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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BERNARDINE EVARISTO'S *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER* AS A CONTUMACIOUS NARRATIVE

Wandja Fatoumata TUO
Alassane Ouattara University
Wandjita5@gmail.com

Abstract: *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) explores varied burning issues related to gender plurality, sexuality, and narrative experimentation that challenge both patriarchal norms and conventional academic writing practices. This article examines the novel as a contumacious narrative, foregrounding its deliberate subversion of grammatical conventions and cis-heteronormative tenets. Drawing on decolonial theory, the study investigates how the text advocates a pluriversal understanding of identity and the English language. It argues that Bernardine Evaristo's stylistic and thematic disruptions constitute a form of epistemic disobedience that aims at reconfiguring both literary form and socio-cultural norms. The paper first analyses the deconstruction of gender and sexuality, then discusses the novel's unconventional grammar as a decolonial strategy. As a result, the study reveals the power of literature to question established norms and imagine alternative possibilities. Its contumacy lies not merely in its defiance but in its capacity to offer new spaces for thought, identity, and expression.

Key words: Contumacy, decoloniality, gender, pluriversality, run-on sentence

Résumé : *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) explore diverses problématiques brûlantes liées à la pluralité des genres, à la sexualité et à l'expérimentation narrative, remettant en cause à la fois les normes patriarcales et les pratiques conventionnelles de l'écriture académique. Cet article examine le roman comme un récit insoumis, en mettant en lumière sa subversion délibérée des conventions grammaticales et des normes cis-hétéronormatives. S'appuyant sur la théorie décoloniale, cette étude montre comment le texte promeut une compréhension pluriverselle de l'identité et de la langue anglaise. Elle soutient que les ruptures stylistiques et thématiques opérées par Bernardine Evaristo constituent une forme de désobéissance épistémique visant à reconfigurer à la fois la forme littéraire et les normes socioculturelles. L'article analyse d'abord la déconstruction du genre et de la sexualité, avant d'examiner la grammaire non conventionnelle du roman comme une stratégie décoloniale.

Mots-clés : Insubordination, décolonialité, genre, pluriversalité, phrase extensive sans ponctuation conventionnelle

INTRODUCTION

Viewed as citizens of the wretched of the earth (Fanon 2004), women strive to be visible. In this endeavour, their agency is in accordance with their attempt to regain freedom. Contemporary female writing frequently operates as counter-discourse, challenging dominant epistemologies and social structures. *Girl, Woman, Other* by Nigerian-born British author Bernadine Evaristo is a novel whose form and content comply with women's dream of

liberation. The novel under study disrupts conventional narrative structures while simultaneously contesting fixed notions of gender and sexuality. Its stylistic experimentation—particularly the use of extended sentences and minimal punctuation—combined with its representation of non-normative identities, positions it as a contumacious text.

Like a stubborn child who refuses to comply with patriarchy, this literary output rejects conventional codes of narrative writing, thus making it a novel of protest that aims to decolonize the mind and writing norm. Viewed under this perspective of resistance, decoloniality is an appropriate tool to analyse the narrative. The concept of decoloniality was introduced by Anibal Quijano (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 6). It seeks to dismantle the enduring structures of colonial power, particularly in knowledge production. Unlike postcolonialism, which critiques colonial legacies, decoloniality emphasizes epistemic delinking and the creation of alternative modes of thinking and behaving.

To fully understand decoloniality, it may be best to explore what it is not. Decoloniality is neither decolonization nor postcolonialism. Even if both decolonization and postcolonialism are not the points at issue in this study, it is worth showing what they are. Though decolonization does not only refer to the complete removal of the domination of western trails and signs within the geographical, cultural space, and different institutions of the colonized, it resists imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence (Said 1994, 33). Decolonisation amounts to what Reiland Rabaka terms Africana critical theory which argues that theory, in the revolutionary sense should not be disconnected from praxis, but should always be linked to the ongoing process of revolutionary decolonization and revolutionary re-Africanization (Rabaka, 2010, 299). Therefore, decolonization tallies with contumacy, revolt and self-determination.

As for postcolonialism, it emerged as a movement consolidating and developing around the ideas of Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri C. Spivak, to cite a few. These thinkers draw inspiration from the political movements for decolonization. Thus, in Robert J. C. Young's parlance, it seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world (Young 2003: 2). He goes further writing that postcolonialism is about a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further (Young 2003, 2). It follows from this that decolonization and postcolonialism aim at social and mental change. They take place when the colonized people intellectually, socially and at worst militarily overthrow an occupying power and reclaim the lost freedom. In short, they symbolize resistance and aim to free people from the yoke of the dominant power, injustice and oppression.

Dealing with decoloniality, the perspective adopted in this paper, it must be put that it starts with the earlier work of scholars such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and Enrique Dussel. If Aníbal Quijano views the coloniality of power as being based on the imposition of the idea of race as an instrument of domination (Quijano 2000, 569), decoloniality can be seen as the subversion, the demolition of this powerful idea imposed upon the weak class. So, decolonial thinking is understood ‘as a particular kind of critical theory’ (Mignolo 2007a, 155).

In an article entitled “Delinking,” Walter D. Mignolo pens that: “decoloniality is an even larger project that encompasses both, as Fanon puts it, the colonized and the colonizer and therefore, emancipation and liberation. De-coloniality turns the plate around and shifts the ethics and politics of knowledge” (Mignolo 2007, 457). In this precise sense, emancipation cannot be the guiding light for liberation/de-coloniality but the other way round: liberation/de-coloniality includes and re-maps the ‘rational concept of emancipation’” (Mignolo 2007, 458).

Sara Duvisac has this to write: “decolonial theory advocates for individuals and institutions to center and cede power to the knowledge, voices, and experiences of people marginalized by colonialism and coloniality” (Duvisac 2022, 3). As it can be noted, Evaristo’s novel aims to decolonize, to delink and re-shape life and prose writing according to any perspective that reflects the experience of subalternised people. In this paper, the analysis of decoloniality is not about western people as such. Instead, it is about the binary male and female, conventional and unconventional writing code. As a female writer, Evaristo seems dissatisfied with the epistemic consequences of the knowledge produced by patriarchy. In this respect, both the content and the form of her novel give people a kind of freedom to do and to be.

It is then pertinent for the goal of this article to raise some questions: Why does Bernardine Evaristo write what she wants (Biko 2002)? How does the novel subvert dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality? And eventually, in what ways does its form enact the rejection of linguistic norms?

The study aims to highlight the reason for challenging both the universality of Western grammar and the rigidity of gender binaries, proposing instead a pluriversal vision of identity and expression. It consists of two main parts. The first point to discuss is the contribution of subaltern perspectives to epistemological questions that aim to disobey and delink cis-heteronormativity, hence from universality to pluriversality: undoing gender and sex. The second section addresses the decoloniality of the text through delinking and disobeying the grammar rules as regards the writing style of the novel.

1. From Universality to Pluriversality: Undoing Gender¹ and Sex

The tension between universality and pluriversality is central to decolonial thought as illustrated in the novel under study. While universality imposes a single model of truth or identity, pluriversality, as articulated by Ashish Kothari et al. envisions a world where many worlds fit (Kothari et al. 2019, xxviii).

In the Zapparistas of Chiapas' words, Ashish Kothari et al. further emphasise that "All people's worlds should co-exist with dignity and peace without being subjected to diminishment, exploitation and misery" (Kothari et al. 2019, xxviii). As such, the universality of both gender and sex is challenged so as to suggest their pluriversality.

1.1. Gender Subversion and the Emergence of an Agender Subject

Bernardine Evaristo's narrative subverts and destabilizes the binary conception of gender deeply rooted in many societies, including British contexts. Traditionally, gender roles are tied to biological sex, assigning women domestic responsibilities and men positions of authority and domination. However, the novel challenges this essentialist view by presenting gender as socially constructed, echoing Judith Butler's argument (2004). By implication, she makes some characters shift from one gender to another, or to select an agender status. Before defining what an agender is, it is worth putting that gender refers to the social categories of male and female. These categories are distinguished from one another by a set of psychological features and role attributes that society has assigned to the biological category of sex (Helgeson 2017, 30). Thus, every single gender's role goes along with being male or female such as giving birth to children, cooking, and taking care of the family unit reserved for women, while working hard, and the decision-making are viewed as being men's prerogative.

By contrast, an agender is a person who does not identify with gender identity or expression. Some agender-identifying people consider themselves genderless, and/or nonbinary, while some consider "agender" to be their gender identity (Online, 4). An agender is then a person who does not identify with any gender. He/she rejects participation in gender categories and norms.

It is crystal clear that the reader of *Girl, Woman, Other* is allowed to note that gender is not fixed, and that people are free to choose what fits them. The novel is flooded with characters whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their birth assigned gender (Cho et al. 2004, 5).

¹ Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender*. London: Routledge. 2004. She uses this title to protest the place assigned to women in society.

Yet, gender-free characters are alien to the British lore. Indeed, in Britain and elsewhere in the world, a person is considered a man or woman when they are assigned a male or female sex at birth. Despite the wind of modernity, many a person in the world and in Britain in particular find it unacceptable to shift into an opposite gender as some characters perform in *Girl, Woman, Other*. The author lets the reader know her determination to free gender when she claims through the character of Bibi that: “gender’s a social construction, most of us are born male or female but the concepts of masculinity and femininity are society’s inventions, none of it is innate” (Evaristo 2019, 319). It follows from this that gender is determined by the society we were born into since it is a social fabrication.

Consequently, we are free to choose the desired gender, then crushing patriarchal and social norms. In this way, gender is made unsettled. Such a gender trouble (Butler 1999) is made ostensible when Megan states that: “she considers herself to be in the gender-free category gender-free means I identify as neither male nor female” (Evaristo 2019, 336). If she identifies herself as an agender individual, this is tantamount to destroying the British ethos of gender category. Her genderless state amounts to subverting the British view of gender issue which consists in putting cis-gender at the center of social life. The *Transgender Studies Quarterly* defines cis-gender as follows: “The term cisgender (from the Latin cis-, meaning ‘‘on the same side as’’) can be used to describe individuals who possess, from birth and into adulthood, the male or female reproductive organs (sex) typical of the social category of man or woman (gender) to which that individual was assigned at birth” (2014, 61). This means that a cisgender person’s gender is on the same side as their birth-assigned sex unlike an agender or a transgender subject who rejects the birth-assigned gender. As a contumacious female writer, Evaristo distances herself from the British principles that promote cisgender.

In fact, swinging from one gender to another, or destroying one’s gender, can be viewed as a contumacy as per the collective unconscious. Unlike Simone de Beauvoir who claims that: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (de Beauvoir 2011, 14); people tend to claim that one is born a woman or a man and must stay who they are. As such, true gender expression should comport with the myth of femininity or masculinity as ordered by patriarchal and social norms. The then universal feature of gender based on masculinity and femininity is questioned to make the pluriversality of gender thrive and then abrogate both the male and female gender. It can be argued that Evaristo is readying us for many possible worlds in which no gender prevails over another. The male gender and female gender we are accustomed to are no longer valid. What counts is the pluriversal gender, namely transgender, gender neutral in addition to the two classical known genders. Such a view might seem hard to us, but the scourge has already

gained impetus among us. Pluriversal as a decolonial concept is then of interest as the fixity of universal is debunked.

By pluriversal, Ashish Kothari et al. pen that: “A pluriversal world overcomes patriarchal attitudes, racism, casteism, and other forms of discrimination” (2019, xxviii). Unlike universalising ideology of the men-dominated world, the pluriversal world intends to liberate anybody. Therefore, Megan’s gender-free option concurs with the writer’s ambition of trying other world(s) in which the dignity, integrity and freedom of every single person count. Another anti-establishment project couched in the opus is the same sex love.

1.2. Contesting Cis-heteronormativity in Contemporary World

Socio-economic crisis, and the high cost of living paired with poverty do not impede people from giving birth to children viewed as the continuity of the family and beyond the society. However, a great deal of characters of *Girl, Woman, Other* distance themselves from this principle. The novel further challenges dominant sexual norms by foregrounding lesbian relationships and other non-heteronormative identities. This narrative strategy aligns with the decolonial project of giving voice to marginalized identities and resisting normative principles imposed by patriarchal system. To give life to a child, men and women should have sex, not between same sex, which she portrays not as a deviance. Evaristo challenges cis-heteronormativity via her characters’ non-conforming sexual orientation as per the authentic British view. The concept of cis-heteronormativity consists of two terms, that is cisnormativity and heteronormativity that deserve defining.

Indeed, established in the work of G. R. Bauer et al., cisnormativity “describes the expectation that all people are cissexual, that those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women (2009, 356). In this respect, they are likely to give birth to children after sexual intercourse.

Cisnormativity is sustained by gender and sexual binary: masculine/feminine. It is through cisnormativity that gender is made “real” and recognisable as a stable and immutable category that has only two sides. Someone is either a man or a woman. Under this angle, cisnormativity denies the existence of transpeople, perpetuating the belief that transpeople are gender “abnormal” and that “the average person does not need to know about their existence” (Schwartz et al. 2017, 303).

Dealing with heteronormativity, Thomas Crisp writes that: “Heteronormativity assumes close links between gender and sexuality: people who perform femininity are expected to desire people who perform masculinity. Those who do not fit or refuse to fit into this order are silenced or made invisible (Crisp 2009, 335). K. Whittington has this to add heteronormativity is the

“system in which sexual conduct and kinship relations are organized in such a way that a specific form of heterosexuality becomes the culturally accepted ‘natural order’ (2014, 210). From this standpoint, heteronormativity describes the processes through which social institutions and social policies reinforce the belief that human beings fall into two distinct sex and gender categories, that is male and female. This ideology produces a correlative belief that these two sexes exist in order to fulfill complementary roles.

Therefore, according to cis-heteronormativity, being gay, lesbian, non-binary, bisexual and homosexual equals being queer, weird, and an ‘other’ that should be ostracised. Yet, reading and analysing *Girl, Woman, Other*, we notice that Evaristo refuses the erasure of lesbian existence by decolonising the socially established sexual code. To some of her characters, having other sexual orientations is not a blameworthy act. By introducing non-conforming characters like Amma, Dominique and Nzinga, the novel offers a space for women to realize that they can be anyone or an ‘other’ amongst their fellow humans. It encourages them to think beyond cis-heteronormative values and lead a life as per their want. Here, Amma’s, Dominique’s and Nzinga’s collective choice is lesbianism, which maintains that there is nothing queer and unnatural about their desire. The text reads:

I’ve fallen in love properly for the first time in my life with the most wonderful woman I’ve ever met, who desires me from a position of inner strength, Amma, and it might sound odd but that’s so new to me and darned sexy, like she can rip my clothes off whenever she wants to (which she does) and I feel helpless and dominated (which I like), whereas my previous lovers desired me from a position of weakness, of adoration, which just isn’t interesting to me any more the tension between us is electrostatic, Ams, it’s like I’m being charged up with electric volts, we can’t bear to be apart, not even for five minutes (Evaristo 2019, 80).

What is gleaned from this excerpt is the contumacious attitude beyond the erotic pleasure obtained. Lesbianism is contrary to cis-heteronormativity. The character’s account praises same-sex relationship. The ideology of heterosexuality deemed to be natural and convenient is then debunked while same-sex love and other forms of gender expression such as lesbianism, gayism, bisexuality, transgendering, and queer (LGBTQ+) are advocated. Instead of depicting this non-conformist sexual orientation as abnormal and deviant, Evaristo portrays it as something laudable and praiseworthy through “it might sound odd but that’s so new to me and darned sexy” in the aforementioned extract. Generally speaking, it is known that men’s and women’s social contract is built on binaries and has strictly categorised gender into male and female. Any gender and sexual orientation that resist these two categories is considered as a challenge, and a disobedience as the studied characters are performing.

The novelist's subversion of patriarchy is also strengthened when she makes the character of Dominique vehemently castigate it as follows: "the patriarchy is divisive, violent and authoritarian, misogyny is so unthinkingly entrenched I can see why women give up on them for ever, it's so special here, so liberating to be removed from having to deal with male oppression every day" (Evaristo 2019, 102-103). There is then a real hatred for men, hence her wish to remove their domination.

Moreover, with *Girl, Woman, Other*, patriarchy must be deracinated root and branch. Reference is made to the conversation Gaia has with Dominique in these lines: "Gaia told her (Dominique) she'd been through the wars for social and legislative acceptance in the fifties and sixties, eventually deciding to turn her back on men, she was done with the patriarchy" (Evaristo 2019, 88). Like many girls and women in this fictitious society, Gaia is determined to free herself from patriarchy.

What is striking in this passage is these women's commitment to put an end to men's hegemony. Their want of total decolonization is unequivocal. This is more substantiated through "the women's magazines argued that women should not define themselves by a male partner, that to depend on a man was a sign of weakness" (Evaristo 2019, 297). Here, all the magazines about and for women convey only one message, that of the "de-patriarchalization" (Kothari et al. 2019, xxxiv) of the society by helping the voiceless get voice and decide on their sexual and gender orientation. The definite article "the" used to accompany women's magazines is a telltale sign as regards their determination to get free. In this De-linking (Mignolo 2007, Mignolo 2010) project, Gaia and her fellow women characters aim to depart from the patriarchal norms set by the society they live in.

This might account for their coming out, which means showing one's sexual orientation regardless of the threat, violence, and ostracism they are likely to be confronted with. For Walter D. Mignolo "De-linking, once again, implies work at the fringes, at the border between hegemonic and dominant forms of knowledge, of economic practices, of political demands" (2010, 7). Therefore, as a decolonial writer, Evaristo has a choice to make: either 'to bend and accept what is human according to Western knowledge' or 'to de-link, engage in epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo 2009, 11). In the framework of this analysis, what is at stake is the protest of British authentic view of gender issue. De-linking then shall be grasped as a decolonial epistemic shift leading to other-universality, that is, to pluriversality as a universal project (Mignolo 2007, 453). Through her lesbian characters, Evaristo suggests that new possibilities and new worlds can co-exist, hence pluriversality. So, if sex is a social construction, then it can be deconstructed and adapted according to the person's desire and

aspiration as depicted in *Girl, Woman, Other*. These characters are then dreaming of a sex-free world wherein there is no restriction by reinventing their bodies.

In this vein, sex becomes an organ of pleasure that liberates them. This is substantiated through “sex is interesting, they enjoy sharing their reinvented bodies with each other, giving and receiving pleasure according to what works for them” (Evaristo 2019, 331). Here, the sexual intercourse that fits these girls and women is lesbianism that comports with their feeling, thereby, crushing the “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980, 637) conveyed by patriarchy.

However, in her defense of this queer project, Evaristo sounds unrealistic. A woman is and will remain a woman. The presence of breasts as well as the menstrual cycle are obvious facts that can never be prevented from happening. The character of Megan, the girl who is transitioning from girl to boy is an illustration of this. These lines are revelatory as regards her attitude: “then her body started to show womanly curves and it didn’t feel right, it wasn’t what she felt herself to be so much so that she hated catching herself in mirrors, hated the breasts that appeared without her permission” (Evaristo 2019, 312). This is a compulsory female trait any woman has to experience and undergo. Whether a woman is transgender, gender neutral, or a lesbian endowed with the husband status, she is and shall remain a woman. Megan loathes the breasts, but this is a reality she and her fellow sisters can never stop, because they shall come across the Lacanian Real (Lacan 2006, 184). In Jacques Lacan’s parlance “all that is real is rational” (2006, 184). Yet, the rational can be viewed as the impossible change of the birth assigned gender and sex.

The unrealizable change resides in the menstrual cycle stop. Even though Frantz Fanon maintains through the excipit of *Black Skin White Masks* that: “O my body, always make me a man who questions!” (2008, 206), these transgender and lesbian women’s bodies should not make them question their feminine identity. This identity is already and permanently fixed. Changing it, is irreversible and impossible, hence the rationality.

Moreover, the menstrual cycle is of note as evidenced by “Dominique wanted to wash her own undies, especially the ones stained with menstrual blood” (Evaristo 2019, 97). Here, the real (Lacan 2006) is the menstruation issue which is universal to all women. What goes for Dominique the wife goes for Nzinga the so-called male spouse who plays the husband role in the plot, and beyond the worldwide women.

As such, this dream amounts to mimicry and camouflage as Jacques Lacan writes: “Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly sense” (1978, 99). It is clear that the maverick people merely mimic in as much as they can never be what they want to. Their

attitude is tantamount to aping the manners and the attitude of the gender or sex they crave for. It can be argued that the writer as well as her favourite characters live in a world of pernicious fantasy.

However, the impossible that is the lacanian real constitutes an impediment. Apart from moral solace, the non-conformist gender gets; he/she remains a loser for he/she neither gets what is allowed to him/her at birth nor what he/she dreams about by transitioning. They are losers on every level. They neither get the assigned privilege due to the natural and assigned gender and sex; they do not get the privilege assigned to the desired sex or gender either.

Therefore, I can maintain that if Evaristo aims to create and prepare people for transitioning, lesbianism, homosexuality and non-binary, it must be born in mind that this undertaking will remain suspended due to its unrealistic feature. In fact, the pleasure they get from this practice is a mere psychological solace, because only man and woman can achieve full sexual pleasure. Furthermore, the narrative is a true fire against the established academic norms of writing.

2. The Decoloniality of Text: Delinking the Prose Writing Codes

Beyond thematic subversion, the novel's form itself constitutes an act of resistance as exemplified by the presence of run-on sentences.

2. 1. Run-on Sentence and Narrative Contumacy

One of the most striking characteristics of *Girl, Woman, Other* is the presence of run-on sentences. The pluriversal and interversal feature that bothers is the presence of excessively long sentences the novel is written with. As such, these run-on sentences as well as extended punctuation-light sentences disrupt conventional reading patterns and challenge established grammatical norms. Indeed, the novel comprises five chapters, one epilogue, and one section devoted to acknowledgements for the closing part. The other four chapters are made up of three subchapters each, save for the last chapter which consists of one subchapter. This implies that it contains fifteen subchapters.

However, what is striking and upsetting about the novel is the excessive lengths of sentences, thereby, making me surmise that it is a run-on sentence-based novel. Though, this study is a literary rendition, its grammatical structure, which is part of linguistics is of note. As such, it cannot be overlooked. But, prior to any analysis about run-on sentence, it would be helpful to know what a "sentence" means.

In *Language Arts, Grade 4*, the sentence is defined as a group of words that tells a complete thought. The words in the sentence should be in an order that makes sense. Begin every sentence with a capital letter and end it with the correct end mark (2005, 45). As it can

be noted, a sentence respects a set of rules, that is its length, a complete conveyed thought in an order that makes it easier for understanding paired with the upper-case letter and the suitable punctuation mark. This indicates that every sentence has two main parts: the subject which is the part about which something is said, and the predicate that tells about the subject.

However, reading sentences in *Girl, Woman, Other*, makes me note that these rules are trampled on, then corroborating its contumacious trait. Its incipit that reads “Amma is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her city, a few early morning barges cruise slowly by to her left is....” (Evaristo 2019, 1-14) only ends on the page fourteen. Thus, this sentence spreads over fourteen pages before ending with a full stop. Such a sentence is nothing other than the contesting style of prose writing admitted in the academic field. Dealing with the run-on sentence, it can be maintained that a sentence can be considered as run-on, if it either has too many independent clauses or two independent clauses that are not linked correctly (*Language Arts, Grade 4* 2005, 64). Put simply, a run-on sentence is a poorly constructed sentence that either ignores some rules of grammar or tries to connect too many ideas into a single sentence. From a traditional linguistic perspective, a sentence is expected to convey a complete thought with clear boundaries marked by punctuation. However, Evaristo deliberately violates these rules, creating long and flowing passages that blur syntactic divisions.

Therefore, from this situation, I have good grounds for stating that *Girl, Woman, Other* is interspersed with run-on sentences from the first page to the last one. In the novel, grammar rules are overlooked. In this regard, the style bolsters the writer’s ire against the norms fixed by the academic society. If the novel is composed of fifteen subchapters ending with a period, then it can be ascertained that there are fifteen full stops. Correspondingly, it comprises fifteen run-on sentences. In this way, it can be argued that this four-hundred-and-fifty-three-page novel belongs to the contumacious style. Undoubtedly, this writing mode obeys decolonial project, because decoloniality disobeys, and delinks from this matrix; constructing paths and praxis toward an other wise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 4). Obviously, Evaristo is fed up with the ascertained norm of the academic writing.

Her excessive use of run-on sentences is a problem the reader is confronted with, because the latter has to be focused while reading so as to grasp the gist of the plot. One could imagine the characters’ way of speaking. Certainly, they are speaking speedily. As such, this has an impact upon the writing style. Accordingly, the potential reader exhausts himself to achieve his reading as there are no periods the sentences are provided with except for a few commas. Indisputably, her option for writing so, aims at confusing the reader by blurring the plot, which seems to create space for the ‘other’ amidst the ‘selves.’ This might be behind her

depiction of gender and sex issues outside the African ethical norm that rejects homosexuality and queer gender expression. In fact, most of these scenes are taking place in London and in America, not in Africa whereas the author is of Nigerian origin.

However, the author is worth praising because she gives new impetus to writing. Her refusal to abide by the set grammatical rules is likely to pave the way for a new writing style in which we are likely to be free while writing and speaking. This view tallies with Jacques Derrida's contention which reads:

What we do when we do something, when we write, when we use grammar is invent new grammatical rules which in their turn will be challenged. An event is not simply an interruption, a break in the rules, in what is predictable, it's already the production of new rules, a new expression, a new text (2003, 14).

Therefore, Evaristo is not complying with what is created by her society, she is paving the way for new modes of writing, thereby, finishing with monotony and the same ideology. The aesthetics of her novel lies in the emergence of a new kind of writing. If her very long sentences I call the unbounded ones make her narrative harder to read, they all the same give it a revolutionary dynamic, and beyond a new scent that makes us write and read the novel otherwise. She prolongs the suspense, and the reader is made to wait for the targeted idea until the middle or end of the sentences. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the words run on and on. As for the commas and semi-colons, they subdivide the subsets together with sentence fragments. The characters do not give the reader any time to pause due to the period shortage. In this vein, the writer shows her contumacy since a single sentence can span a length of fourteen (14) pages such as the sentence of fourteen (14) pages from page 1 to page 14 (Evaristo 2020, 1-14), the one of nine (09) pages from page 249 to page 258 (Evaristo 2020, 249-258), at last that of eleven (11) pages from page 23 to page 34 (Evaristo 2019, 23-34), to mention but a few. This stylistic choice can be interpreted as a form of decolonial resistance. By rejecting standardized grammar, the novel contests the authority of linguistic norms rooted in Western traditions.

2. 2. *Girl, Woman, Other* and the Rise of Pluriversal Grammar

If decoloniality is a way, an option, a standpoint, an analytic, a project, a practice, and a praxis (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 5), then *Girl, Woman, Other* is that of pluriversal possibilities that breaks with universal grammar. The novel also experiments with language through the use of gender-neutral pronouns and unconventional syntactic arrangements.

Dealing with pluriversal grammar will be a bit awkward if universal grammar is left unnoticed. American linguist Noam Chomsky defines it as the system of principles, conditions,

and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages, not merely by accident but by necessity (1975, 29). The terms “principles and rules” are roughly the same concepts that help use the language efficiently and accurately. In fact, the use of grammar obeys a set of rules that allow the language users to speak and write by reducing or avoiding mistakes and errors. Universal is general, which is the opposite of pluriversal decolonially speaking. Universal grammar is then about general rules that govern the language use. In short, the language structures as well as the language functions depend upon grammar, which appears as the compass of the language use.

However, distancing itself from universality and opting for pluriversality, this novel seems inadequate to the right English language acquisition for both native and non-native learners and speakers in the academic field. I hold this stance because it can disrupt the students’ accurate use of grammar in regard to the misuse of punctuation, the weird order of words, the sentence structures together with verb tenses, and the subject-verb agreement. My analysis of this section will be focused on three aspects: the writer’s attempt to deconstruct and coin other possessive adjectives, personal and object pronouns, the destruction of linear order of words to make sentences to the detriment of the vertical order, and eventually her rejection of the ordinary subject and verb agreement. Indeed, Bernardine Evaristo’s will to abrogate men’s domination and assert women’s power is read through her deconstruction of the English grammar via possessive adjectives, and subject/object pronouns. This is evidenced through “they discuss the best gender-neutral alternatives such as *ae*, *e*, *ey*, *per*, *they*, and teased each word to see if the words tripped off the tongue or tripped over it, ditto with the alternatives to his and hers: *hirs*, *aers*, *eirs*, *pers*, *theirs* and *xyrs*” (Evaristo 2019, 328). No official grammar book suggests such subject/object pronouns, and possessive adjectives. In substituting the right words for the coined weird ones that are not so far in human repertoire, not only does she broaden the field of the English language, but also she does disrupt and destabilise the official English language acquisition. The use of the neologism like “*ae*, *e*, *ey*, *per* *hers*, *hirs*, *aers*, *eirs*, *pers*, *theirs* and *xyrs*” as gender-neutral pronouns and possessive adjectives amounts to removing the powerfulness of the suitable English grammar. Therefore, destroying ordinary pronouns and beyond grammar through this neologism is commensurate with desexization, thereby subverting sexist discourse and establishing a gender free world. The coined words are in accordance with the writer’s attempts to advocate pluriversal grammar, which is likely to nullify the universal one.

Henceforth, we should ask a person we meet “which pronoun(s) do you prefer to be called?” rather than “who are you?” referring to their gender identity. Evaristo finds it pointless

we are defined by the socially assigned pronouns. For her, the established norm should be excluded from the teaching of the English language. There is not only one grammar, but many grammars, hence its pluriversality. For the time being, such words can be detrimental to adults and children learners at training centres, as they would be bothered to make the difference between the classical ones and the new codes.

Another pluriversal trait in the novel is the juxtaposition of some words in some sentences. Instead of writing the words of these sentences horizontally, the author writes them vertically “someone who actually knows what she’s talking about

Now

As

I

Was

Saying” (Evaristo 2019, 227).²

Examples of this kind are on many pages in the novel. If such a disposition gives the novel an aesthetic feature, it must be born in mind that it is about the pluriversal, and beyond the author’s contumacious and unruly project toward the right norms of both reading skill and writing skill. In fact, we are used to reading sentences in a horizontally linear order, that is the subject, the predicate that contains both the verb and the object. Rather than writing the sentence in this established order, we are offered to read it vertically. In this respect, *Girl, Woman, Other* can be called in Şebnem Toplu’s words a novel-in-verse (2011, 10), as some of its sentences are written in verse-like manner.

Accordingly, the writing standard is decentred, then rewriting the literary canon. Universal grammar, which should permit the learners to grasp grammar liable for the exact rules is no longer valid. The syntax is broken. Yet, Chomsky defines syntax as the study of principles and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular languages (Chomsky 1957, 11). The following sentences tell a lot about Evaristo’s decolonial project of the universal grammar of the English language: “Mrs Wright and Mrs Missingham greeted us as if we was long-lost friends” (Evaristo 2019, 264); “they was getting caned” (Evaristo 2019, 264), “we knew our boys was lively but they wasn’t bad” (Evaristo 2019, 265). The disagreement between the subject and the verb in the aforementioned sentences testifies to the unfamiliar grammatical rules students as well as other language users are not accustomed to. These innovations also

² The sentence as presented originates from the studied novel.

raise pedagogical concerns. For learners of English, the novel's deviation from standard grammar may complicate language acquisition.

However, what is worth putting is the writer's attempts to show that other forms of grammar are possible, hence pluriversal grammar, not the universal one whose rules represent a prison for us. I can also sketch in that Evaristo has a hidden agenda which consists in annihilating the Western imperial via the English language. Thus, it can be averred with Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo that it is time to start learning to unlearn this assumption among others in order to relearn (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012, 3). It follows from this standpoint that the english language users should learn to delink the conventional and established rules in order to decolonise their minds. *Girl, Woman, Other* is then about a big "OTHER³," which encompasses transgender, lesbian, homosexual, pluriversal grammar, and other maverick persons. Unquestionably, Evaristo is preparing teachers, parents and children to read fiction otherwise. Her novel is an alternative to narrative that promotes the ideology of the marginalised social group, the hegemony of patriarchy as well as the ascertained writing conventions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the theory of decoloniality, this paper has demonstrated that *Girl, Woman, Other* functions as a contumacious narrative that challenges socio-cultural, patriarchal, and linguistic norms. Through its representation of gender plurality and its experimental form, the novel embodies a decolonial project that aims at dismantling dominant discourses of identity, expression and grammar.

Bernardine Evaristo's work foregrounds marginalized voices and proposes a pluriversal vision of the world wherein diverse identities coexist. At the same time, its radical stance invites critical reflection on the limits and implications of such transformations, particularly within specific cultural contexts.

The novel exemplifies the power of literature to question established norms and imagine alternative possibilities. Its contumacy lies not merely in its defiance but in its capacity to offer new spaces for thought, identity, and expression. It is then viewed as a contumacious writing or fiction unbound (Toplu 2011) insofar as the writer's protest tells a lot despite the utopian trait of her dream. As a novelist who writes from the perspective of the marginalised trans community that perforce seeks to dismantle patriarchy by rejecting its societal foundation that

³ This capitalisation accounts for my emphasis of the word.

has been keeping alive the myth of femininity, Evaristo might be informing us that there is a new wind people have already relished.

In her contumacy and subversion, she explicitly expresses misandry for men. This anti-masculinity expressed through the voice of Nzinga reads: “I don’t want to live in a man’s world” (Evaristo 2019, 90). She goes further putting forward that women were much happier without men (Evaristo 2019, 92), just to show her hostility toward men. Thus, this misandristic message unmasks her anti-patriarchal stance. In this way, like Pauline Harmange, Evaristo hates men (2019). In *I Hate Men*, Harmange defines misandry in these terms: “I use the word misandry to mean a negative feeling towards the entirety of the male sex. This negative feeling might be understood as (...) a rejection of their presence in women’s spaces” (Harmange 2020, 9). This hate speech accounts for most of the writer’s characters’ agency in the studied novel.

Bernardine Evaristo deserves praise because fiction helps her reveal what she dare not display in actual world flooded with unutterable facts and taboos. On that assumption, *Girl, Woman, Other* is a protest and a revolutionary novel that distances itself from British literary tradition hence its contumacious trait. Thus, the only one message I catch from this text is the author’s plea for a pluriversal world. With its emancipatory and contumacious message that reads “I reckon we’re all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female” (Evaristo 2019, 39), *Girl, Woman, Other* gives Bernadine Evaristo a household name in the British literature canon, which signals a bright future for non-conformist sexuality and gender identities.

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