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The Third Gender Conundrum: A Critical Reading of *Girl, Woman, Other*

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ABSTRACT

Gender is a social construct that has acquired the status of a natural phenomenon over the years, owing to the history and tradition behind its social, linguistic and cultural performance. The social conditioning on the binary system of gender necessitated the creation of a third category to represent deviant expressions. This paper critically examines the limitations of a third gender category as an expression of identity. It argues that while the third gender as a category provides social acceptance to a certain level, it is still reductive and is an offshoot of the very binary system of gender classification it challenges. The study seeks to examine this problem through a critical reading of the 2019 Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo. The characters from the novel are analyzed to explore the shifts in cultural and social discourses around the traditional binary gender system. It examines how the characters navigate the intersections of sex and gender through self-expression, thereby contributing to the need to revisit the third gender as a linguistic, social and cultural expression of gender deviance. The paper calls for a revisionist approach to initiate a paradigm shift in the mainstream perceptions of gender identity.

Keywords: *Deviant, discourse, gender, identity, sex, third gender*.

Introduction

Gender, a social construct is often confused with sex, a natural biological attribute assigned to humans at the time of their birth. While the one born with the male sex organ is destined to behave in a particular way, the female counterpart is expected to behave just the opposite. These 'expectations' later become essential in understanding human behaviour. The extent to which a person fulfils these roles is paramount in dictating social validation. Social validation thereby stabilizes identities for the ones who carry out the expectations. This is why Stuart Hall defines identities as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position

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ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225). Those who find it hard to submit to these expectations and, in turn, construct identities are therefore ostracized and labelled meaningless. This 'meaningless' ness makes them 'strange' and 'queer.' In his essay On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense, Friedrich Nietzsche writes:

> a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth… it is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves… and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things--metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. (Nietzsche)

Here, Nietzsche is exposing the transitoriness of language and other social systems. He suggested that language constructs truth and reality way before structuralism emerged as a distinct school of thought, which posited language as a structure that constructs reality and shapes our perception of the world. Poststructuralism emerged as a school of thought in the 1970s attempting to question some basic structuralist assumptions. When Structuralism proposed that reality is constructed through the structure of language, Poststructuralists questioned the constancy and validity of these structures itself. According to them, the meanings proposed by these structures are not ultimate, and could change with time. Thus, Saussure's concept of the transcendental signified is questioned as Derrida proposes, "the absence of the transcended signified extends the domain and play of signification ad infinitum" (249). When Structuralism suggests that language "does not refer to things in the world, but only to concepts of things in the world", (Nagarajan 162) Poststructuralism suggests that language "refers neither to things in the world nor to our concepts of things, but only to the play of signifiers of which language itself is made" (Nagarajan 162). It is this 'play of signifiers' that constructs reality.

Gendered Realities

Gerda Lerner writes in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* that gender is "a costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance" (238). Gender has traditionally been classified into two, therefore, humans are also expected to belong to any of these. A third category came in response to the need of representing those who either identify with none or both. It supposedly situates individuals who could not identify with the linguistic, social and cultural image of what it means to be a man or a woman. Deconstruction critiques Western cultural tendencies that essentialize binary oppositions to arrive at conceptual clarity. It challenges the notion that meaning exists in pairs and in accordance with the degree of correspondence and difference between them. It problematizes the nature of the dyad, which

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authorizes 'the play of signifiers' to regulate the system of gender positioning and rationalizes one gender category's superiority over the other. This 'play of signifiers' points towards the way in which gender bias is constructed and maintained. Thus, a poststructuralist perspective on gender can explain Simon de Beauvoir's words,

The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality, the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general. In contrast, woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity (15).To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognising each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other". (686)

The construction of a third category can also be attributed to this 'play of signifiers', which is usually patriarchy. As patriarchal assumptions are driven deep into our psyche, we internalize how men are expected to be rational and strong and women emotional and passive. Thus, the dyadic system of gender is too tight to include any variant expressions, as the system finds its validation itself in the stark opposition of the categories of male and female. Here comes the question of the validity of a third gender category as an expression of identity. The term 'third gender' is used to refer to people who do not identify as a man or a woman. It also includes those who identify with both and hence cannot be classified entirely as belonging to one of them. Hence, the system's limits are expanded to incorporate a slightly different expression. But to what extend does this grant membership to those who deviate from the binary norms of gender. While some non-conformists identify with the category of third gender, a large majority of those who deviate from mainstream gender perceptions do not belong or do not wish to belong to this category. *Girl, Woman, Other* locates the female characters at the intersection of gender, identity and sexuality. The way in which the characters of the novel deliberate the validity of gender categories and question the idea of being a 'woman' contributes to broader deliberations on the inflexibility of the binary system of gender and other forms of signification that draws its material from the same.

Non-conformity in *Girl, Woman, Other*

Bernardine Evaristo became the first black British person to win the Booker Prize in 2019 with her novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. The novel captures the life of twelve black women, offering a

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canvas of diverse human experiences discussing gender, sexuality, identity, motherhood, race, class, culture and beyond. The title of the novel itself points to the question of identifying with the binary framework of gender. As Evaristo uses the words 'girl' and 'woman' here, she is not referring to the traditional woman, a strictly patriarchal invention, and is instead redefining girlhood and womanhood in an unprecedented manner. The word 'other' is complicated here as she envisions it to be an emblem of inclusivity and acceptance. The novel's dedication is noteworthy in this regard. Evaristo writes, "For the sisters & the sistas & the sistahs & the sistren& the women & the womxn & the wimmin & the womyn& our brethren & our bredrin & our brothers & our bruvs& our men & our mandem & the LGBTQI + members of the human family" (Evaristo). Evaristo's 'other' expands to infinity as she explores diverse experiences and ways of identifying in the novel. There are female characters who stick to traditional gender roles as submissive daughters, caring wives and nurturing mothers, but who fail to act accordingly in the course of their life.

For instance, Bummi is a traditional mother who desperately tries to find matches for her daughter before she gets thirty, and she thinks that her motherhood is denied as her daughter Carole marries an Englishman without her approval. As the story progresses, we see Bummi challenging the patriarchal shackles that fettered her for a long and ultimately escaping from them, embracing her identity. She also recalls how her mother, who was forced into marriage at the age of fourteen by her father, had advised her to fight against the traditional ways of designating the lives of women. She also contemplates on how she was considered as a sexual prey by the church bishop after the death of her husband, which in turn led her to prostitution. All these incidents force her to re-evaluate her perceptions on tradition and gender roles. Here, she accepts that the system is corrupted as it grants unequivocal authority to one sex, even enabling them to take the liberty and autonomy of the opposite sex for granted. Thus, Bummi, who has lived more than half of her life as a traditional daughter, wife and mother, appropriating pre-conceived notions on femininity, realizes the problem with the system of gender, that has in turn structured her perceptions of truth and reality itself. She disrupts the internalized structures of heteronormativity as well as she encounters her bisexuality.

Winsome is another mother who disrupts the archetype of the nurturing, self-effacing and stoic mother in the course of the novel. She is a traditional wife who teaches herself that she "had to obey her husband" (Evaristo 259) and that "divorce was shameful and only granted on the grounds of adultery" (Evaristo 259), and a traditional mother who fears that her daughter's lesbian friend might make her own child "catch the bug" (Evaristo 250) and a traditional

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grandmother who keenly listens to her grandchildren's lives, without being listened to by anyone. Winsome encounters her real self as she feels a "bursting sexual desire" (Evaristo 269) for her son-in-law Lennox in their first meeting. She experiences the conflict between the ideated image of a woman she has appropriated for herself, and the impulses of any other human being consumed by desire. Eventually, she enters a relationship with her son-in-law, all the while questioning the ideated image of motherhood she has subscribed to so far. Here, Winsome also re-orients her structures of knowledge and reality as unwelcome feelings confront her as a mother. As she suspects she is at war with her morals, she unwittingly realizes that her morals were nothing short of a structure that constructed her reality. She understands that no greater power governs her actions than a prescribed designation of wifehood and motherhood handed over to her through linguistic and cultural images. She abandons her self-effacing counterpart as she realizes the futility of the structures that constructed her reality. She steps into a fresh reality where the 'play of signifiers' is different. Thus, Winsome, like Bummi, is a woman who tries hard but cannot fit into the mould of womanhood. Here, Bummi and Winsome unsubscribe to those structures that constructed their reality for a long time. The "transcendental signified" of what it means to be a woman and a mother change for Bummi and Winsome, respectively, as they carve new definitions of womanhood and motherhood, which does not align with the traditional perceptions. This is because of a change in the 'play of signifiers' that construct their worlds.

Penelope is another character, a working woman who finds it hard to fit into the traditional descriptions of womanhood and motherhood. Penelope's husband who considers the patriarchal order of things as "natural" tells her, in response to her desire to return to work after pregnancy, "me hunter-you homemaker/ me breadwinner-you bread-maker/ me child maker-you child raiser" (Evaristo 289). She is disturbed as she thinks of how educated women "were supposed to be satisfied with their roles as mothers and homemakers", while they were in reality "simmering with a discontent they were not allowed to express" (Evaristo 288). She places herself alongside them who were forced to "stay at home" (Evaristo 288) by their husbands, wasting their life with "boredom and banality" (Evaristo 289). Her husband Giles scoffs the idea of women enjoying "the fulfilment of both motherhood and job satisfaction" (Evaristo 289) at once and forbids Penelope from going to work after delivery. At the same time, she does not really enjoy the process of mothering as she mourns the "waist that wouldn't return to its original measurement", and the "lost bouncy ball quality of her breasts" (Evaristo 293-294). As Phillip, her second husband, accuses her of drinking, Penelope reproaches, "why

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was it all right for you to drink in the pub with your friends of an evening but not all right for me to go continental in the privacy of my own home?" (Evaristo 293). Ultimately, Penelope understands that both her husbands were subject to a patriarchal mindset that mapped her life in such a way that it revolves around wifehood and motherhood and that she has lost connection with herself by trying to conform to gender roles. Penelope's reality undergoes a paradigm shift as the discourses around her change with time. For instance, she recalls how magazines she is read as a young woman advised women to be obedient and submissive while those she reads now "argued that women should not define themselves by a male partner and to depend on a man was a sign of weakness" (Evaristo 297).

Amma is another character, a lesbian mother who materializes her gay friend's desire to become a father. Though her sexual preference is different from traditional notions on heteronormativity, she enjoys her motherhood more than anything. Though she does not fit in to the traditional definitions on womanhood, she embraces and appreciates motherhood. Evaristo describes Amma's feelings thus, "Yazz was the miracle she never thought she wanted, and having a child really did complete her, something she rarely confided because it somehow seemed anti-feminist" (36). Thus, her quality of nurturing does not come from any biological, instinct women supposedly possess from birth. In fact, she carries in her motherly feelings which some other mothers (who lived traditional ways of life) in the novel do not relate to. Hence, she topples the supposedly immutable notion that womanhood and motherhood are related concepts that inevitability stem from a person born female.

Dominique, Amma's friend, is a lesbian who struggles in her relationship with a "powerful, uncontrollable" (Evaristo 78) radical feminist Nzinga. It is interesting to note how. Nzinga assures Dominique's safety, "although Dominique wasn't feeling particularly unsafe", and completion, "although Dominique wasn't feeling incomplete" (Evaristo 90). She even reaches to the point where she reminds Dominique that she's only her "apprentice" (Evaristo 93) and even suggests renaming Dominique. As Nzinga's love gradually demands Dominique's freedom and independence, the latter, who is schooled to normalize a discourse where men are assertive and women are passive, associates Nzinga's character to that of a typical male chauvinist. Though the relationship ends in a breakup, Dominique confronts the reality behind pre-conceived gender roles and expectations.

Megan is another character who turns into a non-binary individual in course of her life. As a young girl, she is subjected to "repeating patterns of oppression based on gender" and is thereby forced to get the "approval of society at large" (Evaristo 308). As the broader cultural and

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social discourse have traditionally appropriated cars for boys and dolls for girls, Megan is tasked to play with Barbie dolls, which she, in turn, defaces, a reaction against society's conformist attitudes on gender. As she deviates from mainstream perceptions of gender classification, her mother says, “she's such a beautiful child but there's not a feminine bone in her body” (Evaristo 309). She in fact starts hating her “womanly curves” and “breasts” and rejects her body as it is it used as an instrument to dictate her ways of behaving. The idea of being “feminine” haunts her until she accepts and embraces her non-binary identity.

Thus, she does not identify with any of the gender categories and might be considered as a third gender individual. However, as Megan asks her friend Bibi “weren't manhood and womanhood set in stone?” (Evaristo 319), she voices her concern regarding the possibility of extending the limits of the rigid structure of gender. Moreover, Megan prefers to be identified as non-binary, not third gender. She wishes to transcend the binary system rather than seeking to extend its limits. Megan’s friend Bibi is a transwoman who says, “Megan, much as I reject conformist gender bullshit… I still feel female, for me it’s not about wanting to play with dolls, it goes much deeper than that” (Evaristo 321). Bibi’s words are noteworthy since she claims female identity on account of something that goes beyond biological characteristics and pre-conceived behavioural notions. Incidentally, she cannot belong to the traditional category of women or the third gender. This leads Megan to the conclusion that gender is “full of misguided expectations” (Evaristo 321).

Other female characters like Carole, a working woman caught up in the cross roads of gender bias in the professional world, whose consent is taken for granted most of the time to ensure a better professional environment, Grace who feels no motherly instinct to nurture her baby, born out of forced sex, not love and Hattie who as a teenager is considered inappropriate to fulfill the role of the nurturing mother, because of the fear of exclusion in the marriage market, add to the novel’s deliberations on gender roles and expectations. All the characters are noteworthy in regard to the instability and misrepresentation the traditional category of ‘women’ offer them. They show how gender roles function with varying significance in various stages of a person's life. Never does it allow a woman to exercise her choice or freedom thoroughly. Thus, they are victims of the traditional gender expectations attached to women and is unwittingly experiencing a sense of unbelonging in the group. As it has been outlined here, all the characters undergo a shift as they encounter the absurdity of stabilizing their identity after they become aware of a change in the ‘play of signifiers’ that characterize the broader cultural and social

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realm they are a part of. Thus, they confront their reality and eventually confirm their detachment from the traditional system of gender categorization.

The Question of Representation

The introduction of a third gender category stemmed from the immutable, air-tight nature of the traditional dyad of gender signification. Any discussion on the third gender category therefore initiates a re-examination of the sanctity and stability of the other two categories. As it has been discussed in the earlier section, women who were schooled to follow the traditional system of gender and who even tries hard to fit in, experience a sense of unbelonging in the group. This throws light upon the limits that define gender categories. In her essay One Is Not Born a Woman, Monique Wittig talks about the naturalization of gender, especially in the case of women. She says: "In the case of women, ideology goes far since our bodies as well as our minds are the products of this manipulation. We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us" (Leitch et al. 1906). Wittig calls for action, starting with the destructing of this very idea of 'woman' precisely, the "myth of woman" (Leitch et al. 1909).

When third gender as a category accepts characteristics of pre-existing gender categories, the latter (here 'women') still does not guaranty representation to all born female. It constructs inflexible presuppositions on identity that does not change with time or discourse. As a result, the system is failing to represent even those who are associated with the group traditionally. This thought resonates in Bibi's words, "other trans females might think that being a woman is all about adhering to a stereotyped version of womanhood, when clearly most women can't be arsed with it all?" (Evaristo 324). In this context, the extent to which third gender as a category can extend representation to those who cannot belong biologically but still wants to belong is questioned.

Thus, third gender as a category is reductive in it that it does not mark a break from the binary system of gender and is instead a product of the system only. Even though it offers a space for individuals who do not conform to the binary gender norms, it still relies on a characterisation that is fundamentally rooted in the binary logic of being 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Thus, those who are marginalized by the gender binary system embraces third gender as a category only to accept the very system that has excluded them. As it has been discussed earlier, when individuals who are attributed traits of womanhood for being born female, find it hard to

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identify with the system, third gender as a category is problematic as it still tries to belong to the system that inherently restricts the freedom of self-identification.

As long as third gender as a category does not provide adequate representation to transgender, transsexual, non-binary, quiver gender, polygender, lesbian, gay, bisexual and gender-non-conforming females, it exists only as an offshoot of the inflexible binary system of gender. And even if these identities are represented, it still, by definition, stems from the binary system. Hence, the binary classification of gender has to be disrupted to initiate a re-orientation in the category of third gender. This will inevitably lead to the introduction of broader categories of gender differentiation that does not naturalize or normalize the binary system that considers other systems of signification as 'queer'. Evaristo shares in the novel a thought towards this direction, "Megan wondered aloud how she could put her gender-free identity into practise when they were living in a gender-binary world, and that too with so many definitions, the very idea of gender might eventually lose any meaning, who can remember them all? Maybe that was the point, a completely gender-free world" (Evaristo 327). As Megan's story concludes, she is Morgan. She wishes to be addressed using the pronoun 'they'. She identifies as a "gender-free" (Evaristo 336) individual, i.e. "neither male nor female, I also identify as pansexual, which means I'm attracted to individuals on the male-female-trans spectrum" (Evaristo 336). Just like how Megan cannot identify with both the categories of gender, particularly that of 'women', the characters discussed earlier also could not belong to the system due to different reasons. Since third gender extends this system, it too does not provide adequate representation to them and is hence unvalidated. This in turn calls for disruption of the binary system only.

Conclusion

We are not bothered by the arbitrary nature of the relation between language and the reality it constructs, since we understand language only as an instrument that constructs our reality. We perceive reality as something that transcends the limits of language, when reality truly exists only within the limits of language. Therefore, when we use the word 'woman', it signifies realities that go beyond language but that still exist in language. This itself points to language's unreliability as a signifying system and thereby, Derrida's discussions on différance and trace. The concept of différance posits that meanings differ as well as defer, i.e. they change with every re-investigation and are always under flux. This inevitability leads to the concept of trace,

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which refers to those meanings that are not accounted for by the "play of signifiers" in language and are hence invisible.

These silences and ruptures are questioned in *Girl, Woman, Other* as it brings out the issues behind an essentialist approach to understanding human behaviour via pre-conceived notions of gender. The novel brings out the fundamental issues those conventionally identify with the group encounter, thereby problematizing another category that derives from this. As a result, the need for a revisionist approach is signalled, where the absence of meanings can be accounted for, and meanings associated with the sex organ are not fundamental in dictating a person's identity. This is where the novel locates all the female characters who do not essentially identify as 'women' or 'third gender' and thereby proposes the need for a somewhat flexible system of identification.

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