

Beyond the Binary: A Queer-Theoretical Reading of Gender and Identity in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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Abstract—

This article examines the representation of gender and sexuality in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* through the theoretical framework of Queer Theory. Drawing primarily on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorisation of sexuality and identity, the study investigates how the novel challenges binary and essentialist understandings of gender. Particular attention is given to the character, Morgan's non-binary identity, the representation of queer relationships, and the negotiation of sexuality across generations. Through a qualitative close reading of selected characters and narrative episodes, the article argues that Evaristo presents gender and sexuality as fluid, relational, and continually negotiated rather than fixed categories. Furthermore, the novel's interconnected and polyphonic narrative structure reinforces its resistance to rigid boundaries of identity. The article concludes that *Girl, Woman, Other* does not merely represent queer identities but uses both characterisation and narrative form to question the cultural structures through which gender and sexuality are defined.

Keywords—*Queer Theory; Gender Performativity; Non-binary Identity; Sexuality; Gender Fluidity*

Introduction

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) offers a multifaceted representation of contemporary Black British identities through the interconnected lives of twelve characters. Moving across generations, social classes, cultural backgrounds, genders, and sexualities, the novel challenges conventional assumptions about identity as fixed, stable, and universally experienced. Although considerable critical attention has been given to the novel's treatment of race, feminism, intersectionality, and Black British identity, its disruption of normative constructions of gender and sexuality also merits a focused queer-theoretical examination.

Queer Theory provides a significant framework for understanding Evaristo's representation of identities that resist conventional categories. Judith

Butler's concept of gender performativity, developed particularly in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), challenges the idea that gender is a natural or essential characteristic and instead understands it as continually produced through repeated social practices and norms. This perspective is particularly relevant to Morgan in Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, whose non-binary identity unsettles the conventional binary distinction between "man" and "woman." Morgan's experience consequently raises questions about the stability of the category "woman" and the social expectations attached to gender.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) further contributes to this analysis by examining how sexuality is shaped by social systems of knowledge, disclosure, and heteronormative expectations. Evaristo's representation of diverse sexual identities and

relationships demonstrates that sexuality, like gender, cannot always be contained within rigid categories. The novel therefore creates a space in which identities are continuously negotiated and redefined.

This article examines how *Girl, Woman, Other* destabilises fixed constructions of gender and sexuality through Butler's theory of gender performativity and Sedgwick's queer theoretical perspectives. Through qualitative textual analysis, it focuses particularly on Morgan's non-binary identity, diverse representations of sexuality, and the novel's interconnected narrative structure. It argues that Evaristo not only represents queer identities but also challenges the categorical structures through which gender and sexuality are conventionally understood.

Review of Literature

This section reviews the contributions of prominent queer theorists and examines how queer theory has been applied in studies of gender and identity. Watson (2005) examines the development of queer theory, highlighting its major concepts, influences, and criticisms. The article explores identity as relational and fluid, questions fixed gender and sexuality categories, and demonstrates queer theory's potential contribution to group analysis. Valocchi, S. (2005) examines a recent sociological examination of queer theory evaluates four empirical studies to assess its application in gender and sexuality research. The study emphasizes nonnormative identities, performative subjectivities, institutional power, and the importance of ethnographic methods in queer analysis. Jagose (2009) examines the complex relationship between feminist and queer theories, challenging their traditional separation. The study highlights the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality, emphasizing the shared intellectual foundations and continuing dialogue between these theoretical frameworks. McGuire (2022) defines queer theory through the multiple meanings of the term "queer" as a noun, adjective, and verb. The study emphasizes non-normativity, fluid identities, and the process of challenging and deconstructing established social and cultural norms.

The reviewed studies demonstrate the diverse applications of queer theory in examining gender, sexuality, identity, and power. However, limited research has applied a queer-theoretical framework

to Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. This study addresses this gap by offering a focused analysis of gender and identity beyond binary constructions.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual-analysis methodology grounded in Queer Theory to examine the representation of gender and sexuality in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019). Rather than treating gender and sexuality as fixed biological or social categories, the analysis approaches them as identities that are constructed, performed, negotiated, and continually reshaped. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorisation of sexuality provide the principal theoretical frameworks. Butler (1990) argues that gender is constituted through repeated social acts and norms, while Sedgwick (1990) demonstrates how sexuality is organised through cultural binaries, disclosure, knowledge, and heteronormative assumptions.

The analysis employs close reading of selected passages, particularly those concerning Morgan, whose movement from Megan to a non-binary identity provides a significant site for examining the instability of conventional gender categories. Morgan reflects on their mixed heritage by stating that they were "essentially ... just a complete human being" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 316). Although this statement concerns racial and cultural identity, it is methodologically useful for examining Evaristo's broader resistance to fragmented and imposed categories. More explicitly, Morgan's understanding of gender develops through encounters with transgender and non-binary communities. The novel describes the transformation in Morgan's thinking through the recognition that "gender was full of misguided expectations" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 321). These passages are examined in relation to Butler's argument that gender norms are socially produced rather than naturally predetermined.

The methodology also comparatively examines other characters and their experiences of sexuality, femininity, and social expectations. This comparative approach avoids reducing the novel's queer dimension exclusively to Morgan and allows the analysis to consider how different generations negotiate changing understandings of gender and

sexuality. In addition, attention is given to Evaristo's experimental narrative form, particularly its multiple perspectives, interconnected stories, and fluid movement between voices. Recent scholarship similarly identifies the novel's polyphonic construction and formal fluidity as significant to its representation of diverse identities (Abram, 2024). Thus, the study combines theoretical interpretation, close textual reading, and comparative character analysis to demonstrate how Evaristo challenges binary and essentialist constructions of gender and sexuality.

Discussion

Evaristo's representation of gender fluidity can be productively compared with existing queer-theoretical readings of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith. Research on Woolf's *Orlando* demonstrates how the protagonist's transformation from male to female challenges binary constructions of gender. Moslehi and Niazi (2016) argue that Orlando's androgyny and bisexuality expose gender as socially instituted and performative. Similarly, Morgan in *Girl, Woman, Other* questions the necessity of binary identity, describing gender as "one of the biggest lies of our civilization" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 327). However, while Woolf imagines gender fluidity through Orlando's transformation across historical periods, Evaristo locates gender fluidity within contemporary debates surrounding non-binary identity and pronouns.

Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* provides a second significant comparison. Kim (2010) argues that Winterson deliberately leaves the narrator's gender unspecified, thereby challenging readers' tendency to interpret identity through binary sex/gender categories. Evaristo similarly destabilises categorisation through Morgan, whose "gender-free identity" resists a gender-binary world (Evaristo, 2019, pp. 326–327). However, Winterson achieves queerness primarily through narrative ambiguity, whereas Evaristo makes non-binary identity explicitly visible and socially situated.

A third useful comparison is Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*. Andermahr (2018) argues that Smith, like Brigid Brophy, employs a "both/and" aesthetic that refuses binary oppositions in gender, sexuality, language, and art. Evaristo similarly refuses singularity through her interconnected characters and multiple perspectives. Recent scholarship by

Abram (2024) observes that Evaristo's fluid movement between focalising voices creates a form of "grammatical queering," particularly appropriate to Morgan's contemporary negotiations of gender and pronouns.

Thus, while Woolf foregrounds gender transformation, Winterson emphasises gender ambiguity, and Smith explores both/and fluidity, Evaristo brings these strategies together through an explicitly non-binary character and a polyphonic narrative. *Girl, Woman, Other* consequently extends earlier queer literary practices by connecting gender fluidity with race, generation, sexuality, and contemporary Black British experience.

Conclusion

This article has examined Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* through the framework of Queer Theory, focusing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's understanding of sexuality and identity. The analysis demonstrates that Evaristo challenges essentialist and binary constructions of gender by presenting identity as fluid, performative, relational, and continually negotiated. Morgan's non-binary identity particularly exposes the limitations of conventional definitions of "woman" and demonstrates the possibility of identities beyond the gender binary. The comparative discussion with Woolf's *Orlando*, Winterson's *Written on the Body*, and Smith's *How to Be Both* further establishes Evaristo's contribution to a broader tradition of literary representations that destabilise gender and sexual categories. Moreover, the novel's interconnected, polyphonic, and non-linear narrative structure reinforces its thematic resistance to fixed boundaries. Recent scholarship similarly identifies queer temporality and narrative multiplicity as central to Evaristo's work. Ultimately, *Girl, Woman, Other* demonstrates how contemporary literature can expand understandings of gender, sexuality, identity, and belonging.

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