The Postmodern Woman as a Complex Multifaceted Subject: Protean Identities in Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

Linda Muloh Munki (PhD)
Department of English
University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon

ABSTRACT

Factors that characterise the postmodern condition and society tend to make it difficult or even unnecessary for characters to obtain a stable sense of identity. Most of these factors require a sense of identity adaptable to the fast-changing and fragmented condition of the postmodern society. Characters who tend to shift their identities according to the changing conditions of their societies are considered to have protean identities. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo represents characters whose race, class, gender and sexual identities shift across contexts and over time. This paper examines the identity of the postmodern woman as a complex multifaceted subject and how this is depicted in *Girl, Woman, Other*. In the context of this study, I will focus on identity fluidity in relation to race, gender, sex and sexuality. These are some of the fundamental categories that constitute a subject. The postmodern literary woman's identity construction seems to be open to multiple possibilities of the self. Textual analysis will be done through the lenses of postmodern feminism, especially the concepts developed by Judith Butler. This study revealed that in her attempt to adapt her sense of self to the diverse and fast-changing conditions of the postmodern society, the postmodern woman adopts a multifaceted and sometimes fragmented identity. Fluid and multiple identity construction processes become a liberating and empowering phenomenon for women. The characters who seek to define themselves do so in an attempt to gain some power over their lives or take control over their own experiences.

Keywords: Protean Self; Postmodern Woman; Identity; Multifaceted Being

INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism brought along changes in the ideological perspectives of the postmodern period, which affected how people view themselves and the world around them. Postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives in favour of local smaller narratives, acceptance of differences, and relativity of truth defy the possibility of a stable and authentic identity capable of acting independently of others. Kenneth J. Gergen shows the relationship between identity construction and social context by identifying three periods that correspond to the different conceptions of the self. He posits that in the romantic era, people believed in a self that was fixed, passionate and volatile. In the modern era, the self was seen to be governed by reason. Passion and volatility had to be harnessed and treated respectively. As suggested by Cote and Levine, Gergen believed the modernist notion of the self "came under siege in the late 20th century as a result of the 'saturation of self' by new technologies that increasingly dominated the social and occupational landscape" (26). As we enter the postmodern period, "belief in a stable inner core and reason governed personality is being abandoned in favour of a relational self"[2] (Cote and Levine, 26). The relational self is influenced by the socialising technologies which constantly "mediate our relationship with others" (Cote and Levine, 26). The more exposed characters are to the effects of the postmodern condition, the more fragmented and fluid their identities become. Most of the characters in the selected novels who have fluid identities are those who live in postmodern societies and have been exposed to advanced technological developments, globalisation, multiculturalism and late capitalism. Factors that characterise the postmodern condition and society tend to make it difficult or even unnecessary for characters to obtain a stable sense of identity. Most of these factors[3] require a sense of identity adaptable to the fast-changing and fragmented condition of the postmodern society. New technologies, for instance, facilitate the proliferation of images. Face-to-face encounters are gradually giving way to new forms of interactions aided by technology. These aided technological mediums of interaction allow for the

---

[2] Idea of the self as created by our interaction with others. That is, those aspects of our identities constructed through these interactions.
[3] New technologies, globalisation, Multiculturalism and late capitalism.

postmodern self to "slide from image to image and to eschew substance in favour of superficiality. The self is now presented according to the context with constructed, situated identities often conveyed through various forms of apparel" (Cote and Levine, 26). The self tends then to be the reflection of images conveyed to and received from others.

The phenomenon of globalisation also provokes a constant shift in identity. Characters get exposed to other cultures and ways of life either through travelling to other countries or through the mobility of culturally embedded goods and services. To Wang Ning, "National and cultural identity is becoming more and more obscure, with single identity replaced by multiple identities. As a result, people in the age of globalization are suffering from a sort of identity crisis"[4] (42). Plurality and fragmentation of identity is, therefore, a major feature of the postmodern social phenomenon. Individual identity seems to have lost stability. A deep authentic self seems to be harder to find as individuals are torn between an increasing number of roles. Most works of art of this period reflect this condition. Multiculturalism requires the cohabitation and the acceptance of different cultures in the same society. The development of multiculturalism provides for a vast amount of cultural information that serves as an open-source cultural archive of possible identity models where individuals can choose, reconstitute, deconstruct, remix and send back their own identity models.

The late capitalist paradigm that characterises the postmodern condition feeds on the expendable and replaceable nature of the postmodern consumer culture. Therefore, postmodern characters need to adapt their identities to the fast-changing conditions that characterise their society. Having a stable substantial self seems to be not only difficult but even irrelevant. As David O'Mahony suggests, "the current postmodern or late-capitalist paradigm requires a sense of self that is malleable, and as expendable and replaceable" (4). What is important now is not the ability to locate a true and enduring self but the ability to act to full potential the moment at hand. Considering the fast-changing characteristics of postmodern society, it becomes evident that postmodern characters are more likely to have fluid and fragmented identities. They tend to develop these types of identities in an attempt to adapt to their social conditions.

Characters who tend to shift their identities according to the changing conditions of their societies are considered to have protean identities. The term protean is derived from the attributes of Proteus. Proteus is a Greek sea deity who is capable of changing shapes at will. He knows all things but does not like revealing what he knows. According to Greek mythologies, people consult him because of his ability to see the future. However, for him to respond to any request, he must be caught and bound. Therefore, his shape lifting capacity makes this task challenging. The word protean is often used to describe something flexible or ever-changing. To Marianna Jadwiga Winczewski, proteanism, "involves a form-seeking assertion of the self that is continuous and self-perpetuating, whose desire to be mobile, adaptive, dynamic, fluid, and variable describe the postmodern phenomenon from an optimistic avenue filled with a sense of possibility" (35). The protean subject, therefore, presents a "self that is continuously performing under shifting circumstances, presenting personae customised for each environment" (O'Mahony, 16). Thus, protean identity involves continuous performances under shifting circumstances. In *Girl, Woman, Other,* Evaristo represent characters whose race, class, gender and sexual identities shift across contexts and over time.   Ron Charles asserts that women in the novel "challenge the limit of binary structure" of gender and express a gender plurality. Alex Diggins observes that the novel shoulders weighty themes like "racism, immigrant experience, the increasingly fluid borders of gender and sexuality".

This paper examines the identity of the postmodern woman as a complex multifaceted subject and how this is depicted in *Girl, Woman, Other*. In the context of this study, I will focus on identity fluidity in relation to race, gender, sex and sexuality. These are some of the fundamental categories that constitute a subject. The postmodern literary woman's identity construction seems to be open to multiple possibilities of the self. Textual analysis will be done through the lenses of postmodern feminism, especially the concepts developed by Judith Butler.

PROTEANISM IN RACIAL IDENTITIES

Characters exhibit protean racial identities when they consider themselves as sometimes black, sometimes white and sometimes biracial. In this case, their racial identity is embedded with situation-specific fluidity. They can be black or white or biracial when it best suits the situation at hand. Different aspects of their racial identity are more or less salient depending on their social contexts. When they are in a white context, they try to make the white aspect of their identity more salient. For instance, in *Girl, Woman, Other,* Hattie chooses to identify herself with the black community, but her children prefer to identify themselves with the white community even though they have a darker complexion. Hattie can pass for a white woman more easily than her children because her father is white and her mother is coloured. However, when she leaves her village for a dance in Newcastle, which was also "her first dance in the big city", she meets coloured Englishwomen and "felt instantly comfortable among these girls, who all looked like versions of

---

[4] This study does not view the phenomenon of multiple identities as a imminent crisis

herself, she'd never felt so welcome" (361). The girls decide to brighten Hattie's plain features to make her look pretty. This suggests that they have accepted her as part of their group since they want her to look like them. Hattie finds herself in a social context that permits her to feel comfortable with the black version of herself and, therefore, decides to make their version of her racial identity more salient. From there, Hattie identifies with the black community and marries a black man, Slim. This encounter in town helps her define her racial identity, which she could not do in the village as the social context there does not allow her the opportunity to reassert herself in the same way. Once her identity is redefined, Hattie gets married and moves back to the village where her identity remains more stable because her social context also remains stable.

Hattie's children have a harder time internalising their desired identity because of their darker skin. The treatment they receive from society pushes them to reject their black origin. They refuse to identify with their father who is black and prefer to see themselves as white:

> *Ada Mae painted herself as a white child in her drawings, and from the age of twelve Sonny never wanted to be seen with his father beyond the village, hated having to go to the cattle fairs with him as a teenager and he begged her not to bring his father to school events,*
> *She overheard Sonny telling a boy whose father dropped him home one day that Slim, who was leading sheep out to pasture, was a hired labourer. (367)*

Ada Mae and Sonny try to make those aspects of their identity that links them to the black race less salient in their surroundings because their social context does not accommodate black people. Therefore, they choose to identify with the white race and that is why Ada Mae pains herself as white. They leave for London as a sign of their rejection of their original black race represented by their father in the village. Unlike their mother, their experience in London is unsuccessful. They are rejected by the white community and it is "impossible to get accommodation other than in a rundown house with coloured immigrants in a slum area called Nottinghill" (358). Even "the immigrants scornfully accused them of being like white people" (359). Their failure to integrate the coloured community is perhaps the result of their own rejection of that community. They have internalised an image of themselves as white and therefore are unable to identify with any other race. Society sees them as black or coloured but they see themselves as white. Therefore, their projected identity is not intelligible to their community.

Intelligibility is a vital element of an identity negotiation process. This is because we depend on others to forge an identity. The way we perceive ourselves is not enough to build a socially recognisable identity. The way others see us is an important part of identity construction. Ada Mae and Sonny fail to get recognition for their projected identity because their society cannot perceive them as anything else other than black. That is why a conflict emerges when they behave like white people in a community that perceives them as black. Social intelligibility is important for all identity categories. This explains why a change in an individual's racial, socio-economic, gender, sexual identity has to pass through a process of social recognition.

Ada Mae and Sonny decide to move to a different community where it is easier for them to negotiate the social recognition of their desired identity. After three months in London, they leave to settle in Newcastle. Belamghari posits that as "individuals move through time and space, new means of making sense of their identities arise, and so are the markers and mechanisms they use to shape their being and mould their personalities" (2). It is the same Newcastle where Hattie identified with the black race. Unlike Hattie, they both marry white partners and start the transformation of their family's racial identity from black to white. Hattie mentions that:

> *her grandchildren all look more white than black because Sonny and Ada Mae married white people*
> *none of them identifies as black and she suspects they pass as white which will sadden Slim if he was still around*
> *she doesn't mind, whatever works for them and if they can get away with it, good luck to them. (349)*

Hattie's grandchildren end up identifying as white because their parents choose to discard their black identity and make the white aspect of their identity so salient to the point that it seems to be their sole racial identity. Since the black identity gives the bearer an inferior and marginalised position in their society, Hattie's children adopt the white identity in order to position themselves among the dominant group in society. Once they shift from black to white, Hattie's family tries to maintain that identity because it is more relevant in their social context and resist any attempt to get them back to their black roots. For instance, they object to Chimango, a black nurse who wants to marry Julie, Hattie's granddaughter because their "family was becoming whiter with every generation and they didn't want any backsliding" (350). This suggests that their newly acquired racial identity comes with a privileged social status they intend to maintain. Racial identity here is a determinant factor in power relations.

Another character whose racial identity changes in the course of the novel is Penelope. Penelope grows up identifying as a white woman until the day she discovers her biological family. When her foster parents reveal to her that she is not their biological daughter, Penelope feels an emptiness and;

> *decided she would go to college, marry a man who idolized her, become a teacher and have*
> *children*
> *all of which would fill the gaping, aching chasm she now carried inside her*
> *the feeling of being*
> *un*
> *Moored*
> *un*
> *wanted*
> *un*
> *Loved*
> *un*
> *done*
> *a*
> *no*
> *one.* (283)

Her lack of roots creates a feeling of unbelonging which continuously haunts her as she keeps "torturing herself with terrible thoughts" (282). She goes through an identity crisis after this revelation that shatters her perception of the self. She does not know who she is anymore.

First, she needs "someone to put her back together", so she "homed in on Giles soon after her identity has been exploded into scattered fragments" (284). Her marriage to Giles helps to restore her sense of belonging. However, the question of her identity pops up again after she survives "a cancer scare that made her feel incredibly mortal" (444). The experience brings back the need to trace her roots. She finds "herself suffering restless nights about her birth parents, something she thought she'd laid to rest as a very young woman, once she'd overcome the shock of knowing that Edwin and Margaret weren't related to her by blood" (445). She keeps asking herself the same question she asked a long time ago: "who were the people who brought her into this world only to give her away?" (445). The answer to this question is what changes Penelope's views on racial identity completely. Before then, she thought "her roots were likely to be in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Lincolnshire. Possibly Durham, possibly with Viking ancestors, perhaps she's descended from a Viking warrior queen/that made sense" (446). However, her imagined racial origin is far from reality.

Penelope's quest for identity is facilitated by technological advancement, which makes it possible for people to know their origin through Ancestry DNA testing. Sarah informs her mother "about the availability of Ancestry DNA testing, which is very popular in her own part of the world" (445). Sarah hopes the test will tell Penelope which parts of the UK her birth family comes from. Even Sarah's imagination does not go beyond the boarder's of Britain.

The results of Penelope's Ancestry DNA test create "a collision between who she thought she might be and who she apparently was" (446). She realises that she does not have a single racial identity. She is a combination of "so many different nationalities" which also suggests different races. Her results reveal her racial composition as follows:

> *Europe*
> *Scandinavia   22%*
> *Ireland   25%*
> *Great Britain   17%*
> *European Jewish   16%*
> *Iberian Peninsula   3%*
> *Finland/Northwest 2%*
> *Russia*
> *Europe West   2%*
> _____
> *Africa*
> --------------------------------
> *Ethiopia   4%*
> *South Sudan   1%*
> *Kenya   1%*
> *Eritrea   1%*

Sudan	*1%*
Egypt	*1%*
Ivory coast/Ghana	*1%*
Cameroon/Congo	*1%*
Africa South Central	
Hunter Gatherer	*1% (446-447)*

The DNA test result is shocking to Penelope. Instead of providing answers, "it confronted her with questions" (447). Penelope just wants to find her birth family which will help her build an idea of who she is, but the test result opens up a whole range of questions she did not expect.

The test results bring further complications to her quest for identity. In her process of racial identity confirmation, Penelope realises that identity is a complex phenomenon. The test has opened other dimensions of her identity she finds difficult to believe or to reconcile with. Penelope has never identified as black and "never in a million years did she expect to see Africa in her DNA, that was her biggest shock of all" (447). She is shocked because she has been racist and has acted several times in the assumption she was white. For instance, Shirley complains that Penelope is biased towards poorer children who are immigrants in the majority. Penelope justifies her dislike for the immigrant pupils by the fact that she "felt a sense of responsibility towards her own kind, and didn't like it at all when the school's demography began to change with the immigrants and their offspring pouring in" (297). Penelope openly disliked the immigrants whom she considers as intruders into space previously occupied by English children of the working class.

Penelope used to enjoy teaching the disadvantaged English children until when the demography changed, her commitment dropped. This is because she felt no responsibility towards the new students who were mostly immigrants. She even felt resentment towards the children for taking up the spaces meant for the children of middle-class white people. She once suggested during a staff meeting that most of them should be dismissed. Yet, when the result of the Ancestral DNA test comes out, she realises that "only 17% of her was British which was a terrible disappointment" (448). She would behave differently towards the school children if she had the slightest knowledge of her African origin. Finding out that she is only 17% British is so disappointing to Penelope because she realises how easily a person can flip from being the centre (privileged) to being the margin (underprivileged) simply with a shift in one's identity, be it gender, racial or sexual.

The discovery of the plurality of her racial identity changes Penelope's views on the concept of racial identity and racism. She realises she cannot fit perfectly in any specific racial identity. Trying to imagine herself as one race only leads her to see herself as the other:

> *she imagined her ancestors attired in loincloths running the African Savanah spearing lions, at the same time wearing yarmulkes[5], eating open-topped rye sandwiches and paella, and refusing to hunt on the Sabath*
> *perhaps she should get a dreadlock wig in keeping with her new identity, become one of those Rastafarians and sell drugs. (447-448)*

Her imaginations keep jumping from one identity to another, picturing her different racial self in stereotypical terms. She imagines that her African ancestors were "nomads roaming over the continent killing each other before the British demarcated regions into proper countries and thereby imposed discipline and control" (448). This is a stereotypical image of Africans as constructed by the British. She equally imagines "her ancestors were potato farmers" in Ireland (448). Penelope deconstructs those stereotypes at the same time she reflects on them as she is unable to identify with any in a unique way. This suggests that the concept of people as stable entities is put into question. Penelope has to embrace her multiple racial identities as she realises that people hardly have a single identity and someone who is visibly black or white may have other racial attributes within.

The changes in her views on racial identity affect her attitude towards black people. Before she would treat people of colour with contempt. For instance, she once addressed Bummi in racist terms, saying she had found a "wonderful African cleaner called Boomi" (296). Her lack of consideration is emphasised by the fact that she misspells her name as Boomi instead of Bummi. However, after her enlightenment, Penelope begins to show better consideration for black people. For instance, the taxi driver who drives Penelope to Hattie's residence is African. She decides to treat him respectfully because "he could be a relative" (450). From what she has realised in "the past forty-eight hours, anyone can be a relative" (450). When she disembarks from the taxi, she pays the transport fare "plus a tip, considering he's practically a sixth cousin or something" (451). Penelope suddenly feels a sense of responsibility towards her own

---

[5] A cap worn by Jewish men

kind, which this time around involves the same Africans she used to minimise. She has moved from considering herself a white woman to seeing herself as multiracial.

Evaristo demonstrates here that racial identity, like many other identity categories, is not a fixed identity category. Even though racial identity is determined by biology, it is still not a fixed entity as people often have mix racial origins and what they consider as their race might just be an expression of a dominant racial attribute among many others. Penelope realises after the test that she is more Irish than British and she is almost as much an African as she is British. She can easily adapt her racial identity to many social contexts by making any of her racial attributes more or less salient depending on the context. This makes it possible for her to have a fluid identity as she can easily move in and out of different racial identities depending on which one is more accommodating to her needs.

The deconstruction of racial identity disrupts the concept of white hegemony. If a person has both British and African origin, how will he/she claim superiority of one racial identity over the order? Like Penelope, many Europeans have diverse racial origins even though they are white physiologically. Evaristo suggests here that racism is an expression of ignorance. For instance, the women who run the Northern Association's Home for Girls tell Grace that she "will suffer much rejection by people less enlightened than" they are (*Girl, Woman, Other,* 381). In another instance, Hattie feels sickened by her children's racial attitudes and thinks that they should be "more enlightened" (350). This suggests that racism is the resort of unenlightened individuals. Through technology, people are becoming aware of the fact that racial identity around which so much oppression has been organised has no essence. This realisation then disrupts the power relations constructed around the concept of race. The question of the superiority of one race over the other collapses with the realisation that people can belong to multiple racial or ethnic groups. Technology in this case stands as an important tool in the process of identity construction and the establishment of power relations in the postmodern society.

Even those who seem to belong to a single racial identity can have multiple cultural identities. Lene Arnett Jensen, et al argue that "[f]orming a cultural identity involves adopting the beliefs and practices—the custom complexes—of one or more cultural communities" because people are getting exposed to more and more diverse cultural beliefs and behaviours as a result of globalisation (286). The multicultural nature of the postmodern society permits characters to be versed with various cultural ways of being. They can conveniently integrate and identify with different cultural and social groups. They are also able to identify what cultural identity will work best in every socio-cultural environment and present just that. Individual's socio-cultural identity can, therefore, fluctuate depending on their socio-cultural context and their current interest. Individuals often choose to identify with the social group that holds power at the moment. David Simo suggests that identity construction also linked power positioning[6] (316). People adopt different identities as they move in and out of different cultural, social and ideological contexts. The multicultural nature of the postmodern society also means that characters tend to develop fluid cultural identities. The impact of the cultural diversity of the postmodern society is depicted in the selected novels through characters like Carole and Josie.

When Carole arrives at Oxford, she encounters a culture completely different from the one she grows up in. So she decides to adopt the new culture in order to fit in. This means that she has to refine her language: *what would you like*? instead of whatdyawant? / *to whom were you speaking*? instead of who was you talking to? / *I'm just popping to the loo* instead of I'm gonna go piss" (136). Her eating habit also changes. She "watched what they ate, and followed suit" (136). She changes her dressing code as well: "she scraped off the concrete foundation plastered onto her face, removed the giraffe-esque eyelashes … /ditched the weaves sewn into her scalp for months at a time" and "had her tight curls straightened" (137). This suggests that everything that serves as Carole's cultural marker changes. Bummi has been grooming Carole on the Nigerian culture hoping that her daughter will adopt their culture, marry a Nigerian and make her father proud. Yet when she returns from Harvard, Bummi notices that her daughter is now behaving like a white woman. Mohamed Belamghari suggests that "to provide their psychological and physical security, individuals are inclined toward adopting and adapting to the culture, behaviours, social values, ethics, or doxas of their community" (1). By shifting her cultural identity, Carole makes her identity more relevant to her current context.

FLUIDITY IN GENDER, SEX AND SEXUALITY

Among the fundamental identity categories, gender identity seems to be the most unstable identity category in the postmodern era. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler posits that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). She posits that gender identity is constructed through "discursive performativity", which produces that which it names (*Bodies That Matter*, 13). That is, gender identity is constructed through a continuous process of stylised bodily acts regulated by normative heterosexuality. This nonessentialist view of gender identity suggests that they are observable shifts in the

---

[6] This is especially the case when power is closely linked to identity like in a society where a particular ethnic group holds political power.

postmodern concept of gender identity. As mentioned earlier[7], gender is expressed mainly through individuals' roles, attitudes, and appearances. All these gender attributes are "changing through people's actions which affect the social subsystems that influence the development and transformation of gender identity" (Kay Bussey, 603). The analysis of the selected novels reveals that many characters who live in postmodern societies no longer express conventional gender attributes be it in their attitudes, roles, or appearances. Gender-specific activities are diminishing as people are expressing themselves in multifaceted ways. This means that the line between what it means to be a man or a woman in the postmodern society is blurring.

Plurality in gender identity is portrayed in the novel in two major ways. First of all, characters in postmodern societies have shifting gender performances. Gender identity now "varies across individuals and across the life span within a given individual" (Bussey, 609). It also varies across time and space. Masculine attributes and roles are no longer restricted to men and feminine attributes vary across and within sexes. Characters in the selected novels portray progressive and changing gender roles. Many female characters perform both masculine and feminine gender roles depending on their context. Other characters like Shirley and Lenin perform both masculine and feminine gender roles at home. Carole and LaTisha are both excelling in the professional world and occupying top managerial positions. LaTisha intends to ditch out domestic duties for career success. Women, therefore, sometimes maintain mainly masculine behaviours especially when they are in the public sphere where these attributes are valuable. They express feminine behaviours when they are in other contexts like the home where these behaviours are necessary. Women can also become more feminine or more masculine at a different point in their lives depending on which role occupies the majority of their time. For instance, a character like Penelope transitions from being a full housewife to a career woman.

The disparate roles played by postmodern characters also require them to accommodate multiple selves. For instance, women work in jobs that require different sets of skills and attitude than the ones they use at home as wives and mothers. They may be tough, aggressive, and imposing in her workplace yet gentle, and nurturing to her children at home. Women are torn between the need to be good wives and the need to show their bosses that they are serious. Struggling to reconcile these selves into a unified self can be depressing. Constructing an appropriate fluid identity permits women to move in and out of their diverse social roles less stressfully.

Some characters express radical gender fluidity when they completely cross the gender line from masculine to feminine or feminine to masculine. For instance, people expect Morgan to behave in a feminine way but she refuses to act according to their expectations. Her mother is worried because "there's not a feminine bone in her body" (309). Morgan starts her gender transition journey by replacing her feminine appearance with a masculine one. She shaves off her hair and wears men's shoes. The reaction of her schoolmates and friends is spontaneous. The boys loved her and the girls envied her "natural suntan" and her "blonde corkscrew curls", but her change of appearance brings a "drastic effect of turning everyone against her" (312). Her friends drop away, "embarrassed to be seen with her" (312). She suddenly moves from being the beautiful girl everyone admires to becoming "the butchest girl in the class, and the ugliest" (313). Her identity, therefore, shifts with her change of attitude and physical appearance.

Morgan is a literary representation of fluid gender identity. After rejecting the socially imposed definition of her gender, she begins an exploration of the LGBTQ world online where she spends "hours trawling, assessing, evaluating". She is "taken aback when she meets hundreds of genders on the internet". She comes across:

> *genders like trans female or trans male and non-binary, ... the Hijras of India and the Two Spirits of Native Americans, other were total head fucks like the quivergender-a gender whose intensity fluctuates, polygender-identifying as multiple genders, or staticgender-like fuzzy television static and how can your gender change multiple times in a day as the synchgenders claim? (323)*

This leaves her confused at the end despite the assistance of Bibi who a transsexual. Bibi was also born a male named Gopal in a Hindu community and was disowned by her parents as soon as she started going out in "dresses and make-up" (322). They believed she is "sick in the head" (322). Bibi benefits from the technological advances of her society.

It seems some younger characters like Morgan and Bibi are challenging restrictive gender categories and expressing gender in ways that transcend the gender binary. They challenge the notion of fixed gender identity by adopting genders that do not follow from their sex. While characters like Bibi and Venus choose the gender of the opposite sex, from masculine to feminine. Morgan refuses to adopt any specific gender identity preferring to see herself as nonbinary.

---

[7] In chapter four we illustrated the role of gender performances in shaping identity.

Radical deconstruction of gender may pose a threat to political feminism. If there is no identity group under the umbrella name "women", therefore, the fight for women's rights becomes obsolete. After listening to Morgan's talk at her school, Yazz tells her mother that

> *feminism is so herd-like, ..., to be honest, even being a woman is passé these days, we had a non-binary activist at uni called morgan Malenga who opened my eyes, I reckoned we're all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female, which are gendered performances anyway, which means your women's politics will become redundant. (39)*

Evaristo seems to suggest here that younger generations of women, influenced by the deconstructionist perspectives on gender identity, are beginning to discard the notion of feminism as a political movement. However, the whole notion of non-binary gender seems radical and lacks linguistic backings. How do we address a genderless child: he or she? Evaristo's gender nonbinary characters choose to be addressed as "they". However, generalising such articulation may create serious semantic confusion regarding the syntactic subject. By removing all standards and subjecting gender and sexuality to individual feelings and experience, the postmodernist view plunges the world into a state of sexual and gender anarchy. Parents who chose to raise genderless children still make a choice, genderless is still gender. Boundaryless view of gender in the workplace and school society can create a lot of confusion as these attributes give easy clues for social interaction.

Equality between men and women can be achieved without the radical disruption of gender. An analysis of Dominique's relation with Nzinga suggests that lesbianism is not the solution to gender oppression. The association of feminism with queer theory alienates women whose religious and cultural values do not align with the queer agenda. Many women reject the feminist label because they fear that it may somehow portray them as anti-men, radical, socially undesirable, or lesbian according to Elizabeth A. Suter and Paige W. Toller (136). Gender identity may be a social construct but it is not completely needless. Society must have attributed certain acts and attitudes to each gender for the sake of practicality. The deconstruction of gender reveals its fictive attributes, however, it does not completely invalidate its practicability. The problem of oppression may rely on the masculine and feminine gender category, but it is not caused by categorizing people into different genders. Instead, oppression starts with value attribution.

The protean characters may also portray fluid sexual identities. At one point, they are heterosexual and another they tend to be homosexual or bisexual, depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves. Bummi's sexual identity is far from stable. She moves from being a heterosexual to homosexual and later bisexual identity. Evaristo's early presentation of Bummi prepares the reader for a surprise later on in the development of this character. Bummi is portrayed as a devoted wife, mother and Christian. These identity attributes are completely incompatible with homosexuality. However, after the death of Augustin, Bummi gets involved in a sexual relationship with another woman. Bummi's sexuality seems to fluctuate in relation to her circumstances. While married to Augustine, there is no mention or traces of homosexuality as far as she is concerned. Her homosexual tendency seems to develop from a lack of sexual satisfaction coupled with her attachment towards her friend, Sister Omofe. Omofe is also a married woman, abandoned by her Nigerian husband. The change of both Bummi's and Omofe's sexuality suggests that sexual desires can be influenced by environmental factors. It also puts to question the notion of a stable sexual identity. It provides textual evidence for Butler's claim on sexuality as a non-stable category. Bummi decides to give up on lesbianism but cannot stop herself from feeling jealous when her partner gets on with another woman. After getting married to Kofi, her second husband, Bummi still feels the desire for women in her sexual life.

Though Evaristo carefully lets the elements of incompatibility to fade out before this relationship through the death of her husband and the emancipation of her child, Bummi's swift sexual shifts still raise the reader's eyebrows. Butler emphasises in *Gender Trouble* that sexual orientations "are rarely if ever, fixed. Obviously, they can shift through time and are open to cultural reformulations that are in no sense univocal (205). As suggested above by Butler, sexual orientations are open to cultural reformulations. One can develop homosexual tendencies while living in cultures that condone homosexuality. Bummi's unstable sexual orientation is hardly the results of the effects of circumstances linked to the absence of a man in her life because her attraction towards women does not seem to subside after her second marriage. There are two possibilities. It is possible that she had these tendencies from childhood and that the tolerant and culturally diverse British society open up spaces for their expression. Another possibility is that the cultural environment itself creates these tendencies.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the selected novels reveals that racial identity is not fixed but embedded with situation-specific fluidity. In *Girl, Woman, Other,* Evaristo demonstrates that even though racial identity is determined by biology, it is still not a fixed entity as people often have mix racial origins and what they consider as their race might just be an expression of a dominant racial attribute among many others. Characters choose to be black or white or biracial when it best suits the situation at hand. That is, different aspects of their racial identity are more or less salient depending on their social

contexts. This study also supports the fact that many characters who live in postmodern societies no longer express conventional gender attributes be it in their attitudes, roles, or appearances. Gender-specific activities are diminishing as people are expressing themselves in multifaceted ways. This means that the line between what it means to be a man or a woman in the postmodern society is blurring. Even sexual identity and orientations are rarely fixed since they are open to cultural reformulations. In her attempt to adapt her sense of self to the diverse and fast-changing conditions of the postmodern society, the postmodern woman adopts a multifaceted and sometimes fragmented identity. Fluid and multiple identity construction processes can be a liberating and empowering phenomenon for women. From the analysis in the in this paper, the characters who seek to define themselves do so in an attempt to gain some power over their lives or take control over their own experiences. Shifts of the character's identity often begin when they become aware of the positive and negative signification of belonging to a particular identity category. If one can slip from one identity to the other in the postmodern condition, the relationship between identity and power becomes shaky. The postmodern woman, therefore, is represented in the selected novels as someone with a multiple sense of self.

REFERENCES

1. BELAMGHARI Mohamed. "The Fragmentation of Identity Formation in the Age of Glocalization", *SAGE*, April-June 2020, journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo. Retrieved November 2020. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020934877
2. BUTLER, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limit of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
3. -------------------. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
4. BUSSEY, Kay. "Gender Identity Development". *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. Eds. Schwartz, S. et al. New York: Springer, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_25
5. CHARLES, Ron. "Bernardine Evaristo's '*Girl, Woman, Other*' received half a Booker Prize, but it deserves all the glory". *The Washington Post,* October 2019.
6. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/bernardine-evaristos-girl-woman-other-received-half-a-booker-prize-but-it-deserves-all-the-glory/2019/10/28/b22212fa-f97a-11e9-8906-ab6b60de9124_story.html
7. COTE, James E and Charles G. Levine. *Identity, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychology Synthesis.* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Association Inc., 2002.
8. DIGGINS, Alex. "Bernardine Evaristo shoulders weighty themes lightly- *Girl, Woman, Other* review". *The Spectator*, December 2019. https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/Bernardine-evaristo-shoulders-weighty-themes-lightly-girl-woman-other-reviewed. Retrieved October 2020.
9. EVARISTO, Bernardine. *Girl, Woman, Other*. London: Penguin, 2019.
10. NING, Wang. "Postmodernity, Postcoloniality, and Globalization: A Mainly Chinese Cultural and Literary Perspective". *ARTIKELEN FRAME.* Vol. *19*. No. *2*. (2006): 31-49.
11. O' MAHONY, David. "Constructing Identity in Postmodern Visual Culture". Crawford College of Art & Design, January 2014.
12. SUTER, Elizabeth A. & Paige W. Toller. "Gender Role and Feminism Revisited: A Follow-Up Study". *Sex Roles.* Vol. 51, No. 1/2 (July 2006). 135–146. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9065-4
13. WINCZEWSKI, Marianna Jadwiga. "Consumption, Pastiche and Identity In Postmodern Visual Culture". University of Pretoria October 2008.