



**Universitat de les
Illes Balears**

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau

Deconstructing Motherhood Ideals and Developing Maternal Empowerment in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Any acadèmic 2022-23

Treball tutelat per Cristina Cruz Gutiérrez

Departament de Filologia Espanyola, Moderna i Clàssica

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Paraules clau del treball:

Bernardine Evaristo, Black and white motherhood, political motherhood, Black British writing, maternal empowerment.

Abstract

This dissertation delves into the idealisation of motherhood presented in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), by Bernardine Evaristo. I study how motherhood is produced in Evaristo's book, and how she deconstructs the patriarchal representations and archetypes both found in Black and white motherhood. I examine how motherhood can become empowering by exploring which features of Black motherhood are idealized, which mothers are presented as fulfilling such an idealisation, and which are not. For this, emphasis is placed on Motherhood Studies from a Black British point of view (Hill 2002) and on Evaristo's work as Black British Literature (Stein 2004). The focus is then on those characters that are mothers. These characters are divided into two sections: Black Motherhood and White Motherhood. In the first section, there is an examination of maternal empowerment, motherhood, and its idealisation. The second section's aim is to scrutinize the Black motherhood ideals, and on how Evaristo deconstructs such ideals. Although the third section discusses the idealisation of white motherhood, it also compares the dichotomy of Black and white motherhood, and whether the white one is empowered and constructed similarly to the Black motherhood. Finally, it concludes by determining how Evaristo empowers her characters and by identifying the idealisation of motherhood created by patriarchy.

Key Words: Bernardine Evaristo, Black and white motherhood, political motherhood, Black British writing, maternal empowerment.

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Introduction

In 2019, Bernardine Evaristo won the Booker Prize with her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), and she became the “first black British woman author of fiction to win it” (Zorc 2020). Author of books such as *Lara* (1997), *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), *Blonde Roots* (2008), or *Mr Loverman* (2013), Evaristo mentions in her *Manifesto On Never Giving Up* (2021) how, “after forty years working professionally in the arts. [...] [She] received the kind of attention [she] had long desired for [her] work” (1). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the author presents twelve Black British women of different ages and backgrounds. The purpose of this novel as Evaristo reveals herself in her *Manifesto* is to give Black women the visibility that they have been long denied (142). In each chapter, the characters explain the struggles that they have endured. By doing so, the reader easily perceives their suffering and injustices which are derived from the oppression, the racism, and the exclusion that most of them suffer because of their skin colour. All these terms are related to the topics of race, gender and patriarchy which are key in the novel. This dissertation then aims at delving into the idealisation of motherhood presented in *Girl, Woman, Other*.

Because of the recent publishing date of *Girl, Woman, Other*, there is not any study regarding motherhood within this book. Consequently, the purpose of this dissertation is to shed light on this topic. I will study how motherhood is presented in different ways: Evaristo portrays how older mothers are swayed by patriarchal dictums on Black¹ motherhood, whereas younger generations offer alternative models of motherhood. Taking this generational change as a point of departure, this dissertation will analyse the idealisation of Black motherhood, and how patriarchy and race play an important role in shaping the identity of some mothers created by Evaristo. This will be achieved by examining how motherhood can become empowering and by exploring which features of Black motherhood are idealized, as well as which mothers are presented as fulfilling such an idealisation, and which are not. For this, I shall analyse whether these mothers are regarded as good or unfit. This perception can be further explored through the dichotomy of white *versus* Black motherhood.

In order to carry out this analysis, emphasis will be placed on Motherhood Studies from a Black British point of view. Motherhood Studies from a postcolonial perspective have “focused attention on the various ways in which mothers cannot or will not submit to the (white, middle-class, heterosexual) norms of good mothering” (Kawash 2011). This will be vital in comprehending *Girl, Woman, Other* as some of the mothers presented in the book are not

¹ Through the dissertation, the term Black will be capitalised because of its significance.

swayed by the norms that Kawash mentions. Most importantly, Evaristo uses motherhood as an empowering tool. “Motherhood as a patriarchal institution is a place of oppression, while the experience of mothering can be a source of power for women” (Sarıkaya-Şen 2021). This is an example of how Evaristo illustrates motherhood.

It is relevant to note Evaristo’s work belonging to the heterogeneous label of “Black British writing” (Evaristo 2021, 165). She mentions how “the idea of black British writing wasn’t just marginalised, it was barely on the radar of a literature sector that couldn’t quite grasp that such a demographic existed, or was worthy of publishing” (165). Mark Stein in his work explicates that “the term *black British* does not signify a *homogenous* social group that share a common ethnic, cultural, regional, or national background” (Stein 2004, 11; emphasis on the original). That is, Black British Literature is written not only by Windrush novelists that migrated to Britain, but also by post-Windrush authors, who were already born in Britain. Black British then constitutes a heterogeneous group (11). This heterogeneity leads to the idea that Black British Literature does not have its own space as it constitutes several nations (10). For instance, considering that it is diasporic, such a space will not only pertain to one specific territory, but to different regions. “Black British literature derives from its own *space*, yet this place is not homogenous in terms of time or culture or location, it is an imagined experimental field of overlapping territories” (10; emphasis on the original). Another key term by Mark Stein is that of the Black British novel of transformation (Stein 2004, 53). As the name hints, transformation indicates the progression that a character may undergo because of the influence of the British culture (53). In connection with *Girl, Woman, Other*, the novel of transformation can be perceived in the evolution of motherhood. What I intend to explain is that motherhood is transformed by adopting the British culture, especially with the different generations of mothers. As the analysis develops, this transformation is also linked to the concept of an idealisation moulded by the patriarchy.

Lastly, I shall briefly mention the literary form of *Girl, Woman, Other*. It is not the first time that Evaristo writes her novels using verse fiction (*Lara* was also written in verse), and as she mentions in her *Manifesto*: “the characters’ lives and stories are interlinked through a literary form [she has] coined ‘fusion fiction’ – which employs a pro-poetic patterning on the page and non-orthodox punctuation, while fusing the women’s stories together” (Evaristo 2022, 142). She mentions as well that writing in this form permitted her “to flow freely” (142). Because of the use of verse, the reader can feel and comprehend how these characters are feeling. The following verses, which I found rather noteworthy, describe when Carole, a non-mother character, is raped, and it transmits perfectly what she is enduring:

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 was hurtinghurtinghurting (*GWO*, 126)²

Writing in this form changes the experience of the reader, as one submerges oneself in the story.

The first section of this dissertation deals with a contextualisation of maternal empowerment, motherhood, and its idealisation. The focus on those characters that are or become mothers is divided into the second and third sections. The second section will focus on Black Motherhood, being thus devoted to exploring the evolution of Grace, Hattie, Winsome, Amma, Shirley, Bummi and LaTisha. Therefore, the aim will be set on scrutinizing the Black motherhood ideals, and on how Bernardine Evaristo deconstructs such ideals. Penelope, being the only white mother, will be analysed within the third section. This last section will analyse the white motherhood ideals and how these contrast with the Black ones. An analysis will be made on whether Penelope's motherhood is empowered as well, or if her evolution is constructed differently. For this, it shall be important to develop Penelope's character in a separate section since white motherhood has the most repercussion and prestige.

Contextualising Empowerment, Motherhood, and Its Idealisation

Before examining the mothers from *Girl, Woman, Other*, a consideration needs to be made on how motherhood can become empowering for women, and which are the ideals of motherhood in general. As Patricia Hill points out:

Motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-

² This is how it will be referred to the book from now on.

reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment. (Hill 2002, 176)

This goes hand in hand with what Evaristo tries to illustrate in her book. She writes about Black women who have never been visible or powerful amongst the rest of the population. Not only does she try to highlight this idea by narrating the different struggles that mothers endure, but also, by indicating how strong they are since they never give up on their dreams after becoming mothers. For instance, after Amma becomes a mother, she keeps pursuing her dream of being a playwright, and she even directs her own play *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, or Bummi who also pursues her dream of becoming a businesswoman and owning her own cleaning company. "The recognition of the mother as a woman with her own needs, her own past, and limitations can pave the way for maternal empowerment" (Jiao 2019), this is another key instance of how Evaristo creates this empowerment.

Motherhood can be perceived in two different ways. The first is that of a woman as a human factory, whose only job is to birth other humans. Whereas the second perception is that one of motherhood as an experience which is seen as a "potent force in shaping" women's lives (Cowdery and Knudson 2005). Mothering as a natural element acknowledges the inherent connection between mothers and their children, considering mothering as a gendered skill (338). This perspective is influenced by patriarchy, which reinforces "the re-making of specific cultural and historical collectivities of identity and belonging" (Gendalof 2009), particularly evident among those mothers from the first group within the section of Black Motherhood. Despite societal progress, today there are still people who tend to think that motherhood is a natural element of womanhood, associated with nurturing and childbearing (G'sell 2020)³. Mostly, this is rather an ideology influenced by patriarchy. It is important to note that patriarchy extends beyond being "a social and political system that leads to patriarchal outcomes – men over women", but it is also a system of oppression (Benstead 2021). In *Girl, Woman, Other*, this patriarchy perception is, once again, in the eldest mothers. As the novel develops, motherhood is less affected by this patriarchal ideology. In addition to these two perceptions of motherhood, Patricia Hill mentions two more perceptions acknowledging that some women view motherhood "as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. [While] others see motherhood as

³ Brady G'sell and Lindsay Benstead works are focused on solely Africa. However, I apply Benstead's definition on patriarchy to the context of motherhood outside Africa. The same applies with G'sell work, in which I only apply her representation of motherhood in the present day.

providing a base for self-actualization” (Hill 2002, 176). These perceptions by Hill are not intertwined with the previous ones mentioned because they provide a more realistic understanding of motherhood from women’s perspectives, rather than being solely influenced by patriarchal ideologies.

Within motherhood, there is a “false opposition between mothering and work: not only mothering is work [...] but that movement between unpaid care and paid work is an important aspect of most mother’s lives” (Kawash 2011). This refers to women who are home-stayed mothers, and do not have the same economic resources as those women who work besides of simply mothering. This idea goes hand in hand with Evaristo’s construction of Penelope being an oppressed home-stayed woman (*GWO*, 287). More connotations regarding motherhood are, for instance: that “becoming a mother enhances perceptions of women’s maturity and gains them respect and esteem in their communities” (979); or that “poor and working-class mothering practices are commonly denigrated as bad mothering by associating them with poor outcomes for children” (980). This last assumption is wrong because it only prejudices women by making them think that they are not worth of becoming mothers.

With reference to the idealisation of motherhood, there is an endless list on how a mother needs to be. Even if the perfect mother myth does not exist, societies still believe that there is one. For example, mothers need to have an “infinite patience and constant adoration” (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 2) towards their children. They are also “urged to be fun-loving, spontaneous, and relaxed, yet, at the same time, scared out of [their] minds that [their] kids could be killed” (3). Women are under peer pressure when becoming mothers, such a pressure makes women believe that they are not good enough. As mentioned before, though, this is just a myth. This idealisation of how to be a perfect mother is just a result of patriarchy. A more standard ideal of only Black mothers is, for instance, that “ [they] are suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women” (Wade-Gayles 1984). In addition to these generic idealisations, Douglas and Michaels define on their book that the “‘new momism’: [is] the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids” (4). Also, they indicate that “‘new momism’ is a set of ideals, norms, and practices” (5) which can be mostly found in the media, and whose influence results in deluding women (5). These days, women do not give much importance to this old idealisation of motherhood, and they start to follow their own instincts and doing what they think is appropriate.

The ideals that regard bad mothering can be seen as those of being abusive, or of not being completely there for their children. Bad mothers thus “expose the dark underside [...] of motherhood: [...] anger, violence, and even the mildest acts involving choosing of one’s own needs [...] are not only wrong but unnatural, even monstrous” (Kawash 2011). Focusing on Black mothers, “the controlling image of the ‘superstrong Black mother’ praises Black women’s resiliency in a society that routinely paints [them] as bad mothers” (Hill 2002, 174). Black women are perpetually perceived as unfit mothers, whilst white women are supposed to be the good model.

Black Motherhood

This section studies the evolution of the Black characters’ motherhood. To this end, these Black mothers are classified depending on their age. That is, there is the first group of mothers: Grace, Hattie and Winsome; the second one: Amma, Shirley and Bummi; and lastly, the third one, in which only LaTisha is found. These mothers are analysed based on whether they fulfil the motherhood idealisation; and if not, how they are constructed by Evaristo. Grace, Winsome and Amma are studied in more detail than the rest of the mothers, since they are more complex characters, and consequently, several themes can be identified. Hence, the themes of racism, diaspora, sense of belonging, gender, and Black feminism are explained along with the analysis of these three mothers.

The development of the Black mothers from *Girl, Woman, Other* begins with the scrutiny of Grace, Hattie and Winsome since they are the eldest. Their age varies between their 80s and early 90s. The purpose of this is because:

In Evaristo’s novel, the eldest black Britons are depicted as living anachronistically, whereas their descendants seem to have ‘caught up’ as a result of an imperial project that has assimilated them to the modern European times. (Sánchez 2022)

This refers to motherhood being influenced by the English culture and also by being less patriarchal. From the three of them, Winsome is the only one who migrated from Barbados to England, whilst Grace and Hattie were already born there. Grace is Hattie’s mother, and Winsome does not have any relationship with them. The first step is to examine how Grace, Hattie and Winsome are represented by Evaristo.

Regarding Grace’s motherhood, I shall only focus on her post-natal depression and on her identification as a birthing machine. Referring to the former, this post-natal depression is a key element that Evaristo uses to show that motherhood is not always perfect and ideal. This

means that Evaristo uses this common mental health issue as a tool to deconstruct motherhood ideals because the “best mothers always put their kids’ needs before their own [...]. [They] are the main caregivers. [...] [they] always smile” (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 6). This is why she might be seen as an unfit mother, which reinforces the idealisation of motherhood created by patriarchy. Even if Evaristo represents Grace as a strong woman, she does not fulfil the prototypical idealisation of how to be a good mother because of not being there for her child. Grace marries a white man from the north of England, whose only desire is to have a male heir who will take over their family farm. “Joseph [her husband] gave no time to Grace, he wouldn’t stop trying for another, there had to be an heir, he said” (*GWO*, 396). This illustrates the concept of Grace being a human breeder. After many tries and seeing two children die before the age of one, Grace finally gives birth to a healthy baby girl – Hattie. The loss of her two previous children also influences her upcoming depression, “Grace spent months barely able to speak or haul herself out of bed, [...] she dreamed of slicing her arteries to get rid of the pain” (398). Hence, these two aspects in Grace’s development function as a deconstruction of the idealisation.

In order to avoid repeated features, I shall focus on Hattie and Winsome at the same time as they are both depicted as good mothers, and because they deal with racism as well. The main difference that I shall highlight is the migration of Winsome and how that affects her motherhood. Hattie and Winsome are constructed by Evaristo with maternal love and self-sacrifice (Kawash 2011). For instance, Hattie can be analysed not only as “the mammy [or] the matriarch” (Hill 2002, 176), which is a common idealisation of Black motherhood, but also as a good mother. After her children left home, she “never stopped worrying about them being so far away in the capital city / where anything could happen to them” (*GWO*, 359). Worrying about one’s children is another example of an ideal. This same aspect applies for Winsome since she worries for her daughter’s well-being when growing up. In the book, Hattie is represented as a lonely woman whose relatives are only interested in her inheritance. For example, during a Christmas gathering, “[her progeny] carry on without her, amusing themselves, happy to ignore her like she’s of no consequence, most of them don’t listen to what she says anyways” (344). Despite her children being rather selfish, she has always been there for them. Evaristo constructs her as a protective and caring mother. This is seen, for instance, when her children are bullied for being black. Hattie tries her best in protecting her children, while she also struggles to make her children feel confident of their colour, and to be proud of it.

Racism is a recurrent theme across the book, and some characters suffer from it. In Hattie’s case, she faces racism when her children are being bullied because of their colour.

Hence, “while motherhood, [and] domestic responsibilities, [...] affect Black women’s mental and physical health, racism continues to take a significant social and emotional toll” (Rodriguez 2016). Not only that, but more specifically, in the United Kingdom, “racism has been a defining feature of post-war Britain and endures in the contemporary period, across various domains and levels of society” (Shakley and Rhodes 2020, 206). Linking racism with the theme of diaspora, notably in Winsome’s character, “migration, as a physical movement between two nation-states, cultures and often, gender ideologies, has massive transformative potential” (Dahir 2023) on Winsome ideology on how to exert her motherhood. She emigrates to England when she is young, and once there, she meets her future husband, Clovis, who is also from Barbados. “‘Black’ immigrants were viewed through a range of tropes, stereotypes and prejudices that saw their presence as both alien and threatening” (Shakley and Rhodes 2020, 206). Winsome faces racism when “people wasn’t just unfriendly, they was downright hostile, who were these two monkeys people” (*GWO*, 261), or when she is told that: “you can’t sleep here because your colour will come off on the sheets” (261). These examples reinforce Winsome’s sensation of not feeling accepted, and this affects her motherhood.

Throughout the novel, it is appreciated how Winsome has this persistent sense of belonging to Barbados. “It needs to be noted that the domestic space is often simultaneously as problematically fixed to a more limited and limiting notion of belonging” (Gendalof 2009). Winsome never expresses this sense of belonging to England, and she solely desires to return to Barbados. For Winsome and her husband, migrating to England means a new beginning, a new home. However, “England makes a claim for being that home place, yet it is not a simple claim to make” (Cousins 2018). This idea of sense of belonging is also interrelated to seeing her daughter, Shirley, adopting the British culture. Winsome continuously tells her daughter not to copy her friend Amma, or not to dress like her (*GWO*, 250), because if Shirley does that, it will reflect that she is undergoing a process of acculturation. These two aspects sway her motherhood by making Winsome rather strict on Shirley, and on how she needs to behave. By doing so, Evaristo is “committed to issues of migration, heritage and (un)belonging, [and she] dramatizes the literal diaspora of the black Britons” (Sánchez 2022). In addition, Evaristo “sees to counter the dominant idea within the genre of black British literature of mixed-race or diasporic hybridity” (Cousins 2018). Finally, since Winsome and Hattie perpetually care for their children, they both fulfil the motherhood idealisation.

The second group of mothers, Amma, Shirley and Bummi are grouped together because of their similar age; Amma and Shirley are around their early fifties, while Bummi is on her late fifties. With the purpose of avoiding repeating common motherhood ideals, Shirley and Bummi

are analysed altogether. Nonetheless, Amma does not entirely fit within the characterization of the other two because Evaristo constructs her as a rather liberal, non-preoccupied, and easy-going mother, whereas Bummi and Shirley are constructed and represented as strict mothers who need to have everything under their control.

Amma is a Black feminist, bisexual, and a single mother who has her daughter, Yazz, through a sperm donation by a friend of hers. Even if “lesbians, by virtue of their sexuality, represent a vanguard of women who escape social pressure to become parents” (Dunne 2000), Amma still desires to have a baby. Yet, “by embracing motherhood, lesbians are making their lives ‘intelligible’ to others – their quest to become parents is often enthusiastically supported by family and heterosexual friends” (13). When Amma says that she would like to become a mother; everyone supports her, and her friend Roland tells her that he is willing to give her his sperm, and they agree on co-parenting their daughter. Another important idea that needs to be emphasized is that of Amma representing motherhood as an experience:

Yazz was the miracle she never though she wanted, and having a child really did complete her, something she rarely confided because it somehow seemed anti-feminist

Yazz was going to be her countercultural experiment (*GWO*, 36)

This idea of feeling complete after having a baby is a clear instance of motherhood idealisation, and of how “having children is the most joyous, fulfilling experience” (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 8). The use of fusion fiction by Evaristo is also noticeable in those lines because the reader perceives Amma’s excitement. Another aspect to clarify is that Evaristo constructs Amma in a similar manner as Grace. They both have features that regard them as unfit for several reasons, such as Amma’s sexuality or Grace’s mental health. Thus, Amma and Grace are two complex characters because the patriarchal idealisation makes them appear as unfit.

It is important to highlight how the themes of gender and Black feminism can be significantly identified in Amma’s characterisation. “The black feminist movement has grown partly as a response to the invisibility of black women and to the racism of the white feminist movement” (Anthias and Yuval 1983). Black women have been ignored within white feminism, and as a consequence, it emphasises Black women’s feeling of being excluded and marginalised, when in reality, all of them fight for the same cause. Another illustration of this is that “women of colour have been vehement in challenging privileged feminist whose racial and class power seems invisible to them” (McClintock 1993). Therefrom, Evaristo uses Black women not only to give them voice, but also to:

Present a transmodern, plural and inclusive cultural world that intermingles various cultures and respects otherness and difference including, but not limited to, the lives of lesbian and gender-free black British women. (Sarıkaya-Şen 2021)

It is for this reason that gender has a key role within the development of this mother. For instance, Amma is marginalised when she tries to find a job in the theatre since she has “African hips and thighs / perfect slave girl material one director told her when she walked / into an audition” (*GWO*, 6). Not only the gender theme is portrayed here, but also the racism she endures. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, gender is connected to motherhood as “notions of women’s sexual difference (more ‘submissive’, ‘feminine’, ‘intuitive’, [...]) and their ‘essential mothering role’ are used and are often manipulated for [...] justifying women’s positions” (Anthias and Yuval 1983). This leads to the already mentioned idea of women as natural breeders. Interestingly, as McClintock mentions, “women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit” (McClintock 1993). This is rather crucial because it defines the fact that motherhood is nothing less than a political institution.

Shirley and Bummi are nothing alike to Amma. Bummi’s development is close to Winsome’s because she also does not like her daughter, Carole, adopting the British culture. In Bummi’s daughter case, she gets acculturated soon after leaving for university, and she hoped that once her daughter finished her degree, “she would return to her real culture” (*GWO*, 151), which is African. Both Shirley and Bummi fulfil the idealisation because they perform the responsibilities of motherhood which are “to nurture, to preserve and to protect” (Walker 1995) their children. They are then constructed as good mothers because they provide their children with “emotional care and involvement” (424). For instance, Bummi does this especially when her daughter goes to university. Bummi tells Carole that she needs to finish her degree as it shall be important for her future. Shirley, who is a teacher, uses her experience on teaching Black children when mothering. She commits herself to “giving the kids a fighting chance” (*GWO*, 234), and so does this with her own children. All these instances demonstrate Evaristo’s construction of Shirley and Bummi with motherhood ideals.

To conclude the overview on Black motherhood, I shall discuss the last Black mother from the book, LaTisha. LaTisha is analysed separately because she is the youngest (i.e., her thirties). She gets pregnant while being a teenager and before the age of 20, she has three children by three different men. Therefore, this highlights the idea of LaTisha being an unfit mother. In her case, her pregnancies are all accidental since her partners manipulated her by making comments such as “real men don’t wear condoms” (*GWO*, 205). Just like, Shirley and Bummi, LaTisha pressures her children to study because “they have no choice other than do

well on the exams” (190). She does that because she does not want her children make the same mistake as her and leave school. This is why, Evaristo represents her as a young girl who does not have any knowledge on mothering. Even LaTisha’s mother tells her that “that baby will die if you’re left alone to look after it” (207). Just “because women are biologically capable of bearing children, we assume that they are, by definition, capable of nurturing children” (Wade-Gayles 1984). With all examples mentioned above, it is rather clear that Evaristo deconstructs motherhood by presenting a young girl, who does not seem to be able to take care of herself, having three unwanted children. Consequently, LaTisha does not fulfil the motherhood idealisation. In conclusion, “Black women are not a monolithic group with the same needs, the same strengths, the same weakness, and the same dreams. They are variegated flowers in a garden of humanity” (Wade-Gayles 1984). This quote is an excellent example of how Black women should be regarded as instead of being subjected to, for instance, racism and stereotypes.

White Motherhood

On the contrary to the previous section, this upcoming part deals with white motherhood while examining Penelope’s motherhood. In this section, the analysis focuses on whether Penelope is constructed similarly to the Black mothers, and whether Evaristo empowers her motherhood as well. After the overview on how Penelope is portrayed, a comparison is made with the purpose of showing the analysis results between Black and white motherhood. The section concludes with a reference to maternal empowerment with the aim of finding out how it is depicted in both types of motherhoods.

White motherhood is identified as a role model and has the major repercussion and prestige. *Ergo*, emphasis is needed on the dichotomy of Black and white motherhood. According to Wade-Gayles, interpretations based on white motherhood show that mothers and their daughters are alienated because these mothers teach their daughters to be passive within the patriarchal rules (Wade-Gayles 1984). Yet, “Black women have not stood as fragile figurines on pedestals white feminists seek to dismantle, they have a decidedly different approach to rearing daughters” (12). All this is referred because in *Girl, Woman, Other*, there are predominantly mother-daughter relationships, and it is necessary to have this aspect present. Herein, the dichotomy of Black and white motherhood can be understood as Black being “independent, strong and self-confident” (12), while white is the opposite since they are shown to be dependent and passive. Another factor that sways this dichotomy is feminism. “While feminism remains one of the few discourses advancing important analyses of motherhood, the

combination of its perceived Whiteness and antifamily politics limits its effectiveness” (Hill 2002, 175). This quote refers to the idea that white motherhood has still a great power, whereas Black motherhood is not at the same level.

As explained previously, Penelope is the only white mother in Evaristo’s book. She is in her seventies and works as a schoolteacher. Despite of her white appearance, Penelope discovers through a DNA test that her biological parents are actually of African descent. In the epilogue of the novel, it is revealed that Penelope’s biological mother is Hattie, who had her as a teenager, and Penelope was subsequently given up for adoption by Hattie’s father. Besides this fact, she is deemed and represented throughout the whole novel as a white woman. As to Penelope’s construction of motherhood, Evaristo illustrates her as a self-sacrificing mother who leaves her career aside in order to take care of her children. Initially, Penelope finds joy and happiness in her role as a mother, but later on, she begins to feel drained and wary. For example, Penelope is not resentful of “staying at home,” (*GWO*, 286) initially relishing on the love she feels for her children, but after three years she begins to feel “sucked dry by them” (*GWO*, 286). Shortly after, she decides to continue with her teaching career. Those lines from the book are a perfect example of how Penelope is constructed: Evaristo portrays her in alignment with the motherhood idealisation created by patriarchy. First of all, she is a home-stay mother, which is a central aspect of the idealised concept of good mothering (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 12). Secondly, she fulfils the idealisation because she is the main childbearing.

Additionally, Penelope’s husband exhibits oppressive behaviour as seen in the instance when she tells him that she wants to start working again. He dismisses the idea, saying it is not necessary for her to do so. This aspect of Penelope’s story highlights the significance of patriarchy in her character development since her idealised perception and representation of motherhood is based on patriarchal models. Similarly to Grace, Penelope also struggles with self-esteem because of her husband. Evaristo portrays her husband, Giles, as uninterested and repulsed by lactating breasts, which greatly affects her sense of self-worth (*GWO*, 293). Despite these struggles, Penelope can be described as a good and devoted mother because she is consistently present for her children. This can be seen because her daughter, Sarah, never leaves her side (301). Nonetheless, Evaristo narrates Penelope’s disappointment with her children because they prefer their wealthy father; whilst she “had been the parent who raised them” (301). However, this does not have an impact on her role as a good mother. Lastly, it is important to stress the idea that Penelope’s motherhood is empowered by Evaristo as well. Evaristo creates this empowerment by making Penelope realise that there is no need for her to be a home-stay mother, and that her teaching career is equally important as to her being a mother.

After closely studying all mothers from *Girl, Woman, Other*, a comparison needs to be made between Black and white motherhood. It is common for both motherhoods that: “women are [...] nurturing and maternal, love all children, and prefer motherhood to anything, especially work” (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 138). However, Evaristo deconstructs this idealisation in both motherhoods by representing her characters wanting to work alongside their role as mothers, which leads to their empowerment. Additionally, another example of a recurrent theme across both motherhoods is of that of being good or unfit:

Good mothers were always in a good mood and ready to play. Good mothers never bad-mouthed their ex-husbands in front of the kids [...]. Bad mothers kept a messy house. Bad mothers did not listen to their kids, yelled at them, and were not adequately empathetic. (223–24)

Even though the theme of being an unfit mother is recurrent throughout the book, none of Evaristo’s mothers are represented as mean or abusive towards their children. Furthermore, another similarity between the two motherhoods is that “women bring to the role of mother their individual strengths and weaknesses as persons, and what they feel about themselves as persons influences their performance as mothers” (Wade-Gayles 1984). This characterisation suggests that women after becoming mothers put on their best masquerade in order to fulfil the idealisation; otherwise, they will be criticised for not being appropriate mothers to their children.

A major difference in the way both motherhoods are portrayed lies in Black motherhood being affected by “racial stereotyping [which] marginalizes ethnic mothering, [and are] detrimental to both the autonomy of the mother and the daughter” (Jiao 2019). Yet, this stereotyping is not found in white motherhood. Two further examples of differences between Black mothering and the white one is that Black mothers “internalize a mothering ideology that emphasizes sacrifice in order to distance themselves from an association with stigmatized ‘bad’ mothering” (Taylor 2011); and this results in Black mothers using attachment in pursuance of claiming good mothering (Hamilton 2021). Black mothers are regarded instinctively as bad mothers, whereas white ones are the good ones. Not only that, but Black mothers are also excluded “from contemporary mothering ideologies” (2598). As Evaristo well presents in the book, white motherhood is influenced by the patriarchal idealisation, whereas the Black one is not. Similarly, since Black motherhood has never had the same protection as the white one, Black women are advised “to ignore the reality of their experiences in the interstice in favor of a universal notion of the woman and the mother that is insufficient in its articulation” (Fuentes 2018). Hence, “Black motherhood is one form of Black women’s resistance against white

supremacist frames” (858). In relation to racism and the development of Black motherhood in *Girl, Woman, Other*, the “Black mother-child relationship is marked by the historicity of fear and precarity” (860). This is not visible in white motherhood since white mothers are not subjected to this racism.

In conclusion, it is thoroughly seen how Evaristo constructs and develops her characters, either Black or white, with empowerment. “Maternal empowerment depends on mutuality, [...] which is especially true for women who mother against the grain, against the multitudes of marginalisation and pathologization” (Jiao 2019). This empowerment that Jiao mentions is indeed proved through the entire book because it is mostly referred to Black women. As seen before, Black women have been the target of offensive assumptions in terms of their mothering. It is well known that all these untrue assumptions are a result of racism that Black people still highly endure these days.

Conclusion

To conclude with, this dissertation has aimed at delving into the idealisation of motherhood which has been proved to be created by patriarchy. It has revealed that motherhood is not only a complex conception, but also a political one because of the patriarchal idealisation. However, throughout the development of the mothers, emphasis has been placed on distinguishing how motherhood has become less political through the generations of mothers. Younger mothers, like Amma or LaTisha, have not been swayed by such an idealisation. Whereas older mothers, such as Grace, and Penelope are constructed and represented by conforming with these patriarchal archetypes. In connection to this evolution of motherhood, the Black British novel of transformation is perceived in a similar manner. As seen in the fact that motherhood is becoming less political and is adopting the British culture. Bernardine Evaristo through Black British Writing has given voice to a group of invisible Black women who needed to be heard. Most importantly, her coinage of fusion-fiction allows the reader to fully comprehend and empathise with the characters’ experiences and emotions during difficult struggles or traumatic moments.

Evaristo has constructed Hattie, Winsome, Shirley, Bummi and Penelope as good mothers who indeed fulfil the standard motherhood idealisation. Whilst Grace, Amma and LaTisha belong to the group of bad mothers. With the analysis of these mothers, there has been a close examination of the important themes found in *Girl, Woman, Other*, such as gender, racism, diaspora, sense of belonging, or patriarchy. Furthermore, the dissertation has focused

on identifying the criteria for being labelled good or bad mother. Traditionally, in pursuance of being a good mother, a woman needs to be reduced to her main role of being a mom. However, this does not need to be entirely true since a good mother can aspire to have a successful career as well as being a mother. Evaristo thus empowers her characters' motherhood by giving them the power to make choices, but also by giving them the encouragement to pursue their ambitions, and by showing how motherhood is in real life. This maternal empowerment is constituted by women who recognise their own needs and prioritise these needs besides of simply mothering.

Black motherhood still does not have the same repercussion as the white one. Racism is the main factor regarding these inequalities. As stated previously, Black motherhood is characterised for being strong and independent, whilst white motherhood is passive and submissive to patriarchy. Finally, this dissertation has focused on analysing the perceptions that motherhood constitutes, including the notion of motherhood as a natural element for women, and the reduction of women to mere human breeders. However, Evaristo has done an outstanding work in proving these complex notions by providing empowerment to Black women, and by giving them the voice that they have been longing for.

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