Stigma as an Attribute of Oppression or an Agent of Change: The Novel *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the processes of stigmatization and oppression of women as presented by Bernardine Evaristo in her book *Girl, Women, Other*. The book features twelve female characters who are very different from each other, but what they have in common is that they each, in their own way, face stigma, misunderstanding and social exclusion. The social construction of stigma causes various kinds of social inequalities of the stigmatized. Through the fictional narratives of the stigmatized and the reflection of their position in the novel, stigmatized women become the bearers of change and not merely the victims of oppression.

Key words: stigma, racism, oppression, gender, Bernardine Evaristo

In 2019 the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction went to two women writers for their new novels, the Canadian literary icon Margaret Atwood (*The Testaments*) and the first black British woman author of fiction to win it, Bernardine Evaristo (*Girl, Woman, Other*). The prize, a proven literary *succès d'estime*, is a big achievement for black British women that now have an internationally acclaimed contemporary literary voice. This is a contemporary panoramic, polyphonic novel, written partly in prose and partly as a poem or simply a poem in prose, without using initial capital letters in sentences and full-stops apart from the endings of individual (sub)chapters, which describes the fictional lives of mostly black women in Britain. The twelve protagonists are of various ages, with different cultural and social backgrounds and have very different personalities.

> Her eighth novel follows 12 characters, most of them black British women, moving through the world in different decades and learning how to be. Each character has a chapter; within the chapters their lives overlap, but their experiences, backgrounds and choices could not be more different. There's Amma, a lesbian socialist playwright, and non-binary Morgan, who uses the internet to navigate their gender identity – but also Shirley, a teacher who feels alien in Amma's community, and Winsome, a bride who has arrived from Barbados to an unhappy marriage. Many of the characters are close – friends, relatives or lovers – while others simply visit the same theatre on the same night or argue with each other on Twitter. (Micha Frazer-Carroll)

THE STIGMA OF WOMEN IN THE NARRATIVES

The title of the book *Girl, Women, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo poses a question right from the very beginning. Who are the Others, according to Edmund Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology? Through the stories of the twelve female characters, we see that the Other women here are those, who are in any way different or that is at least how the world around them sees them. They are women, who do not belong to the traditional notion of femininity, with their appearance, skin colour or sexual orientation, but deviate from it in some way, who are stigmatized and socially excluded. Through the narratives of various female characters and their narrative stories, Evaristo shows how stigmatization and oppression are manifested through gender, race, social class and sexual orientation, which causes their invisibility in society and increases social injustice. Girls and women reveal themselves to the reader through very different life experiences, but what they do have in common is that they are, because of the difference, excluded, marked, and they react to it very differently. It is precisely the stigma that allows the rest of the

environment to see them as being the "Other" and "different". This "difference", due to gender, skin color, class, or sexual orientation, is what makes the environment perceive them primarily through the prism of difference.

The ancient Greeks used the term stigma "to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman 1963, 11). This has very specific effects on how the stigmatized body is literally seen and treated. The stigma namely appears as 'real', visible on the body of the stigmatized, because the social construction of stigma and its symbolic violence are often obscured (Howarth 2006). This is very true for the stigma of race. Race appears as 'real', defining a particular body as 'raced' – as it can be seen on the body itself. Hence the stigma of race appears non-negotiable (Howarth 2006). Goffman in his classic work entitled *Stigma: Notes about Spoiled identity* (1963) studied and analyzed the stigma and the processes of stigmatization, which he understands generally as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" and reduces an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, disconnected one" (Goffman 1963, 3). Goffman further suggests that stigma has three principal dimensions: first »*bodily abomination*« (disfigurement or physical impairment, for example); second, »*character blemishes*« (identity or lifestyle, for example); and third »*tribal stigma*« (negative characteristics associated with a particular group) (Goffman 1963, 184).

Stigmatized identities are produced through the processes of perception, typification and achieve their result in interpersonal relations in the processes of exclusion. Systematic discriminatory practices are incorporated into a micro (personal social interactions), meso (organizational and institutional procedures and strategies) and macro cultural norms and practices. Stigma thus needs to be seen as collectively constructed, institutionalized and resisted in the systems of difference, privilege and inequality that constitute the social structures and institutionalized practices of any society (Howarth 2006). Goffman defines symbols as being a part of information control; they are used to understand the others. Stigma symbols are similar. Skin color is a stigma symbol (Goffman 1963). Labels that have the power to stigmatize are propped up by discourses (according to Goffman's stigma theory) that dehumanize and discriminate, and that explain the labelled group's inferiority in terms of "inherent/ essential biological differences, status/breeding or just reward for prior action" (Graham & Schiele 2010).

In the book the main female protagonist Amma observes how through labeling and through various acts a discriminatory activity takes place. To the question of what it means to be a black woman among white feminists Amma responds:

> she listened as they debated
>
> what it meant to be a black woman what it meant to be a feminist when white feminist organizations made them feel unwelcome

> how it felt when people called them nigger, or racist thugs beat them up
>
> what it was like when white men opened doors or gave up their seats on public transport for white women (which was sexist), but not for them (which was racist) (Evaristo 2019, 18-19)

At this point the protagonist Amma starts to become aware of her oppression due to her skin colour, which is also present among white feminists. Conceptualizing race in this way not only sheds light on the operation and contestation of racism but highlights the ways in which stigma operates in order to produce and defend structural inequalities. Race is seen in or on the body itself; while race may inform social spaces, linguistic styles and fashion, it is primarily linked to the body, or more particularly the skin (Fanon, 1952).

One of the book's protagonists called Jazz, for example, is fully aware of the fact that Amma constantly experiences an invisible discrimination, since she does not belong to the majority. Jazz describes Amma with the following words:

> Jazz knows full well that Amma will always be anything but normal, and as she's in her fifties, she's not old yet, although try telling *that* to a nineteen-year old, aging is nothing to be ashamed of
>
> especially when the entire human race is in it together although sometimes it seems that she alone among her friends wants to celebrate getting older
>
> because it's such a privilege to not die prematurely, she tells them as the night draws in around her kitchen table in her cosy terraced house in Brixton
>
> as they get stuck into the dishes each (Evaristo 2019, 3-4)

In the novel's narratives the reduction of life chances unthinkingly is described through the life of Amma, who is the main protagonist of the novel, a black lesbian who wants to establish her own theatre. Her mum Helen is a half-caste, born in Scotland, her father was a Nigerian student. There is a clear writer's semi-autobiographical element present there.

According to Young (1990), marginalization is perhaps the most severe form of oppression because it pushes groups to the outer edges of society, where they are made to feel invisible or experience a lack of recognition. The faces of marginalization, powerlessness and exploitation are associated with social and power divisions of labour and describe the ways in which social arrangements and structures tend to block opportunities and reproduce inequalities. Young articulates five faces of oppression, which can be used to determine the degree of vulnerability groups may experience. These are: (1) marginalization; (2) powerlessness; (3) exploitation; (4) cultural imperialism; and (5) violence (Young 1990). Young

further suggests that cultural imperialism is the universalization of a dominant group's experiences and culture and its establishment as the norm. In this matrix, the final face of oppression is violence, which implies a range of abuse including physical harm, aggression, harassment, intimidation and ridicule. Evaristo in her descriptions clearly shows the marginalization that leads to the exclusion and reduction of the individual's possibilities in the processes of stigmatization, in the school that takes place in mutual relations and can lead the individual to deviant behavior and 'criminal career':

> when he complained of the cold, the teachers said he had behavioural problems
>
> when he spoke patois, they thought he was thick and put him in a class the year below, even though he was top of his class back home
>
> when he was naughty with his white schoolmates, he alone was singled out and sent to the Sin Bin
>
> when he got angry at the injustice of it all, they said he was being abusive
>
> when he stomped out of the classroom to let off steam, they said he was being aggressive
>
> so he decided to be, threw a chair at a teacher, narrowly missing him the first time
>
> but not the second
>
> he was sent to Borstal for the crime of chair-throwing, LaTisha, it was like a prison for young offenders, where he served time with junior murderers, rapists and arsonists (Evaristo 2019, 195)

These negative social perceptions of the individual are internalized by the author and they become part of the self-perception. Before the beginning of a 'criminal career' there are processes of defining, labeling, marginalization, which, with the increasing strengthening of unwanted behavior, reduce the chances of an individual for socially desirable alternative forms of behaviour. These labeling processes that take place in interpersonal relations are not limited to the individual but can lead to discrimination against different individual groups that differ from the majority culture.

We can recognize the different degrees of marginalization based on race. Hélène Cixous asserts that the man/woman and white/black dichotomies emanate from the same oppressive system of binary opposition. She writes: "As soon as [women] begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous" (Cixous 1976, 878). Cixous further says that

the oppressions come from the same place: the phallocentric culture built on the Symbolic Order (Cixous 1976, 19).

Identity is thus established through the processes of differentiation which lead to the oppression and exclusion of those who are different in the opinion of the majority. Socio-economic situation may be one of the factors on the basis of which an individual has less chance of success. When one of the featured women characters named Carol first visits college she feels her difference, not only because of the color of her skin but because of a social environment that is different from most others. She claims:

> most students weren't like that but the really posh ones were the loudest and the most confident and they were the only voices she heard
>
> they made her feel crushed, worthless and a
>
> nobody without saying a word to her
>
> without even noticing her
>
> nobody talked loudly about growing up in a council flat on a skyscraper estate with a single mother who worked as a cleaner
>
> nobody talked loudly about never having gone on a single holiday,
>
> like ever
>
> nobody talked loudly about never having been on a plane, seen a play or the sea, or eaten in a restaurant, with waiters
>
> nobody talked loudly about feeling too ugly, stupid, fat, poor or just plain out of place, out of sorts, out of their depth
>
> nobody talked loudly about being gang-banged at thirteen
>
> when she heard another student refer to her in passing as 'so ghetto', she wanted to spin on her heels and shout after her, excuse me? ex-cuuuuuse me? say that to my face, byatch!
>
> (people were killed for less where she came from)
>
> or had she misheard it? were they actually (Evaristo 2019, 132)

The feeling of invisibility and social isolation is one of the facets of oppression, which Carol experiences at her visit to the faculty and it is the result of her difference. The heroines in the various narratives of Evaristo's book are, in fact, faced with "visible" social categories or social identities (such as race and ethnicity) as well as "invisible" ones (such as sexual orientation and social class (Bowleg 2012). Woodward challenges the narrowness of the conventional views of identity:

Identities are forged through the marking of difference. This marking of difference takes place both through the symbolic systems of representation, and through forms of social exclusion. Identity, then, is not the opposite of, but depends on, difference. In social relations, these forms of symbolic and social difference are established, at least in part, through the operation of what are called classificatory systems. A classificatory system applies a principle of difference to a population in such a way as to be able to divide them and all their characteristics into at least two, opposing groups – us/them, self/other". (Woodward 1997, 29)

STIGMA AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

An individual can respond to oppression in a variety of ways. One of the strategies is to identify with it. Amma's mother is an example of this. In a patriarchal marriage, she accepted the subordination of herself as a wife and renounced her own development. The author writes: "Amma saw it as symptomatic and symbolic of her mother's oppression Mum never found herself, she told friends, she accepted her subservient position in the marriage and rotted from the inside " Evaristo 2019, 35). The subordinate role of the mother is more minutely described here:

> Mum worked eight hours a day in paid employment, raised four children, maintained the home, made sure the patriarch's dinner was on the table every night and his shirts were ironed every morning meanwhile, he was off saving the world
>
> his one domestic duty was to bring home the meat for Sunday lunch from the butcher's – a suburban kind of hunter-gatherer thing
>
> I can tell Mum's unfulfilled now we've all left home because she spends her time either cleaning it or redecorating it
>
> she's never complained about her lot, or argued with him, a sure sign she's oppressed
>
> she told me she tried to hold his hand in the early days (Evaristo 2019, 11)

Amma's father is from Ghana and came to Great Britain, where he never really became successful and felt at home. His migrant experience the author describes as traumatic: "It must have been so traumatic, to lose his home, his family, his friends, his culture, his first language, and to come to a country that didn't want him once he had children, he wanted us educated in England" (Evaristo 2019, 35).

In her book *Stigmata* the French author Hélène Cixous does not perceive stigma only in a negative way, but sees in it also a potential development of the new,

"in another reign, in another scene, that of vegetation […] the stigma is a sign of fertilization, of germination" (Cixous 1998, 14). It is just the vulnerability that stigma causes that it at the same time enables new possibilities. Thus, while vulnerability may well be an opening, a wound, a stigma, Cixous's interest lies in our *response* to this wounding: do we close it up, sewing it tightly together to avoid any possibility of contagion? Or do we allow the wound to blossom, opening ourselves to new encounters and new possibilities, however joyous or painful they might be? In this way, Cixous suggests the necessity of considering vulnerability - as porosity - as both a point of horror *and* a promise of regeneration (Cixous 1976, qtd in Boone, 86).

The female characters in *Girl, Woman, Other* deal with oppression and stigma in several ways. By expressing this, they reflect their position of inequality, which points to the way to bring about changes. They do not subscribe to the role of powerless victims but are critical to the world around them. Jazz, Amma's daughter does not accept a subordinate position: "I mean, how on earth can you be a Professor of Modern Life when your terms of reference are all male, and actually all-white (even when you're not, she refrained from adding) (Evaristo 2019, 61). In the oppressed women there is rage and readiness to fight: "I'm not a victim, don't ever treat me like a victim, my mother didn't raise me to be a victim" (Evaristo 2019, 61). Amma, the main protagonist in the novel rebels against the traditional binary understanding of gender.

> Amma
>
> the only person of colour in the whole school
>
> she demanded to know why the male parts in Shakespeare couldn't be played by women and don't even get me started on cross-racial casting, she shouted at the course director while everyone else, including the female students, stayed silent
>
> I realized I was on my own
>
> the next day I was taken aside by the school principal (Evaristo 2019, 8)

They are aware of the need to talk about their subordinate position, name it, and oppose it, especially where it has become part of them as an internalized self-oppression. An example of this is given by the author:

> Nzinga didn't miss a beat in replying that black women need to identify racism wherever we find it, especially our own internalized racism, when we're filled with such a deep self-loathing we turn against our own
>
> it struck Amma that this woman could be a formidable opponent (Evaristo 2019, 82)

Dominique, another fictional character, expresses her awareness of difference in a slightly modified manner:

> her relationship history of blonde girlfriends might be a sign of self-loathing; you have to ask yourself if you've been brainwashed by the white beauty ideal, sister, you have to work a lot harder on your black feminist politics (Evaristo 2019, 79)

Carol, on the other hand, finds support in her mother, who encourages her not to give up:

> lastly, did me and Papa come to this country for a better life only to see our daughter giving up on her opportunities and end up distributing paper hand towels for tips in nightclub toilets or concert venues, as is the fate of too many of our countrywomen?
>
> you must go back to this university in January and stop thinking everybody hates you without giving them a chance, did you even ask them? did you go up to them and say, excuse me, do you hate me?
>
> you must find the people who will want to be your friends even if they are all white people
>
> there is someone for everyone in this world
>
> you must go back and fight the battles that are your British birthright, Carol, as a true Nigerian (Evaristo 2019, 133-134)

The narration of stories in the novel is also of form political statement, rebellion and broadcasting »voices« excluded from or neglected within dominant political structures. By narrating their life stories they become visible and are being heard and thus get the power for change. By giving a positive meaning to their own identity, oppressed groups seek to seize "the powering of naming difference itself, and explore the implicit definitions as deviance in relation to a norm, which freezes some group into a self- enclosed nature "(Young 1990, 171). Diversity thus does not represent more difference as defined by the privileged group, but rather means specificity and heterogeneity. A relational understanding of difference leads to greater justice without neglecting the specificity of individual groups. Social movement asserting the positivity of group difference have established this terrain, offering an emancipatory meaning of difference to replace the old exclusionary meaning (Young 1990, 160).

The theory of intersectionalism has shown the influence of race, gender and class on the identity and experience of women, while emphasizing how the addition of individual categories increases the marginalization, exclusion and oppression of

women (Davis 2008, 70 -71). Syed (2010) asserts that researchers need to advance from using intersectionality as a framework to develop intersectionality-based theories capable of offering insights into identity (work) processes. Studies that utilize intersectionality-as-framework and intersectionality-as-theory explore how multiple interlocking identities are constructed by relative sociocultural power and privilege (Parent et al. 2013). Jones (2009, 298) in her intersectional study discussed "two identity processes at work", one focused from the outside in and the other from the inside out. Identity work encompasses how people categorize them. As a framework, intersectionality reminds researchers that "any consideration of a single identity, such as gender, must incorporate an analysis of the ways that other identities interact with, and therefore qualitatively change, the experience of gender" (Warner and Shields 2013, 804-5). Evaristo shows this through one of the protagonists, who knows that the various forms of oppression are intertwined and form various forms and degrees of underprivileged status, she says:

> yes but I'm black, Courts, which makes me more oppressed than anyone who isn't, except Waris who is the most oppressed of all of them (although don't tell her that)
>
> in five categories: black, Muslim, female, poor, hijabbed
>
> she's the only one Yazz can't tell to check her privilege (Evaristo 2019, 80)

Thus multiple social identities (such as race, gender, disability) intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reveal multiple interlocking social inequality (i.e., racism, sexism, ableism) at the macro social-structural level (Bowleg 2012).

According to Watson's (2008, 131) theory of self-identities as the individual's own notion of who s/he is becoming and social-identities as "cultural phenomena [which] relate to various social categories existing societally and are, in effect, 'inputs' into self- identities (mediated by identity work) rather than elements of self-identities as such". This kind of self-identity construction the women continuosly rebel against in the novel, one of them says:

> they go inside the building and climb the stairs as Waris continues talking, says she's learned to give as good as she gets if anyone says any of the following
>
> that terrorism is synonymous with Islam
>
> that she's oppressed and they feel her pain
>
> if anyone asks her if she's related to Osama bin Laden if anyone tells her she's responsible for them being unemployed

if anyone tells her she's a cockroach immigrant

if anyone tells her to go back to her jihadist boyfriend

if anyone asks her if she knows any suicide bombers

if anyone tells her she doesn't belong here and when are you leaving?

if anyone asks if she's going to have an arranged marriage if anyone asks her why she dresses like a nun

if anyone speaks slowly to her like she can't speak English if anyone tells her that her English is really good if anyone asks her if she's had FGM, you poor thing

if anyone says they're going to kill her and her family (Evaristo 2019, 60)

Women's narratives in Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other* Narratives function in the book's master narrative as different forms of broadcasting »voices« otherwise excluded from or neglected within the dominant political structures. They open up and address the various forms of oppression of women in the modern world that are intersecting with each other, thus reducing women's opportunities in the patriarchal world. In this world they are stigmatized because of their differences, which characterizes each of the heroines in her own way. Despite the vulnerability caused by oppression, they do not give up their Otherness, but this allows them new spaces of life to experience themselves and the world. The novel's fictional heroines thus suggest that a different world is possible without dichotomous divisions based on a patriarchal system. These women expose themselves and offer the reader the opportunity for a different perception of diversity, not based on exclusion but on acknowledging and respecting diversity. By describing the invisibility, stigmatization and the process of the othering of women, Evaristo proves that "writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures« (Cixous 2008).

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Stigma kot atribut zatiranja ali agent spremembe: Roman Bernardine Evaristo *Girl, Woman, Other*

Namen prispevka je opis procesov stigmatiziranja in zatiranja žensk kot jih prikaže avtorica Bernardine Evaristo v svoji knjigi *Girl, Woman, Other*. V knjigi nastopajo liki dvanajstih žensk, ki so si med seboj izredno različne, vendar jim je skupno to, da se vsaka na svoj način sooča s stigmatizacijo, nerazumevanjem in socialno izključenostjo. Socialna konstrukcija stigme pozroča socialne neenakosti stigmatiziranih. Skozi pripovedi stigmatiziranih in refleksijo svojega položaja stigmatizirane ženske v romanu postanejo nosilke sprememb in ne zgolj žrtve zatiranja.

Ključne besede: stigma, rasizem, zatiranje, spol, Bernardine Evaristo