III. 2

BERNARDINE EVARISTO, FROM NOVEL TO MEMOIR: THE HU/WOMAN SELF AND OTHER SEEN IN *MANIFESTO* AND *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER*

Gillian M. E. Alban[*]

Bernardine Evaristo's life story recounted in *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021), offers a compelling statement of this unique writer and dramatic poet's life and literary journey, which she recently celebrated with her Booker prize-winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019). Both these works demonstrate to aspiring artists and struggling women that life's challenges may be outfaced with determination, courage and skill. Bernardine forged her path to success from modest beginnings, despite the difficulties facing her as a female, half-caste or brown skinned, working-class girl in London, encountering slights and disapproval even from within her own family, against which attacks she learned to wield the power of her own creative self-expression. Her memoir *Manifesto* relates her struggles to survive assaults while developing her literary voice, breaking through to success. *Girl, Woman, Other* offers further stories relating women's efforts to survive as individuals and express themselves against obstacles. She also shows ostracism against lesbians, together with the struggle against a Mental Dominatrix's attempts to bully her, retold through her character Dominique. But the issue that Evaristo returns to in her memoir and her prize-winning novel is the racism she suffered while being snubbed as the Other. Through her literary pen and dramatic efforts, she has established her own space and a "permanent home" (Manifesto 2021: 63). *Manifesto* offers the human story of Evaristo's journey to monumental success,

[*] İstanbul Kültür University, Istanbul, Turkey; gmealban@gmail.com; orcid.org/0000-0002-6226-0014

illustrated through a dozen women's stories in her novel. She had originally intended to relate a thousand stories, but by creating a dozen voices, she felt she had "in a sense made her point" (Evaristo; Gatti, 2019: 48). The prize she won with this novel was jointly awarded to her and Margaret Atwood, as "two women, two races, two nations, two generations—two members of the human race—… ascended the stage hand-in-hand to rapturous applause" (Manifesto 2021: 145). This chapter presents the life story of Evaristo told in *Manifesto*, together with certain accounts, especially those of Carole and Dominique, from her novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, illustrating the plight of a Hu/Woman expressing her Self while being perceived as the Other. Sarah Manyika suggests that Evaristo is the one "to read if one wants to gain some insight into the lives of black British women and their ancestral legacies" (qtd. in Sarikaya-Sen, 2021: 303). Evaristo's latest novel creates a rich panorama of a dozen interacting characters, related in her unique, dramatically poetic style in this polyphonic novel, fusing and interweaving women's narratives. She calls her style "fusion fiction," with its free-flowing style and "pro-poetic patterning on the page and non-orthodox punctuation" (Manifesto 2021: 142). This novel tells "dynamic stories which take readers on an imaginary adventure that offers insights into who we are as a people" (Evaristo; Donnell: 99). While reading these fictional lives alongside Bernardine's own life account of *Manifesto*, it is good to bear in mind that while Evaristo incorporates several of her experiences into her fiction, her own story is distinct from this novel.

1. STRUGGLES AGAINST RACIAL OPPRESSION

Bernardine inherited her surname Evaristo from her Brazilian grandfather, who returned to Nigeria after the liberation of the slaves in Brazil in 1888, while her father set off sixty years later in 1949 in the opposite direction for Liverpool on the 'Good Ship Empire,' subsequently meeting her mother at a Commonwealth dance in London. He was thus of the post-war *Windrush* generation, welcome in England when labour wad needed, but which welcome was subsequently withdrawn from many immigrants; despite the myth that the British Empire was founded on a mission to civilize "barbarous cultures," it was actually a "hugely profitable capitalistic venture" (Manifesto 2021: 8). Her parents married in defiance of current racial assumptions, on the day that "LOVE triumphed," making an "abhorrent union" (Manifesto, 2021: 30), which caused her mother to encounter racism even within her own family. Her grandmother was the

only one of her mother's family to join this wedding, sitting with a sour expression on her face; several of her relatives cut her mother off as a result of her marriage to a Nigerian. Their eight children were all classified as half-caste, of mixed-race, as a result of the colourism or shadism omnipresent in the lives of people like her. Because of her skin colour, she was never able to claim white identity, even if she had wanted to, despite the fact that her ancestry is equally white and black. She has always been subjected to racism as a dark skinned, bi-racial woman, through the prevailing shadism within society's internalized racism; the "artificial constructions of borders, and the manmade barriers of culture and race" (Manifesto, 2021: 5). While her family is also of German descent, significant in the years after the Second World War in England, Evaristo admits that assimilation is far easier where there is no colour difference to distinguish people.

Evaristo could not even be regarded as 'black British' while growing up in the 60s, since this was considered a contradiction in terms at the time; how could someone black possibly be considered British? However, knowing no other country, lacking any concept of the vaguely defined Nigeria of her father, she nevertheless identified herself as British, however much she was not accepted as such by those around her, who treated her as subaltern; her response to such concepts is that "the idea of race is absurd" (Manifesto 2021: 6); race does not biologically exist, since human beings share 99 percent of their DNA. Her roots in Britain go back to 1703; she ruefully confesses she would have felt a stronger sense of belonging while growing up if she had known this at the time; instead, she was viewed as a "foreigner, outsider, alien" (8). As for the Authentic Blacks whom she later met, and who assumed the right to tell black people how they should behave, the culture, music and speech they should acquire, including being expected to like reggae; she has no time for such racial stereotyping either.

Evaristo discusses the political activism of both her parents, who flew "the flag for equality" (Manifesto, 2021: 24) in their arduous lives, while bringing up eight children alongside their full-time work; this activist, fighting spirit is seen in her own powerfully vibrant writing on behalf of the disadvantaged and is clear from the sub-title of her memoir: "On Never Giving Up," indicating her refusal to accept victimization. She asserts that her rebellious father and unorthodox mother never placed her under any expectations—her mother only once suggested she learn how to type in order to fall back on secretarial work if necessary (echoing the suggestion Aurelia Plath made to her daughter, when she was castigated by Sylvia Plath for advising her to learn typing). Bernardine admits that her mother was

right, since she spends so much time writing at the computer, but no more did she follow her advice!

Her family lived next to a Catholic church, which they attended into their teens. Her mother once asked a priest if he could help her control the size of her family, rather an unsuitable person to refer to for such advice. Despite their loyalty to the church for years, her family were never accepted. Her white mother was once visited in hospital by a priest who referred to the "darkie" children living next to the church, unaware that these were her own children; she was shocked by the racist language of this cleric (Manifesto, 2021: 16). A priest finally visited her home and ate her sandwiches, but she was repulsed when he stated the reason for his visit as the church's wish to buy her house from her. She tells how her mother endeavoured to prepare her eight children for church, while on one occasion the cruel priest stopped the service as they came in late "so that everyone turned around to watch the walk of shame of the little brown children traipsing down the aisle" (155). Such an attitude ultimately determined the decision of most of them to leave the church at the age of fifteen. Bernardine admits that the Catholic church which she left because of its hypocrisy actually had "a subliminal influence" over her "through the dramatic and poetic spectacle of the church services" (154).

She indicates her experience of racism everywhere; on the street, in the home, while also showing how victims of racism readily turned their own judgmental look back against other people. Her half-German grandmother cut them off, even though she had married a Jewish exile herself, once again suggesting the overriding significance of skin colour. Besides race, she tells her experience of negotiating England's subtle class gradations and prejudices, in which individuals are assigned a status regarding race, colour, sex, gender, socio-economic situation and language use. She was aware of the bad treatment of many women around her, while relieved to have been spared some of the worst abuses; she also states that she has "a tough inner core" (22). She learned to protect herself and to adopt a defensive body language while moving about London from a young age, between school, drama classes and home. She thus admits that beside racial discrimination, the major force on her life has been her secondary status as a woman.

Of necessity growing up fiercely independent and without financial means, she worked a paper round from the age of thirteen, landing a full-time job at eighteen. Moving out of her home to live with a boyfriend, she was nearly strangulated by him after bringing back her women lovers to

the home she set up independently next door to him. While she feels that her behaviour was provocative, she still asserts that domestic assault is inexcusable; however, since her Strangler did not murder her, only throwing her and her possessions out onto the street, she reckons that she got away with his attack relatively lightly.

2. SLIGHTS, ABUSE AND RAPE

She would often take victims of physical assault into her home, listening with horror to their stories and learning how victims would abjectly return to their drunkard, abusive boyfriends. She heard stories of girls' sexual abuse from within their own family. A friend told her how she was taken into the countryside and "coerced to have sex" with several men, as if she had somehow colluded in this gang rape (Manifesto, 2021: 51). Even if such stories come to court, the victim is questioned about her dress or whether she had drunk alcohol, assuming a high level of self-blame for victims of violent rape. In her novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, she relates such a set-up imaginatively with the thirteen-year-old Carole enjoying a party in her friend's home, when a boy lyingly entices her to take some fresh air: "you're so delicate I got to protect you, Lady" (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019: 124), as he physically overwhelms her and marches her out of the house:

> once outside, he bundled her up under his arm as if her head
> was a package he was carrying and when she tried to lift it,
> she couldn't and it was going round and round and she felt
> overpowered by his cologne or was it deodorant? actually, it
> smelt like air freshener
> would they stop and kiss? her first kiss, not with tongues,
> which was revolting, but gently on the lips like in the old
> black and white films Mum liked to watch
> except she couldn't move her head out of his armpit as he
> walked her out of the estate
> it was as if she was being lifted off her feet, floating on the
> wings of love, was that a song?
> ….
> they were not alone
> she heard other voices
> she tried to look up again, it was like her head was in a vice
> and she wasn't walking no more, she was being frogmarched

then she was flat on her back on the ground, damp grass
against her bare back, legs and arms, she wanted to sleep, just
five blissful minutes, felt her eyes closed, when she opened
them, she couldn't see, she'd been blindfolded, her arms were
pinned above her head
how had her clothes come off?
then
her
body
wasn't
her
own

no
more
it
belonged
to
them. (*Girl, Woman, Other*, 2019: 125-26)

This terse, horrifying account expressed in this young, inexperienced girl's voice indicates how the situation escalates out of her control, with the single words marching staccato down the page, as her body is violently taken over and abused by men she can neither see nor resist, in what starts from a domestic situation. Bernardine relates how this story made her "extra vigilant" (Manifesto, 2021: 51). After this devastating gang rape experience, Carole loses all motivation to go on with her schooling or make an effort in life. Unable to confide in anyone, she remains buried in a sense of guilt, discouraged to attempt anything: "what was the point in learning when something like this had happened to her? … I mean, what—was—the—point?" (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019: 127). She starts to drift through life, with everyone around her appearing to accept her defeat, lacking the motivation to go on, until she finally wakes up to see her friends around her pursuing their hopeless lifestyles:

she saw their futures and hers, as baby-mothers pushing
prams, pushing fatherless timebombs
forever scrambling down the side of the sofas for change to
feed the meter, like Mum

> shopping in Poundland, like Mum
> not me, not me, not me, she told herself, I shall fly above and beyond. (*Girl, Woman, Other,* 2019: 128)

Waking from this horrid dream that almost has the power to destroy her, she revives her determination to prove wrong all those who have starting giving up on her. Despite being unable to share this devastating experience with anyone because of her deep feeling of shame, she eventually manages to put this ugly experience behind her. She continues her mathematical studies, gaining inspiration from her clever Mama, who shares with her algebra and geometry, measurements: "maths as a process of discovery … it is like the exploration of space, the planets were always there, it just took us a long time to find them" (121). Eventually, through her extraordinary determination and the skills she gained, she achieves her dream of higher study and becomes successful, despite the continuing racism around her, ready to destroy her. Even as a high-ranking business woman, she still finds that clients and new colleagues look past her in the expectation of meeting another person as she walks up to them, not a black woman like her, as she firmly and confidently greets each person with "perfectly clipped Received Pronounciation" (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019: 117), taking control of the situation, while trying to forget the hurts and slights against her. On a business trip to a country with a deplorable human rights record, she is once again subjected to violent physical abuse, vividly bringing back her rape experience, as, despite presenting the official paperwork at the border, she finds herself in a dungeon-like room without windows, her body is again invaded, on the suspicion that she might be carrying drugs internally. She thus demonstrates how a person's appearance may unjustly and cruelly be used against them.

Bernardine declares herself always to have been a fighter, following her father's tradition as a Yoruba fighter; one who met racist opposition or obstacles, head on, with his fists, keeping a hammer beside his bed at all times, and using it when his family were subject to violence through the "unfettered racism of yesteryear" (Manifesto, 2021: 9). Evaristo presents her defiance to conventions in the dedication to *Girl Woman Other*, embracing all the social and sexual misfits: "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 LGBTQ1+ members of the human family" (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019). In the following excerpt from this novel, Carole's

mother instructs her daughter never to give up, however much she may feel discouraged:

> "I'm done Mama, I'm done
> eh? eh? which kain nonsense be this? Bummi shouted, am I hearing you correctly or you wan make I clean my ear with matches?
> listen to me good, Carole Williams ….
> firstly, do you think Oprah Winfrey (VIP) would have become the Queen of Television worldwide if she had not risen above the setbacks of her early life?
> [Secondly … thirdly …]
> lastly, did me and Papa come to this country for a better life only to see our daughter giving up on her opportunities and end up distributing hand paper towels for tips in nightclub toilets or concert venues, as is the fate of too many of our countrywomen?
> you must go back to this university in January and stop thinking everybody hates you without giving them a chance, did you even ask them? Did you go up to them and say, excuse me, do you hate me? …
> you must go back and fight the battles that are your British birthright, Carole, as a true Nigerian (*Girl, Woman, Other*, 2019: 133-34)

We see how forcefully, expressed in her own diction, Carole's mother encourages her to return to her prestigious university and persist in her chosen studies, claiming both her British and Nigerian birthright, which leads to her eventual success in her desired banking career, through both her social and academic endeavours; the reader is yet shocked to learn the frequent slights she continues to be subjected to, which could easily crush a weaker person. Her story is one of success against adversity: "raised in a high-rise," subjected to sexual violence, she manages to become "a high-flying banker" (Evaristo; Donnell, 2019: 100).

Bernardine reports meeting flashers, recounting how vigilant she has always been when walking the streets, as a large, androgynous-seeming woman, prepared to scowl at all comers. Her worst attacks were perhaps from the drunk who hammered nightly on her door, threatening to break through the glass. After marrying years later, she is scarcely able believe the

relaxed world her husband had always inhabited and felt himself enabled in, never needing to protect himself, while she had always been obliged to defend herself vigilantly, even as a tall and feisty young woman. She did learn to access male susceptibility towards female parts, such as wearing a short skirt to work in order to deflect her boss's ire; on seeing her legs, she relates how his annoyance would evaporate, thus making an extraordinary statement about male vulnerability. She remarks: "As a good feminist, it was my duty to expose his patriarchal obsession with female body parts by taking advantage of it, thereby redressing the balance, right?" (Manifesto, 2021: 57). She laughed off the advice of a friend's suburban mother to tone down her wacky dress style, which might cause her to be targeted by racists, claiming her right to make a "sartorial demonstration" through her clothes; with her conviction that she was going places, she was able to surpass the limited dreams of ordinary inhabitants of suburbia (111-112).

3. OPPRESSION AND CHOICES, BREAKING THROUGH TO SUCCESS

Navigating her world independently, Bernardine meets oppression of a different sort, in becoming subject to The Mental Dominatrix, an aggressive vampire who broke through her radar and subjugated her to her forceful personality for years. She relates this extraordinary account of a bullying Mental Dominatrix twice her age, who took physical and mental possession of her, in both *Manifesto and Girl Woman Other*. Nzinga is the first African-American whom Dominique had met; a striking, statuesque woman, who relates her two-week pilgrimage back to the Motherland in Ghana undertaken to empathise with the experience of thousands of Africans who had been crammed into the dungeons of Elmina Castle for months, with scarcely any food or water, and no sanitation or facilities, "before being shipped to the Americas as slaves" (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019: 76). Even here the narrative voice retains an objective perspective: while realizing that "the white man has a lot to answer for" (76), Dominique does not remind her new friend that "the African man had also sold Africans into slavery so it was a lot more complicated than that" (77). She listens intently to her new friend's story of rising above "the tragedy of her terrible childhood to become so magnificent, [exuding] warmth and experience" (78), and falls in love with this larger-than-life woman. When introduced to Dominique's friends, Nzinga, originally named Cindy, instructs them all how to live in vigilant awareness of their black rights, including not wearing black underwear: "why crap on myself" she asserts, only to be answered by

Amma: "that's not a problem for me, because guess what, I've not crapped my pants since I stopped wearing nappies as a kid" (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019: 83).

Nzinga delivers an ultimatum for Dominique to follow her to the US or else to lose her, as an abject Dominique, renamed by her Sojourner, against her old friend's advice, follows this new friend to America. Once in Nzinga's women's community, she finds herself cut off from all outside contacts, turned into this woman's apprentice and reduced to a follower, not a leader. While submitting to this superior person, Dominique realizes that she has been taken over, but even after her old friend visits, she cannot manage to escape from her own oppression. Nzinga assumes the right to tell her how to live her life, creating a defensive situation of the two of them against the rest of the world, driving away all her friends and family and bullying her against having sex with men. In her memoir this woman declares herself Bernardine's greatest cheerleader, assuming the right to declaim her poetry in an over-the-top reading, despite receiving a negative response, while dismissing the uselessness of "sickkkk-cesssss" (Manifesto, 2021: 76). She discourages her from publishing her writings, even destroying her poetry, reducing her to selling jewellery out of a suitcase in Hackney and Brixton, before the shocked eyes of passing friends. Their fights become more physical as she finally determines to move out.

In the novel, Gaia, a member of the woman's community, shares her opinion on this dominating so-called friend: "we've all experienced her wrath, her unreasonableness, her general animosity towards the world, to us, you can talk to us" (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019: 106), as she enables Dominique to build up the confidence to leave, after losing three years of her life to her, admitting how their life together "resembled being incarcerated in Alcatraz" (Manifesto, 2021: 83). She came to realise that it was her manipulator who needed her and not the other way round, understanding that the controller is actually dependent on their partner's subjugation and weakness, thus admitting her complicity with her oppressor, having allowed herself to be seduced by the personality of this plausible woman. She thereby learns that the abuse of power is not the preserve of men, whites or heterosexuals, and that women are not necessarily good, like her own mother, the Virgin Mary, the goddess, while men are not always bad, like her domineering father, in fact coming to appreciate the infinite variety of human beings. Generalisations about race, gender and sexualities are gross simplifications. Women like herself are "othered" because they are "black, women, non-binary, or because of their class or sexuality, or their

immigrant status… [while actually people are] flawed and complex and messy, [expressing] constant variety and fluidity" (Evaristo; Gatti: 49). Later, re-entering the world of heterosexual relationships after this traumatic experience, effectively newborn socially, she realizes how dreadfully naïve she has become, accepting inferior deals with men who use her to have sexual dalliances, rather than approaching her for a decent relationship.

Bernardine tells how her first writing was confessional poetry for her own self-expression. After studying at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama, supplementing her grant by working in a burger bar, she and her friends staged short theatre pieces at the Royal Court Theatre, from which they established the Theatre of Black Women, acting and writing their own plays together, and collecting the dole when necessary. But the prospects of black women establishing themselves in the theatre seemed so hopeless that she determined to concentrate on her writing instead. She relates: "I was never writing from a place of financial security or emotional complacency, or in a stable domicile" (55), however, the mental agility she gained thereby has repaid her well in her writings. She first wrote in prose and then developed her poetic prose style, which also owes much to the dramatic speech of theatre, stretching across the page with limited punctuation, as she honed her particular style of self-expression in loose, dramatic poetry, making forceful, clear and succinct comments. Her progress in writing taught her empathy with the members of her family, whether hostile or supportive, simultaneously enabling her to develop writerly empathy with suffering characters (Manifesto, 2021: 145). Her first novel, *Lara*, tells her parents' story, which was followed by *The Emperor's Babe*, the story of Zuleika the Nubian who grew up eighteen hundred years ago in Roman London; this novel she read from at a conference in Van, Turkey. This was followed by *Soul Tourists*, with an imaginary mismatched couple travelling together as the ghosts of colour emerge from the man's life. *Blonde Roots* starts from a short story on the slave trade which grew into a novel; *Hello Mum* was written in less than a month, telling the story of a fourteen-year-old offender; prison inmates informed her how authentic they found his story, and *Mr Loverman* tells the story of an elderly, gay Caribbean married man from the perspective of both husband and wife.

Through her writing Bernardine has reached the position where "Writing became a room of [her] own; writing became my permanent home" (63); she alludes here to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's* Own, while admitting that she initially felt a visceral reaction against Woolf (Manifesto, 2021: 158). She has also learnt that it is not necessarily the

academic high-achievers who become successful in life, as they often plateau or decline, while the ones who need to struggle in their early days often overcome the early knock-backs in life, since they learn the resilience to succeed in the long haul (162). She expresses her inspiration as generally coming from writers of colour like herself, including Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, and Buchi Emechita. Through her initiative, a mentoring scheme to promote poets of colour has enabled the success of at least thirty poets. She also founded the Brunel International African Poetry prize in 2012. Her latest project has been to curate Black Britain: Writing Back, with her publisher, Hamish Hamilton at Penguin UK; this has led to the publication of six novels and six non-fiction titles so far. Recently appointed President of the Royal Society of Literature, she injected new blood into this two-hundred-year-old institution by opening its gates to sixty-two new fellows, while claiming the continuing vibrancy of this prestigious institution as entirely in tune with the twenty-first century (Bakare, 2024). She relates:

> Writing a novel takes stamina and an unstoppable drive, more so when you're not sure you're heading in the right direction and have to start again. Every minute, every hour, every day, every week, every month, every year spent crafting a manuscript so that it materializes into your ambition for it, requires immense dedication. For every writer who produces novels at speed, there are many more of us for whom the writing process is a lot more complicated, although not unenjoyable. When writers complain that writing is painful, I wonder why they do it. Surely we do it because it's incredibly rewarding. (Manifesto, 2021: 145)

Evaristo shares with her readers her experience of carving out her unique route to success through many obstacles, while keeping her eyes and ears open to the experiences of those around her, aspiring to success against all the odds. Her writing is vibrant and exciting: "At heart, *Girl, Woman, Other* is a polyphonic paean to black British womanhood and to non-binary people, in all our flawed complexity. If I had to choose just one of my books to give to my younger self to read, it would be this one. I think she'd get a lot from it" (Manifesto, 2021: 144).

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