

**RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BLACK WOMEN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
BERNARDINE EVARISTO'S *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER***

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Abstract

Since the era of slavery and colonialism, the alarming issue that the world has been facing are racism and ethnic issues, as well as power and class connections between individuals, entities, communities, and institutions. In this research paper social dominance theory is used to showcase the main aspect of group-based hierarchy based on racism. Racism perpetuates the idea that one race is superior to another. The main focus of this article is race as a social reality in the US. It demonstrates how racism creates majority and minority classes in American culture and how through the practice of 'white privilege,' racism frequently upholds white people's dominating roles in society for personal benefit. Bernardine Evaristo, is a prominent postmodern writer on cross-cultural issues. *Girl, Woman, Other* is a polyphonic book on conflicts on identity. The book has many peculiarities, including a literary style that Evaristo refers to in her book *Manifesto On Never Giving Up* as "fusion fiction" (142).

The researcher in this study brings out how Bernardine Evaristo schemes her word choice to highlight the stigma that people have due of their race and how black women fight back against racial injustice.

Key-words: Racism, black women and discrimination

A contemporary literature is one that was written from the end of World War II (1945) to the present. The contemporary period of literature was immediately followed by the modernist period which was known as the Postmodern era. The contemporary era is characterized by the prevalence of social dominance in the society.

The exercise of power by one group over the other and a person or group who takes on the hegemonical position over other social groups is generally known as social dominance. Milaka Virley in his article *Social Dominance Theory: The Explanation behind Social Hierarchy and Oppression?* published in 2013 states, "The theory was constructed with a foundation from a variety of pre-existing psychological models, social-psychological models, structural-sociological models, and lastly evolutionary models" (2). It is evident that factors such as economic status, race, gender, and religion determine the social dominance between one individual over the other or one ethnic group over the other. In 1992, social psychology scholars Jim Sidanius, Erik Devereux and Felicia Pratto propounded the theory on social dominance. Felicia Pratto and Andrew L Stewart define social dominance theory in their article *Social Dominance Theory* published in 2012 states:

... a multi - level theory of how societies maintain group -based dominance. Nearly all stable societies can be considered group - based dominance hierarchies, in which one social group – often an ethnic, religious, national, or racial one – holds disproportionate power and enjoys special privileges, and at least one other group has relatively little political power or ease in its way of life. (1)

The significance of social dominance theory lies in its ability to clarify the reason why some groups are more privileged than the other. According to the Social Dominance Theory (SDT), societies are hierarchical, with certain groups possessing greater prestige, authority, and wealth than the others. It implies that social structures, personal beliefs, and individual actions uphold these hierarchies. These hierarchies have a three system: age system, gender system and arbitrary system. SDT places a strong emphasis on how socialization and group-based ideologies like racism help to maintain these hierarchies. SDT offers a framework for comprehending how oppression and hierarchy based on groups are upheld in society. The Social Dominance Theory (SDT) sheds light on the ways that societal structures support racial discrimination. Societies are set up so that some racial groups have greater prestige, power, and resources than the others. Numerous factors contribute to the maintenance of this hierarchy. These ultimately favor the dominant racial groups, social norms that support prejudice and

stereotypes, and group-based ideologies like racism that support and legitimize unfair treatment. In order to attain racial fairness, SDT emphasizes the systemic nature of racial discrimination and the necessity of addressing the underlying societal structures and ideas.

Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist, in her book *Race and Racism*, defines racism as, “. . . the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority” (87). One of the main driving forces for racist behavior is the need for control and power, and it utilizes threats and humiliation to get that authority. The underprivileged groups aspire to possess them whereas dominant social groups define social ideals and possess financial wealth or important social symbols. Thus, dominating groups intend to maintain the situation by discriminating against and supporting the inner group.

Evidently, Bernardine Evaristo being a postmodern writer, a playwright and a creative writing instructor, is the author of six novels, a novella, and a collection of poetry. This research paper focuses on her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) which won the Booker Prize. The author herself being a black, tries to bring in the complexities that the so called ‘color people’ face in a white society. Even though most of her works include both women and men characters, this book is exclusively written for women where she writes about the life of twelve black British women aged 19 to 93 who suffer from racial discrimination.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Amma is a fifty-year-old lesbian who takes great pride in her lifelong stropiness and her reluctance to follow anyone else’s rules but her own. Evaristo places Amma on the periphery of society as “. . . a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment that excluded her until the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it” (2). As Bell Hooks, a feminist and racial theorist, in her book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* says, “White rage is acceptable, can be both expressed and condoned, but black rage has no place and everyone knows it” (15).

Black women’s conditions are made worse by several forms of oppression. They face prejudice and are oppressed by society in addition to being denied chances. In order to conform to stereotypes, living turns into a performance act. When Amma attends a black women’s group in Brixton, Evaristo highlights their suffering that all black women experience throughout the story:

. . . 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 how it felt when people called them nigger, or racist thugs beat them up what it was like when white men opened doors or gave up their seats on public transport for white women (which was sexist), but not for them (which was racist). (13)

Even though feminism is a struggle of women, there is an oppression even there due to race. This is strongly stated by Bell Hooks in her work *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, “As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized” (16).

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, all the characters demonstrate the multicultural global nationality, and intricacy of inter-mixed race. Evaristo uses the following to illustrate how complicated Dominique’s ancestry’s racial origins are.

Dominique was born in the St Paul’s area of Bristol to an Afro Guyanese mother, Cecilia, who tracked her lineage back to slavery, and an Indo Guyanese father, Wintley, whose ancestors were indentured labourers from Calcutta the oldest of ten children who all looked more black than Asian and identified as such, especially as their father could relate to the Afro Caribbean people he’d grown up with, but not to Indians fresh over from India. (7)

Evaristo challenges the division of people into distinct races, using the example of Dominique, a British citizen. Her father is an Indian, and her mother’s ancestry dates back to slavery. Despite living in Britain and the west for a long time Dominique feels alienated in her own mother land. Evaristo raises debates over whether Dominique should be defined by her father’s origins, her mother’s, or oppressed by the circumstances of both, illustrating the inconsistency of racial segregations based on science and history. Megan is also portrayed to be an inter mixed racial character who is “. . . part Ethiopian, part African-American, part Malawian, and part English” (311). Megan finds it to be absurd and unnatural to be defined by her genealogy when she is just a human. Gabrielle Zevin author of the

novel *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* states, “And as any mixed-race person will tell you—to be half of two things is to be whole of nothing” (78).

The black is often stereotyped as childish, uncivilized, and barbaric, with little expectation of rationality or learning abilities. It is regrettable that stereotypical racism is not just used by white people. Even black people have a tendency to stereotype one another. Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto social psychology scholars in their book *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* states that, “Stereotypes not only can provoke self-confirming behavior in stereotyped others, but also can bias memory in ways that get people to recall stereotype-confirming “evidence”” (14).

Evaristo in the novel brings out the black women’s theatre life that also had the issue of racism. When Amma and Dominique went to the main stream theatre, they were not allowed into the theatre just because of the reason that they were black. They were only allotted the roles of “. . . slave, servant, prostitute, nanny or crim” (6). This evidently validate the existing social and cultural reality that even the highest roles were not allotted to the people of color.

In addition, Evaristo also highlights Nzinga’s skepticism of black women’s ability to speak English with a British accent. Evaristo describes Amma's reaction to the statement:

Amma thought she was accusing them of being too white or at best, in-authentically black, she’d come across it before, 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. (82)

Evaristo’s characters, thus fight against internalized racism in addition to racism perpetrated by white people. A black individual is patriarchally rewarded for being more civilized than their siblings when they adopt white culture and talk fluently in English. When the black people achieve success, they are frequently labeled as ‘black successful persons,’ in contrast to white people who are never assigned labels based on their race or skin color. Bell Hooks states in her work *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* that:

. . . we talk about the way white people who shift locations, as her companion has done, begin to see the world differently. Understanding how racism works, he can see the way in which whiteness acts to terrorize without seeing himself as bad, or all white people as bad, and all black people as good. (49)

The dichotomy between black and white people is deeply ingrained in people’s minds. Without critical thinking, blacks are often viewed as the color people lacking morality, untruth, sin, animism, and poverty, while whites are seen as representatives of purity, civility, progress, goodness, and truth. Further on, Nzinga comments, “. . . black women need to identify racism wherever we find it, especially our own internalized racism, when we’re filled with such a deep self-loathing we turn against our own” (82).

Obviously, Evaristo illustrates the potential dangers that come with a white person hanging out with a black person. This is highlighted when Courtney tries to get into the gang of Unfuckables, Yazz insists her to check her privilege as the people won’t see them as women anymore, they see “. . . white woman who hangs with brownies” (65) she warns that she would lose her own privilege. When Yazz and Courtney walks through Brixton Hight Street, Yazz notices all the attention of the boys where on Courtney and Yazz was completely ignored as usual. “. . . a white girl walking with a black girl is always seen as black man- friendly” (68). This incident highlights the depressed state of black women. Bell Hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* states that, “While it has become “cool” for white folks to hang out with black people and express pleasure in black culture, most white people do not feel that this pleasure should be linked to unlearning racism” (17).

Evaristo challenges hierarchical oppression and portrays characters striving for independence. Carole, a banker, strives to improve her social status. Despite achieving her place and dignity, she is nonetheless subjected to covert racist stereotyping by coworkers, clients, and colleagues who make disparaging remarks about her racial inadequacy. She responds with hidden discomfort. Bell Hooks in her *Black Looks: Race and Representation* states that, “Why is it so difficult for many white folks to

understand that racism is oppressive not because white folks have prejudicial feelings about blacks (they could have such feelings and leave us alone) but because it is a system that promotes domination and subjugation?" (15).

Evaristo demonstrates that prejudice, whether overt or covert, has comparable impact. For Amma and Dominique, who choose to speak out against the oppressive structures, Evaristo crafts this scene. They decided to start up their own company called "Bush Women Theatre Company" (14) to "be a voice in theatre where there was silence black and Asian women's stories would get out there" (14) with the moto "On Our Own Terms or Not At All" (14). Through Nzinga's character the author tries to showcase the characters racial incrimination on stepping on a black doormat is like stepping on their own people and not use anything that is of black in color.

Thus, in *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo depicts the hierarchical structure that permeates racism and discrimination as well. Through Shirley's mother Winsome who moved to Britain, Evaristo brings to light the plight faced by a colored person living in a white area named Scilly Isles. When she entered the place for the first time, "slowed down to gawp or hurl insults" (261), they had to live in a railway station as they were not allotted any lodging. A women said that, "you can't sleep here because your color will come off on the sheets" (261). She experienced prejudice, including being the last customer to enter a store and being purposefully pushed and shoved to demonstrate their authority and ability to abuse her. She once came home to discover that her door had the words "GO HOME" (263) painted on it and dead rats at door step. One thing to remember from that experience, she says, is to either go back and never return because there were no anti-discrimination laws in place, or to stay for a long time and act in a way that people would grow accustomed to. Frantz Fanon, an Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, argues in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* that, ". . . white and black represent the two poles of a world, two poles in perpetual conflict: a genuinely Manichean concept of the world" (31). These overt forms of tyranny and discrimination have the same consequences as Carole's experience with covert forms of discrimination from her coworkers, who compliment her accomplishments and accent with a paternalistic sense of empathy.

Thereby, Evaristo bring in displacement, diaspora, and uprooted identities in numerous lives. Grace, who was placed in an institution to train servant girls to work for the white people after losing her mother at an early age, still yearns for her mother. After being married to Joseph and having her own place, she speaks in a monologue to her mother who has already dead about the beauty and elegance that lies in the simplest form of existence. This emphasizes how different the average immigrant's and the natives' levels of living are. Evaristo's discussion of racial intermixing, highlights the equality of humans, regardless of color and ethnicity. Due to the racial discrimination the individuals develop a kind of complex that makes them look down upon their own selves. This ultimately lead them into a kind of neurosis in which stereotype threat surrounds the sufferer all the time. Evaristo portrays this neurotic state in *Girl, Woman, Other*, where Carol exhibits neurotic behavior after moving in with the white people:

. . . when she heard another student refer to her in passing as 'so ghetto', she wanted to spin on her heels and shout after her, excuse me? ex-cuuuuuse me? say that to my face, byatch! (people were killed for less where she came from) or had she misheard it? were they actually saying *get to* – the library? supermarket? (132)

The same way Amma and Dominique pour a jar of beer on a director for featuring a semi- naked black woman running around the stage for a play.

Eventually, *Girl, Woman, Other* depicts the situations faced by those who are the most marginalized in society. Majority of these characters are women of color who experience double alienation both from the patriarchal world and from the whites that include both male and female. Added to the above mentioned discrimination, alienation happens also through the unjustified racial discrimination, marginalization, disdain, denial of human rights, and an early disadvantage in their fight against these discriminatory systems. Evaristo depicts the suffering, oppression, dehumanization, and discrimination that these black women face throughout her work *Girl, Woman, Other*. Despite feeling

excluded and devalued, these women rewrite societal narratives by inventing and creating new selfhood techniques for themselves.

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