
**Polyphony and the Distribution of Narrative Voice in Bernardin Evaristo's
*Girl, Woman, Other***

B. P. Logeshwari¹

Ph D Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University), Vallam, Thanjavur – 613403, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. B. R. Veeramani²

Professor & Research Advisor, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University), Vallam, Thanjavur – 613403, Tamil Nadu, India.

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Abstract:

Contemporary discussions on British fiction increasingly highlights the connection between narrative form and the politics of representation. Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) illustrates how narrative form can serve as a mode of ideological intervention. The novel's themes of intersectionality, diaspora, and gender politics have been the main focus of earlier studies, but the narrative processes that arrange these thematic issues have received very little attention. This article makes the case that Evaristo creates a polyphonic narrative structure where multiplicity functions as a structural principle as opposed to only a thematic requirement. Drawing on Susan Lanser's analysis of narrative authority and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, the study investigates how structural segmentation, syntactic fluidity, and distributed focalization decentralize authorial control within the text. The article uses close textual analysis to show how the novel's stylistic elements such as the lack of traditional quotation marks, the seamless transitions between narration and interior monologue, and the arrangement of chapters around distinct characters create a dialogic narrative field where multiple consciousnesses coexist without hierarchical subordination. Special emphasis is placed on the novel's evolving generational viewpoints and the convergence scene towards the end of the novel, where once distinct individuals inhabit a common narrative space while maintaining their ideological divergences. These tactics exemplify Bakhtin's notion of 'Unfinalizability' and demonstrate how *Girl, Woman, Other* converts polyphony into a fundamental principle of narrative structure.

Keywords: Polyphony; Narrative Voice; Bakhtinian Dialogism; Feminist Narratology; Distributed Focalization.

Introduction

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* has garnered significant critical acclaim since its release in 2019 and its subsequent receipt of the Booker Prize. Researchers have predominantly analyzed the novel through the frameworks of intersectionality, diaspora, Black British feminism, and queer temporality. These investigations have yielded significant insights into issues of identity, race, gender, and cultural affiliation. Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been directed toward the novel's narrative architecture as a structural factor influencing these thematic issues. Multiplicity has been recognized as a thematic element; nonetheless, its formal manifestation as a polyphonic narrative framework necessitates additional scrutiny.

The novel features twelve major characters whose lives intersect across generations, social backgrounds, and sexual identities. Instead of centering these viewpoints on a singular protagonist, Evaristo allocates narrative focus among various consciousnesses. Every chapter highlights a distinct experiential perspective, although these realms are interlinked within a larger narrative structure. The lack of traditional quotation marks, the seamless transition between internal monologue and external narration, and the meticulously structured chapter arrangement result in a work that defies hierarchical organization. As a result, the novel deviates from monologic narrative frameworks where character perspectives are determined by authorial power.

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing recognition that ideological configuration and narrative form are inextricably linked. It is impossible to comprehend the politics of representation without examining the structural processes that organize, privilege, and exclude voices. Questions of voice are especially important in contemporary British fiction, where narrative power has historically been centralized within hegemonic literary traditions. Evaristo's work **intervenes** at both the level of form and content. The text questions established authorship and subjectivity hierarchies by decentralizing narrative power.

Despite the fact that critics often refer to *Girl, Woman, and Other* as 'multiple' or 'inclusive,' these terms run the risk of reducing structural complexity to thematic diversity. According to Bakhtin's theory, polyphony is not the same as having a large cast of characters. It refers to a specific narratological situation where independent consciousnesses coexist

without being subservient to a single interpretive center. Therefore, the novel is approached in this study as a formal enactment of dialogic coexistence rather than just as a representation of multiplicity. This paper investigates how structural convergence, syntactic fluidity, and distributed focalization work together to produce what may be termed a polyphonic narrative structure. Narrative authority is not concentrated in one viewpoint in this form. Rather, the novel divides narrative focus among several independent consciousnesses, enabling each character to express a distinct ideological stance. Polyphonic architecture denotes a narrative design wherein multiple voices coexist independently, without yielding to a singular authorial perspective.

The theory of polyphony developed by Mikhail Bakhtin offers a useful framework for comprehending this structural arrangement. According to Bakhtin, a polyphonic novel is one in which distinct voices coexist without being dominated by a single ideological center. Even though Bakhtin expands on this idea by analyzing Dostoevsky, the paradigm is nevertheless applicable to modern literature and transcends its initial setting. The plurality of voices in *Girl, Woman, Other* represents more than just societal diversity. It functions as a narrative principle that arranges the text. The novel creates a dialogic field where nobody's viewpoint is given ultimate authority.

This article makes the case that *Girl, Woman, Other* creates a kind of collective subjectivity through the development of a polyphonic narrative structure. Evaristo turns multiplicity into a structural logic through fractured structure, scattered focalization, and the deliberate convergence of characters in the concluding portions. The novel formally practices coexistence rather than merely portraying a variety of identities. This study shows that polyphony serves as the primary organizing principle of the text by analyzing the relationship between narrative voice, structural segmentation, and collective convergence.

Form and ideology are increasingly understood as inextricably linked in contemporary narratological discussions. The structuring of perspective determines whose experience gains interpretive legitimacy and which stays peripheral. Narrative architecture functions as a mode of epistemological distribution in this way. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze Evaristo's formal tactics as both structural intervention and stylistic innovation. The novel challenges established hierarchies of literary authority by distributing narrative space among several consciousnesses and decentralizing authorial supremacy. The current study argues that polyphony functions here as a ruling structural logic rather than as descriptive plurality through attentive textual reading informed by feminist narratology and Bakhtinian dialogism.

Literature Review

Girl, Woman, Other has garnered consistent scholarly interest in feminist, postcolonial, and contemporary British literature studies since its release in 2019. The novel's discussion of intersectionality, diaspora, and gender politics is highlighted in much of this criticism. The work is widely acknowledged by academics as a major intervention in modern depictions of Black British femininity. These methods have improved understanding of the novel's engagement with national literary discourse as well as its socio-political importance. However, there has been relatively little sustained attention paid to the narrative architecture that formalizes these thematic concerns.

A considerable body of scholarship examines the novel using intersectional frameworks based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal work. Critics argue that Evaristo depicts intersecting systems of racial, gendered, and class-based marginalisation in contemporary Britain. The work is frequently interpreted as a reinterpretation of womanhood that emphasizes diversity rather than essentialism. These analyses effectively demonstrate how the book rejects homogenized feminist narratives and instead emphasizes diverse lived realities. Nonetheless, such readings tend to view narrative multiplicity as evidence of ideological variation rather than a constructive narrative principle. The formal organization of narrative voice receives less sustained attention than the identities it represents.

Other researchers investigate how the novel engages with time and diasporic memory. Grosch's exploration of queer and West African temporalities highlights the text's rejection of linear narrative progression and normative chronologies. This approach shows how temporal disruption facilitates the expression of alternate histories by emphasizing cyclical and layered temporality. In a similar vein, research on Black British feminist lineage places the novel in a larger context of cultural activism and theatrical practice. These interpretations highlight the novel's engagement with historical movements and its intergenerational consciousness. These contributions broaden the scope of interpretation, although they are more concerned with thematic temporality and historical location than with narrative structure.

Polyphony is specifically mentioned by several critics. Abdulkadhim describes the novel's portrayal of feminist diversity as polyphonic. Husain suggests that the narrative form of the text emphasizes interconnected subjectivities through relational ontology. These studies recognize plurality as a key component of the design of the novel. Nevertheless, they fail to distinguish between polyphony as a particular narratological structure characterized by the decentralization of authorial authority and polyphony as thematic multiplicity.

Narrative multiplicity is often seen as a reflection of the diverse social fabric of modern Britain in more general themes of multiculturalism and diaspora. Plurality is seen as representational content in these readings. The distribution of narrative authority throughout the text's divided chapters and shifting focalizations is still unexplored. The mechanisms by which consciousness is maintained and decentralized without hierarchical resolution have not been systematically theorized.

This study addresses that gap by emphasizing polyphony as a structural principle rather than a descriptive term. By investigating how narrative voice is assigned, repositioned, and sustained among autonomous consciousnesses, this study contends that multiplicity operates not just at the representational level but also at the level of narrative architecture.

Theoretical Framework

Polyphony, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, serves as the study's theoretical foundation for the present study. Bakhtin describes the polyphonic novel as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin 6). Characters in such a structure are not subsumed under a single ideological framework. Instead, each voice maintains its autonomy and participates in a dialogic environment in which perspectives coexist without hierarchical absorption.

Bakhtin separates this approach from monologic fiction, in which "the author combines in his person a direct and fully competent ideological power to mean" (Bakhtin 82). In monologic narrative, character consciousness serves as an object of authorial interpretation. The author reconciles ideological differences and stabilizes meaning. In contrast, in a polyphonic novel "the author retains for himself no essential 'surplus' of meaning and enters on an equal footing with Raskolnikov into the great dialogue of the novel as a whole" (Bakhtin 75). Domination does not follow from authoritative presence. The author arranges voices without completing them.

This refusal of closure stems from Bakhtin's concept of openness of the character consciousness (Unfinalizability). According to him, "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken" (Bakhtin 166). Characters in a polyphonic structure are subject to reinterpretation. Their ideological convictions are not reinforced by narrative judgment. Meaning remains dialogic rather than conclusive.

Dialogism further clarifies this principle even more. Bakhtin emphasizes the dialogic nature of discourse, arguing that "the single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic

human life is the open-ended dialogue” (Bakhtin 293). Language is fundamentally relational. Every utterance arises in response to prior conversation and anticipates future responses. Voices engage in a polyphonic narrative without collapsing into synthesis. Meaning is produced through dialogic interaction rather than centralized authority.

Susan Lanser's *Fictions of Authority* provides critical insight into the debate over narrative authority. Lanser argues that " the narrator's grammatical gender is a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices" (Lanser 6). This suggests that narrative voice is influenced by ideological frameworks rather than operating as an impartial conduit. Authority is not a neutral concept; rather, it is enmeshed in discursive frameworks. She further suggests that,

The act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it-like my own act of writing a scholarly book and seeking to publish it-is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence. (Lanser 7)

This indicates that narrative authority is actively constructed rather than passively given. As a result, narrative perspective influences how interpretive power is distributed within the text. When authority is centralized, meaning appears to be stable. When it is diffused, understanding becomes collaborative and dialogical.

Girl, Woman, Other brings Bakhtin's polyphony and Lanser's theory of narrative authority together. Evaristo creates a narrative structure in which autonomous consciousnesses coexist without a final closure. Authority flows rather than consolidating. Polyphony serves as a formal redistribution of narrative authority, rather than just thematic variation.

Polyphonic Architecture and Distributed Consciousness

Evaristo rejects conventional narrative hierarchy from the beginning of the work, establishing its polyphonic structure. The text starts without quotation marks or explanatory frames: “Amma / is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her city” (Evaristo 9). The visual separation of the proper name emphasizes subjectivity before descriptive context is provided. There is no intermediary narrator who introduces Amma with evaluative comments. Instead, the narrative enters her perceptual field. This structural decision embodies Bakhtin's definition of "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 6). The authorial presence facilitates but does not dominate. Rather than offering hierarchical explanation, meaning develops from the autonomy of her perspective.

The novel further undermines monologic control by allowing fluid temporal mobility. The narrative moves from present action to recollection without transitional

framing: "she thinks back to when she started out in theatre" (Evaristo 9). The movement is sudden and unmarked. Associative recollection replaces a chronological sequence. Amma's remembrance of militant activity reflects her ideological conviction: "they believed in public, disruptive, and downright annoying" (Evaristo 9). The narrator does not use irony in the phrase "downright annoying." The evaluative language is part of Amma's historical consciousness. Bakhtin suggests that authorial presence does not erase character autonomy. Authorial orchestration does not imply ideological correction. The dialogic area of the text preserves the character's worldview.

Internal dialogism emerges more clearly during self-interrogation. Prior to her theatrical debut, Amma anticipated critical backlash:

what if she's slated by the critics? dismissed with a consensus of one-star reviews, what was the great National thinking allowing this rubbishy impostor into the building? (Evaristo 11).

The absence of quotation marks blurs the distinction between narration and internal monologue. Competing evaluative voices share the same syntactic flow. Anxiety and defiance coexist without resolution. She quickly counters herself: "Oh shut up, Amma, you're a veteran battle-axe, remember?" (Evaristo 12). The self-address portrays consciousness as internally dialogic. Bakhtin's concept of the openness of character is applicable here. "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world," according to him; "the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken" (Bakhtin 166). Amma's subjectivity remains open. It is not sealed with narrative judgment. The narrative maintains tension rather than resolving it.

Polyphony is amplified through structural segmentation. The abrupt transition to "Yazz" (Evaristo 38) indicates a shift in narrative authority. There is no direct narrative linkage between the mother and daughter. Focalization moves without hierarchy. Yazz's generational critique is forcefully articulated: "it all means that the older generation has RUINED EVERYTHING, and her generation is doooooomed" (Evaristo 39). The typographic exaggeration visually conveys ideological urgency. The narrative does not undermine or mock this discourse. Instead, it provides equal validity. Bakhtin distinguishes polyphony from the monologic novel, in which "all confirmed ideas are merged in the unity of the author's seeing and representing consciousness" (Bakhtin 82). In Evaristo's structure, no single voice serves as the ultimate authority. Yazz's critique does not supersede or subordinate Amma's point of view. Authority circulates across generational lines.

This redistribution of perspective aligns with Lanser's view of narrative authority as constructed through discourse. A steady narrative center does not hold interpretive power; rather, it emerges through relational positioning. When Yazz questions her father: "tell me, are you God now, Dad? I mean officially?" (Evaristo 44) - she undermines Roland's intellectual self-fashioning. The narrative does not use explanatory comments to restore paternal authority. Instead, it sustains ideological debate. Meaning emerges through dialogic interaction rather than hierarchical control.

Syntactic design supports the redistribution of voice. Evaristo's deliberate lack of traditional punctuation disrupts the barrier between narration and cognition. The absence of quotation marks makes it difficult to distinguish between speech and narrative, weakening the hierarchical differences between narrator and character. This stylistic decision opposes what Bakhtin terms the consolidation of "a single consciousness and a single point of view" (Bakhtin 82). The text permits speech to flow into narrative exposition rather than showing dialogue as contained and governed by a broad narratorial frame. The outcome is structural democratization rather than stylistic quirkiness. Voices move throughout a common textual space rather than being typographically contained. Thus, the novel shows that narrative authority is inextricably linked to its formal articulation by converting grammatical form into ideological practice.

Evaristo develops what could be called diffused consciousness throughout several chapters. Every section maintains autonomy while reorienting narrative attention. Within a cohesive conceptual framework, characters are not reduced to thematic symbols. Rather, they express distinct stances influenced by sexual orientation, generation, race, and class. According to Bakhtin, the text opposes "a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness" (Bakhtin 49). Autonomous subjectivities share narrative authority. As a result, polyphony functions as structural redistribution rather than just thematic multiplicity.

This redistribution of narrative authority is further reinforced by the division of chapters. The transitions between each phase are purposefully unmediated, but each is organized around a unique focalizing consciousness. There isn't a narratorial synopsis that ranks or assesses earlier viewpoints. The novel instead makes use of juxtaposition. Adjacency, as opposed to criticism, creates meaning. This structural arrangement results in what could be called horizontal narration. Instead of standing beneath a dominant interpretative frame, voices stand next to each other. Monologic conventions that rely on a dominant perspective for narrative coherence are directly challenged by such horizontal

alignment. Coherence arises dialogically from the interaction of independent portions of Evaristo's text. The end effect is relational plurality rather than fragmentation.

Temporality, Convergence, and the Refusal of Synthesis

This decentralization is reinforced by temporal fluidity. Retrospective revision frequently disrupts linear chronology. This instability is exemplified by Amma's recollection of her mother: "Mum never found herself, she told friends, she accepted her subservient position in the marriage and rotted from the inside" (Evaristo 33). "rooted from the inside" is an evaluative force that conveys youthful ideological confidence. However, the story then casts doubt on this conclusion: "she had been a selfish, stupid brat, now it was too late" (Evaristo 34). Reinterpretation emerges from temporal distance. Consciousness does not remain fixed but evolves. The character is not finalized within her earlier perspective. This structural openness reflects Bakhtin's idea that character remains open to further dialogic development.

Polyphony is extended into spatial form in the novel's final convergence scene. Previously separated consciousness come together in a common setting for the after-party. However, ideological unity does not result from physical proximity. Voices overlap but do not blend together. Different viewpoints continue to exist. There is neither narrative closure nor synthesis at the end of the scene. It stages coexistence instead. Lanser argues that "the narrator's grammatical gender is a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices" (Lanser 5). And this tension is spatially dramatized in the after-party. Rather of being imposed from above, authority is negotiated through interaction.

Spatial logic is also reconfigured in the convergence scene. Characters in the novel occupy different narrative spaces that are characterized by ideological and generational division. The after-party collapses spatial fragmentation without eliminating ideological differences. The gathering functions as a transient dialogic space where consciousnesses meet without synthesis. No single character resolves conflict through a conclusive speech. No narrative commentary steps in to explain the moment as a whole. The structural lack of resolution supports Bakhtin's claim that "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world" (Bakhtin 166). Co-presence replaces consensus. As a result, the novel envisions community as ongoing plurality rather than uniformity.

The rejection of synthesis is especially important in a narrative concerned with intersectional identity. A conventional realist structure might culminate in reconciliation or ideological clarification. Evaristo resists this trajectory. The novel maintains multiplicity as a continuous situation rather than offering interpretive closure. The collective moment is kept open to more discussion because there is no authorial summation. In this way, the

convergence scene does not conclude the narrative but extends its dialogic horizon. Beyond the page, s to exist, allowing readers to take part in the incomplete negotiation of meaning. Crucially, difference cannot be eliminated by convergence. Personal concerns, political differences, and generational conflicts continue to exist. Multiplicity is affirmed without being diminished by the structural gathering. According to Bakhtin, the novel rejects closure. The final word has not yet been said. Evaristo adapts polyphony to a modern setting characterized by intersectional complexity by maintaining dialogic tension even during times of collective assembly. The redistribution of narrative voice becomes both an aesthetic strategy and a political intervention. Polyphony serves as the structuring logic of narrative form rather than decorative multiplicity.

Conclusion

According to this study, *Girl, Woman, Other* constructs a polyphonic narrative structure that transforms multiplicity into a structural principle. Using Lanser's analysis of narrative authority and Bakhtin's idea of polyphony, the paper has shown how Evaristo decentralizes authorial control and sustains autonomous consciousnesses across segmented chapters. The narrative does more than only depict a range of identities. In order to prevent any one viewpoint from achieving semantic dominance, it redistributes narrative legitimacy. The text avoids monologic closure through scattered focalization, syntactic flexibility, and nonlinear temporal movement. Bakhtin's idea of Unfinalizability is demonstrated by the characters' continued ideological openness. Even the after-party's structural convergence fails to combine differences into a cohesive whole. Rather, coexistence continues without a definitive conclusion. Instead of forming a cohesive interpretive framework, authority circulates across racial, ideological, and generational boundaries, resulting in a dialogic field rather than a unified framework.

The narrative technique used by Evaristo has wider ramifications for modern fiction. The novel questions established literary hierarchies that have traditionally favored unique viewpoints by rearranging narrative authority. Polyphony turns into a method of epistemic reorientation as well as an aesthetic strategy. The text shows that individual autonomy can be preserved while constructing group subjectivity. In this way, *Girl, Woman, Other* demonstrates how narrative form itself can enact social diversity by applying Bakhtinian theory to Black British writing in the twenty-first century. Here, polyphony is neither ornamentation nor metaphor. The novel uses structural logic to arrange experience, think, and rethink literary authority.

This study has shown the ongoing significance of polyphony for contemporary fiction by placing Evaristo's story inside Bakhtin's theoretical framework. At the same time, the novel reworks Bakhtinian concepts by embedding dialogism within intersectional

consciousness. Here, narrative diversity represents both historical necessity and artistic experimentation. *Girl, Woman, Other* shows how literary form can effect social change by spreading narrative authority among underrepresented voices. Polyphony turns into an ethical and methodical approach. In the end, the text affirms that narrative can sustain plurality without collapsing into fragmentation, and that collective subjectivity does not require unity.

Future research may extend this analysis by examining how polyphonic narrative structures operate in other works of contemporary fiction. Comparative analyses of authors like Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo, or her previous works could shed further light on how narrative multiplicity serves in 21st-century writing as a political intervention as well as an artistic tactic.

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