

# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, RACISM AND RESILIENCE MECHANISMS IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK BRITISH WOMEN LITERATURE: BERNARDINE EVARISTO

*Violencia contra la mujer, racismo y mecanismos  
de resiliencia en la literatura contemporánea  
británica negra: Bernardine Evaristo*

Nuria Torres López  
*Universidad de Almería*

RECIBIDO: 01/05/2024  
ACEPTADO: 25/05/2024

“Resilience is about being able to come back from the setbacks, and each time you come back, you come back stronger. It’s about the refusal to give up, to keep pushing forward even when it feels like the world is pushing against you.”

*Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021)  
Bernardine Evaristo

**Abstract:** This article intends to be of interest for readers in Black contemporary women fiction based mainly on identity, violence against women, racism and the capacity of resilience to overcome some traumas from the past and from the present. Black British women, represented here as female characters in the selected writings by Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and *Manifesto: on Never Giving Up* (2021), or even through the author’s experiences herself, develop some resilient mechanisms in order to overcome the traumatic experiences they have suffered due to violent and/or racist episodes. Moreover, some reflections about Black literature written by women in general as well as Black British women writers, more specifically, and their power of sisterhood, are also themes dealt with in this paper.

**Keywords:** Black women literature, sisterhood, Bernardine Evaristo, resilience, racism, violence.

**Resumen:** Este artículo puede ser de interés para aquellos interesados/as en la literatura contemporánea escrita por mujeres que se centra, principalmente, en la identidad, en la violencia contra las mujeres, el racismo y la capacidad de resiliencia para superar algunos traumas tanto del pasado como del presente. Las mujeres británicas, representadas aquí como personajes femeninos en los textos de Bernardine Evaristo aquí seleccionados, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) y *Manifiesto: on Never Giving Up* (2021), o incluso a través de experiencias de la propia autora, desarrollan mecanismos de resiliencia para superar las situaciones traumáticas que han sufrido debido a episodios violentos y/o racistas. Además, en este estudio se han abordado algunas reflexiones sobre la literatura negra escrita por mujeres, en general, así como también, y más específicamente, sobre escritoras negras británicas y su “hermandad”.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura negra de mujeres, hermandad, Bernardine Evaristo, resiliencia, racismo, violencia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the struggle for equality and freedom Black women have played a heroic role all over the world and, in the words of the scholar Stephen E. Henderson, “Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth smolder with deathless pride” (1984, p. xxiii). According to him, Black literature has always been implicated in their freedom struggle and have also been always involved in the generation and sustenance of culture in general and their literature concretely. Henderson states the following when she talks about the heroism of black women defending their rights:

Black Power movements forced sensitive and intelligent women to reexamine their own positions vis- á-vis the men and to conclude that they were the victims not only of racial injustice but of sexual arrogance tantamount to dual colonialism -one from without, the other from within, the Black community. When black women discovered a political context that involved both race and gender, our history in this country (America) took a special turn, and our literature made a quantum leap toward maturity and honesty. What has happened in the past few years is a “revolution within the Revolution,” one that was initiated by and has been sustained chiefly by Black women (Henderson, 1984, p. xxiv).

It can be said that the impact of this can be felt nowadays in many aspects of contemporary life and in the daily world around us and, of course, in the world of art and culture as well. Black women writers, known and unknown, have come into new awareness of the powers they have because they have always struggled heroically to liberate themselves expanding the corpus of Black literature so these authors “have historically played in building the institution of Black literature” (Henderson, p. xxv). Black Literature and its criticism have been always put to uses that were not primarily aesthetic; rather, they have formed part of a larger discourse on the nature of the black and his or her role. It is said, and confirmed by academic experts on this topic like Henry Louis, that black literature is a verbal art like other verbal arts and that “Blackness” is not a material object, an absolute, or an event, but a trope with no essence that is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unit (40). He also adds that “even the slave narratives offer the text as a world, as a system of

signs” and that “the black writer is the point of consciousness of his or her language” (41). The history of Black women’s literature started long before black women were finally permitted their right to literacy. The literature and other creative art were mainly oral, with roots in storytelling and the African/African American folk tradition: “because Black women rarely gained access to literary expression, Black women identified bonding and folk culture have often gone unrecorded except through our individual lives and memories” (Bethel, 1990, p. 179). Nowadays, there is an increasing and consolidated movement by those involved with scholarly research on Black women. We could say that in the last thirty years, black feminist scholarship has developed rapidly and Black women and feminist scholars explore the diverse dimensions of generational and cultural continuity for women of African descent. Moreover, there has also been recent studies which explore deeply Black women’s literature, not only through a cultural or historical perspective but also from a feminist, lesbian point of view, using Marxist and traditional methodologies:

The concept of “diaspora literature” as women’s literature calls into question imposed, man made literary boundaries such as “Nigerian”, “American”, or even “African” literature in relation to the writings of Black women; a diaspora perspective opens up relationships and connections not easily addressed even in continental studies (Willentz, 1992, p. xv).

Black women writers have always (and still do) passed their cultural values and traditions through their narratives. Black women authors narrate their own experiences (or their ancestors’) as Black women and also as Black women writers or they recreate stories based on their heritage and culture putting them into fiction. All of them overcome silence and share stories within a common speech community: “individual identity is possible only after an acceptable communal identity has been established. The boundaries of society and self are moveable, but the territories remain stubbornly interdependent” (Parkison, 1998, p. 2). Andrea Katherine Medovarski publishes in 2019, *Settling Down and Settling Up: The Second Generation in Black British Women’s Writing*, where she also deals with the theme of the diasporas among others interesting ones for our study like identity, resistance, race, gender, patriarchy, nothingness, oppression, culture and literature. Medovarski articulates in her book that Canada and UK are diaspora spaces, a term used as well by Avatar Brah when she suggests that “diaspora space” (as different from the known concept of diaspora) “is ‘inhabited’ not only by diasporic subjects but equally by those who are constructed and represented as ‘indigenous.’ [...] the concept of *diaspora space* foregrounds the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put” (1996, p. 16). Medovarski points out as well that Brah focuses specifically on the UK, a space that for the last two decades has been readily understood as a site of diaspora (1996, p. 5). Carole Boyce was one of the first literary and cultural critics considering questions of diaspora from a feminist point of view and her invocation of a “migratory subjectivity” disrupts national, patriarchal and colonial hegemonies when she insists that “black women’s writing should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally boundary category of writing” (1996, p. 4).

In contemporary fiction by Black British women, gender overarches and underpins questions of culture, space, history, class, diaspora, violence, trauma, resilience and identity. Glory Edim, the author of *Well-Read Black Girls: finding our stories, discovering ourselves* (2019), carries out this anthology of Black women writers as a tribute to the brilliant Black women “who have made us, from the first published African American female poet, Phillis Wheatley, to legendary winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction Alice Walker and Toni Morrison” (2019, p. xx). The essays found here remind us the magnificence of literature; “how it can provide us with a vision of ourselves, affirm our talents, and ultimately help us narrate our

own stories [...] This anthology is for women who are emboldened to tell their own stories” and the premise of this book is trying to find the answer for this simple and interesting question: When did you (as a Black woman) first see yourself in literature?:

Thankfully, the legacy of Black women in literature is extensive, diverse, and beautifully complicated. Like any cultural lineage, its definitions, commonalities, and inspirations have shifted over time. The writing of Black women is always *becoming*, voices intertwining, forging an original, innovative amalgamation [...] With WRBG, I strive to galvanize readers and bring visibility to the narratives of Black women. (Edim, 2019, p. xxi)

This anthology by Edim is a clear and mere example of the efforts that some women, writers in this case and normally black ones, are doing still in the present in order to view the writings of magnificent black authors who did not have, and nowadays they still have not raised the acknowledgment they actually deserve. This has been a struggle of many Black women authors through the years as it happens with the great author Marie Evans, who edited a volume entitled *Black Women Writers at Work (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* in 1984, where she declares that Black women have toasted to literature a deep knowledge about their experiences and lives that is as different from the portrayals of women always offered by men “as the vision of Black writers in the sixties and fifties differed from that of whites writing on Black subjects” (Evans, 1984, p. xxiv). Evans also claims in her book that the process of correcting the descriptions of black women has involved not only the creative writer but also the scholar-critic serving frequently these functions, and the one as sustainer, by one person and declaring that women have made and are making very substantial contributions to literature and that they clearly constitute an integral part of the deep structure of Black literature, “which includes the writers themselves, the scholars and teachers, the critics, the editors, the journals, and the professional organizations” (1984, p. xxv). Eva Lennox joins herself to some other academic colleagues in the effort to proclaim the hard labor of many Black women writers, the importance of making an act of uniting, named and known as sisterhood, and reflect the increasing interest in black literature production by Black women authors. Lennox publishes *Black American Women’s Writing: A Quilt of Many Colours*, where she claims that teachers and students have shared an enthusiasm for the study of diverse texts by black women writers pointing out that this is a good chance to discuss their writings, and “that have hitherto remained outside the prescribed male, white, literary canon” (1994, p. 3). Lennox observes that an honest scholarship should exist and she asserts that excluding some works written by black women writers is a racist exclusion:

Teachers of literature have both opportunity and responsibility to facilitate the building of racial bridges by joining students in serious reading of writers whose cultural and historical roots are significantly different to those of white British and white American writers [...] Hence white teachers (as Lennox is) should be encouraged to include black writing on their literature courses at all levels in the education process. The important consideration to bear in mind, however, is that literature that has been shaped by cultural forces that differ from our own, must not then judged by critical criteria that are themselves sexist or racist [...] and any criticism should be, in my opinion, from a feminist standpoint (1994, p. 4).

## 2. BLACK BRITISH WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR CONCEPT OF SISTERHOOD: CHALLENGING IMAGES.

Concerning 21<sup>st</sup> century Black British women's fiction, we can state that critics and Black women writers are acting under the premise that "one must speak for oneself if one wishes to be heard" (Tate and Olsen, 2023, p. 14). This vision remains the healing, life-affirming vision writers can give in our time due to these black women writers, British or American, make us deeply aware of what harms, denies development, degrades, "destroys of how much is unrealized, un-lived; instead of 'oppressed victims', they tell of the ways of resistances, resiliences" (Olsen, "foreword", p. x). Black women writers "transform common circumstances so they do not injure", they believe that this is possible as well as necessary because "it enables us to comprehend, shape, change reality and the human destiny" (Olsen, 2023: xi). Langston Hughes immortalizes this idea in verse:

...someday somebody'll  
 Stand up and talk about me,  
 And write about me  
 Black and beautiful-  
 And sing about me,  
 And put on plays about me!  
 I reckon it'll be  
 Me myself!  
 Yes, it'll be me.

"Note on Commercial Theatre"

*Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*

In 2016, according to Pallavi Rastogi, many Black British women writers in the late twentieth century and beyond have used prose fiction "to achieve literary self-determination" (2016, p. 77), and they have done in this way partly to invoke postmodern literary techniques "including: the use of metanarrative techniques to reflect on identity, rewriting history from the margins [...] and speaking from multiple perspectives to compose a fictional mosaic" (78). The demographic differences in immigration and the varying articulations of racialization in the UK have had distinct political implications and they have emerged in somewhat different cultural and literary landscapes. In the words of Medovarski, "in Britain, Andrea Levy and Zadie Smith can be situated within a substantial constellation of African, Caribbean, or South Asian descended second-generation writers and post-immigrant writers who grapple with issues of generational difference and un/settlement. They include, among others [...] Monica Ali, Bernardine Evaristo, Jackie Kay..." (Medovarski, 2019, p. 28). In *Black American Women's Writing: A Quilt of many Colours*, edited in 1994 by Eva Lennox, this professor makes reference to the term of sisterhood, and she reminds the readers that some black feminist critics, who have successfully encouraged the development of black feminist theory such as Barbara Christian or Barbara Smith who have successfully encouraged the development of Black feminist theory. Moreover, Lennox remembers bell Hooks in order to have an idealistic notion of automatic sisterhood between black and white women dismissed and she states that Hooks (2000) reminds us that 'sisterhood' "stresses that the onus for the real change lies with the individual whose self-examination will reveal that labelling ourselves feminists does not change the fact that we must consciously work to rid

ourselves of the legacy of negative socialization” (1994, p. 5)<sup>1</sup>. Lennox, in this book, also declares that white women cannot share the experiential reality of white racism suffered by black women and she affirms that both, white and black women, experienced exclusion though it has to be admitted it was in a different level: “black women were excluded much more firmly from engagement in discourse than were their white sisters” (8), so for this reason, according to her, in the writing of black women it is easy to appreciate that they speak much more clearly and their texts reveal a complete rejection of this process to which all women have been subjected. In addition, in words of Lennox, “their writing challenges the received orthodoxy of the dominant culture, in which are inscribed those ideas on race, gender, class and religion on which oppression is built” (10). The popular Black British writer, and Professor of creative writing at the University of Newcastle, Jackie Kay<sup>2</sup>, writes her poem entitled *So you think I’m a mule?* from which these following lines have been fetched. Here, she expresses her pride for being black and proclaims the union of the sisterhood, her “black sisters” as she calls them, to defend their belongings and rights as black women:

I am black  
 My blood flows evenly, powerfully  
 and when they shout “Nigger”  
 and you shout “Shame”  
 ain’t nobody debating my blackness.  
 You see that fine African nose of mine,  
 My lips, my hair. You see lady  
 I’m not mixed about it.  
 So take your questions, your interest,  
 Your patronage. Run along.  
 Just leave me.  
 I’m going to my Black sisters  
 to women who nourish each other  
 on belonging  
 There’s a lot of us  
 Black women struggling to define  
 just who we are  
 where we belong  
 and if we know no home  
 we know one thing;  
 we are Black  
 we’re at home with that.’  
 ‘Well, that’s all very well, but...’  
 No But. Good Bye.

Jackie Kay (1985)

Dealing with sisterhood, as a union of black women authors to defend their rights and fight against injustice, and about the concept of black heroism, it is necessary to mention

<sup>1</sup> Lennox declares that here Hooks was speaking specifically of American women but her comment could be applied with equal veracity to women in British society, who have inherited the same legacy of ‘negative socialisation’ within patriarchal, capitalist structures.

<sup>2</sup> She was also proclaimed “Scots Makar”, national poet of Scotland in 2016. Kay has won several literature prizes such as *Forward*, *Saltire*, *Scottish Arts Council*, *Guardian Fiction*, *IMPAC of Dublin* and the *Decible British Book Award*.

a very recent publication by Claudia Tate and Tillie Olsen entitled *Black Women Writers at Work* (2023). Here, the reader can find a very interesting anthology about some of the most prominent black women authors. All these writers are seen as black heroines because, thanks to their literature, the experiences and lives of Black women are known from a real perspective of life, where the black heroine is a “guerilla warrior, fighting the central oppression of women by men. She wages this struggle with self-confidence, with courage and conviction, and her principal strategy is her self-conscious affirmation of black womanhood” (Tate and Olsen, 2023, p.11).

According to them, typically, the black heroine lives her daily life with the belief of life should not be seen as a problem to be solved, for often there are not answers, and she tries to teach “a great deal about constructing a meaningful life in the midst of chaos and contingencies, armed with nothing more than her intellect and emotions [...] The black heroine’s awareness of herself, first as a human being and second as a woman, is firmly secured in her psychological makeup” (2023, p. 12). Black heroine’s quest for self-affirmation, self-discovery, and self-esteem, which are always present in their writings where the most depicted subjects treated by black women authors are conflicts and ambitions constituting their struggle “to map out her destiny and her meaning” (12). Olsen and Tate, also point out that many black women writers do not write for recognition or money, but they do it for themselves as a way of keeping emotional and intellectual clarity, “of sustaining self-development and instruction. Each writes because she is driven to do so, regardless of whether there is a publisher, an audience, or neither” (5):

Black women writers usually project their vision from the point of view of female characters. Regardless of the genre, these writers’ imaginative embodiment of the female perspective in “the black heroine” has distinct characteristics, some of which originate in gender and its associated sex roles while others reflect the process of observation from a vantage point other than that determined by sex (Tate and Olsen, 2023, p. 7).

### 3. BERNARDINE EVARISTO: ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHY

Bernardine Evaristo is one of the most popular and iconic British women writers, best sellers of the moment, who is perfectly engaged with the term of Black British literature, and a very active literary activist for inclusion. She is a professor of creative writing and also an activist in the literary world. Evaristo has almost forty years of professional experience in the arts and is well-known for her representation of minorities in her writing and experimental works. She is the first black author to win the Booker Prize, thanks to her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), and a member of the Royal Society of Literature. She has pushed for the inclusion and representation of people of colour in the publishing industry for many years as an activist and supporter of ending racial discrimination. She has written eight volumes in a variety of genres, including play, versed fiction, short fiction, essays, literary criticism, and radio drama adaptations. Evaristo has even founded several successful initiatives and associations including Spread the Word, a writer development agency (1995-ongoing), The Complete Works, a mentoring scheme for poets of colour (2007-2017) and the Brunel International African Poetry Prize (2012-ongoing). This Black British author has even published what has been catalogued as “one of the most uplifting memoirs of 2021 (Stylist), *a Manifesto: on Never Giving up* (2021), an engaging memoir which can be seen as a honest meditation on personal transformation, activism, love, and belonging.

Evaristo stated in the Oxford Union interview (2020) that she enrolled in a community theatre arts course in the 1980s, which is when she was initially exposed to the arts. Some years later, she enrolled in acting school, where she was surrounded only by

strong, influential political women who gave her the motivation to be a formidable lady. When she was encouraged to compose her own plays, this experience solidified her as a writer and developed her as a young artist. After graduating from acting school in 1982, she started Theatre Black Women. In the UK, it was the first Black Women's Theatre group. They produced, wrote, and performed their own plays for six years before deciding to split up. She then concentrated on creating a life for herself that would enable her to pursue her creative endeavours, and she succeeded in doing so by going to college. She started writing books after her first one was released in 1994, since then, twenty-five years ago, Bernardine Evaristo has been involved in literary activism. According to the author, her desire for a more egalitarian society and her conviction that everyone should have equal opportunity drive both her creative writing and her activism efforts (The Oxford Union, 2020). This Black woman writer has won multiple honours and been nominated for numerous more since the release of *Girl, Woman, Other*, prizes including the 2020 British Book Awards' Fiction Book of the Year and Author of the Year<sup>7</sup>. Barack Obama named her one of the best books of 2019 and she also received the Gold Medal of Honorary Patronage and the Indie Book Award for Fiction. Furthermore, for five weeks, she topped the UK paperback fiction rankings, making history as the first Black British author to do so. However, receiving the Booker Prize for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, as indicated before, has significantly developed her career. Some aspects of Evaristo's activism, feminism, racism, violence against women as well as their capacity of resilience are present not only in her fiction, taking as a reference her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), but also in her memoir published in 2021, *Manifesto: on Never Giving up* (2021).

#### 4. VIOLENCE, NEW IDENTITIES AND NEW MEANING

Nowadays, it is sadly acknowledged that violence affects millions of women and children over the world, and it mainly impacts on the vulnerable groups, that is, the weakest and the poorest population. Contemporary literature does not only portray different forms of violence (sexual, gender, domestic, psychological, etc.) but it is also committed to get rid of this social scourge when dealing with topics and characters that either suffer from it or perpetrate it, making the reader aware of the situation and the need to eradicate any kind of violence.

Violence against women exists in many private and public settings in forms of migrations, poverty, sexual harassment, physical violence, sexual exploitation, etc, and it manifests itself in different aspects and places. Sadly, this kind of violence defines, in lots of cases, the identity of the victims suffering from it or people who have suffered because of it in the past. It is well known by all that black women have been subjected to a long history of physical, sexual and reproductive violence. The psychosocial and emotional consequences of violence leave traces that speak of vulnerability which can be perceived through most of the Black women authors and their female characters appearing in their writings. Moreover, some of them also activate resistance and resilience mechanisms as suppliers of personal defense, capacities which allow activating one's own strength processes, and rebuild oneself beyond the experience of violence (Ungar, 2012), as it will be seen next in Bernardine Evaristo's works.

The autobiography, *Manifesto on Never Giving Up* and the novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, both by Bernardine Evaristo is a deep examination of the identity which is focused on the dynamic relationship between the self and the other. The writer explores in these two masterpieces, the intersecting lives of several female characters who are black British women (and also about herself), showing their own unique experiences, struggles, and different aspirations in



life. In these two writings, the concept of the identity is intricately intertwined with the presence of the other, prompting readers to consider the concepts of belonging and social forces that influence individual lives. Bernardine Evaristo's depiction of these characters and their interactions challenges conventional notions of selfhood which reveal the complex nature of human existence. This brief section wants to show how the themes of violence and the self and the other are examined in *Girl, Woman, Other* and her *Manifesto*. These two narratives illuminate how Evaristo's work functions as a relevant exploration of identity, community, and the intricate interplay between the individual and society (Herrera, 2024, p. 258), something which is analyzed in further sections within this article.

Talking about the concept of sisterhood, it could be said that the character of Megan, who is later identified as Morgan, emerges as the focal character in a narrative that delves into her sexual identity and the dynamics of her relationship with her partner. Moreover, the character of Hattie, is, according to Herrera, "characterized by her courage [and] defies societal norms by openly embracing her lesbian identity [while] Carole exemplifies the significance of sisterhood and the interconnectedness among women in the pursuit of gender equality through her relationship with her friend La'isha" (2024, p. 275).

##### 5. *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER (2019) AND MANIFESTO: ON NEVER GIVING UP (2021). VIOLENCE, RACISM AND RESILIENCE.*

Bernardine Evaristo is an author who has left a significant mark on contemporary literature, and her works *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* and *Girl, Woman, Other* are outstanding examples of her narrative skill and her focus on social and personal issues. The following is a brief narrative analysis and the differences between these two novels. *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* is an autobiography organized into thematic chapters that address different aspects of Evaristo's life, such as his childhood, his literary career, and his personal and professional struggles. The book explores Evaristo's life, from her origins to her success as an author, focusing on her identity as a black and bisexual woman in the UK, and how these identities have influenced her life and work. She also discusses themes of perseverance, creativity, and the importance of self-expression. Evaristo uses an intimate and reflective tone, inviting the reader into her inner world and personal experiences. The language is direct and sincere, full of anecdotes and reflections that reveal her process of self-acceptance and resistance. *Manifesto* aims to inspire and motivate readers to not give up in the face of adversity and to pursue their dreams while offering a detailed insight into the journey that led Evaristo to become the writer and public figure she is today. According to Hope Wabuke:

*Manifesto* resonates with tenderly drawn stories of Evaristo's family history — beginning with mourning the grandmother whom she never met and trying to find a connection to her Nigerian family, a familiar story of Africans caught in the rapacious capitalistic project of European colonization ... This personal reflection allows Evaristo to delve into an incisive analysis of class and race in the United Kingdom ... What sustains Evaristo throughout is this: a dedication to the craft of writing and an astute awareness of the importance of community. Evaristo understood that for Black artists, whose art was shut of the mainstream conversation, the creation of art also necessitated the creation of community (2022).<sup>3</sup>

*Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) is a contemporary fiction novel divided into twelve chapters, each focusing on the life of one of twelve protagonists, whose stories intertwine in

<sup>3</sup> Wabuke, H. (2022). *Manifesto is a story of dreams made real by never giving up*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/18/1073739054/manifesto-is-a-story-of-dreams-made-real-by-never-giving-up>

various ways. The novel explores the lives of twelve characters, mainly Black British women, covering a wide spectrum of experiences in terms of age, sexuality, class, and personal circumstances. It addresses themes of identity, racism, feminism, sexuality, and intersectionality. Evaristo employs experimental prose, often lacking traditional punctuation, creating a continuous flow of thoughts and actions reflecting diversity and complexity of human experiences. The narrative is polyphonic, allowing multiple voices and perspectives to interweave and resonate throughout the novel. *Girl, Woman, Other* seeks to give visibility and voice to a diverse range of female experiences that are often marginalised in literature and society. The novel aims to be a mirror of the cultural and social diversity of contemporary Britain, and a testament to the resilience and strength of Black British women. In terms of the main differences, *Manifesto: on Never Giving Up* is her autobiography, while *Girl, Woman, Other* is a fictional novel. The first work follows a more traditional structure with thematic chapters and a direct and personal narrative style, while the novel has a polyphonic structure and uses experimental prose that reflects the diversity of its characters. In terms of thematic focus, *Manifesto* focuses on Evaristo's life and experiences, offering an introspective look at her personal and professional process, while the fictional novel explores a wide range of different women's experiences, addressing variety of social and cultural issues. *Manifesto* seeks to inspire readers through Evaristo's personal story, while *Girl, Woman, Other* aims to broaden the representation and understanding of the diverse experiences of Black British women. In short, both of Bernardine Evaristo's works address issues of identity, violence, racism and resilience, as we will see next, but they do so from very different perspectives and genres, with their own unique style.

One of *Girl, Woman, Other's* central themes is the idea of racism: "Don't be afraid to be different, diversity is what makes us unique" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 85). The lives of twelve protagonists who experience systematic oppression and discrimination because of the colour of their skin are examined in this novel. They must endure within a discriminatory system that has historical roots. White privilege is an absence of the consequences of racism. An absence of structural discrimination, an absence of your race being viewed as a problem first and foremost (Eddo-Lodge, 2019). These female characters deal with prejudice and persecution in a variety of ways, for example, coming into many challenges that they must overcome and are exposed to the bias and prejudice of others. It is true that while some of these characters are more active in practicing activism and standing up for their beliefs, others are less interested and show themselves more passive. The narrative begins with the introduction of two characters called Amma and Dominique who have always been vocal campaigners who stand up for what's right. When they first began working in theatre, they would avoid performances that offended them. Dominique and Amma shared a passion for theatre, but because they were black, they felt alienated from the theatre world and this is very well exposed in the novel. They express disillusionment at receiving roles in characters like slaves, servants, prostitutes or nannies, as they were only given opportunities that reinforced racial stereotypes and discriminatory treatment and still failing to secure employment (Evaristo, 2019, p. 6). Unfairly, they were restricted to playing roles that narrowly and stereotypically portrayed Black women until the point that they even decide to create a theatre group to speak for marginalized and oppressed voices. Given that Bernardine also started her theatre group to highlight the experiences of Asian and Black women, this could be interpreted as an autobiographical glimpse into the author's life.

Within the second chapter of this novel, the reader gains insight into the life of a black woman working in a high-level business role, Carole, who is from a very low-income family and is the daughter of immigrants from Nigeria. She had a strong desire to excel intellectually and move past her background since childhood. This character is in a position of authority working in a bank, and she has numerous challenges as a result. In her daily life,

she has to cope with racism and misogyny. Just because she is a black woman people do not expect her to hold a high position: “she’s headed for an early morning meeting with a new client based in Hong Kong, whose net worth is multiple [...] is used to clients and new colleagues looking past her to the person they are clearly expecting to meet.” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 117). Additionally, Carole discusses how hurtful it is for others to be taken aback by a black woman acting professionally: “she can’t help remembering all the little hurts, the business associates who compliment her on being so articulate, unable to hide the surprise in their voices, so that she has to pretend not to be offended and to smile graciously” (2019, p. 118).

This character also discusses the privilege enjoyed by white businesspeople who often disregard their entitlement to be treated with dignity. She is targeted as a criminal suspect at airports when she is dressed professionally and takes a suitcase because they always presume that she might be doing drugs, something really traumatic for her.

Another example of racism in *Girl, Woman, Other* is seen in Bummi’s chapter where some female characters must deal with the systematic prejudice too. Here, the narrator explains how Bummi’s mother did many efforts in her life to provide a good education to her daughter who finally got a degree at the university. In addition, Bummi’s husband was also an educated man but, despite their high level of education, they would face prejudice and be perceived as foreigners of African descent: “she was unaware that her top-notch degree from a developing nation would have no bearing in her new nation” (Evaristo, 2019, p.167). It was obvious that Bummi was concerned that people would only think of her as a cleaner rather than a sophisticated woman: “she and Augustine had been trapped in a despair that had paralysed their ability to snap out of it, devastated by the weight of a rejection that had not been part of their dreams of migration, (2019, p. 170). It could be said that the author uses Bummi’s story as a way of a critique about many immigrants who fled their home nations in search of a better life and good opportunities only to be met with prejudice and rejection, instead. Moreover, in *Manifesto: on Never Giving Up* (2021), Bernardine Evaristo deals with racism in a very brave and sincere way because she exposes how diverse racist situations affected her life and the way in which she understood the world since she was just a child because she felt herself profoundly affected by the high level of hostility even when she was not mature enough to understand some racist behaviours:

As a child, you are profoundly affected [...] You feel hated, even though you have done nothing to deserve it, and so you think there is something wrong with you, rather than something wrong with them. A child needs to feel safe, to feel that they belong, but when you are prejudged before you even open your mouth to speak, you feel as if you don’t. It seemed unfair because I felt the same inside as my little whipte pals. We liked the same music [...] breathed the same air, ate the same food, had the same feelings – human ones. (2021, p. 14)

The racist ideology in post-colonial African contexts is one of the reasons why African feminists add the race issue to their struggle for liberation. Black writers such as Toni Morrison, Aminatta Forna or Mikki Kendall, who proceed from very different backgrounds and circumstances, argue that “the depiction of Black women as others justifies any sort of oppression, which shows why their black female characters defy the negative stereotypes linked to black women and their fight against injustice” (Herrera, 2024, p. 263). Fortunately, the current generation of African women writers supports innovative shifts that “seek not only to reinterpret, but to change the world in favour of women” (Ekpa, 2017, p. 28), which is Evaristo’s purpose in her novels. According to Herrera, by engaging the innovative shifts identified by Ekpa, Evaristo demonstrates her dedication to reshaping narratives, amplifying

marginalised voices, and ultimately eradicating stereotypes about black women. In addition, this writer “encourages readers to accompany her on this transformative journey by emphasising the possibility of growth and development” (Herrera, 2024, p. 264). Bernardine Evaristo confesses that she suffered a lot because of racism she suffered, and it was really hard for her to try to understand why she could not be seen simply as a girl and not always being treated as a black one. These feelings caused her to develop a strong sensation and necessity of having to protect herself and her family. She developed, as she says, “a self-protective force field on me, which persists to this day” (Evaristo, 2021, p.14). A significant interest in resilience research has increased over the past two decades among practitioners due to its possible effects on health, well-being, and quality of life (Hasket, 2006, p 799). Resilience is described as “(of a person) recovering easily and quickly from misfortune or illness” (Collins Dictionary, 2010). This idea is also described as “the personal quality of a person exposed to high risk factors that often lead to delinquent behaviour, but they do not do so” (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2019) in discipline-specific dictionaries. Resilience has been characterised more recently as “positive results despite significant challenges to development or adaptation” (Masten, 2001, p. 229). In order to value the significance of the term resilience in relation to Bernardine Evaristo’s last writings, the fictional and the autobiographical one, it is imperative to have a basic understanding of this concept. The author deals with gender violence in *Girl, Woman, Other* and also in her *Manifesto: on Never Giving Up* and points out the resilient mechanisms that her character and herself developed to finish with some toxic and dangerous relationships. A good example of a resilient character within the fictional novel is Dominique, who firstly appeared in chapter three and endures psychological abuse at the hands of her partner Nzinga, who commits different kinds of abuses towards Dominique. Dom, as she is also named through the novel, is aware of the situation that she is living, sharing her life with a woman who appears to be obsessed with her, due to Nzinga treats Dominique like her property, and she even starts acting aggressively towards her. Dominique understands that living with a violent lady who limits her independence is not at all good for her so she takes the decision to leave Nzinga far behind because of her poisonous love for her: “Nzinga pressed herself up against Dominique, an arm around her neck it felt like a sign of affection more than a strangling [...] Dominique didn’t need rescuing, she shook her head Nzinga pulled her closer, kissed her noisily on the cheek, good girl” (2019, p. 103). The author reveals Dominique’s challenging circumstances. First, she had to face the challenge of getting past the trauma she had experienced after learning what was happening in her relationship and discovering that Nzinga was abusing her. In the end, Evaristo’s primary aim is to demonstrate how this heroine possesses the bravery to save herself by fleeing from an abusive and toxic individual like Nzinga is. Evaristo also shows how strong Dom is by showing how she was able to get past the trauma. In association with the fictional story that Evaristo reflects in *Girl, Woman, Other*, through Dominique and Nzinga’s love affair, the reader of her *Manifesto* finds a very similar relationship between the author and one of her girlfriends whom she calls The Mental Dominatrix (TMD), she never mentions her real name. She explains that once she had just finished a loving relationship with other girl she calls eX, she immediately started a “torture affair [...] a controlling relationship” (Evaristo, 2021, p. 75) with an older woman than her who marked and changed her life during many years. Fortunately, in the novel and in the real life, Evaristo puts an end to these two relationships, liberating the fictional character (Dominique) and herself of a toxic affair. The author takes Nzinga and TMD their masks off, in fictional and real life respectively, and both, the character and Evaristo herself start a process of catharsis to assimilate all the facts lived, a period of five years in Evaristo’s case. They recover their lives, friends, freedom, their spaces and even their personalities which had been changed completely for these two controller women, respectively. Evaristo points out in her memoir that, after “a period of self-recalibration” (2021, p. 89), she was in charge of her life and future again: “now I could

look forward to building a life without having to be answerable to another person, especially not someone who believed their opinions overrode mine” (89). Both, Dominique as a fictional character and our writer, Evaristo, are clear examples of resilient people who overcome traumatic circumstances in spite of the difficulties.

In Evaristo’s novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, resilience is a central and recurring theme where the author deeply portrays individuals who demonstrate resilience in the face of various challenges, including societal expectations, discrimination, and personal struggles. The characters of this novel come from different backgrounds and navigate different life experiences but they also demonstrate resilience in their own ways. From Amma, the unapologetic feminist playwright, to Carole, the successful businesswoman grappling with her identity, to Shirley, the retired teacher reflecting on her past, each character embodies resilience as they confront and overcome obstacles. Through the exploration of resilience, Evaristo delves into themes of identity, race, gender, and class. All these characters confront societal norms and expectations, challenge stereotypes, and assert their individuality with strength and determination. Their resilience serves as a source of empowerment and self-discovery, allowing them to navigate the complexities of their lives and assert their agency. Moreover, Evaristo highlights the resilience of marginalized communities, particularly Black women, who have historically faced systemic oppression and discrimination. By portraying their resilience, this writer celebrates their strength and resilience in the face of adversity, equality and social justice.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Black literature is a literary phenomenon whose interest is increasing daily. Many academic researchers have paid more attention to this in the last decades. However, Black women literature has only been considered more recently, so for this reason, many Black women writers and scholars have wanted to emphasize the labour that many Black women authors have been doing since a long time ago with their writings in order to be seen and considered. In this study the relevance of the work by many Black women in literature has been showed, the way in which they have visualized their own literature and how they have linked their efforts and voices in order to give their literature and writings the place they deserve, something that they have reached thanks to their sisterhood. They have been black heroines, the ones with self-affirmation, self-discovery, and self-esteem, the ones who are always present in their writings where the most depicted subjects treated by black women authors are conflicts and ambitions constituting their struggle “to map out her destiny and her meaning” (Tate and Olson, 2023, p.12).

Through the detailed analysis offered here, we have explored how the Black British writer, Bernardine Evaristo, addresses critical issues such as racism, resilience and violence against women at the same time that she provides a multifaceted perspective on the experience of Black women in Britain. It has been revealed how Bernardine Evaristo not only chronicles individual struggles and triumphs, but also situates these stories in a broader context of activism and social change, highlighting the interconnectedness between personal narratives and collective struggles for equality and justice. There is a systemic oppression, in which the novel foregrounds racism as a central theme, illustrating how Black women face prejudice and marginalization in various aspects of their lives, from professional environments to personal relationships. Resilience is seen in most of her characters appearing in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) who exemplify activism against racial and gender oppression as well as in her autobiographical work, *Manifesto: on Never Giving up* (2021). Evaristo’s characters demonstrate remarkable resilience in facing societal expectations, discrimination, and personal struggles.

## REFERENCES

- Bethel, Lorraine. (1990). "This Infinity of Conscious Pain". Hull, pp 176-88.
- Eddo-Lodge, R. (2019). *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Edim, Glory. (2019). *Well- Read Black Girl: finding our stories, discovering ourselves*. An Hachette UK company.
- Ekpa, Anthonia Akpabio. (2000). Beyond Gender Warfare and Western Ideologies: African Feminism for the 21st Century. In Emenyonu, Ernest (ed.), *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom: New Critical Perspectives on African Literature*, Africa World Press, pp. 27–38.
- Evans, Mary. (1984). *Black Women Writers at Work (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Anchor Books
- Evaristo, Bernardine (2019). *Girl, Woman, Other*. Grove Press.
- Evaristo, Bernardine (2021). *Manifesto on Never Giving Up*. Hamish Hamilton.
- Haskett, Nears, Ward, Mcpherson (2006). *Diversity in adjustment of maltreated children: Factors associated with resilient functioning*. Clin Psychol Rev, (26), pp 796–812.
- Henderson, E. Stephen. (1984). "Introduction" in Mary Evans (ed.). *Black Women Writers at Work (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Anchor Books.
- Herrera Cárdenas, María. (2024). *Violence against Women in Anglophone and Hispanic Contemporary Literature*. Tesis Doctoral. Universidad de Jaén.
- hooks, bell. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody. Passionate Politics*. South End Press.
- Lennox, Eva. (1994). *Black American Women's Writing: A Quilt of Many Colours*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Medovarski, Andrea K. (2019). *Settling Down and Settling Up: The Second Generation in Black British Women's Writing*. University of Toronto Press.
- Oxford Union. (2020, June 20). "Booker Prize Winner, Bernardine Evaristo" | Full Q&A at the Oxford Union [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TZpzw0puZk>. Research: March 5, 2024.
- Parkinson, Lois. (1998). *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*. Longman.
- Rastogi, Pallavi. (2016). "Women's Fiction and Literary (Self-)Determination." *The Cambridge Companion to Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)*. Ed. Dierdre Osborne. UP, 2016. 77-94.
- Tate, C and Olsen, T. (2023). *Black Women Writers at Work*. Haymarket Books.
- Ungar, M. (Ed.). (2012). *The Social Ecology of Resilience: A handbook of theory and practice*. Springer.
- Wabuke, H. (2022). "Manifesto is a story of dreams made real by never giving up." NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/18/1073739054/manifesto-is-a-story-of-dreams-made-real-by-never-giving-up>. Research: June 11, 2024

Willentz, Gay. (1992). *Binding Cultures: Black women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Indiana University Press.