

FICTION

REGENERATION

SANJEEDA HOSSAIN

One Day Last Week
I had an awful dream.
I dreamt that I had lost my way.
I couldn't get to my university hostel. From Petaling Jaya to Pantai Hill Park, KL Central and Mid Valley, changing one bus after the other; no one knew where my hostel was.
I was carrying a huge piece of luggage; its handle and wheels, broken. A Chinese boy came forward and carried it to the next bus stop.
And instead of finding another bus, I got into his car. He drove me through a dark forest full of mosquitoes.
I kept thinking about the dream the whole day.
Around 7 o'clock in the evening, Ismat, a



classmate from Sudan, prepared rice and tuna with carrots and spinach. After sharing the dinner I helped her with the dishes.
When I started washing the spoons and plates in the washing area beside the flower garden, a black and white mosquito circled around me and bit me on my shoulder.
I rushed to Ismat's room. She shrieked in terror— three dots forming a triangle: she held a mirror so that I could see.
She immediately gave me some antibiotic soap to clean that area and asked me to drink a lot of water.
Three Days Back
I rushed to the wash basin as soon as I felt blood dripping from my mouth.

I was having shortness of breath. My heart was thumping fast. My whole world was reeling.
I remembered, last night, I asked my brother to call me back as soon as he would manage a little free time during his preparation for his final exams. He said that he would definitely give me a call before going to bed.
I waited, maybe for three hours before going to sleep.
In the morning, I ate six slices of bread with three slices of cheese, a mug of hot tea and an orange; drank 3 litres of water; cleaned my room and had a long shower.
In the afternoon, I went to the hostel office to file a complaint. They expressed their genuine concern and gave me a mosquito repellent to spray in my room.
"Stay alert, cover the bare parts of your body and be careful from six to eight during the morning and the evening. That is the time when they bite," the superintendent said in a mellow voice.
"But I have already been bitten by a mosquito," I cried.
She gave me a helpless, blank look and left her office.
I decided to go downstairs to the hostel café. I ordered tom yam soup and nasi goreng. I ate and watched the boys and girls playing handball.
I also watched monkeys arriving at the hostel, gripping the edges of the roofs with their legs and tails.
They generally start these expeditions every afternoon at five, arriving at the hostel compound mostly in large groups consisting of twelve to fifteen monkeys: babies hanging from their mothers' necks, young adults and white bearded old grandfather monkeys— they come to forage. They never lose contact with each other and always stay close. Before it starts getting dark, together they leave.
Do husbands and wives in monkey communities have to live apart because they are studying in different places?
I sent my husband a message that I had been bitten by a mosquito. He replied that even if it is dengue, no one gets killed by dengue these days. People from developing nations like ours are quite immune to such fevers.
I wanted to speak to him. I called and he declined my call. He was doing his assignments and would soon be out to join a concert of one of Brisbane's most celebrated rock bands: The Ramjet. He promised to call me 30 minutes later.
I came up and went to the toilet. I saw my face

in the mirror. I had rashes all over my skin. My lips were swollen and red.
I went to bed and had a troubled sleep. When I woke up, it was two hours since my husband sent me that message with his promise.

The Day before Yesterday
It was 12 o'clock at noon. The sun blazed outside my window. I should be going to the clinic.
Mother called and I informed her that I had a fever, "Please pray for me, maa. I am terribly unwell".
"Oh my baby, you will be alright," she tried to calm me.
I could not remember what else she said, and I did not know for how long I lay down in bed.
When my roommate Nabila returned, she drove me to a clinic at Bangsar. A South Indian doctor examined me. I told her about the mosquito bite and she sent me for a blood test.
The report said that I had dengue fever and my platelet count was less than 150,000. She suggested that I get admitted at my university hospital the next morning. I wouldn't be able to bear the cost here.
I felt a strange indifference towards life and I asked Nabila to take me back to my room.
I noticed how she drives: smooth and elegant. I asked who taught her driving. She replied that it was her mother who insisted that her daughter should learn to drive.
We finally arrived in the room by 10 at night. As soon as I entered, I checked my phone.
No one had called.
Yesterday
I arrived at the hospital at 8 o'clock in the morning. I waited and the doctor arrived at 9. I bled like water. After three hours of tortuous waiting, finally the blood report arrived. The platelet count this time dropped to a perilous 45000.
A nurse arrived at the counter and asked me to leave the hospital. I showed her the report from the clinic and the South Indian doctor's reference. She seemed indifferent and just asked me to eat and drink well.
I started walking under the blazing sun. I had left my umbrella in my room. I had pain around my eyes. I was angry.
I wanted to eat.
As soon as I reached a nearby café, I started loading my plate with everything I could: chicken, rice and eggplant curry, chicken liver cooked with onions, bitter gourds and bean sprouts, curry puffs, boiled potatoes with some unknown scaly,

smelly fish, and I ordered carrot juice with milk and ice.
I had an immense urge to listen to the voice of my husband. I gave him a call. He said that he was sleeping. Was that something very important? I said, "No, nothing of much importance."
I took the bus to my hostel and somehow reached my room.
When Nabila found me, I was bleeding profusely. She screamed and called the girls from the nearby rooms.
I was rushed to the hospital.
I could only inform my father that I had gone into shock and my platelet count dropped to a drastic 30, 000.
The doctors and nurses at the hospital were screaming at the top of their lungs, trying to figure out who it was that sent me back instead of having me admitted in the morning.
My platelet count dropped to 20, 000. I knew I was about to die. When Ismat came to see me, I asked her to check my phone, "Did anyone call?"
"No, dear," she replied.

Last Night before Daybreak
It was midnight and everyone had left for home.
According to my religion, if I am about to enter the eternal world, I have to leave all the ephemeral earthly matters behind. Far away from my homeland, family, known and familiar surroundings, was I ready to leave everything behind at any given moment?
With large, round drops of tears rolling down my cheeks, I started to pray, as if I was having a hearty conversation with God.
I continued to speak with God for the rest of the night and, I knew, He was listening.
Today
In the morning, the doctor comes to announce of my astounding recovery. He informs me that my platelet count is rising. It has risen straight to 150,000. If I want to, I can leave the hospital tomorrow.
He also informs me that my bill is 3, 000 RM. Where will I get so much money from?
He reassures me that since I have suffered due to their negligence I won't have to pay anything.
Nabila arrives. I request her to take me to the window. I ask her to hand me my phone. I see twelve missed calls.
I throw my phone into the deep, dark, green water of the lake beneath the window.
I can feel life jingling inside my veins. Again.

Sanjeeda Hossain teaches at the Department of English, University of Dhaka.

POETRY

THE WIND'S ONLY RECOURSE

UNTARA SHAKIRA

The wind afire
Like a wild mare's ire,
Breathless in its heat
Which nothing can defeat,
Flying through windows
Banging through doors;
Ripping at branches
Threatening to tilt arches.

Smashing, growling and howling with full force
Only to know death as its only recourse.

Untara Shakira is a Literature Major and bibliophile. She also loves her cats and her coffee.

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REVIEWS

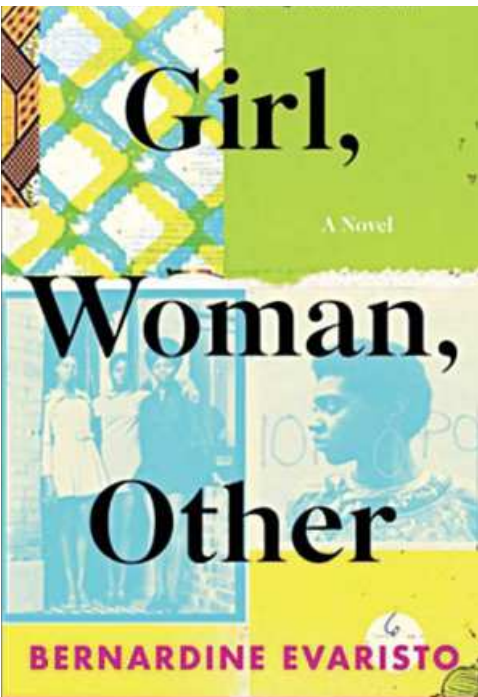
Girl, Woman, Other: A Review

REVIEWED BY SAHID KAMRUL

Bernardine Evaristo. ISBN: 978-0-241-364901, Hamish Hamilton, 2019

Girl, Woman, Other by Bernadine Evaristo is a beautiful rendition of the intertwining lives of people in modern Britain. Twelve people, most of whom are women, each dedicated a chapter, are seen in the best and worst moments of their lives. From Amma Bonsu, "Queen of the Dykes" to Penelope, a semi-feminist schoolteacher, from Winsome with her sexual obsessions about her son-in-law to Megan/Morgan who finds themselves by "travelling into the batshit-crazy end of the Transgender verse" published at the beginning of May 2019 and Atwood's co-winner of last year's Booker Prize, Evaristo's latest novel has been described as a polyphony of female voices, mostly black, coming together to retell the experiences of a black modern Britain. Polyphony is certainly the correct term for a novel that casts twelve main characters, each telling their story, each with their own take on sexuality and gender, each of a different shade of "black," spanning from the nineteen year old Londoner Yazz to the ninety-four Hattie, who has lived all of her days in a rural mansion in the northern English countryside.
Evaristo has very cleverly sketched characters that are relatable and complex, with stories that will break your heart and make you smile. She has tackled issues faced by most women in their day to day lives, regardless of color and societal position. As the interconnected stories of the twelve main female characters unfold, the reader will be quick to judge that the there

is no one black Britain emerging between these pages, and intentionally so – *Girl, Woman, Other* is not so much about femininity and blackness as it is an episodic deconstruction of whatever preconceived perception we might have held of these.
The first woman we meet is Amma, a "sixty-something dyke" who has been a feminist activist in the eighties when she ran the Bush Women Theatre Company together with her dearest friend Dominique (also a lesbian, but "uber-cool," as Amma defines her, and an intersectional feminist). After a lifetime of attempts to get her artistic struggles the attention they deserved, Amma's most recent play – a lesbian take on an eighteen century royal England – *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* about to open at the National theatre, is sold out, and expected to be attended by over a thousand spectators.
Among these we will find some of the main characters: Yazz (Amma's extraordinarily self-confident and explosive daughter, always surrounded by her squad of "unfuckwithables" friends), Dominique (who flew back from America for the occasion), Shirley (one of Amma's closest friends, a feminist, but, according to Dominique, a homophobe), Carole (who ends up at the play's opening because her husband Lennox has to attend it, but had also been Shirley's high-school pupil) and Morgan (previously Megan, now the renowned influencer/trans-worrier, non-binary,



pansexual going by the pronoun "they", whom Yazz has met at a University conference).
With a full black female cast and performed in a "fan-shaped auditorium, modelled on the Greek amphitheaters that ensured every-one in the audience had an uninterrupted view of the

action," Amma's play seems to act as a frame to Evaristo's polyphony of voices and emulate the novel's structure and mode in a parallel montage. This is particularly apparent when one considers the writer's choice to close the novel with an Epilogue, which not only adds a thematic sophistication at the novel's end but concurrently places it in the tradition of Greek tragedies as well.
Girl, Woman, Other is written in the style of a prose poem which Evaristo has termed "fusion fiction," Apparently uttered in the voice of a third person and defiant of the traditional usage of punctuations, the text reads like a collection of monologues, where the line break may simply replace a common full stop and signify a shift in the perspective of a narrator:
"The fluid way in which I shaped, lineated and punctuated the prose on the page enabled me to oscillate between the past and the present inside their heads, outside their heads, and eventually from one character's story into another character's story."
Evaristo manages the prose well and unceremoniously, moving nimbly through different registers. Her narration is to the point, experimental enough to feel new but always careful to make itself accessible to all readers. The unconventional of the prose is eye catching and surprisingly easy to read. The idea behind the book, of the intermingled lifelines of women, however, is not as original as those of other prominent black women

authors like Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison who have already explored it before. However, the execution of the trope, the narrative style, and the profound connection between the characters are brilliant. Not only complex concepts like identity, sexuality and race have been traversed, but also other equally problematic issues as in politics, empathy, and pretensions have been duly observed and successfully communicated.
Standing between poetry and prose, between fiction and drama, *Girl, Woman, Other* seems to argue that everything we think we can pin down to definite categories and phrasings – traditional literary forms, gender, sexuality, blackness, religion, even feminism – lay haphazardly on a spectrum. In a time that requires that we learn to make well-informed judgments, it is unsurprising and refreshing that *Girl, Woman, Other* was awarded the Booker Prize, making Evaristo the first black woman writer ever to win it. Leaving prize selections and winning speculations on the other side, I agree that Evaristo's novel is not undeserving of its attention and attainments: like Yazz says of her mother's play, Evaristo's novel goes "down like a lead balloon" – beautifully crafted and heartfelt, although some may find the material a little hard to digest.

Sahid Kamrul is a Research Fellow at Freie University Berlin, Germany.