is a systemic bias rooted not merely in individual conduct, but in the very structure and culture of the societal whole. Carol's experience highlights how this bias operates professionally: despite her credentials as an Oxford graduate and a vice president in the banking sector, "she's used to clients and new colleagues looking past her to the person they are clearly expecting to meet" [19]. Beyond professional invisibility, the delegitimization of female pain further illustrates this inequity. The stigmatization of menstruation acts as a tangible mechanism of patriarchal control, forcing women to mask their suffering to maintain status. Carol "takes extra-strength painkillers in order to haul herself to work or risk being accused of pulling a monthly sickie" [19]. Ultimately, the devaluation of female physiology, where normal traits such as menstruation and dysmenorrhea are viewed as disadvantages, reinforces the objectification of women and justifies their subordination to hegemonic power.

3.1.3. Deprived Rights: The Impact of Economy and Education

Beyond the matrices of race and gender, class emerges as a critical determinant of social stratification, mirroring disparities in education and economic capital. Daisy's trajectory, beginning with single motherhood at sixteen, exemplifies the systemic denial of educational resources, particularly sex education, to marginalized Black women. To survive, Daisy endured grueling factory work that failed to provide a living wage. The convergence of excessive labor and insufficient medical intervention accelerated her illness, revealing the direct correlation between economic disadvantages and health outcomes. This cycle of poverty was bequeathed to her daughter, Grace, who was orphaned and forced into domestic labor at age thirteen. Her daily reality, characterized by "non-stop scrubbing, scraping, shining, ironing, folding, fetching and carrying" [19], highlights the truncation of childhood and the foreclosure of career development. Such exploitation of destitute women and minors signifies a form of structural violence, perpetuating the subjugation of vulnerable groups within an unjust socioeconomic framework.

3.2. The Loss of Identity

3.2.1. From Britain to Africa: The Conflict of National Consciousness

The narrative of Amma interrogates the hybrid identity of the Black woman born and raised in Britain. Her ideological confrontation with Nzinga serves to highlight the friction within the diaspora, particularly the observation that "foreigners equating an English accent with whiteness, she always felt the need to speak up when it was implied that black Brits were inferior to African-Americans or Africans or West Indians". Although postcolonial theory posits that identity is fluid and multifaceted, Amma's experience demonstrates how it is constrained by social structures. Her accent functions as a contested signifier: it is read as an alignment with British hegemony and a deviation from "orthodox" Blackness, thereby marginalizing her in the discourse on racial identity. Consequently, the specific cultural dissonance experienced by Black Britons engenders understandings of self that differ markedly from those of their African or Caribbean counterparts.

3.2.2. From Loss to Resistance: The Absence of Bodily Awareness

Latisha's emotional development and identity formation were profoundly destabilized by the loss of paternal support following her father's infidelity and subsequent abandonment of the family. Viewed through the lens of postcolonial feminism, the female body acts as a social and cultural "field" wherein female agency and self-knowledge are frequently suppressed [20]. Latisha's inability to assert boundaries regarding unprotected sex illustrates a surrender of bodily autonomy, the consequence of which is "three kids all before her twenty-first birthday" and the perpetuation of a cycle of "three kids who'd grow up with no fathers in their lives". While the first two pregnancies may be attributed to an adolescent lack of understanding regarding her body and gender dynamics, the third represents a tragic violation of her emerging consciousness. Confronted with rape, she possesses an internal sense of resistance yet lacks the power to enact it; significantly, even in the aftermath, she struggles to assign blame to the perpetrator, instead shifting the burden of responsibility onto herself. This dual exploitation of her physical and psychological self results in a profound distortion of Latisha's body image and self-worth.

3.2.3. From Dependence to Integration: The Confusion of Self

Penelope's discovery that she is a foundling deals a severe blow to her sense of self. Upon realizing that she is "rootless, unwanted, unloved, hopeless, and nobody" [19], the subsequent "tearing" of her identity and the collapse of her self-concept precipitate a profound existential crisis. Consequently, she projects her hope and her meaning in life

onto men. This dependency constitutes not merely a submission to cultural norms, but a systematic deprivation of female agency [21]. Seeking to construct a familial ideal through marriage, she is instead relegated to the domestic sphere, exacerbating her marginalization. Even when her second husband ostensibly supports her career, his "intrusive interrogation" of her choices inflicts psychological oppression, leaving her feeling increasingly entrapped within the marriage. Her fear of becoming a "public humiliation" or a "social outcast" through another divorce underscores the stigmatization and systemic devaluation of women she faces. Succumbing to this pressure, she chooses to "just get by", compromising herself within unhealthy dynamics. This erosion of autonomy culminates in the admission that she has "lost the me of myself and was subsumed within the we of marriage", a statement that marks the dissolution of her personal boundaries and deepens her crisis of identity.

3.3. The Construction of Identity

3.3.1. Mutual Support: The Path of Women's Alliances

Dominique's relocation to America with her girlfriend, Nzinga, marks the beginning of a period of profound oppression, characterized by daily psychological manipulation and domestic violence. Nzinga's coercive control exemplifies a radical revolt against masculinity and outsiders often found in separatist feminist ideologies [22]; however, by severing Dominique's contact with the external world, this revolt paradoxically constitutes a violation of her autonomy. Consequently, the intervention of her old friend Amma is pivotal, as it challenges Nzinga's authority and reawakens Dominique's desire for freedom. Furthermore, the shelter provided by her neighbor, Gaia, allows Dominique to reclaim her dignity as a Black woman and a human being. Upon escaping Nzinga's control, she finds refuge with a community of women who provide material support and emotional belonging, an environment in which she rekindles her artistic passion. Later, her connection with Laverne, another Black woman survivor of domestic violence, demonstrates a relationship built on equality and mutual understanding. This supportive bond allows Dominique to reaffirm her identity and embrace a new life, showing that identity is not formed in isolation but is continuously constructed through interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, because both her trauma and her redemption occur in the U.S., her identity expands beyond the U.K. or Africa; for her, America is "home". Her marriage to Laverne symbolizes this solidification of self, transforming her story into a celebration of the historical and cultural diversity of her community.

3.3.2. Resisting Authority: The Voices of the Marginalized

Amma, a playwright whose career is defined by lifelong rebellion, challenges systemic racism from the very inception of her work in the theater. Viewed through the lens of postcolonial feminism, which highlights the systematic marginalization of Black women's voices, Amma's refusal to compromise constitutes a direct challenge to mainstream authority. Her willingness to prioritize her convictions over professional expediency serves not only as an affirmation of her identity but also as an act of collective resistance. Indeed, Amma's trajectory illustrates that authentic self-identity is forged through the confrontation of oppression. Critical of the dominant forces that exclude her, she utilizes her work, such as *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, to transform art into a tool of resistance that empowers the silenced. Through theater, Amma amplifies the experiences of Black women, countering the mainstream culture's tendency to trivialize these narratives. In the text, her declaration that "They would be a voice in theatre where there was silence," and her insistence that "Black and Asian women's stories would get out there," "On Our Own Terms," "or Not At All", represents a profound resistance to deep-rooted racial and gender hierarchies. By shaping this collective discourse, Amma fights not only for herself but for the visibility and respect of her entire community. Her journey underscores that discourse is power; the act of giving voice is simultaneously a process of

personal liberation and a reinvention of cultural identity [23]. Ultimately, within the context of postcolonial feminism, Amma embodies the hope and power of self-determination for Black women and other minority groups across artistic and political spheres.

3.3.3. Economic Independence: The Empowerment of Underprivileged Immigrants

Bummi's dual identity as a Nigerian university graduate and a cleaner at the bottom of the British socio-economic hierarchy exemplifies the complexities faced by postcolonial women in migration, exposing the deep economic inequalities at the intersection of race and gender. This dissonance creates a painful contradiction between her self-perception and her reality, leading her to ask: "Do I not have a degree in Mathematics? further, do I not possess the intelligence to acquire a first class degree in Mathematics, without even sleeping with the professor?". Following the death of her husband, Bummi becomes the sole breadwinner, a role that compels her to improve the family's financial standing. Her decision to launch a business functions not merely as an economic strategy, but as a mechanism of identity reconstruction, a struggle to reclaim agency in the face of adversity. This transformation from passivity to self-empowerment is fraught with difficulty; initially, she endures the indignity of selling her body to secure the start-up capital for a loan, a choice that underscores the crushing pressure of survival and the steep price of changing the status quo. While this experience highlights the desperation of postcolonial women facing economic hardship, it also reveals a profound desire for self-worth and responsibility toward her family. As her business stabilizes, Bummi not only builds a financial foundation but continues her self-improvement through education. Her evolution from cleaner to business owner enhances her social status and creates employment for other women, embodying a tangible resistance to gender and racial prejudice. Ultimately, her efforts facilitate the success of her daughter, Carol, enabling her to attend Oxford University and become a bank vice president. This achievement validates Bummi's struggle and serves as a concrete manifestation of her reconstructed identity, as she breaks the economic and cultural shackles of the migration process to forge opportunities for the next generation. The power of this "intergenerational transmission" is significant in feminism, demonstrating how creative outlets and mobility can be carved out amidst oppression [24].

4. Discussion

The Black women in the text construct pluralistic identities through mutual assistance, resistance to authority, and the pursuit of economic independence. In this context, Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory provides a crucial framework for understanding these multicultural identities and the nuanced experiences of individuals in postcolonial settings. For the twelve central figures, identity is simultaneously shaped by intersecting factors such as immigrant background, race, gender, and class, resulting in a highly complex dynamic. In pursuing their personal ambitions, these women do not simply accept or reject a singular culture; instead, they actively rethink and recreate their identities. Carol, for instance, inherits the cultural values of her parents within the domestic sphere but is simultaneously shaped by the dominant British culture of her external environment. Consequently, her identity takes on a hybridity, which is what allows the various other positions to emerge as a "third space". Ultimately, while the history of colonization objectively intensified cultural exchanges and highlighted profound differences, reaching mutual understanding across these divides cannot be achieved within the confines of a single culture. Rather, it necessitates the forging of a common ground through ongoing translation and negotiation.

Marginality constitutes a foundational element of postcolonial identity. For the women in this text, marginalization signifies not merely exclusion or neglect, but a generative space for the redefinition and creation of the self. Through avenues such as

entrepreneurship, education, and artistic creation, they actively subvert entrenched power structures. This collective resistance serves as both a direct challenge to mainstream hegemony and a catalyst for other disadvantaged groups to pursue self-empowerment.

Identity is inherently fluid and hybrid. Amidst historical and cultural shifts, the identities of these Black women remain in constant flux; rather than remaining static, they continually reinvent themselves in response to evolving circumstances. By navigating intersecting roles such as educator, mother, and sexual minority, they demonstrate profound adaptability and innovation. Ultimately, this dynamic mobility enables them to negotiate external pressures effectively, carving out vital spaces for survival and prosperity.

5. Conclusion

Girl, Woman, Other dismantles essentialist paradigms, revealing the marginalized body not as a passive site of oppression, but as a dynamic genesis of postcolonial identity. Evaristo's polyphonic architecture transfigures intersectional vulnerability into collective agency, fundamentally redefining diasporic belonging. By inhabiting the interstitial "Third Space," these women forge resistant, fluid subjectivities that render hegemonic boundaries obsolete. Ultimately, the text asserts that authentic liberation necessitates the relentless, unapologetic reinvention of the self, transforming historical subjugation into an enduring blueprint for profound sociopolitical emancipation.

References

1. C. Sánchez-Palencia, "Feminist/queer/diasporic temporality in Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other (2019)," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 316-330, 2022.
2. D. Z. Maver, "Stigma as an Attribute of Oppression or an Agent of Change: The Novel Girl, Woman, Other by Bernardine Evaristo," *Acta Neophilologica*, vol. 53, no. 1-2, pp. 119-131, 2020.
3. S. Strauss, "Intersectionality and fourth-wave feminism in Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other," *Women: a cultural review*, vol. 34, no. 1-2, pp. 14-32, 2023.
4. N. Abram, ""Being/together": Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other and the Black British Women's Movement," *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 18, p. vpae018, 2024.
5. E. W. Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 162-206, 1977.
6. L. Nader, "Orientalism, occidentalism and the control of women," *Cultural dynamics*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 323-355, 1989. doi: 10.1177/092137408900200304
7. U. Al-Wazedi, "Postcolonial feminism," *Companion to feminist studies*, pp. 155-173, 2020.
8. C. Mohanty, "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses," *Feminist review*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 61-88, 1988.
9. G. C. Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?," In *Imperialism*, 2023, pp. 171-219.
10. G. Winker, and N. Degele, "Intersectionality as multi-level analysis: Dealing with social inequality," *European journal of women's studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 51-66, 2011.
11. K. W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color," In *The public nature of private violence*, 2013, pp. 93-118.
12. H. K. Bhabha, "The location of culture," *routledge*, 2012. doi: 10.4324/9780203820551
13. A. Easthope, "Bhabha, hybridity and identity," *Textual practice*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 341-348, 1998.
14. H. K. Bhabha, "Signs taken for wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 144-165, 1985.
15. C. Tatham, "A systematic literature review of Third Space theory in research with children (aged 4-12) in multicultural educational settings," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 867-886, 2025.
16. K. Homi, "The World and the home,".
17. F. B. Khalifa, "Reconceiving Translation: Homi Bhabha's Hybridity and the Third Space in Literary Translation," *International Journal of Translation and Interpretation Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 16-26, 2025.
18. I. Stepanikova, and G. R. Oates, "Perceived discrimination and privilege in health care: the role of socioeconomic status and race," *American journal of preventive medicine*, vol. 52, no. 1, pp. S86-S94, 2017. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2016.09.024
19. B. Evaristo, "Girl, Woman, Other: A Novel (Booker Prize Winner)," *Grove Press*, 2019.
20. S. Zaragocin, and M. A. Caretta, "Cuerpo-territorio: A decolonial feminist geographical method for the study of embodiment," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, vol. 111, no. 5, pp. 1503-1518, 2021.

21. O. Stuhler, "The gender agency gap in fiction writing (1850 to 2010)," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 121, no. 29, p. e2319514121, 2024. doi: 10.1073/pnas.2319514121
22. R. Jennings, "Creating feminist culture: Australian rural lesbian-separatist communities in the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 88-111, 2018. doi: 10.1353/jowh.2018.0015
23. C. Bithell, "A different voice, a different song: Reclaiming community through the natural voice and world song," *Oxford University Press*, 2014.
24. P. Montañés, S. De Lemus, G. Bohner, J. L. Megías, M. Moya, and R. Garcia-Retamero, "Intergenerational transmission of benevolent sexism from mothers to daughters and its relation to daughters' academic performance and goals," *Sex Roles*, vol. 66, no. 7, pp. 468-478, 2012.