

## Inequality Experienced by Black Women Characters in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*: A Black Feminism Study

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### Abstract

Gender roles are determined by expectations and values within society, which can lead to stereotypes and prejudice. Stereotypes are judgments that are considered correct for a group, while racial stereotypes are assumptions about all people of the same race. These racial stereotypes can make life difficult for women. This research aims to analyze the inequality expressed in *Girl, Woman, Other* and how the disparity occurs in society. The study employs Kimberle Crenshaw's Black Feminism theory. Moreover, this study uses a qualitative descriptive research method to analyze the novel. The information, approach, and theories are drawn from books, dictionaries, internet sources, journals, encyclopedias, and other primary and secondary sources. The primary data is the novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. The result of this study is that the novel *Girl, Woman, Other* clearly illustrates that inequality occurs not only because there is one identity that is owned but because each character owns several intersecting social identities. Race, gender, class, and sexual orientation that intersect with one another are the leading causes of the inequalities experienced by the characters in *Girl, Woman, Other*. The inequality experienced by the six characters causes them to struggle to gain equality in society as human beings.

**Keywords:** Inequality; Black Feminism; Kimberlee Crenshaw; gender role; discrimination

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender roles are determined by the various expectations that individuals, groups, and society have of individuals based on their gender, as well as each society's gender values and beliefs (Blackstone, 2003). Girls and women, for example, are expected to dress traditionally feminine and to be polite, accommodating, and nurturing (Wajiran, 2019). Men are commonly thought to be strong, aggressive, and courageous. During this time, gender socialization occurred through disseminating messages, language, values, norms, beliefs, and models that embody specific gender representations. Related to how the role of gender will lead to a view of social groups in a particular environment, which is called a stereotype (Wajiran, 2020).

Stereotypes are usually defined as a judgment that is considered correct for a group; they can also be regarded as prejudice as an evaluation or attitude towards a group, and discrimination as behavior that systematically benefits or harms a group because it is not always considered right or wrong. Stereotypes are founded on faulty and inaccurate

information about others - in other words, false knowledge. When knowledge is derived through exclusionary systems, it has the potential to oppress further and humiliate people who are already misunderstood and misrepresented in dominant group thought. Furthermore, if organizations base their knowledge on exclusionary thinking, they are prone to behave exclusionary, repeating society's racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, class oppression, and homophobia. Thus, confronting repressive racial, class, and gender relations in society involves the reconstruction of knowledge to build a foundation from which to transform these detrimental and dehumanizing stereotypes and oppressive structures (Margaret, 2006).

Then, a stereotype can occur when assessing the role of gender, culture, or race. A gender stereotype is a belief that may lead to the holder making assumptions about members of the subject group, women or men. Gender stereotyping, on the other hand, is the practice of applying a stereotypical belief to a person (Ring & Jupiter, 2005). While racial stereotypes are assumptions that all people of the same race have certain features. These associated traits are often unfavorable (Jewell, 1993). The existence of gender stereotypes in the social environment makes life as a woman complicated, especially being a black woman. The term 'black' has negative implications in ordinary discourse. Indeed, having a black mark against one's name, being in a bad mood, or being the family's black sheep are all synonyms for possessing negative attributes that cause others to use exclusion and avoidance methods. It scarcely seems necessary to point out here that the definition of the term 'white' demonstrates its socially created contrast to black by generally implying purity and innocence. Thus, being whiter than white or telling a white lie is equivalent to having no harmful intent.

There are gender stereotypes, especially women, as will be analyzed here. This creates discrimination and leads to inequality in the social environment. Therefore, to deal with it, women unite their strength through an understanding called feminism. Feminism is a set of political ideas and practices based on the premise that women are human beings equal to men. Feminist analysis emphasizes the considerable role that gender, specifically how society defines femininity and masculinity, plays in our day-to-day existence. For instance, gender significantly impacts how we perceive ourselves and interact with others.

In addition to the existence of inequality, they are based on gender. Inequality can also be experienced when someone's possessions differ from those of the majority in their social surroundings. This inequality can manifest as discrimination, racism, and sexism, all of which are common among black people. If the existence of feminism can eliminate women's inequality, then there is a concept known as black feminism. Black feminism focuses on Black women's lived experiences, allowing them to discuss and highlight the many aspects of their identity and how this relates to gender inequality (Wajiran, 2024). According to Endraswara (2003), literary works can be used to criticize societal conditions sharply. This exemplifies how the role of gender as a social condition can be found in scholarly works (Siswayanti, 2013). Wajiran (2022) explains that a literary work is a piece of writing that describes an actual occurrence in the society (Wajiran, 2022). The author wishes to adopt life values through this literary work's medium to comprehend life's meaning and nature.

Many writers are currently discussing issues of inequality in their works. This theme is thought to be related to the disparity that often occurs, especially among black women in society. Inequality is widespread in various works, including *In Every Mirror, She's Black* by Lola Akinmade Åkerström, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *SULA* by Tony Morrison. These works overcome the inequality that occurs in society and the struggles carried out by black women. The researcher finds similar challenges and problems in *Girl, Woman, and Other*.

Novelist Bernardine Evaristo has published a novel titled *Girl, Woman, Other* in 2019. In the same year, this novel received the 2019 Booker Prize (Hamilton, 2019). From a young girl to an elderly lady and a non-binary character who cannot be classified as female or a male. The story recounts the lives of 12 individuals who have resided in the United Kingdom for several decades. Each character has a separate chapter with a narrative about her passion, family, love, and suffering.

Each character is descended from early black immigrants to the United Kingdom. The author describes how immigrants made it through life in a society that oppressed women and people of color. Twelve characters, primarily women, black, and British, collide with their identities, including gender, class, country, ethnicity, age, and sexuality. Some characters receive unequal treatment because of racial or gender differences. Their relationship is where gender repression mostly happens, and some people in society have come to accept it.

The central character, Amma Bonsu, is a feminist and queer writer who directed *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, which will premiere at the National. The narrative was followed by numerous chapters connected to black characters Dominique, Bummi, Carole, Shirley, and LaTisha. The story was also followed by the story of characters that were mixed or light-skinned, and their names are Penelope, Morgan, Hattie, and Grace. The injustices black women suffer are shown in *The Girl, Woman, Other* in a powerful way. Because of their race, some characters face prejudice and discrimination in their professional and academic lives, as well as in society at large.

The characters grapple with issues such as gender inequality, racism, colorism, and the intersections of their identities. They navigate the complexities of womanhood, confronting societal expectations and carving out their unique paths. Through the various perspectives presented in the novel, Evaristo provides a nuanced study of the relationship between gender, race, and social class. In addition to external forms of oppression, characters face internalized prejudice and self-discovery. They seek to redefine womanhood on their terms, challenging societal narratives and resisting the limitations imposed on them.

The characters embrace their uniqueness and forge relationships with one another, finding solace and strength in their shared experiences. They engage in critical conversations about identity, politics, and social justice, amplifying their voices and challenging power systems. In addition, this novel acknowledges the historical contribution of black women to the feminist movement and emphasizes the importance of intergenerational dialogue and solidarity. The researcher chooses to analyze it using the black feminism theory by Kimberlee Crenshaw, which focuses on the intersectionality concept, especially related to black women's inequality and how victims struggle to deal with discrimination in the form of racism, sexism, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). The inequality in *The Girl, Woman, Other* is caused by the existence of intersecting identities that each character has, according to the concept of intersectionality put forward by Kimberlee Crenshaw. Then, this inequality makes each character desire to struggle for equality, like the idea put forward by Marsham (Crenshaw, 2013).

The researcher is excited to analyze this novel based on the description above. First and foremost, no research addresses this topic. Second, this novel describes the social conditions in English society with the presence of black immigrant women, which is very interesting. Third, this novel received the 2019 Booker Prize award alongside Margaret Atwood's *The Testament* (Hamilton, 2019).

## RESEARCH METHOD

There are two sources of data used in this study. The primary data of this study comes from the whole book, such as monologues, dialogues, created atmospheres,

conflicts, and solutions. This study uses the novel published in 2019 by Bernadine Evaristo. The secondary data uses journal articles, a thesis, reviews about black feminism, and other related studies.

The data samples were collected using documentation and a note-taking technique. According to Sugiyono (2015: 329), documentation is a method used to obtain data and information from books, archives, documents, writing numbers, and pictures in the form of reports and information that support the research (Sugiyono, 2015). The documentation is used to collect data, which is observed and then analyzed to get the conclusion as the research result. The data collections were analyzed using descriptive qualitative research. According to Sugiyono (2009:13), qualitative research methods are referred to as interpretive methods because the results of research data are more concerned with interpreting data in the field (Sugiyono, 2009). In this study, researchers employ the technique of black feminism analysis. Researchers employ intersectionality as the central concept of black feminism, which concentrates on race, gender, sexual orientation, and social identity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part provides an overview of the results and a discussion of the researchers' opinions. This sub-chapter is divided into two sections: the first discusses experiences of inequality, and the second discusses initiatives that struggle for equality. In this study, the researcher highlights various instances of inequality among the characters based on their social identities, including race, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation.

### Inequality Experienced by Black Women Characters

The researchers show the data already collected from *Girls, Women, others* in the research findings. According to Kimberlee (1989), inequality can be caused by a single identity factor and multiple identity factors, namely several social identities that intersect (Crenshaw, 1989). The social identities referred to in Kimberlee's theory of intersectionality are race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. *Girl, Woman, Other* tells about black women characters who experience inequality in their lives as black people and other factors such as race, gender, and class.

### Intersecting Racial and Gender Inequality

In *Girls, Women, Other* Characters, Amma experiences inequality due to her gender and racial identity as an African woman living in England. Amma is a person whose career began in theatre and drama. As a beginning professional, she travels from one location to another to get a job. Most of the time, Amma receives poor treatment from others. When she attempted to become a theatre artist, she was mainly subjected to discrimination based on her gender and race. The following quotation illustrates this point clearly:

*Amma was shorter, with African hips and thighs, perfect slave girl material, one director told her when she walked into an audition for a play about Emancipation. (Evaristo, 2019, p.6)*

The situation above occurred when Amma was still starting her career by auditioning from one place to another. Amma is portrayed as participating in a theatre audition in the preceding dialogue. She attempted to audition for a role in a play with an exciting theme, specifically emancipation. However, the first time she tried to stand up for the audition, a director bluntly informed her that her appearance suited for the role of an enslaved person because she was small and had an African physique, i.e., she had black color, was short in appearance, and had curly hair. Receiving such treatment led Amma

to believe that being a black woman was her most significant difficulty in achieving her goal. The director is a white person; he indirectly presents his identity as superior, and the majority feel entitled to demean someone. The director determines which roles suit Amma based on ethnicity and gender. This is an example of intersecting racial and gender inequalities in the character of *Girls, Women, Others*.

### Intersecting Patriarchal and Gender Inequality

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, inequality does not only occur because of gender or race but also because of the concept of patriarchy, which makes a woman experience gender inequality in the position between men and women.

Other inequalities are experienced by the characters in *Girl, Woman, Other*:

*“Mum worked eight hours a day in paid employment, raised four children, maintained the home, made sure the patriarch’s dinner was on the table every night, and his shirts were ironed every morning meanwhile, he was off saving the world” (Evaristo, 2019, p.11)*

The quote was made by Bummi, a character in the novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, who used to live with her parents during the early stages of her life. Her father figure represented the role of a patriarch, demonstrating his perceived dominance as a male inside his household. Bummi experienced examples of gender-based discrimination against her mother. The mother was pressured to work in employment to contribute to the family's financial well-being and assume responsibility for managing household matters. The previous quote was made by Bummi, who expresses frustration at the continuing existence of inequality within her nearest environment.

As a woman living in a patriarchy, you are always expected to follow the rules that the hierarchy establishes, in which males are superior and are excluded from having to take care of home tasks. Next, in the following quotation, Bummi makes a sarcastic comment on how his father's only job is to work to provide a living for his family, which ironically seems to save the world out in the middle of nowhere, according to Bummi's narration in *Girl, Woman, Other*, one of the most challenging jobs that her father had to complete was purchasing meat for them to eat together.

As related to the cases that occur in this novel, people sometimes only try to understand the issue of patriarchy but cannot articulate how sexism or gender discrimination can occur because of patriarchy itself. This explains why gender inequality exists within the Bummi family. This novel contains evidence of gender inequality due to the existence of patriarchy, which causes distinctions between fathers and mothers. As Crenshaw (1991) points out, the problem is not only that both discourses disappoint women of color by failing to recognize "additional" issues of race or patriarchy but also that discourse is frequently inadequate for the distinct task of articulating the complete dimension of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1991). The situation described in the preceding quotation demonstrates that another instance of gender-based inequality exists in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

### Intersecting Class and Gender Inequality

After escaping the patriarchal lifestyle she experienced with her father and mother, Bummi now lives with her affluent aunt in the hope that she will be cared for until she can live independently after her parents pass away. Bummi is a woman of the black race and

the inferior socioeconomic class. So, she frequently receives poor treatment while living in a new location.

The following quote explains the inequality that Bummi's characters experience due to socioeconomic differences:

*It would be best if you were grateful I took you in, Aunty Ekio said, showing Bummi her three-level concrete house, the first time Bummi had been inside a home not made of bamboo, with rooms that led into other rooms such as one called a nursery for the children to play with their toys and a 'walk-in wardrobe' for Mrs Ekio. (Evaristo, 2019, p.163)*

This quotation describes how Bummi's aunt mistreated her. When she arrived at her aunt's house for the first time, she attempted to greet her respectfully but instead greeted her disrespectfully. Her aunt is a rich woman who owns a luxurious home. She also lives glamorously every day. She lives like a princess, going to the salon, shopping at the mall, and meeting her friends. Her aunt also implied that she was fortunate to have been accepted by her aunt, whose class was higher than hers and who lived in glamour. As a member of the upper socioeconomic class, she believes she can treat Bummi as she pleases. Nonetheless, Bummi is of a lower social class and demands her aunt Ekio to be her living guardian, who takes care of her. Consequently, Aunt Ekio feels more confident and liberated to do anything. In addition, her aunt implies that she is fortunate to have been accepted by her aunt, who is of a higher social class than she is and lives in luxury.

### **Intersecting Sexual Orientations and Gender Stereotyping**

Inequality between the sexes can be caused not only by discrimination from other people but also by an environment that promotes gender stereotyping. Megan is a character in *Girl, Woman, Other* whose mother discriminates against her because she wants her daughter to resemble the majority of women in society as a whole.

The following quotation explains the situation:

Her mother was unthinkingly repeating patterns of oppression based on gender; one example was that Megan preferred wearing trousers as a child, which she found more comfortable than dresses; she liked the look of them, liked having pockets to put her hands and other things into, liked looking like her brother Mark who was three years older (Evaristo, 2019, p.307)

The quote explains that Megan was subjected to constant discrimination, which made her feel like she was born a woman and caused her to experience a great deal of injustice when it came to her clothes. Megan is a born woman, but she feels more comfortable using anything without being prohibited by her mother. For instance, she loves to wear the same clothes as her older brother, Mark, but her mother forbids it because she is a girl. She believes being a woman requires her to be feminine, even though she prefers to dress like her older sibling. Stereotypes represent social attitudes regarding marginalized or minority groups. The existence of disparities between one individual and another demonstrates the existence of a stereotype. These differences cause everyone to experience discrimination and inequality from other individuals (Hall, 1997).

### **Struggle of Black Women Characters**

The numerous inequalities the black women face in *Girl, Woman, Other* inspire them to seek liberation and prosperity in the form of equality. Whoever receives a distinct

treatment from the others truly desires equality. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, each black female character fights for equality. Each character in the novel fights for equality in their way.

According to Marsham (2000), the term struggle denotes a struggle for survival or state independence. Based on the narrative in *Girl, Woman, Other*, we can conclude that black women struggle to maintain a just and prosperous ideology for their lives (see Marsam, 2000). In this case, the characters' struggles in *Girl, Woman, Other* are divided into enthusiasm for career independence, voicing justice, and self-affirmation to increase self-confidence. Therefore, what they do is what they believe will lead them to equality.

### Career Freedom

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the black woman character struggles through career independence. So often encountering inequality in career opportunities, they put all their efforts into achieving equality by creating their jobs. The following quotation describes the character's efforts to fight for equality:

*They decided they needed to start their own theatre company to have careers as actors because neither was prepared to betray their politics to find jobs. (Evaristo, 2019, p.13)*

The quote above illustrates how Amma and Dominique struggle. Based on the previous explanation about Amma and Dominique's experiences when they started their careers in theatre and drama. Throughout their careers as theatre artists, they faced numerous difficulties that were judged unfair due to their race and gender. So many bad experiences make it difficult for them to get career opportunities. They ultimately attempted to overcome these difficulties by founding their own theatre company. This is one of Amma and Dominique's struggles to fight existing inequality. They hope that by creating their own company, there will be no reason for them to be looked down upon, discriminated against, or denied career opportunities. This proves their years of hardship encouraged them to pursue equal opportunities in life.

### Voicing Justice

Another character struggles differently, advocating for justice with his voice. Black women frequently experience inequality because their opinions are not heard. The effort to express this opinion is one of the struggles for social equality. The quotes below describe the struggles of the other characters: Shirley decides it's time to step up and speak out

*I believe in making society more equal for our kids; she plows on, ignoring pointed coughs telling her to get on with it or shut up (Evaristo, 2019, p.226)*

The quote above is a struggle made by Shirley, a teacher. The previous explanation explained that Shirley was a black woman who worked as a schoolteacher in England. Shirley frequently encountered inequality when male and white-female teachers did not hear her opinions. The situation in the quote occurs when Shirley is confronted with statements about students being issued to students with low test scores. Upon recognizing a circumstance contradicting his ideology, he attempted to find the courage to voice his long-held opinion. Shirley felt she needed to bring justice to her students while breaking the standard that black women would never be heard of. This sentence demonstrates that Shirley dared to express an opinion she believed was correct. In this situation, the previous quote demonstrates Shirley's struggle against the dominants by showing her willingness to express her views and her early efforts to promote equality for her students as a teacher.

## Boosting Confidence

The characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* struggle with self-affirmation to boost their confidence. Essentially, every person is valuable regardless of how they are. By boosting their confidence, the characters *Girl, Woman, and Other* can eliminate inequality because they are not easily intimidated or discriminated against in any form.

As Carole's other character contends with inequity, the following quotations illustrate additional struggles: Her morning mantra in the bathroom mirror

*"I am highly presentable, likable, clubbable, relatable, promotable, and successful" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 140)*

This quote explains how Carole's circumstances led her to act this way. Carole works as an employee of a company that experiences a lot of inequality in the form of discrimination against gender and race. As a disrespected office worker, she must continue to struggle and survive in the face of her dominant coworkers' humiliation and harassment. Kartono (1992:10) argues that women may maximize their talents and potential in the struggle for survival uniquely and humanely (Kartono, 1992). Because Carole is essentially talented, intelligent, and hardworking, she always desires to maximize her inherent abilities. Carole emphasized herself in the sentence in the quote above so that she would not feel intimidated when her boss harassed or demeaned her. She cast a spell to suggest to herself that she should always be confident and not easily fall into any form of discrimination. This demonstrates that Carole struggles for equality in her workplace.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research analysis discussed above, the black woman characters Amma, Dominique, Bummi, Carole, Shirley, and Megan experience inequality, which causes them to struggle to achieve equality. The researchers focused on two aspects: the inequalities experienced by black women characters and their struggle for equality. First, the six black women in the novel *Girl, Woman, Other* experience inequality due to their intersecting social identities. Each has multiple intersecting social identities that make them subject to discrimination, resulting in inequality with other communities. The social identities are race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation. Based on the data analyzed, it is clear that the six characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* experience inequality, the majority of which stems from the intersection of race and gender. This occurs because they are African women who live in a predominantly white country, England. Almost all of the six black women characters share a similar circumstance due to the inequality they face. They face discrimination in society and the workplace, where they are treated as worthless and inferior due to their different races and genders. In addition, the existence of sexual preferences that are different from how there are stereotypes makes them discriminated against and considered different.

Second, the characters' struggle in *Girl, Woman, Other* is an effort to achieve equality in society as human beings. The experiences of inequality experienced by the six characters make them struggle in their way. In the novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, their struggle for equality is described in career freedom, voicing justice, and boosting confidence. Career freedom, specifically the battle of Amma, Dominique, and Bummi, is how they carry out the struggle by opening their path in a career by opening a job for themselves. Then, voicing justice, namely, the battle carried out by Shirley and Megan's characters, is an effort to voice justice by expressing opinions that they believe can educate the people around them to listen to each other more and eliminate inequality. Lastly, boosting confidence, specifically, the struggle that Carole is taking part in is fighting for equality, which starts

with increasing self-confidence to combat discrimination or intimidation, which causes it to be easier to experience inequality.

The novel *Girl, Woman, Other* clearly illustrates that inequality is a problem that must be eliminated in society. Inequality occurs not only because one identity is owned but because each character owns several intersecting social identities. Race, gender, class, and sexual orientation that intersect with one another are the leading causes of the inequalities experienced by the characters in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Then, the inequality experienced by the six characters causes them to struggle to gain equality in society as human beings.

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