NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES AND FEMINIST WAVES: LIBERAL FEMINISM IN BERNARDINE *EVARISTO'S GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER, BLONDE ROOTS*, AND *THE EMPEROR'S BABE*

NEGOCIANDO IDENTIDADES E ONDAS FEMINISTAS: FEMINISMO LIBERAL EM *GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER, BLONDE ROOTS*, AND *THE EMPEROR'S BABE*, DE BERNARDINE EVARISTO'S

ABSTRACT

Feminism is a movement devoted to uphold gender equality with a prominence on preserving women's rights. People worked for women's equality and rights in different historical phases, which are known as feminist waves. Liberal feminism is one of the branches of feminism which stresses the importance of individual's rights and freedom in the battle of gender inequality. In Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), *Blonde Roots* (2008) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), the research is to investigate the ways in which identities, feminist waves and liberal feminism are negotiated. The reason for the selection of Bernardine Evaristo is, due to her distinctive Black British Feminist perspective, which reimagines gender identity and freedom with the help of liberal feminist lens. Together, the selected books display how feminist philosophy in historical and contemporary settings to offer an investigation of identity, negotiation and feminist waves. A qualitative textual analysis is utilized in this study. Susan Moller Okin's *Justice, Gender, and Family*, Martha Nussbaum's *Sex and Social Justice*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* are examined through a theoretical framework. The results of the study demonstrated how Evaristo depicted intersecting identities and evolving feminist waves, emphasising equality and autonomy in liberal feminism. The research findings highlighted how Evaristo explored the negotiation of identities and patriarchal norms, aligning with the principles of liberal feminism. The novelty of this research lies in its examination of liberal feminism across feminist waves as interwoven in Evaristo's select novels. This study only looks at a few of Evaristo's novels. This means that it might not show how she deals with feminist and identity issues in all of her writing.

Key Words: Identities, Feminist Waves, Liberal Feminism, Equality and Autonomy.

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RESUMO

O feminismo é um movimento cultural, social e político dedicado à promoção da igualdade de gênero com ênfase na defesa dos direitos das mulheres. As ondas feministas são diferentes períodos da história em que as pessoas trabalharam para obter mais direitos e igualdade para as mulheres. Para combater a desigualdade de gênero, o feminismo liberal coloca uma forte ênfase nos direitos individuais, igualdade e liberdade. O estudo tem como objetivo explorar como identidades, ondas feministas e feminismo liberal são negociados em Girl, Woman, Other (2019), Blonde Roots (2008) e The Emperor's Babe (2001), de Bernardine Evaristo. O estudo emprega uma análise textual qualitativa dos romances de Bernardine Evaristo novels *Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots, and The Emperor's Babe* para atingir o objetivo do estudo. Aplica The Subjection of Women, de John Stuart Mill, A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* de Mary Wollstonecraft, *Sex and Social Justice*, de Martha Nussbaum, e *Justice, Gender and Family*, de Susan Moller Okin, como uma estrutura teórica para analisar os romances selecionados. Os resultados do estudo demonstraram como Evaristo retratou identidades que se cruzam e ondas feministas em evolução, enfatizando a igualdade e a autonomia no feminismo liberal. Autonomia significa a capacidade de uma mulher de fazer suas próprias escolhas e moldar sua identidade livremente. Os resultados da pesquisa destacaram como Evaristo explorou a negociação de identidades e normas patriarcais, alinhando-se aos princípios do feminismo liberal. A novidade desta pesquisa está em seu exame do feminismo liberal através das ondas feministas, entrelaçadas nos romances selecionados de Evaristo. Este estudo analisa apenas alguns dos romances de Evaristo. Isso significa que não se pode demonstrar como a autora lida com questões feministas e de identidade em toda sua obra.

Palavras-chave: Identidades, Ondas Feministas, Feminismo Liberal, Equidade e Autonomia.

Introduction

Postmodernism encompasses a diverse range of subjects, including literature, architecture, fashion, sociology, culture, art, and more. Postmodernism, an extension of modernism, has been well-studied (Hughes, 1996). Social, economic, and political movements and ideologies that comprise feminism are centred on gender inequity and the fight for women's equal rights (Jain, 2020). Liberal feminism can also be referred to as "Mainstream Feminism" or "Reformist Feminism." According to prominent author Rush Limbaugh, feminism is liberalism; see what it does, what it advocates, and what it tolerates (McElroy, 2002). Critics argue that this perspective tends to prioritize the experiences of white middle-class women and insufficiently considers entrenched social inequalities (Zhang & Rios, 2021). Crenshaw (1989) coined intersectionality to show how overlapping identities (e.g. race, class, gender) shape women's varied experiences of oppression. Hill Collins (1990) offers the concept of the "matrix of domination," stressing that Black women's lives are shaped by intersecting systems of oppression

often neglected by mainstream feminist discourse. Mohantly (2003) critiques Western feminist scholarship for treating Third-World women as a homogeneous group urging feminist thought to account for cultural and historical specificities.

The feminist waves illustrate how feminist ideas and actions have evolved over time: First Wave (19th to early 20th century), Second Wave (1960s to 1980s), Third Wave (1990s to early 2000s), and Fourth Wave (2010s to present). However, social opposition has frequently accompanied the spread of feminist ideas. For example, Rush Limbaugh, a conservative pundit, criticised the feminist argument of systematic gender inequity in 1993 by calling the notion of a "war against women" a fantasy and claiming that such narratives are a misrepresentation of men's attitudes towards women. Limbaugh's claim is a prime example of the persistent opposition to feminism and the rejection of patriarchal reality that liberal feminism aims to reveal and change by emphasising individual rights, autonomy, and equality (Limbaugh, 1993). Bernardine Evaristo's selected novels stand out as potent literary interventions that navigate the challenges of identity, autonomy, and womanhood through a decidedly liberal feminist viewpoint against the backdrop of changing feminist movements and steadfast opposition to gender equality.

This study fills a gap in the body of feminist literary theory by examining how *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), *Blonde Roots* (2008), and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) illustrate the intersection of liberal feminism and the negotiation of multiple identities across different feminist waves. Although Evaristo acclaimed appreciation from various critics, only few studies have analysed the way Evaristo's works interact with evolving notions of identity and liberal feminist principles. The researchers used theoretical frameworks by Okin, Nussbaum, Wollstonecraft and Mill to offer a comprehensive analysis on how feminist views are explored and debated in various historical, cultural and racial perspectives. The above approach becomes particularly significant in the mainstream feminist discussions, as concerns intersectionality, inclusivity and ideological shifts remain crucial. Although liberal feminism promotes individual rights, it frequently disregarded race, class and cultural differences.

Review of literature

Notable liberal feminist theorists' foundational works are highlighted in this section and in addition offered how their theories have been used in various researches. Bryson has written plenty about feminist concepts (Pandeeswari, Hariharasudan, & Kot, 2021). In an effort to help women to free themselves from their established tendencies to being solely "suppressed" species. Feminism plays a critical role in defining their sex identities in new ways. In the analysis done by Graham, he confronts liberal feminism using Mill's views of "gender blindness", equal opportunity, and subordination (Gordon, 1994). Gal Gerson addresses the beliefs of individuality creation of the liberal ideals and underlines the importance of liberal feminism (Gerson, 2002).

Bryson argues that women should have the same decision-making authority and access to equal opportunities in all domains as men (Bryson, 1992). The Pollard study looks at the same subject (Pollard, 2020). Megan believed that using the internet would enable her to recognise her gender and better understand her feelings and emotions (Rajapandi, 2022). Existing research on Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots*, and *The Emperor's Babe* often focuses on broader themes like race and gender, but rarely delves deeply into the nuanced negotiation of identity through liberal feminism at the character level. To address this gap, this study offers a more in-depth analysis of the identities and personalities of the characters through liberal feminist ideals.

The novelty of this work lies in its focus on the intersection of liberal feminism and personal identity, providing a unique, character-driven analysis that adds depth to existing feminist literary criticism. By examining the evolving feminist perspectives within the characters, this paper offers fresh insight into how individual experiences and historical shifts in feminist movements influence personal identity in Evaristo's selected novels

Methodology

In order to investigate how liberal feminism and the negotiating of overlapping identities appear in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots*, and *The Emperor's Babe*, this study uses a qualitative textual analysis. These three novels were selected for their thematic relevance, as each prominently explores liberal feminist ideals through diverse female characters offering rich ground for analysing identity negotiation across different historical and cultural contexts. Using a textual analysis on the recurrent themes related to liberal feminist principles such as equality, autonomy, defiance of patriarchal conventions, and the freedom to self-definition were identified in a few selected texts.

Textual evidence was chosen for its significance to major topics at the heart of feminist wave theory and liberal feminism, such as scenarios in which characters confront issues of identity, social mobility, racial marginalisation, and gender norms. Passages that depicted a developing feminist consciousness or directly addressed liberal ideals, such as equality, fairness, and individual freedom, were given preference. By following these guidelines, the analysis was guaranteed to stay on the interaction between feminist theory and story production. Since individualist and equality-driven discourses were familiar in Evaristo's writings, liberal feminism, which draws from Wollstonecraft, Mill, Nussbaum, and Okin, was chosen as the theoretical framework.

Liberal feminism provides a means for comprehending characters' interactions with institutions (such as schools, families, and the law) and their claims of autonomy within pre-existing structures, which aligns with the chosen novels' thematic focus. This is in contrast to radical or socialist feminist approaches. This methodological

structure ensures transparency and potential reproducibility for future researchers, as it identifies themes aligned with liberal feminism, applies a consistent theoretical lens, and selects scenes based on their significance to the development of the feminist wave and identity negotiation.

Tracing Female Agency: From Wollstonecraft to Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft explores topics that align with liberal feminist theory. The statement above highlights the fundamental liberal feminist principle that women must be in control of their own lives, separate from social or marital authority. She observes;

> I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves [73].

In Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, Amma's growth as a writer is similarly depicted as that of a self-sufficient person who challenges social expectations regarding her work, sexuality, and motherhood. She resists heteronormative institutions and cultivates a life that values freedom. Evaristo describes;

> Amma then spent decades on the fringe, a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment that excluded her until the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it [10].

Legal and Social Freedom in *Blonde Roots*

Mill's main defense of women's freedom and the advancement of gender equality is emphasised in *The Subjection of Women*. Since genuine equality between men and women is essential to human progress, Mill advocates for the abolition of social and legal discrimination against women. Mill states,

> The Principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other-is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality (03)

Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*, which promotes gender equality through societal and legislative reforms, is related to Mill's quotation. The internalised oppression that women frequently endure as a result of the long-standing patriarchy is criticised in *Blonde Roots*. Evaristo remarks;

> They weren't weedy like me, and it was obvious that the only fools these women would suffer were their masters. As they silently appraised me one and all, I realized I'd better shape up (189).

Legal Subordination and Personal Liberty: Mill's Influence in *The Emperor's Babe*

According to Mill, gender inequality is a barrier to human advancement as well as a societal issue. He criticises the legal frameworks that support this inequity and promotes a reformist strategy through societal and legal adjustments. He writes;

> The legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement (03)

In Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, Zuleika asserts her personality in defiance of a society that seeks to control her, exemplifying the sort of personal liberty that Mill promotes. Zuleika relates;

> My body is mine to do with as I please. I'm nobody wanting to be somebody. I was born in this town, but I've never been outside. I blame my parents, refugees from the Sudan. This was the first place they felt safe. (158).

Enforcing Gender Roles: Care and Power in *Blonde Roots*

In *Justice, Gender and Family,* Susan Moller Okin emphasises that duties should be divided fairly throughout the family, particularly when providing care. Furthermore, Okin contends that gender roles are reinforced in large part by the family, which is the fundamental institution. Okin conveys;

> Justice cannot be achieved without an equitable distribution of responsibilities within the family, particularly in the care of children and other dependents (151)

Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* explores the above idea by showing the disparity in power between enslaved women and their captors. The work criticises how these roles are enforced on women, even when Annie is compelled to perform other gendered duties and care for her captors' children. Evaristo's Annie ruminates;

> We were to be wives and mothers-so we were taught how to cook: How to separate milk to make butter and cheese. How to bake horse bread from dried peas when the household budget wasn't balancing (56 & 57)

Political Freedom and Intersectionality: Nussbaum's Vision in *Blonde Roots*

In *Sex and Social Justice,* Martha Nussbaum says a fair society must guarantee that people of all sexual orientations, as well as men and women, can live free from the restrictions of compulsion or prejudice. Nussbaum oscillates;

> Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association (Nussbaum 104).

This is consistent with the reality of women in Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* who are compelled to live in subordination as a result of the systemic oppression they encounter. The remark below highlights the significance of considering intersectionality while examining oppression and capacity within Nussbaum's paradigm. Doris observes;

> I was not a slave because I was a female. Now look here, I'm not a worsted-stocking'd knave or a scapegrace or a scoundrel like this lot. I'm not a slave, I own them (146).

Evaristo's novel *Emperor's Babe* speaks to second-wave demands for independence and equality, centred on in ancient Roman Britain, explores women's historical confinement from power and autonomy (Jain, 2020). Zuleika's voice anticipates third-wave intersectionality, as a woman of colour, reveals the ways in which gender and race interact within patriarchal hierarchies. While maintaining liberal feminism features, Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*, a characteristic of third–wave feminism, theoretical race-based enslavement condemns institutional injustice (Jain, 2020). A variety of feminist views and the associations of race, class and sexuality are explored in Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other with a spotlight on inclusivity in the fourth wave (Jain, 2020). The study above negotiates the relationships between identities, feminist waves, liberal feminism, and the ideas in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots*, and *The Emperor's*

Babe. The following phase compares and contrasts liberal feminist ideas in Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots*, and *The Emperor's Babe* with other studies.

Liberal feminism provides a prism through which to examine women's experiences across various historical eras and cultural contexts, as it is grounded in the principles of autonomy, equality, and justice. As seen in the writings of Nussbaum and Okin, liberal feminism has evolved across feminist waves to incorporate broader understandings of gender, race, class, and sexuality, despite its roots in enlightenment philosophy, exemplified by figures such as Wollstonecraft and Mill.

To demonstrate how feminist concerns, particularly the quest for equality and self-determination, remain relevant across time and identity categories, this study applies these principles to the novels which are set in ancient history, in *The Emperor's Babe*; an alternate colonial past, in *Blonde Roots*; and modern-day Britain, in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Although these issues take on distinct forms depending on intersecting experiences, they are all linked in their opposition to institutional oppression and support of individual liberties.

Discussion

The characters of Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots, The Emperor's Babe*, and *Girl, Woman, Other* overcome their problems. Liberal feminist studies are evaluated and compared to Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots*, and *The Emperor's Babe* within the context of the liberal feminist tendency. Numerous works utilise their heroines to highlight different aspects of liberal feminism. To exemplify the liberal feminism seen in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, even though Elizabeth's parents pressured her to marry Mr. Collins, she is portrayed as a free-thinking woman who makes her own life decisions (Suaidi et al. 2016). Her parents planned her marriage to an old, rich man when she was eleven, much like they did with Zuleika in Evaristo's book *The Emperor's Babe*. He hasn't been enthusiastic throughout his whole marriage. She said she and her elderly husband had never gotten pregnant. Zuleika articulates;

> I'll never fall pregnant for him, Alba.
> I just know it, always have. I probably
> can't anyway, he ruined me before I was ready.
> He doesn't seem to care (107).

Wollstonecraft believed that women ought to have the autonomy to govern themselves, which aligns with liberal feminism's emphasis on individual liberty. In *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo highlights the absence of personal agency experienced by enslaved individuals, which contrasts sharply with liberal feminist concepts of autonomy. Annie articulates;

> We slaves don't end relationships. Other people do it for us. Often we don't start them either, other people do it for us [30].

Usha Zacharias' study found that the representation of women is a covert way to encourage women to be more important and executive, as well as to deal with men in social situations (Usha, 2001). Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* contains a similar situation. The world is haunted by the past, which is why readers are tormented by the 18th-century slave world of beatings, brandings, and living human remains piled in containerships. A secret plotline aims to help Doris focus and make better decisions while coping with her ruler, Chief Kaga Bwana, and his violent activities. Doris remarks,

> I tried to walk quickly without appearing to. I had twenty minutes left to get to Paddington Station, and it was going well until I came upon five or six white men with raggedy beards and scabrous chests (241).

While liberal feminism emphasizes individual agency and equality, Evaristo's characters reveal how gender is deeply intertwined with race, class, and sexuality often limiting that agency. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Amma, a Black lesbian from a working-class background, faces marginalization not just for her gender but also her sexuality and class. Yazz is an example of generational change where feminist identity is shaped by class. Evaristo's Blonde Roots, the shift of racial duties stresses the intersection of gender and race with power framework. An individual freedom in the lens of liberal feminism is revealed in Doris experience as a white female slave, which shows how racial and gender oppression impacts autonomy. The class advancement of marriage, racially dehumanised, constrained to gender are reflected in the life of Zuleika, a Sudanese girl in Roman London in the Emperor's Babe. Her life tells how conflicting social forces affect choices.

In order to account overlapping identities and systemic disparities while addressing the flaws of liberal feminism, Evaristo stresses the need for an intersectional approach. Women's autonomy to uphold their equality through their own selection and engagements (Fakih: 1996). Racial, gender and class-based societal norms have restricted protagonist of Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. In a world where repressive institutions prevail, the above specified quote relates internal and external issues that Black women face. Shirley expresses,

> A battle against white supremacy, a battle against misogyny, a battle against the assumption that Black women had to settle for the bottom of the heap (78).

The analysis of Evaristo's *Girl Woman, Other* with the help of John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women, explicit powerful encouragement for women's equality

and autonomy. Such instance brings great basement for promoting equal rights and opportunities for women. Mill reports;

> In the first place, the opinion in favour of the present system, which entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger, rests upon theory only [06].

Evaristo also emphasised the long-term effects of historical subordination by illustrating how outdated cultural norms may impact interpersonal relationships. For instance, rather than common ideals in the present, Shirley and Amma's connection is founded on customs from the past in *Girl, Woman, Other*. Evaristo outlines;

> Her friendship with Amma is based on historical loyalty and comfortable familiarity rather than shared interests and perspectives [333].

Despite being set in ancient London, Zuleika's experiences speak to liberal feminist issues of social constraint, speech, and autonomy in the novel *The Emperor's Babe*. In line with Wollstonecraft's demand for women's education and individuality, her ambition to pursue poetry and defy marital obligations demonstrates that feminist fights of this kind have long persisted in patriarchal systems, independent of historical time.

In *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo exposes the absurdity of past liberal principles that excluded colonized persons by reversing colonial roles. The work is able to examine who gains from "universal" rights because of this satirical setting. The protagonist's desire for independence and acceptance is reminiscent of Mill's liberal feminism, showing how racial and cultural barriers do not affect the relevance of struggles for autonomy, even in imagined histories. Colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and transnational struggles for autonomy echo with Global South feminism's perspectives, although Evaristo is a British writer. The major topics like migration, colonialism and cultural hybridity which are comes under feminist theory from the Postcolonial and Global South movements are very often encountered by Evaristo's characters. Through satire, historical inversion, and intersectional narratives, Evaristo disrupts Eurocentric feminist frameworks, aligning her work with the decolonial impulses of Global South feminisms.

Evaristo's characters served as an example of how feminist waves have evolved in different settings to navigate class, sexuality, gender, and race in contemporary culture in *Girl, Woman, Other*. The liberal feminist ideals influence equality, identity and autonomy such things represented by the characters Amma and Yazz through third and fourth wave apprehensions. Continuous development in shifting cultural, political, and global contexts could be seen in other works of Evaristo from poetry to fiction and offer insightful feminist evolvement. Resist and reformulate liberal feminism ideas demonstrate equality and autonomy which gives foremost understating of how Evaristo's characters respond to overlapping oppressions. Similar to this study, intersectionality, fluid identities and

collective struggle highlighted how Evaristo's characters resist fixed ideas of gender and autonomy as contemporary critics emphasized.

The study provides significant insights into liberal feminism and identity negotiation in Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots and The Emperor's Babe yet it has few limitations like it does encompass the full scope of Evaristo's wider literary legacy. The researchers have examined only three of Evaristo works consequently it is not enough to represent her entire feminist ideologies.

There is a chance to leave out more extensive sociocultural and reader perspective circumstances due to the analysis subjectivity and lack of empirical backing as the study limited to only the qualitative analysis. Criticism could be placed on feminist wave paradigm, although it aids in contextualising historical events, which may prohibit the variety of intersectional and postcolonial feminist conceptions. This study largely discussed gender studies regardless of its emphasis on liberal feminism by evaluating how Evaristo's characters negotiate intersecting identities. In contemporary Britain how literature interacts with postcolonial histories, diaspora realities and changing feminist ideas was an insightful study done by scholars.

Conclusion

By incorporating identity negotiation, liberal ideals, feminist waves in *Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots* and *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo explicit the tenacity and applicability of feminist concepts over time. More nuanced approach to feminist literary criticism promoted by this study that transcends beyond traditional wave models and supports hybrid, context-specific readings by highlighting the connection between liberal feminism and intersecting identities. In order to reconsider feminist narratives via historically conscious and globally inclusive lens, it deepens current discussions in feminist and literary theory by motivating academics. Race, gender, class and historical context progressively shaped liberal feminist values, which includes equality, individual autonomy and access to justice.

Girl, Woman, Other presents an intricate interaction of identities that illustrates how women negotiate the complications of late third and fourth wave feminism. *Blonde Roots* undermines the liberal promise of equality despite the persistence of racial hierarchies by defying previous power systems. *The Emperor's Babe* suggested a proto-liberal feminist position and illustrates how individual freedom and resistance were contested even in earlier historical periods. By applying liberal feminist theory in Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots and The Emperor's Babe, the study states that how there narratives both support and challenge the shortcomings of liberal feminism. This nuanced relation increases one understands of liberal feminism as it engages through feminist waves.

Finally, the results support the study's primary objective, which as to explore the impact of feminist theory and identity negotiation in Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other, Blonde Roots and The Emperor's Babe. The conclusion not only reinforces

liberal feminism's continual relevance but also illustrates the value of approaching it from an intersectional perspective which acknowledges the complexity of human identity in postmodern literature.

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