



Are We All 'Bad Feminists'? An Exploration of Feminist Ideologies, Privilege,
Performance and Difference in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bernardine Evaristo's
Girl, Woman, Other

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My mother Wendy, who taught me to how to be a 'bad feminist', encouraged me to go to university and bought me *White Teeth* for my 21st birthday.

My academic partner in crime, Sam.

Abstract

In her 2012 essay compilation, *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay explores a number of complexities and contradictions experienced by women who identify as feminist, but do not adhere to societal norms regarding 'right' or 'wrong' performances of both feminist identity and gender roles. Historically, mainstream feminism has tended to regard women as a monolithic group, neglecting to consider intersectionality and associated concepts of privilege, performance and difference. Consequently, it has been criticised for embodying the assumptions of white feminism, which presupposes that women, when discussed collectively, are Anglo-American, white, heterosexual and middle-class. Is there a 'right' way to be a feminist? If so, does this neglect to understand and celebrate differences, including those relating to ethnicity, culture, class, sexuality and gender? If we are individual, experiencing unique forms of oppression, does this mean that if we are feminists, we are all 'bad feminists'?

This dissertation investigates how the feminist ideologies of white and Black feminism, along with notions of privilege, performance, and difference, are depicted and critiqued in two contemporary novels authored by British women of colour: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. Through a comparative analysis, this study explores the nuanced portrayals of identity, race, class, sexuality and gender through key female characters, and demonstrates how feminist theories, such as liberal, radical, psychoanalytical, lesbian and intersectional feminism are both represented and assessed.

Findings reveal that both Smith and Evaristo depict feminism as an intersectional, multifaceted ideology, which is more accurately described in the plural, as 'feminisms'. Contradictions and tensions are identified which occur due to differences relating to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and privilege, which mean it is impossible to classify women as a homogeneous group. Therefore, in relation to Gay's term, findings show that we are all 'bad feminists'.

This study thus contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary feminist discourse in literature, revealing how authors navigate the concept 'bad feminist'.

Are We All 'Bad Feminists'? An Exploration of Feminist Ideologies, Privilege, Performance and Difference in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

Introduction - What Is a 'Bad Feminist'?

In her seminal work, Roxane Gay identifies as a 'bad feminist'.¹ She uses the term with ironic intent, to argue against feminist uniformity, through a consideration of the enormity of individual and collective differences. Gay explains that an individual may self-identify as a feminist, whilst simultaneously participating in behaviours that contradict this identity, such as demonstrating ambivalence towards certain feminist principles or enjoying problematic media that misappropriates women. Whilst integral to feminist discussions, the importance of intersectionality has been disregarded somewhat until recently, in favour of what Gay describes as an 'essential feminism'.² When Gay refers to herself as a 'bad feminist' this is a reaction to this notion, which she claims imposes 'proper feminist rules'³ that specifically relate to white, middle-class, heterosexual women, and are therefore associated with both liberal and white feminism. Therefore, she demonstrates that both feminisms and feminists can be flawed. She elaborates:

I openly embrace the label of bad feminist...I am not as well read in key feminist texts as I would like to be. I have certain ...interests and personality traits and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, but I am still a feminist.⁴

¹Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (Great Britain: Corsair, 2014), p. x. Also to note, as this dissertation refers to literature published in both the UK and the USA, references and quotations will use both UK and American English, dependent on the text referenced.

² As Jane Coaston explains, the term **intersectionality** 'was coined in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap. "Intersectionality" has, in a sense, gone viral over the past half-decade, resulting in a backlash from the right'. Jane Coaston, 'The Intersectionality Wars,' *Vox*, 2019 <<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>> [accessed 22 July 2024]. Gay describes essential feminism as 'the notion that there are right and wrong ways of doing feminism' and that there are 'consequences for doing feminism wrong'. She adds that 'the movement has been warped by misconception' and that 'even people who should know better have bought into this essential image'. This could also be described as an 'essentialist' view. Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. 304.

³ Ibid, p. 304.

⁴ Ibid, pp. x–xi.

Gay invites the reader to reflect on the concept of difference, emphasising its relevance at both group and personal levels.⁵ In addition, she undertakes a thorough exploration of the landscape of intersectionality, to understand how various forms of oppression, such as racism, classism and sexism can overlap, impacting women in many ways.

I will explore examples of 'bad feminism'⁶ in two works of contemporary British literary fiction written by women: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. I will assess how through a cast of 'bad feminist' characters, Smith and Evaristo critique a range of ideologies, drawing particular attention to white and Black feminism.⁷ From an intersectional perspective, I will evaluate representations of privilege, recognising different forms and how they are used, along with critically examining how privilege can be subject to change.⁸ I will then look at performance, focusing on the idea that gender is a social construct and that

⁵ Theorists, critics, and authors alike, have identified conflict in relation definitions of feminism, along with highlighting major differences between each wave. As Sara M. Evans states, 'by the mid-1970s the label "women's liberation" was pretty much gone, superseded by "radical feminist", "socialist feminist", "lesbian feminist", "womanist" or just "feminist"'. Sara M. Evans, 'Women's Liberation - Seeing The Revolution Clearly', in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun, 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 26- 31, p. 26.

⁶ Feminist movements and their associated theories have evolved significantly and are both complex and intertwined in nature. Generally, it has been argued that the concept of feminism can be aligned to four distinct waves. Haradhan Mohajan provides an overview of the waves as follows: 'the first wave of feminism arises in the United States and Europe during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and concerns with achieving voting rights, equal opportunities, and other legal rights of women. Second wave feminism has been initiated by both white and non-white women of Western countries as well as in developing countries, starts in the 1960s and ends in the 1990s. It works for equal education and employment opportunities, maternity leave, birth control and abortion rights, etc.; and fights against domestic violence issues, marital rape issues, sexual harassment and rape, etc. Third wave of feminism presents a dynamic critique to the previous feminist political trends, and extends from the 1990s to 2000s. In this movement, women find themselves as strong and rebellious, and working women in various occupations are not subjected to a sexist patriarchy. Fourth wave feminism starts around 2012, which offers a new feminism that depends on online social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.'. Haradhan Mohajan, 'Four Waves Of Feminism: A Blessing For Global Humanity', *Studies In Social Sciences & Humanities*, 1.2 (2022), 1-8 (p. 1,2) <<https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/114328/>> [accessed 29 March 2024].

⁷ It can be assumed with a degree of confidence that equality and rights for women have improved significantly since Mary Wollstonecraft perhaps unknowingly, pioneered feminism. As Valerie Sanders notes Wollstonecraft 'was the first to issue an outspoken, rallying cry to middle-class women, especially mothers, as major influences on society'. She notes that Wollstonecraft is 'mainly concerned with the way society constructs femininity, especially through its inadequate, misdirected education of young girls'. She adds that by the end of the nineteenth century 'the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism' had just begun to be used'. Valerie Sanders, 'First Wave Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion To Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 16-28, p. 16. I use the capitalised term when referring to 'Black feminism' as this it is mainly referenced in the literature I have reviewed. Similarly, I use 'white feminism' without capitalisation, as this is how the term generally represented.

⁸ Gay describes privilege as 'a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage or favor'. She states that different forms of privilege include racial, gender (and identity), heterosexual, economic, able-bodied, educational and religious. Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. 16.

society stipulates a correct way to be a woman, or as Gay explains, 'to perform their gender'.⁹ Finally, I will examine the concept of difference as it relates to sexuality and gender, emphasising representations of diversity, the deconstruction of stereotypes and the introduction of emerging trans-feminist and non-binary discourses.

White Teeth and *Girl, Woman, Other* are examples of contemporary British literary fiction, written by women from mixed ethnic backgrounds. Evaristo encourages the use of the terms 'women of colour' and more specifically 'black British womxn'¹⁰ to describe women writers.¹¹ Significantly, the texts are set against the backdrop of the city, London, providing feminist perspectives through a multi-cultural lens, which can essentially be described as British. Though, as Evaristo explains, for many, 'the concept of "black British" was considered a contradiction in terms during [my] childhood',¹² which may in part, explain her preference for the use of the alternative labels outlined above.

As Gay rather boldly declares, 'the term "women's fiction" is so wildly vague it is mostly useless'.¹³ It can be assumed therefore, that black women's fiction is equally hard to define or categorise, through assumptions based simply on race and/or ethnicity. It is worth noting that texts written by women of colour, particularly in the UK, appear to have received little critical acclaim until recently.¹⁴ Significant works by African American women include *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's *The*

⁹ Gay also describes this as 'the ways in which women, knowingly or unknowingly perform femininity'. Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. 72.

¹⁰ See article which references the terms 'Black British' and 'womxn'. 'Womxn' is a term used particularly within intersectional feminism to avoid sexism as it relates to 'man' or 'men' and to promote inclusivity in relation to trans women and those who identify as non-binary'. Words of Colour, 'Bernardine Evaristo Selects Her Top 20 Recently Published Black Womxn Writers For International Women's Day', *Words Of Colour*, 2020 <<https://wordsofcolour.co.uk/bernardine-evaristo-top-20-black-womxn-writers/>> [accessed 4 August 2024].

¹¹ She is described as a 'longstanding advocate for the inclusion of writers of colour, Bernardine founded the Brunel International African Poetry Prize in 2012 and The Complete Works poets development scheme in 2007'. National Centre For Writing, 'Bernardine Evaristo', *National Centre For Writing | NCW*, p. 3 <<https://nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/international-literature-showcase/bernardine-evaristo/>> [accessed 22 July 2024].

¹² Bernardine Evaristo, *Manifesto On Never Giving Up* (UK: Hamish Hamilton, 2021), p. 5.

¹³ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. 172.

¹⁴ As Marian Ortega notes 'Audre Lorde painfully brings to light the ignorance white women have shown about women of color in an open letter to Mary Daly, where she asks Daly if she has really read the work of women of color'. In her correspondence with Daly, an American radical feminist and theologian, Lorde actively seeks to engage in a feminist dialogue which promotes greater diversity and intersectionality, whilst appreciating Daly's pioneering work within the sphere of feminism. Mariana Ortega, 'Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism And Women Of Color', *Hypatia*, 21.3 (2006), pp. 56–74 (p. 57) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810951>> [accessed 25 August 2023].

Color Purple. From a British perspective, Smith and Evaristo are predominantly referenced, suggesting a long period of under-representation of feminist writing by women of colour. Evaristo was the first woman of colour to be awarded the Booker Prize in 2019, however, this accomplishment was shared with Margaret Atwood. It could therefore, be argued that Evaristo's distinct contributions have been somewhat undervalued.¹⁵ Pascal Niklas states that when 'looking for a female voice in contemporary British literature, Zadie Smith is one of the more obvious choices though she is not at all a feminist author'.¹⁶ My opinion differs, as a detailed examination of *White Teeth* clearly identifies a number of feminist arguments.

¹⁵ As Alison Flood explains in her 2019 article in 'The Guardian': 'The Booker prize judges' decision to break the rules and jointly award the prize to Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo has been criticised, with detractors pointing out that the first black woman ever to win Britain's most prestigious literary award has had to share it – while receiving half the usual money'. Alison Flood, 'Backlash After Booker Awards Prize To Two Authors', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2019, section Books.
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/15/bernardine-evaristo-margaret-atwood-share-booker-prize-award>>

¹⁶ Pascal Nicklas, 'The Feminine Voice Of Zadie Smith', *Anglistik*, 24.1 (2013), pp. 125–35 (p. 125)
<<https://angl.winter-verlag.de/article/ANGL/2013/1/12>> [accessed 26 August 2024].

White and Black Feminisms

White Teeth was published in January 2000, coinciding with the rise of third wave feminist ideologies.¹⁷ Media representations included Riot Grrrls in the US and ladette culture, alongside girl-power in the United Kingdom.¹⁸ Initially, the narrative of *White Teeth* is set in the 1970s, though the timeline fluctuates, concluding at the time of writing.

R. Claire Snyder argues that third wave feminism 'rejects grand narratives' opting for a 'dynamic and welcoming coalition' rather than striving for 'unity'.¹⁹ Smith presents diverse narratives, which help the reader navigate societal changes in relation to both gender roles and equality, within a multi-cultural society. She outlines contemporary perspectives that relate to Black feminism and intersectionality, reflective of both Gay, and Angela Y. Davis,²⁰ who states:

I rarely talk about feminism in the singular. I talk about feminisms. And, even when I myself refused to identify with feminism, I realized that it was a certain kind of

¹⁷ Ortega draws attention to continuing tensions within third-wave feminism, particularly with regards to women of colour. As she notes 'over and over we hear that this group wants to make sure that the voices of those who are at the margin and the voices of women of color are heard. "We need to give space to their voices," say the concerned, well-meaning Third Wave feminists-until a light-skinned woman raises her hand and politely says, "You keep talking about women of color as if we were not here"'. Ortega, *Being Lovingly...*, p. 57.

¹⁸ As Lise Shapiro Sanders explains 'third wave feminists...see their work as founded on second-wave principles, yet distinguished by certain cultural and political differences'. These include - wage discrimination, access to education, domestic violence, eating disorders, globalisation, racism and classism. Lise Shapiro Sanders, "'Feminists Love A Utopia'", in *Third Wave Feminism - A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Mumford (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), pp.3-15, p. 5.

¹⁹ She adds that 'third-wave feminism makes three important tactical moves that respond to a series of theoretical problems within the second wave. First, in response to the collapse of the category of "women," the third wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multi perspectival version of feminism. Second, as a consequence of the rise of postmodernism, third-wavers embrace multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification. Finally, in response to the divisiveness of the sex wars, third-wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political'. R. Claire Snyder, 'What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay', *Signs*, 34.1 (2008), pp. 175–96 (pp. 175–76), doi:10.1086/588436.

²⁰ As Bernice McNair Barnett explains 'in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the challenges, critiques, theorizing, research, and teaching by Angela Davis and other racial ethnic women pioneers generated a new field of recognized scholarly inquiry often referred to as "integrative race, gender and class studies". This new field provided visibility to and analysis of the "multiple" "intersections" and "simultaneity" of race, gender and class relations of power, privilege, oppression, and domination'. Bernice McNair Barnett, 'Angela Davis And Women, Race, & Class: A Pioneer In Integrative RGC Studies', *Race, Gender & Class*, 10.3 (2003), pp. 9–22 (p. 16) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41675085>> [accessed 20 October 2024].

feminism . . . It was a feminism of those women who weren't really concerned with equality for all women...²¹

As bell hooks explains, 'feminists are made, not born', and in simple terms, seek gender equality through challenging 'sexism, exploitation, and oppression'.²²

Although one might contend that whilst Smith, with the exception of Neena and perhaps Joyce Chalfen, does not explicitly label her characters feminist, she certainly employs them to express feminist views and explore feminist themes.²³ Specifically, she utilises Clara to comment on Black and intersectional feminism and challenge dominant feminist ideologies. I argue here that she critiques feminisms that reflect the experiences of white women, at the expense of women of colour.

Evaristo in *Girl, Woman, Other*, distinctly evaluates feminisms prior and up to, those of the fourth wave. She critically examines the relationship between second wave and white feminism, along with offering insights into Black feminism, emphasising the significance of intersectionality. Evaristo employs a range of both prominent and secondary characters of colour, and similarly to Smith, one female protagonist, Penelope Halifax, who, at least initially, presents as white British.

Sara M. Evans argues that second wave feminism neglects intersectionality and multiple layers of oppression.²⁴ Until the 1980s, feminist theories and widely recognised texts were mostly authored by middle-class white Anglo-American

²¹ Interview with Davis on August 5th, 2019, Oral History Interview, National Museum of African American History and Culture. Max Peterson, 'The Revolutionary Practice Of Black feminisms', National Museum Of African American History And Culture <<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/revolutionary-practice-black-feminisms>>

²² bell hooks, *Feminism Is For Everybody* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 7.

²³ Shirley Matile Ogletree Paulette Diaz and Vincent Padilla's 2017 study explores feminist self-identification and its correlation with feminist views and beliefs, amongst Texan students. They found that some women do not identify as feminists due to negative connotations based on stereotypes, but that others have been encouraged to do so by influencers who have declared themselves feminist, such as Miley Cyrus. Shirley Matile Ogletree, Paulette Diaz, and Vincent Padilla, 'What Is Feminism? College Students' Definitions and Correlates', *Current Psychology*, 38.6 (2019), pp. 1576–89, doi:10.1007/s12144-017-9718-1.

²⁴ She states that 'in the 1960s and 1970s, there really was not a language with which to describe the simultaneity of race, class, and gender', She adds that 'women of color, quite rightly, often felt that their insistence on their double and triple jeopardy fell on deaf ears'. Sara M. Evans, *Women's Liberation...*, p. 28.

women with privilege.²⁵ Furthermore, white, second wave²⁶ and mainstream feminism²⁷ are often regarded synonymously. White feminism extends beyond the confines of race or ethnicity. It can be explained as a lack of understanding and/or acceptance of privilege; aligned to a set of ideals and concerns representing the majority and excluding the minority. In *Against White Feminism*, Rafia Zakaria explains that:

A white feminist is someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played, and continue to play, in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas and beliefs as those of all feminism and all feminists. You do not have to be white to be a white feminist. It is also perfectly possible to be white and not be a white feminist.²⁸

Gay associates white feminism with essentialist perspectives, which are dependent on the assumption of shared experiences and the homogeneity of women.²⁹ Like Gay, Smith and Evaristo question this notion, by introducing 'bad feminist' characters, with concurring intersections that leave them susceptible to various forms of oppression, which make their experiences unique. Conventional stereotypes based on essentialist perspectives are contested in the novels, through the depiction of women who can be considered different due to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class and educational status. Consequently, I contend that both Smith and Evaristo offer a cast

²⁵ Theory has been perceived to belong to the privilege of the academy, which lacks inclusivity and can be said to be embedded in patriarchy. It is worthy to note that women (born by sex) were excluded from universities in the UK, in some cases up until as recently as the 1960s. It is even more important to consider that women of colour were at this time, substantially under-represented. The decision was made to admit women to Lampeter in 1965, and the first cohort of female graduated in 1968. The Pembrokeshire Herald 'UWTSd Celebrates First Women Graduates', *The Pembrokeshire Herald*, 2018 <<https://pembrokeshire-herald.com/46364/uwtsd-celebrates-first-women-graduates/>>

²⁶ As Evans argues 'theoretical attention to Second Wave feminism emerged first among literary and social science scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, but their interest was more in the development of theory than on movement activism. It was these academy-based theorists who fixed on the perception of 1970s Second wave feminists as white, middle-class, self-interested and anti-sex'. Evans, *Women's Liberation...*, p. 27.

²⁷ Sue Thornham provides a relevant overview of second-wave feminist discussion in 'Second Wave Feminism' commenting on how it differs with old (first-wave) ideas. She notes that old feminism was considered 'individualist and reformist' whilst second-wave feminism was 'collective and revolutionary'. Sue Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion To Feminism And Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 29-42, p. 29.

²⁸ Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism* (Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2021), p. ix.

²⁹ Rosemary Hunter explains that 'in the English speaking first world, mainstream 'liberal', 'radical', 'cultural' and 'socialist' feminisms have argued that there are certain experiences shared by all women' that differentiate 'women from men'. She adds that 'Black, Third World and lesbian feminisms' reject this notion. Rosemary Hunter, 'Deconstructing The Subjects Of Feminism: The Essentialism Debate In Feminist Theory And Practice', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 1996, p. 135 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13200968.1996.11077198>> [accessed 21 October 2024].

of characters that accurately represent the diverse demographic of London, through an intersectional feminist lens which critiques both white and essentialist viewpoints.³⁰

In addition, Smith and Evaristo make direct references to Betty Friedan's formative text, *The Feminine Mystique*.³¹ Whilst this work has traditionally been regarded as innovative in terms of feminist discourse, it can also be seen to perpetuate conventional ideas associated with white feminism and the concept of female solidarity. This suggests an essentialist perspective which reinforces homogeneity. Friedan asks 'why...so many American wives suffered this nameless aching dissatisfaction for so many years, each one thinking she was alone'?³² She presupposes women, when referred to collectively, are predominantly white, married, middle-class, heterosexual and privileged.³³

Friedan makes use of the term the 'feminine mystique' to challenge patriarchal perspectives prevalent in Anglo-American society, which assume women can achieve complete fulfilment through domestic responsibilities, marriage, sexual

³⁰ Both Smith and Evaristo make use of language representative of the intersections they depict, including colloquialisms, accents and patois as appropriate. Evaristo, abandons traditional rules regarding grammar and formatting. She tells the story in a spoken narrative on the page, which is representative of everyday language and speech patterns.

³¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010). Criticism which can be considered a reaction to the white feminist model includes: *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde and Angela Y. Davis's *Women, Race And Class*. Smith and Evaristo extend their use of intertextuality to further explore feminist dialogues: Evaristo references the work of Grace Nichols *and Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*; both Smith and Evaristo directly mention the text *The Well of Loneliness*. Evaristo's Spirit Moon community can be argued to draw some parallels with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, albeit for parodic effect. As Alex Goody explains 'ostensibly framed as an adventure story, Gilman's novel addresses...feminist ideas...including patriarchal attitudes to women, the structure and economics of the family, marriage and the public role of women. *Herland* has also garnered attention from critics interested in environmental and ecological issues'. Alex Goody, 'Introduction', in *Herland* (Great Britain: Start Publishing LLC, 2024), p. 1.

³² Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 21.

³³ Judith Butler talks about the definition of 'women' explaining that 'feminist critique ought also to understand how the category "women," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought'. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 5. Ellen Rooney analyses the use of the word women to describe a collective group, she asks 'what does the feminist critic mean when she says "women"? Biologically female persons? Individuals who have been socialized as "feminine"? Does that socialization vary when we understand women as already raced, classed, and sexualized and by *contradictory* processes, which introduce differences within every construct of identity, so there is no singular reader, or singular white woman reader, or singular black reader, or singular lesbian reader?'. Ellen Rooney, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion To Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1-26, p. 5. This is supported by Wollstonecraft who comments that she pays 'particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state'. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication Of The Rights Of Woman*, (London: Arcturus, 2017) p. 17.

passivity and the roles of motherhood and child-rearing. She purports to advocate on behalf of 'all women' and argues that they should be able to pursue careers, education and ambitions, to attain equality with men. This is based on the premise that all women occupy similar positions within the class system and unanimously agree with her definition of what constitutes equality. Friedan also holds a position of significant privilege. A woman of lesser privilege may lack the option of refraining from working, or be compelled to take on low skilled positions that offer limited opportunity for education or progression.³⁴ Marian Ortega notes that whilst white women are 'attending a conference on feminism, women of color are cleaning their houses and taking care of their children'.³⁵

³⁴ In her 2022 novel, *Lessons in Chemistry*, Bonnie Garmus refers to Friedan, through demonstration of the experience of the white, middle-class working woman in 1960s USA. In securing a career, her female protagonist Elizabeth Zott experiences further inequality, battling sexism, discrimination, thwarted ambition, sexual harassment and misogyny. She also struggles to balance motherhood and career. 'Inspiration for Garmus was re-reading Betty Friedan's 1963 classic *The Feminine Mystique*, which prompted memories of her mother and inspired her novel's setting. "I could remember these housewives having to do so much work and take care of so many kids, and it was never recognised as work."' Sarah McKenna, 'Bonnie Garmus Interview: "I Had To Teach Myself Chemistry From A 1950s Textbook"', 2022, [penguin.co.uk](https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2022/03/bonnie-garmus-interview-lessons-in-chemistry/) <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2022/03/bonnie-garmus-interview-lessons-in-chemistry/>>

³⁵ She also 'wonders about academic arrogance'. Ortega, *Being Lovingly...*, p. 57.

Cast of Bad Feminists

Smith's cast of 'bad feminists' is fundamentally supported by Joyce Chalfen. Smith characterises Joyce as a Classical- liberal and therefore, white feminist, who is complicit in the reinforcement of patriarchal structures. I contend that through Joyce, Smith also presents an organicist view.³⁶ Alsana Iqbal, a pseudo-traditionalist and covert feminist, is shown to navigate gender roles whilst bargaining with patriarchal structures within the private sphere. Neena exemplifies anti-traditionalism as a third wave, lesbian feminist and Clara Bowden Jones embodies the spirit of feminist enquiry, embarking on a mission to understand feminist and gender role identities within a black, intersectional context.

Evaristo presents an equally diverse ensemble of 'bad feminists'. Penelope Halifax embodies the traditional, second wave, white feminist, whilst Amma emerges as a radical black lesbian, turned intersectional feminist. Dom recounts her experience as a victim of domestic abuse perpetrated by a woman, demonstrating anti-male and anti-trans views. Nzinga disguises narcissistic, oppressive behaviour under the guise of feminist ideology, thus undermining the very principles she claims to uphold. Amma's daughter Yazz, identifies as an anti-feminist humanist, Carole embraces elements of white feminism and Bibi and Morgan are employed to represent trans feminism and non-binary perspectives respectively. Through the character of Bummi, Evaristo portrays a strong, resilient woman, who does not identify as a feminist, but like Smith's Alsana, resorts to patriarchal negotiations to secure her place within society.

Smith utilises Joyce Chalfen, to challenge feminist activism and theory of the late 1960 and early 1970s, along with highlighting struggles in relation to equality and power, faced by women at this time. She aligns Joyce to the flower power movement, which W.J. Rorabaugh describes as a feminist paradox.³⁷ Touching on both its feminist associations and contradictions, Joyce is used as a mechanism to

³⁶ Organicism is a philosophical perspective which views the universe and its parts as an organic whole and, by analogy or literally, as a living organism. 'Organicism - ECPS' <<https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/organicism/>> [accessed 21 October 2024].

³⁷ 'Many women embraced feminism, which challenged traditional gender roles. Amid these changes, hippies occupied a paradoxical position.' W.J. Rorabaugh, 'Bodies, Sex And Gender', in *American Hippies. Cambridge Essential Histories*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 91–131 (p. 91).

highlight feminist identity confusion and gender role struggles within both the public and private spheres.³⁸ As Ann Oakley explains, 'conventional values...label work as a masculine activity and assign women to the home'.³⁹ It can be argued that Smith presents a critique of liberal feminism, specifically in relation to its reliance on heteronormativity, and the emphasis placed on equality within the public, but less so, the private sphere. Furthermore, Smith indicates that within a liberal feminist context, women are mainly relegated to the private sphere and that interactions between a woman and her spouse are considered private matters. Smith positions Joyce as an author, albeit a mediocre one, who encourages women to adhere to prescribed gender roles of wife and mother, promoting patriarchal expectations. Smith identifies the conflict experienced by British women of the baby boomer generation, particularly white middle-class women, struggling to balance advocating for rights and equality with adhering to their expected role and identity in society. Smith argues that a clear disparity of power existed in the 1970s between genders, as women continued to experience significant inequality, with regards to parenting, work and education. The flower power movement exemplified this tension, as whilst sexual liberation and freedom were advocated, women were also encouraged to conform to traditional roles, for example, that of Mother Earth. During the 1970s in the United Kingdom and western society more broadly, marriage, childbearing and motherhood were regarded as essential roles for women. Through use of irony, Smith emphasises that certain women who declare themselves feminist, as exemplified by Joyce's use of feminist rhetoric, are in fact, perpetuating and endorsing gender stereotypes that uphold and sustain structures of patriarchy:

Sisters, the bottom line is this: if we are to continue wearing flowers in our hair into the next decade, they must be hardy and ever at hand, something only the truly mothering gardener can ensure. If we wish to provide happy playgrounds for our children, and corners of contemplation for our husbands, we need to create gardens of diversity and interest. Mother Earth is great and plentiful, but even she requires the occasional helping hand!⁴⁰

³⁸ As Kate Millett explains, 'in terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female' (private) she adds 'the rest of human achievement, interest and ambition to the male' (Public). Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1995), p. 26.

³⁹ She adds that the term 'housewife' is used to describe an unpaid role, performed by a woman'. Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (Middlesex: Pelican, 1974), p. ix.

⁴⁰ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 301.

It can be argued therefore, that Smith characterises Joyce for the purpose of parody. She is employed to both highlight and critique contradictions that exist within liberal feminism. As Amy R. Baehr suggests, liberal feminism is made up of two schools of thought: Egalitarian-liberal feminism is concerned with personal and political freedom whereas Classical-liberal feminism is focused on freedom from ‘coercive interference’.⁴¹ It can be assumed that Smith is further commenting on the limitations of Classical-Liberal feminism. Joyce aligns most closely to this concept, in contrast to Egalitarian-liberal feminism, which argues that women should ‘enjoy personal autonomy’.⁴² Smith suggests that Joyce possesses limited personal autonomy within her marriage, yet she may not fully understand this as a constraint. In addition, whilst she is married into a Jewish family and therefore a matrilinear minority group, the Chalfen’s ignore her family, ‘the long-rejected lineage, the Connor clan’⁴³ due to class snobbery, highlighting further tensions between intersections of race and class.

For Joyce, mothering is the primary aim not parenting; the difference being gender based. Marcus, her husband, requires a space for contemplation, perceiving himself as the intellectually superior and the more assertive gender, while Joyce, the wife, assumes the role of nurturing his self-esteem. Joyce is complicit in this arrangement, however, I argue that it could also be perceived, if taking a radical feminist stance for example, as a prison of misogyny, scaffolded by patriarchy. Therefore, the notion of Chalfenism within the family structure, satirises the very concept it purports to represent:

*Marcus created beings. And Joyce was his wife, industrious in creating smaller versions of Marcus. Fifteen years later and Joyce would still challenge anyone to show her a happier marriage than hers.*⁴⁴

In essence, this can be described as familial patriarchy, orchestrated by the middle-class but liberal Marcus, who is characterised as ‘a bit of an old leech’.⁴⁵ Smith illustrates that Joyce actively participates in this system, demonstrating its

⁴¹ Amy R. Baehr, ‘Liberal Feminism’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2021 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021)

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/feminism-liberal/>>

⁴² Baehr, ‘Liberal Feminism’.

⁴³ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 314.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 312–13.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 318.

transactional nature, which results in benefits such as motherhood, social standing and economic security. Such advantages contrast with the liberation radical feminists pursue, and it should be noted that the dynamics they seek to eliminate are mirrored within the Chalfen familial structure.⁴⁶ *White Teeth* portrays Joyce's experience of a 'very happy marriage'. The summer of '76...things happened in a haze – sometimes Joyce had to pinch herself to make sure this was real'.⁴⁷ It could be argued that Joyce experiences a sense of tension and disorientation within herself, pressured by the very constraints that the feminist movement seeks to dismantle. However, Smith opts to demonstrate Joyce taking a generalist stance and a universal approach, which is further illustrated in the satirical use of the term 'sisters'.⁴⁸

Smith also comments on psychoanalysis, specifically with reference to Juliet Mitchell's work, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*.⁴⁹ Through Joyce, she uses parody to address issues of acceptance of unconscious sexual components inherent in Freudian psychoanalysis, as they relate to the child. As Joyce proclaims, 'the children had their oedipal complexes early and in the right order'.⁵⁰ Mitchell believes that psychoanalysis and feminism are interrelated and can be used mutually to interrogate conventional notions of gender. She suggests that challenging the Oedipal structure is crucial to achieving gender equality, as it is the source from which female subordination and male dominance are derived. As she explains 'the Oedipus complex is the repressed ideas that appertain to the family drama... it is not the actual family situation or the conscious desire it evokes'.⁵¹ In accepting Freud's white, euro-centric discourse relating to the Oedipus complex, Joyce further

⁴⁶ Finn Mackay comments that 'while there is no one definition of feminism generally, let alone the schools or types within it, I have previously defined radical feminism using four criteria: first, the acceptance of the existence of patriarchy alongside a commitment to end it; second, the use and promotion of women-only space as an organizing method; third, a focus on all forms of male violence against women and their role as a keystone of women's oppression broadly; fourth and finally, an extension of the analysis of male violence against women to include the institutions of pornography and prostitution'. Finn Mackay, 'Radical Feminism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32.7–8 (2015), pp. 332–36 (pp. 332–33), doi:10.1177/0263276415616682.

⁴⁷ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 311.

⁴⁸ Durba Mitra, 'Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then And Now', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 122.3 (2023), pp. 431–52 (p. 431), doi:10.1215/00382876-10643959.

⁴⁹ Mitchell explains that 'when Psychoanalysis and Feminism was written, the search in those days of early second-wave feminism was for what qualities women had in common across the many huge divides of class, race, ethnicity family ties...The question was: What differentiates women, not from each other, but from men?' Juliet Mitchell, 'Introduction', in *Psychoanalysis And Feminism: A Radical Reassessment Of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. xxii.

⁵⁰ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 313.

⁵¹ Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis And Feminism*, p. 63.

reinforces patriarchal systems, bolstering the gender stereotypes Mitchell seeks to challenge.

The summer of 1976 is also significant, as the translation of Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* was published. Cixous encourages 'woman to write her self: ...write about women and bring women to writing'.⁵² She argues that binary oppositions of male and female have been constructed by the patriarchal symbolic order. She challenges this construct by encouraging women to articulate their individual experiences relating to their bodies and sexual encounters. In attempting to align French, post-structuralist feminist perspectives expressed by white women to white feminism, it is possible to identify conflict. The former is grounded in philosophy and can be considered a deconstructive critique, which unlike white feminism, is concerned with rethinking identity and difference. Equally, I argue that French post-structuralism may still be considered a variant of white feminism, as it neglects to address intersections such as race and class. Smith, via Joyce, presents a perspective that contrasts to that of Cixous. Joyce's identity is defined by motherhood, and a deliberate reliance on breast-feeding: 'she hated it...when one after the other her children, pop-eyed addicts of breast milk, finally kicked the habit'.⁵³ Cixous describes motherhood within the context of a 'source of goods...There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink'.⁵⁴ I contend that Smith is not opposed to feminist ideologies expressed by white women, as she demonstrates a clear alignment to Cixous encouragement of women to write within the context of *écriture féminine*.⁵⁵ However, I argue that Cixous's views do not align to mainstream or liberal feminism and therefore, she is also a 'bad feminist'.

In addition, Smith comments on the ongoing gender performances of women to satisfy patriarchal structures, specifically by writing a narrative that revisits the

⁵² Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh Of The Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), pp. 875–93 (p. 875) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>> [accessed 5 January 2024].

⁵³ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 315.

⁵⁴ Cixous, *The Laugh Of The Medusa*, p. 881.

⁵⁵ Zoe Brigley Thompson provides an excellent overview in this article and states that the 'French feminists consider their method to be 'feminine', a term which designates a quality connected to women's physical experience, but which is not necessarily defined by biological sex. This use of the term 'feminine', however, has proved controversial among mainstream feminists'. Zoë Brigley Thompson, 'Écriture Féminine', in *The Edinburgh Companion To Poststructuralism*, ed. by Benoît Dillet, Iain MacKenzie, and Robert Porter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 143–62 (p. 144).

1970s. Joyce is the only woman who claims to be, and arguably *is* content within a happy marriage, whilst enjoying the comfort and financial security afforded by the middle-class status she has married into. In this case, I argue that though the concepts are distinct, similarities can be identified between Classical-liberal feminism and early ideas of pseudo-feminism, particularly due to the lack of attention of pursuing equality within the private domain. Gina E. Mingoia describes pseudo-feminism as a 'call to inaction and culpability' rather than a 'call to action'.⁵⁶

As the narrative progresses, Smith utilises the characters Alsana and Clara to deconstruct the superficiality of Chalfenism, both exposing and highlighting the presence of patriarchal structures: 'both felt an independent uneasiness about the Chalfens, of whom they had gradually heard more and more'.⁵⁷

Smith employs Alsana and Samad Iqbal to demonstrate the experience of first-generation immigrants of Bengali descent, who arrived in the United Kingdom in the 1950s. Superficially, it can be assumed that Alsana conforms to traditional expectations, aligned to cultural norms and gender role performance. However, as the novel progresses, Smith's detailed exploration of her character proves to deconstruct such stereotypes and their associated patriarchal values. Alsana relies on logic, not feeling, which is deemed a masculine, rather than feminine quality. She is quick to pick up on and use human emotions for her own benefit: 'her culinary nose for guilt, deceit and fear was without equal in the borough of Brent'.⁵⁸ On a closer reading of Alsana's character, it is possible to identify feminist values, within a cultural struggle spanning the public and private spheres.

Alsana settles for her marriage which within her cultural tradition, has been arranged. However, Smith shows that like Joyce, she is using the transaction of her marriage to her advantage but in this case she, rather than her husband, maintains the power in

⁵⁶ More specifically, she looks at Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which she states is not a tale of feminism, but one of pseudo-feminism'. Gina E. Mingoia, 'Parodies And Distorted Shadows: Pseudo-Feminism In *The Handmaid's Tale*', *The Macksey Journal*, 1.217 (2020) p.2. More recently, the term pseudo-feminism has been used to describe a 'movement that exploits feminist principles by trying to project women as superior to men and giving women an upper hand' which also conflicts with the principles of feminism, which seek equality, not superiority amongst genders. Neeraja S.S, 'Feminism Vs Pseudo-Feminism: Analysing Women's Engagement With Pseudo-Feminist Discourse On Social Media', 2023, p. 90, doi:10.5281/ZENODO.10537402.

⁵⁷ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 343.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 147.

the relationship. It is not a 'love marriage',⁵⁹ it is marked by convenience, however, Samad her husband finds out that she is not 'as meek as he had assumed when they married',⁶⁰ illustrating the expectation that a wife ought to be submissive. Alsana is aware of her position and gender bias, she understands her disadvantage as an ethnic minority woman, along with the stigma and marginalisation she is more likely to experience. She is educated, but forced to carry out menial work, typifying the difficulties and discrimination faced by immigrants in the United Kingdom during this era. Alsana is aware of these political complexities, she is 'from a respected old Bengal family and had read her English History; but look at her now; if they could see what depths...!'⁶¹

Samad and Alsana's relationship embodies generational difference due to a significant age gap, along with conflicting expectations regarding gender roles. Whilst Smith does not explicitly label Alsana a feminist, she endows her some feminist values, which appear to develop further as the narrative progresses. Smith surveys these complexities in depth:

[Samad's] mother worked through the night preparing meat for her family, he said. His mother did not, he said, spend the household money, as Alsana did, on prepared meals, yoghurts and tinned spaghetti. Alsana punched him full square in the stomach. 'Samad Iqbal the traditionalist! Why don't I just squat in the street over a bucket and wash clothes? Eh? In fact, what about my clothes? Edible?'⁶²

In this example, Smith draws attention to the existence of cultural hierarchies, emphasising the patriarchal expectation that women serve as matriarchs, responsible for preparing meals and managing household chores within the private sphere. Alsana not only fails to comply to this obligation, but overtly contests it, by assuming control over the household finances, refraining from cooking and choosing pre-packaged foods. Smith implies that Alsana understands patriarchal systems and expectations, which is evidenced through her remarks that contradict and satirise such values. Furthermore, her actions demonstrate a lack of respect for her husband, as she resorts to physical aggression and confrontational responses.

⁵⁹ Monica Ali explores the concept of a 'love marriage' within diverse cultural settings in her recent novel. Monica Ali, *Love Marriage* (Great Britain: Virago, 2023).

⁶⁰ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 61.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 62.

⁶² Ibid, p. 62.

Notably, throughout the text, the husbands Samad and Archie frequently withdraw to the male dominated environment of O'Connells, that serves as a modern equivalent of the working men's club, from which women are excluded. This can be perceived to exemplify Kate Millett's arguments, that such separation reinforces inequality between genders. As she explains, 'male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different – and this is crucial'.⁶³ She adds that 'traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children'.⁶⁴ This is in part illustrated by Smith, when Samad sends one of their sons to the Bengal without engaging in prior discussion. Deniz Kandiyoti explains classic patriarchy, noting that 'girls are given away in marriage at a very young age...they are subordinate not only to all the men but also the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law'.⁶⁵

Smith portrays Alsana as belonging to the working-class. Through necessity, she is employed making BDSM sex outfits 'sewing together pieces of black plastic for a shop called Domination in Soho'.⁶⁶ Smith highlights the additional challenges Alsana faces; she must balance her economic needs with societal expectations of respectability. This is both a matter of transaction and negotiation; in public she maintains propriety by 'showing her respectability'.⁶⁷ Smith, therefore, suggests that gender roles can be performed publicly, but compromised privately, resulting in women experiencing both advantages and disadvantages.

Smith explores the dynamics of inter-generational, mixed-race relationships, examining the roles of love, security and stability within the institution of marriage. Clara Bowden Jones, a young, self-assured British woman of Jamaican heritage views her older, white husband Archie as a commodity. Whilst questioning the concept of marriage, like Joyce Chalfen and Alsana Iqbal, Clara gains some comfort from the stability marriage brings, even though it is not founded on love. Smith portrays Clara as the dominant force within the relationship; although she, like Alsana, is not initially presented as overtly feminist, she is shown to be confident in

⁶³ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

⁶⁵ Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining With Patriarchy', in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-Kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun, 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 60-65, p. 62.

⁶⁶ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 55.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 64.

her own beliefs: 'she needed no bra – she was independent, even of gravity'.⁶⁸ Smith guides Clara on a feminist journey, which she aligns to third-wave feminist objectives and ambitions for societal change. Clara begins by reading 'Greer's *Female Eunuch*, Jong's *Fear of Flying* and *The Second Sex*' in an attempt (by Alsana's Niece of Shame, Neena) to 'rid...her...of her false consciousness'.⁶⁹ Smith transitions Clara from a state of marital acceptance, to one of increased independence, empowerment and education. She attends night school studying topics including 'British Imperialism 1765 to the present; Medieval Welsh Literature' and notably 'Black feminism'.⁷⁰ One could argue that at least initially, Clara Bowden Jones's views may be interpreted to align somewhat, to Davis's feminist stance, though unlike Davis, they do not present as Marxist.⁷¹ By the time the novel concludes Clara has removed herself from marriage and her daughter 'Irie [is] about to become the first Bowden or Jones...to enter a university'.⁷²

It can be argued that Smith's conclusion is one of mixed outcomes; though there are some indications of progress, a state of equality is by no means achieved. New Year's Eve 1999, was a time marked by anxieties surrounding the millennium bug and apocalyptic predictions, contrasted with a sense of optimism in relation to the approach of a new century. On this 'historic night' Abdul-Mickey of O'Connells 'finally opened his doors to women'.⁷³ In this context, Smith implies with irony, that women are finally equal to men, albeit through the cost of permission rather than acceptance. Regrettably, this is where the narrative ends, but one can remain optimistic that Clara at least, with her new-found feminist perspectives and independence as a single woman, will have discovered more fulfilling pursuits that liberate her from the confines of the patriarchal playpen.

Smith's vibrant array of female characters demonstrates multiple perspectives, many of which align with feminist ideals. Therefore, I argue that within the context of Gay, they can be deemed 'bad feminists'. The characters I have looked at navigate

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 24.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 78.

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 342–43.

⁷¹ Davis describes the 'unorthodox feminine qualities of assertiveness and self-reliance—for which Black women have been frequently praised but more often rebuked' stating these are 'reflections of their labor and their struggles outside the home'. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (Vintage, 1983), p. 133.

⁷² Ibid, p. 376.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 541.

various degrees of sacrifice imposed by patriarchal structures, as defined by their respective cultures. Each character possesses a unique narrative and identity, along with an awareness of both their constraints and the level of compromise they are willing to accept. They do not conform to labels such as 'white' or 'Black feminist' or identify with any specific feminist identity. Whilst Joyce Chalfen can be considered the least engaged in feminist activities that seek equality, I argue that this does not diminish her status as a 'bad feminist'. Feminisms, therefore, are nuanced, focusing on individual rather than collective experience. Therefore, like her characters, Zadie Smith may also be considered a 'bad feminist'. As Niklas states:

Zadie Smith does not fly the colours of feminism or political correctness. Quite on the contrary, she gives gender stereotypes and political incorrectness a lot of scope and creates a space of ambivalent and contradicting voices.⁷⁴

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo presents a more explicit but nevertheless similar, critique of both second wave and white feminism. Penelope Halifax, who embodies the traits of a white, middle-class, second-wave feminist, is employed by Evaristo to serve as a point of comparison in relation to the diverse range of perspectives that are skilfully woven throughout the narrative. Penelope 'couldn't get enough of Ms Freidan, whom she hid in the cupboard with the brooms, Hoover and ironing board'.⁷⁵ Evaristo implies that Penelope identifies with Friedan's cohort of 'bright women...frustrated with their lot',⁷⁶ and like Smith, makes use of parody, locking Freidan in with the tools of the suburban housewife, the very group of women *The Feminine Mystique* represents:

it blew her mind to hear how America's educated housewives were supposed to be satisfied with their roles as mothers and homemakers, but who were, in reality, simmering with a discontent they were not allowed to express, all these poor women imprisoned inside their suburban houses⁷⁷

Penelope, raised in a middle class, white environment, enjoys a level of privilege and has benefited from educational opportunities that have promoted greater equality. However, she endures oppression from men, facing challenges rooted in misogyny and patriarchy. Evaristo employs Penelope's character to explore these disparities,

⁷⁴ Nicklas, *The Feminine Voice...*, p. 126.

⁷⁵ Also to note, the formatting used when directly referencing *Girl, Woman, Other* replicate how the text is formatted in the novel. Evaristo uses non-traditional formatting, sentence construction and grammar in many instances. Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* (Great Britain: Penguin, 2020), p. 288.

⁷⁶ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 288.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 288.

whilst also highlighting the complexities of white feminism, offering a critique of white feminist theory. Evaristo, like Gay, implies that historically, white feminism has been synonymous with essentialist feminism. As Kyla Schuller argues, 'of the factions within feminism, white feminism has been the loudest...the one and only game in town'.⁷⁸

Evaristo, like Smith, makes use of satire. Friedan, whilst implying that she speaks on behalf of all women, neglects to do so by considering only the majority. Penelope serves as Friedan's British equivalent, experiencing similar tensions whilst maintaining a comparably limited perspective, thereby neglecting to identify the complexities of oppression experienced by women with less privileged social status:

she expressed her resentment at the working-class women of England who were allowed to go out and work and the hundreds of millions of women in the Third World who enjoyed the fulfilment of both motherhood *and* job satisfaction.⁷⁹

It is crucial to understand that employment for the working-class and developing nations is often deemed a necessity rather than a choice, carrying significant repercussions such as limited time with children, poor pay and inadequate working conditions. It must also be understood that as Davis argues, class, race and ethnicity are not mutually independent and that feminists of colour can speak from a middle-class status. It should also be noted that both Smith and Evaristo hold a level of academic privilege. It can be argued that whilst works such as Friedan's overlook intersectionality and rely on generalised experiences, they remain influential and integral to ongoing discourse and evolution of feminist movements. Penelope, like Joyce Chalfen, Smith and Gay, is a 'bad feminist', but she is still a feminist.

Evaristo further explores both Black and intersectional feminism, explaining that women of colour experience unique forms of discrimination and oppression, connected to their racial identity. She draws attention to segregation between feminist groups in the 1980s that shared similar aims and objectives but continued to marginalise women of colour. Evaristo also illustrates that Black feminism played a crucial role in the development of intersectional feminism. Her female protagonist, Amma, is initially portrayed as a radical black feminist, however, as the narrative unfolds, her perspective develops in line with intersectional ideology, providing the

⁷⁸ Kyla Schuller, *The Trouble With White Women* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2023), p. 3.

⁷⁹ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 289.

frame narrative for the text. Sue Thornham explains that ‘black women, disillusioned by the sexism of the 1960s Black Movement, were active in the formation of the first radical feminist groups’.⁸⁰ It is important to note, that women of colour have been active in feminist movements globally, since their inception. As The Columbee River Collective remark, ‘there have always been black women activists’.⁸¹ Whilst the late 1960s saw a rise in the popularity of feminist writing by women of colour, feminist theory took more time to diversify.⁸² As Ortega points out, consideration of minority groups and intersectionality was in its infancy, even by the late 1970s. It can be argued that minority groups were excluded from feminist discourses up until this point.⁸³

Evaristo notes two prominent factors influencing oppression, sex and race: ‘white men opened doors or gave up their seats on public transport for white women (which was sexist), but not for them [women of colour] (which was racist)’.⁸⁴ Arguably, this scenario can be interpreted as indicative of the societal attitudes common in Britain during the 1980s. Consideration of additional intersections had just begun, with a clear divide occurring between white and black feminist organisations. Evaristo demonstrates this through the experiences of her characters Penelope, Amma and Dom. Evaristo explains that women of colour continue to suffer additional oppression through racism, particularly from white feminists. She adds that white feminists can be perceived as complicit in the oppression that they claim to be fighting against and that intersections mark difference and segregate women further, rather than fostering solidarity and unity:

they debated what it meant to be a black woman

⁸⁰ Thornham, *Second Wave Feminism*, p. 32.

⁸¹ The Columbee River Collective, ‘A Black Feminist Statement’, in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-Kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 45-50, p. 45.

⁸² The Columbee River Collective add argue that ‘a black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women’s movement beginning in the late 1960s’ ...and that ‘in 1973 black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization’ (NBFO)’. The Columbee River Collective, *A Black Feminist Statement...*, p. 45.

⁸³ ‘Audre Lorde speaks at a New York University Institute for the Humanities Conference on a panel about feminism and the personal as the political. She is one of two African-American women who have been invited at the last minute.’ Ortega, *Being Lovingly...* p. 57.

⁸⁴ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 13.

what it meant to be a feminist when white feminist organizations made them feel unwelcome.⁸⁵

Through representations of Black feminism, Evaristo encourages the reader to recognise the importance of hearing the voices of women of colour. Black feminist groups were instrumental in challenging feminisms that mis-represented women, from class and race-based perspectives. Evaristo comments on this shift:

Amma 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.⁸⁶

But as Patricia Hill Collins argues, 'as long as Black women's subordination...persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed'.⁸⁷ It should also be noted that intersectional feminism should not be dependent solely on the experiences of black women. As Jennifer C. Nash notes, there is a danger that black women, like white women within the context of white feminism, are treated as a single, homogeneous group and therefore 'a unitary and monolithic entity'.⁸⁸

Evaristo employs the character Dominique (Dom), to delve deeper into themes of Black feminism and its influence on intersectionality. Dom 'wondered if she really was still being brainwashed by white society, and whether she really was failing at the identity she most cherished – the black feminist one'.⁸⁹ Using Dom, Evaristo showcases an anthology of works by Black feminist and lesbian activists. She explains that Dom:

went on a mission to educate herself in black history, culture, politics, feminism, discovered London's alternative bookshops
she walked into Sisterwrite in Islington where every single author of every single book was female and browsed for hours; she couldn't afford to buy anything and read the whole of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*
in weekly instalments, standing up, as well as anything by Audre Lorde she could get her hands on
the booksellers didn't seem to mind.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 13.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 25.

⁸⁸ Jennifer C Nash, 'Re-Thinking Intersectionality', in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun, 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 117-123, p. 120.

⁸⁹ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 79.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 8.

Published in 1983, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*⁹¹ includes accounts from thirty-two Black women feminists, from different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and socio-economic groups. Subjects covered in the book include Black feminism, sexuality and sexual orientation. This suggests that Evaristo recognises that feminist discussions concerning intersections date back to at least 1983, albeit not within mainstream discourse. It is also plausible to suggest that *Girl, Woman, Other* mirrors this seminal work. Furthermore, one could contend that *Home Girls*, like Black feminism, has played a vital role in the recognition of other intersections. Therefore, both Barbara Smith in *Home Girls* and Evaristo, in *Girl, Woman Other*, engage with the challenges of universalising experiences, drawing attention to the risks of dilution and simplification associated with intersectionality. Such risks can also be identified within an academic context, in that intersectionality is essentialised, overly relying on black women's experiences which overlook other intersections including disability, sexuality and immigration status. As Nash explains black women have been 'used as prototypical intersectional subjects'⁹² and intersectionality 'has become a scholarly buzzword'.

Dialogue between Amma and Dom echoes developments in feminism across the timeline of the text. Like Amma, Dom identifies as a lesbian. Evaristo initially places her in a relationship with Nzinga, who similarly, is a woman of colour. During the 1980s, women who identified as lesbians experienced high levels of stigma. This is highlighted by Evaristo who refers to 'two middle-aged women... wearing men's haircuts and suits...as if they'd walked straight out of ...*The Well of Loneliness*'.⁹³ Evaristo draws attention to white feminist, lesbian stereotypes. Historically, lesbianism and feminism have frequently been conflated, which led to feminists being ridiculed as man-hating, dungaree wearing, lesbians. Finn Mackay talks more about this in relation to Radical feminism, in which they argue that the notion is also

⁹¹ *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. by Barbara Smith (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

⁹² Jennifer C Nash, *Rethinking Intersectionality...*, p. 118.

⁹³ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 22.

perceived as an 'extreme example' of feminism 'gone too far'.⁹⁴ In the main, Radical feminism neglects to represent the experience of the black lesbian feminist.

Evaristo explores these points further through her representation of Dom and Nzinga's relationship. She delves into the intricate nature of oppression, which includes abuse occurring on an individual, human-to-human level. Dom suffers mistreatment from Nzinga, who's feminist beliefs appear to be at odds with her behaviours and actions. Her experience is not dissimilar to that of some women within a patriarchal male/ female marriage; in which individuals are expected to adhere to prescribed gender roles, which in some cases, can escalate into physical and emotional abuse. Evaristo employs irony to show how a woman, much like a man, can engage in abusive behaviour through a desire to control others. She explains that oppression can occur regardless of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class. Nzinga is portrayed as a feminist activist, well-read in feminist theory, 'knowledgeable about how to be a liberated black woman in an oppressive white world...like Alice and Audre and Angela and Aretha rolled into one'.⁹⁵ Evaristo suggests that Nzinga perceives herself as being a 'good feminist', however, she does not portray her as a morally upright person. Instead, Evaristo demonstrates she is narcissistic, abusive and controlling, indicating that such characteristics are the main drivers of her behaviour, rather than her particular feminist stance. Nzinga paradoxically rationalises the very oppression and mistreatment she claims to oppose, within the context of a female to female, multi-cultural relationship. She uses her intersectional status to justify her actions, assuming she can exempt herself from being labelled abusive. Nzinga demonstrates male characteristics and behaviours, driven by patriarchal structures that she claims to abhor. She renames Dom

⁹⁴ Mackay explains that 'Women worry if they call themselves feminist then they might be seen as being lesbian and not shaving their armpits, you know. I think the battle against feminism has been quite insidious. (Fallon, 32, white, heterosexual, radical feminist). My contention is that this type of misogynist and homophobic anti-feminism attaches particularly to one school of feminism, and that is radical feminism. They also talk about the 'fault lines which exercised the movement of the past, along the lines of race, class and sexuality'. Mackay, *Radical Feminism*, p. 333.

⁹⁵ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 80.

‘Sojourner’,⁹⁶ to symbolise a ‘feminist awakening’.⁹⁷ Ironically, this is an act of control as Dom would prefer to keep her name. Nzinga tells her to ‘keep it’ but that she will call her Sojourner anyway. Evaristo is commenting on the patriarchal tradition of women being compelled to adopt the surname of men. In this example, Evaristo shows that abuse and oppression are not confined to specific groups; rather, they manifest as individual experiences, influenced by personal circumstances. Like Joyce Chalfen, Nzinga can be perceived to be a poor example of a feminist, but she is still a ‘bad feminist’.

Diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging are currently amongst the top priorities on the national agenda. ‘Inclusive Britain’ plans to ‘tackle persistent, unfair disparities, promote unity and build a fairer Britain for all’.⁹⁸ Same-sex marriage has finally been legalised and the Equality Act 2010⁹⁹ safeguards individuals from discrimination that relates to protected characteristics. Through understanding of white privilege and wokeism, cancel culture has emerged, though as Kings College, London have discovered, ‘the word “woke” is increasingly seen as an insult, rather than a compliment’.¹⁰⁰ Feminism has progressed into a fourth wave comprised of a social and political movement concerned with and advocating for equality, which Sara Strauss states ‘is adept at creating solidarity among women across the board, and with people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations’.¹⁰¹ In the 21st

⁹⁶ As Nell Irvin Painter explains ‘Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), the symbol of the heroic black woman in American history, is remembered as a former slave who made herself into an outspoken antislavery feminist. As a symbol of race and gender in a world where all the women are white and all the blacks are men, “Sojourner Truth” is often summed up in a few public speech acts, which have varied over time as the fashion in black women has shifted. She also deserves to be remembered as a woman who defied the nineteenth-century prohibition against women’s preaching in public’. Nell Irvin Painter ‘Sojourner Truth’ in *The American Radical*, ed. by Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, Harvey J. Kaye (USA: Routledge, 1994), pp. 25–32, p. 25.

⁹⁷ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 91.

⁹⁸ GOV.UK, ‘Inclusive Britain Update Report – April 2023’, *GOV.UK* (2023) p.<<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-britain-update-report/inclusive-britain-update-report>> [accessed 18 August 2024].

⁹⁹ GOV.UK, ‘Discrimination: Your Rights’, *GOV.UK*, (2024) <<https://www.gov.uk/discrimination-your-rights>> [accessed 22 July 2024].

¹⁰⁰ King’s College London, ‘Woke, Cancel Culture And White Privilege – How The UK’s Culture War Debate Is Evolving’, *King’s College London* (2024) <<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/woke-cancel-culture-and-white-privilege-how-the-uks-culture-war-debate-is-evolving>> [accessed 18 August 2024].

¹⁰¹ Strauss adds that ‘it is in spite and because of these differences between individuals that present-day feminism aims at raising awareness of shared experiences of discrimination, sexual harassment and violence. It thereby unveils and sharply criticizes the fact that sexism, after all the accomplishments of previous generations of feminists and in contrast to any post-feminist stances, is still a systemic problem, which transcends national borders as much as boundaries of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age’. Sara Strauss, ‘Intersectionality And Fourth-Wave Feminism In Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 34.1–2 (2023), pp. 14–32 (p. 17), doi:10.1080/09574042.2023.2184613.

century, feminists, along with feminist allies, acknowledge the critical significance of intersectionality. Michael Kimmel rightly states that ‘men are not from Mars, women are not from Venus’.¹⁰² Though Evaristo’s work heavily focuses on the experiences of women, she also explores male allyship, through a number of minor male characters, including Yazz’s sperm donor father, Roland, the ‘Professor of Modern Life’.¹⁰³ Though Roland is portrayed as an ally, Yazz argues that his ‘terms of reference are all male and actually all-white’, representing systems of power, relating to sex and race that continue to dominate modern society.¹⁰⁴ Mackay describes this as a ‘shift towards the inclusion of men in feminist organizing and leadership’¹⁰⁵ as opposed to a rebalance of power.

Evaristo demonstrates that methods of activism have evolved significantly, with the advent of social media and digital communication platforms. In contemporary society, hashtags, shares and status updates have largely replaced conventional forms of protest such as marches, banners and symbolic acts, like burning of bras. As Strauss adds:

from the 2010s the feminist movement...gained new impetus through widespread transnational activism, fierce resistance to continuing misogyny and sexual violence as well as by fresh currents in feminist thought’.¹⁰⁶

Amma’s daughter Yazz is used by Evaristo, to challenge both traditional and more recent feminist ideologies. Whilst she appreciates Gay’s *Bad Feminist*, she identifies gaps within feminist discourses:

feminism is so herd-like...even being a woman is passé these days... I reckon we’re all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female, which are gendered performances anyway, which means your *women’s* politics, Mumsy, will become redundant, and by the way, I’m humanitarian, which is on a much higher plane than feminism

do you even know what that is?¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Michael Kimmel, ‘Feminism and Feminist Scholarship Today’, *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 1.1 (2011), pp. 11–12 (p. 11) <<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol1/iss1/9>>.

¹⁰³ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ See also, Gerald Casey’s response to #MeToo Gerard Casey, *After #MeToo: Feminism, Patriarchy, Toxic Masculinity and Sundry Cultural Delights* (UK: Andrews UK Limited, 2020).

¹⁰⁵ Mackay, *Radical Feminism*, p. 333.

¹⁰⁶ Strauss, *Intersectionality...*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 39.

Evaristo portrays contemporary society, examining its perspectives on feminism and gender, whilst highlighting the intricate discussions that are often obscured by traditional feminist viewpoints. From Yazz's perspective, emphasis has shifted towards being 'human' as opposed to identifying as a 'woman' or 'man'. This aligns with Gay's observations in relation to 'bad feminism'. Generation Z, as described by Evaristo and represented by Yazz, distinguishes itself from earlier generations, by rejecting mainstream and more recent models of feminism, encouraging women to embrace their authentic selves and personal convictions.¹⁰⁸ It is worth noting that in revisiting *White Teeth*, which precedes *Girl, Woman, Other* by almost twenty years, there are no references to gender identity beyond the binary classifications of male and female. In contrast, Evaristo engages with non-binary discourse, by introducing a character Megan/ Morgan, who identifies as non-binary. Instead of focusing on specific forms of oppression, the discussion moves to concepts of power and privilege, asserting that 'hierarchies of power and privilege won't disappear...it's innate to human nature and inherent in all societies'.¹⁰⁹

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in feminism. This has resulted in greater affirmation and positive feminist identities but has also led to further discussions around pseudo-feminism.¹¹⁰ Evaristo concludes the narrative of Amma and Dom, by juxtaposing both white and Black radical feminisms with fourth wave feminist ideologies:

once upon a time feminists were so vilified by the media it turned generations of women away from their own liberation because nobody wanted to be denounced as one, now they're in a lovefest with it, have you seen all these glamorous photoshoots of stunning young feministas with their funky clothes and big attitude – until it's no longer on trend feminism needs tectonic plates to shift.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Though it can be argued that Yazz has some strong feminist views. Ibid, p. 47.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 228.

¹¹⁰ Fiona Cyril Creado argues that this is used as a derogatory term, explained within the context that 'feminist advocate for women's rights and demand equality of all sexes and on the other hand, pseudo-feminists are those who only claim to be feminists and blatantly ignore the primary point of feminism which is equality'. She adds that 'the generational gap between the earlier generation of feminists who are supposed to be considered 'real feminists' and the modern feminists already puts the collective identity of the sisterhood into crisis'. Fiona Cyril Creado, 'Branding Women As Pseudo- Feminists: Taking Away Women's Rights To Be Angry Against Injustice', *International Journal of Advance Research, Ideas and Innovations in Technology*, 7.4 (2021), pp. 1713–16 (p. 1714) <<https://www.ijariit.com/manuscript/branding-women-as-pseudo-feminists-taking-away-womens-rights-to-be-angry-against-injustice/>> [accessed 9 November 2024].

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 437.

Evaristo acknowledges this transformation, noting that it stands in stark contrast to the radical era, which was marked by factional divisions and media ostracism. She argues that as long as women persist to fight for equality and advocate for women's rights, the methods that they use should not matter:

we should celebrate that many more women are reconfiguring feminism and that grassroots activism is spreading like wildfire and millions of women are waking up to the possibility of taking ownership of our world as fully entitled human beings

how can we argue with that?¹¹²

Evaristo therefore, is a 'bad feminist'. She chooses not to adhere to a specific notion of feminism, despite possessing a comprehensive understanding of the various movements and theoretical perspectives. Like Gay, Davis and Smith, she understands that individuals possess unique experiences of intersectionality that are deeply personal. The notion of a singular feminism is untenable, rather, Black and white feminisms have developed and now coexist under the broader umbrella of feminist discourse. I argue that it is beneficial to embrace the label of 'bad feminist' and that Evaristo is an example of an authentic feminist, who articulates her stance effectively:

the radical feminists wanted women only quarters, self-governed by a co-op

the lesbian radical feminists wanted their own quarters away from the non-lesbian radical feminists, also self governed by a co-op

the black radical lesbian feminists wanted the same except with the condition that no whiteys of any gender were allowed inside

the anarchists walked out because any form of governance was a betrayal of everything they believed in¹¹³

Privilege Politics

The notion of privilege is central to discussions relating to white, Black and intersectional feminism. Feminist discourse raises awareness of this concept in various forms, seeking the elimination of systems and structures that perpetuate privilege related forms of oppression and inequality. Notably, white privilege has gained significant attention in recent discussions, however, privilege has historically

¹¹² Ibid, p. 438.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 18.

emerged from one's identity as a male and/or heterosexual and can also be influenced by social class, or by being able-bodied.

Smith and Evaristo explore multiple levels of privilege, identifying its unique nature, along with the influence of different forms of oppression. Gay advocates for the understanding and awareness of one's own privilege, viewing it as a means to facilitate positive change, rather than evoking feelings of shame. She states:

Privilege is a right or immunity granted as a particular benefit, advantage or favor. There is racial privilege, gender (and identity) privilege, heterosexual privilege, economic privilege, able-bodied privilege, educational privilege, religious privilege, and the list goes on and on. At some point, you have to surrender to the kind of privilege you hold.¹¹⁴

Smith places Alsana at the centre of the privilege politics. Whilst Alsana is undoubtedly disadvantaged due to her race and class, Smith shows that it is possible for women to benefit from gender, race, cultural and religious norms to establish their own privilege, albeit incrementally. Alsana exclaims 'what do I know...barefoot country girl...never went to the universities',¹¹⁵ however, she possesses a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, gender, patriarchal and socio-economic dynamics she encounters. She is marginalised by her position as an immigrant, but from an objective perspective, she possesses some of the privileges that second wave feminists struggled to attain, including stable employment and the ability to work under her own terms and conditions. Alsana exerts considerable influence within her marriage, resisting the pressures of patriarchal norms or male privilege, particularly in private. Smith explores the concept of compromising one's privilege through a conversation with Neena, who accuses Alsana of being the 'little *submissive* Indian woman'.¹¹⁶ Neena challenges the cultural practice of arranged marriage, questioning Alsana's seeming acceptance of gender-specific, patriarchal and oppressive roles, accusing Alsana of 'saying that a good dose of repression keeps a marriage healthy'.¹¹⁷ However, Alsana replies by explaining that 'it is by far the easier option'.¹¹⁸ Smith demonstrates that Alsana is aware of both the

¹¹⁴ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. 16.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 80.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 72.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 77.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 78.

advantages and disadvantages she experiences due to her marriage, particularly in terms of the privileges it presents. Through their union, Alsana and Samad can create a stable home environment, benefit from two incomes and become parents.

Like Alsana, Clara experiences marginalisation due to her ethnicity. Nevertheless, she also gains advantages from her status as a married woman; she does not need to work and is provided with a comfortable home. Like Alsana, she uses marriage as a commodity and a means to acquire privilege. Her socio- economic status is improved through her marriage to an English man, which also supports her aspirations of motherhood. Yet the implications of this marital arrangement weigh heavily on her conscience, leading her to question the merits of her decision: 'was it better to marry? Even if the man was a heathen? There was no way of knowing'.¹¹⁹ Although Clara physically commits to the marriage, she struggles to engage on an emotional level and as a result, 'spent most of her wedding day looking at her feet'.¹²⁰ While her profession is not explicitly stated, Smith suggests she fulfils the role of a housewife. Although this position may seem privileged to some, like Friedan, Clara is unfulfilled and uncomfortable with 'finding no box interested in her occupation'.¹²¹ Smith demonstrates that whilst Clara belongs to a minority group, aspirations for gender equality resonate with those articulated by Friedan, white feminism and the second wave of feminist thought. Furthermore, Clara exhibits an understanding of and resistance to patriarchal structures: 'I mean, I just think men have caused enough chaos this century. There's enough fucking men in the world'.¹²² It can be argued therefore, that patriarchal expectations and control continue to persist across all sections of contemporary society. Clarke explains that 'men at all levels of privilege, of all classes and colors have the potential to act out legalistically, moralistically, and violently when they cannot colonise women'.¹²³

Smith uses the characters of Clara and Alsana to illustrate the diverse experiences of women, emphasising the complex intersections of oppression that they face. Those characters who endure the most severe forms of tyranny are often the ones

¹¹⁹ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 46.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 49.

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 50.

¹²² Ibid, p. 79.

¹²³ Cheryl Clarke, 'Lesbianism - An Act Of Resistance', in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-Kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun, 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 54-59, p. 54.

who actively resist it, but those with greater privilege appear to more readily accept being dominated. Although both Clara and Alsana are subjected to patriarchal norms, the nature of these expectations varies due to the distinct cultural and social contexts of their respective marriages. Neither woman passively accepts these societal demands; instead, they navigate them to establish their own forms of privilege within different spheres. In contrast, Smith implies that Joyce Chalfen's actions reinforce patriarchal systems, resulting in the loss of some of her own privilege.

A comparison can be drawn between this experience and Evaristo's portrayal of Penelope. However, it is important to recognise that she embodies a form of white feminism characterised by her racial biases. Penelope advocates for her right to pursue a career, whilst simultaneously raising her children. She belongs to the middle class, which influences the significance she places on such an ambition: 'she felt sorry for her [mother] having to choose between a career or a family which seemed terribly unfair'.¹²⁴ Mikki Kendall critiques feminist discourse of this period, noting that 'so much of what feminists had to say of [this] time, was laden with racist and classist assumptions'.¹²⁵ I argue that Kendall's view is represented in Evaristo's depiction of Penelope.

Furthermore, Evaristo engages in discourse regarding contemporary forms of privilege, primarily through the character Yazz. Although Yazz's political views appear well-intentioned, one could argue that her insights are lacking in depth and that her comprehension of both feminist and gender issues is somewhat superficial. For instance, she perceives non-binary identity as a matter of choice rather than an intrinsic aspect of gender, echoing historical discussions about women's agency in identifying as lesbians: 'she was thinking of becoming non-binary herself, how *woke* was that?'.¹²⁶ In addition, she adopts a dismissive stance regarding feminism as a movement and theoretical framework. This perspective may serve as a critique of current activism, which is influenced by the rise in popularity of social media,¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 279.

¹²⁵ Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism* (Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. xii.

¹²⁶ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 338.

¹²⁷ Ashwini Tambe notes that '#MeToo has advanced a version of public feminism that is, in some ways, out of step with currents in academic feminism'. Ashwini Tambe, 'Reckoning With The Silences Of #MeToo', in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-Kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun, 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 91-93, p. 91.

influencers and trends, has led to a phenomenon that A. Freya Thimsen refers to as performative activism, of which Yazz may be representative.¹²⁸ Evaristo further explores the notion of privilege by association, or the absence thereof, in relation to white feminism:

as a white woman who hangs with brownies...you'll lose a bit of your privilege, you should still check it, though, have you heard the expression, check your privilege, babe?¹²⁹

It can be perceived that Evaristo suggests Yazz, as a person of colour, perceives herself as possessing authority regarding levels of privilege. However, she contests this notion by introducing Courtney, a white woman, to provide a counterpoint to the argument which is further backed up by theoretical insights. As Courtney observes, Gay 'warned against the idea of playing 'privilege Olympics' and wrote in *Bad Feminist* that privilege is relative and contextual, and I agree'.¹³⁰ As Evaristo summarises '#whitegirltrumpsblackgirl'.¹³¹

Evaristo expands on the concept by providing an example of multi-intersections of oppression, as Yazz explains Waris (muslim) 'is the 'most oppressed of all of them (although don't tell her that)

in five categories: black, Muslim, female, poor, hijabbed'¹³² However, she demonstrates that Yazz neglects to recognise Waris' privilege through education.

Evaristo further comments on the nuances of class disparity, within a cultural context. Although Bummi and her Aunty are part of a racial group that may face systemic inequality, distinctions exist in the treatment they receive and the privileges they encounter:

Bummi soon discovered her Aunty spent her days reading fashion magazines, going to the beauty salon, 'lunching with the ladies', cooking when she had to, and watching videos.¹³³

¹²⁸ She states that this is a 'critical label that is applied to instances of shallow or self-serving support for social justice causes'. A. Freya Thimsen, 'What Is Performative Activism?', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 55.1 (2022), pp. 83–89 (p. 83), doi:10.5325/philrhet.55.1.0083.

¹²⁹ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 65.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 66.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 66.

¹³² Ibid, p. 66.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 163.

The Auntie exploits her generational and class privileges, regarding Bummi as a servant. Whilst set in Nigeria, and therefore outside of an Anglo-American context, the relationship serves to reflect the privilege often associated with white middle-class paradigms. This scenario resonates with the societal structure depicted by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, specifically relating to the women classified as 'Wives'.¹³⁴

Bummi navigates multiple intersecting identities, which initially result in marginalisation. Like many women from her generation and some of the characters depicted by Smith in *White Teeth*, she migrates to the United Kingdom seeking improved living conditions. She subsequently encounters disadvantages due to her immigrant status. Following her husband's death, she becomes a single parent. It can be argued that Bummi experiences greater privilege in her homeland; in Nigeria she receives a commendable education, though this comes at a significant cost to her mother. Evaristo implies that Bummi is conscious of the disadvantage she experiences, noting that she 'complained that people viewed her through what she did (a cleaner) and not what she was (an educated woman)'.¹³⁵ She functions as a powerful symbol of the struggles faced by immigrant women, while also demonstrating the strength to persevere through adversity.

Evaristo highlights the critical role of intersectionality in considering women's experiences and the ways in which such intersections influence privilege. She demonstrates that a woman can achieve success through determination despite experiencing marginalisation, as seen in Bummi, who emerges as the 'proprietor of her own cleaning company...an Equal Opportunities Employer'.¹³⁶ Bummi therefore, earns and gains privilege.

Nevertheless, this success comes at the cost of moral compromise, in the form of a sexual transaction. Evaristo points out that Bummi uses herself as a commodity in this scenario. Bishop Opi 'behaved as if it was his right to pester his female parishioners, in which case, it was her right to ask him to loan her the money to start

¹³⁴ As exemplified by the character Serena Joy, who makes 'speeches about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home'. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1990), p. 55.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 167.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 170.

her business'.¹³⁷ Evaristo implies that Bummi undertakes this exchange through necessity and perhaps desperation, under the guise that 'she was now a businesswoman' and that 'this was her first transaction'.¹³⁸ Evaristo challenges conventional views relating to patriarchal privilege, illustrating how women can navigate male-dominated systems to their benefit and for their own gain. However, one could contend, that the transactional nature of Bummi's behaviour contributes to, rather than challenges patriarchal systems and norms. While Bummi's deliberate actions appear to challenge patriarchal authority, they also come at a personal cost, manifesting as a sense of shame. Bummi 'would never tell anyone how low she had gone to elevate herself and her daughter'.¹³⁹

As Strauss argues, 'throughout *Girl, Woman, Other*, the disadvantages which the fictional characters experience fundamentally relate to the interplay of their gender, ethnicity and social class'.¹⁴⁰ Whilst each of the characters hold different levels of privilege, along with complexity relating to difference, it can be argued that with reference to Gay, they are all 'bad feminists'. This perspective can also be applied to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Furthermore, it is important to note that both authors are at risk of being labelled 'multi-cultural feminists', particularly with regards to their discussions around notions of privilege. Smith hints at this, stating 'she was fed up with being cast as the "multicultural (ageing) wunderkind''.¹⁴¹

Performance

The relationship between privilege and performance is notably significant. Central to the discourse on performance are themes relating to gender performativity, intersectionality, the politics of representation and performance activism. Prescribed gender roles, particularly as they relate to second wave theories of feminism, have limitations in their validity. Gender performativity is discussed in detail in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues that gender is a social construct – performed

¹³⁷ Ibid, p. 172.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 173.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 174.

¹⁴⁰ Strauss, *Intersectionality...*, p. 24.

¹⁴¹ Lisa Allardice, 'Zadie Smith: "I Get in Trouble When I Talk about The State Of The Nation"', *The Guardian*, 26th August 2023, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/aug/26/zadie-smith-i-get-in-trouble-when-i-talk-about-the-state-of-the-nation>> [accessed 4 November 2023].

and enacted, as opposed to an innate biological characteristic.¹⁴² She adds that gender is shaped by societal norms and expectations. However, it can also be argued that this performative nature also allows for potential disruption. Even Butler's framework, while acknowledging gender fluidity, remains anchored in binary definitions of gender that primarily address male and female identities. As she explains:

In 1989 I was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory. I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity.¹⁴³

In modern society, diverse understandings of gender have developed, resulting in the conclusion that certain frameworks, whilst integral to feminist theory, are increasingly viewed as outdated. Shulamith Firestone stands out as a notable exception, asserting that the 'the end goal of feminism must be...not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself'.¹⁴⁴ Emi Koyama reflects on this argument, noting that:

the second wave of feminism popularized by the idea that the person's gender is distinct from his or her physiological sex and is socially and culturally constructed, it largely left unquestioned the belief that there was such a thing as a true physical (biological) sex.¹⁴⁵

Both Smith and Evaristo probe performance of gender and sex roles, along with cultural expectations that permeate the public and private spheres. They examine the degree of agency possessed by individuals in the enactment of gender, evaluating the impact of society or societies. Butler argues that 'as performance which is performative, gender is an "act," broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority'.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² As she states, 'when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily a female one'. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 10.

¹⁴³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. vii.

¹⁴⁴ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic Of Sex - The Case For Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1988), p. 19.

¹⁴⁵ Emi Koyama, 'The Transfeminist Manifesto', in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun, 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 83-90, p. 85.

¹⁴⁶ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts And Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology And Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), pp. 519-31 (p. 528), doi:10.2307/3207893.

In *White Teeth*, Smith critically evaluates the dynamics of gender role performance. The marriage of Alsana and Samad is marked with instances of verbal and physical abuse, along with unsuccessful attempts to uphold patriarchal control:

Look at you, look at the state of you! Look how fat you are!' he grabbed a piece of her, and then released it as if it would infect him. 'Look at how you dress. Running shoes and a sari?'¹⁴⁷

Smith draws attention to the themes of male anger and shame, which arise through female non-compliance. Samad expresses his discontent with his wife's appearance, criticising her weight and her attire, and most importantly, how she is dressed. Her choice to wear running shoes with a sari indicates a shift towards westernisation. He thus perceives her as disobedient and in response 'she right hook[s] him in the stomach and then followed up with a blow to the left cheekbone'.¹⁴⁸ Smith shows that while Alsana may outwardly conform to the societal expectations of wife and mother, her private response to her circumstances manifests in a manner typically associated with male aggression, deemed inappropriate in a woman. Furthermore, Smith delves deeper into the dynamics of patriarchal expectations and subsequent female resistance that transcends cultures. She reveals the entrenched sexist attitudes of many men in the 1970s, which are increasingly challenged by women who refuse to passively accept male-defined roles. She begins to demonstrate this concept through dialogue between Archie, Samad and Alsana:

emotional matters...yes, that's your department –

'Oh – women's work!' squealed Alsana, through a mouthful of curry. Thanks so much, Archibald'.¹⁴⁹

Alsana demonstrates disregard for the opinions and advice of men, attributing this to their gender and her own perceived inferiority as a woman. She expresses her opinions candidly, and questions prevailing assumptions, as evidenced by her remark 'you two gentlemen talk a great deal of the youknowwhat'.¹⁵⁰ As Millett explains 'patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a

¹⁴⁷ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 198.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 200.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 242.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 242.

connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole'.¹⁵¹ It is important to understand that structures of patriarchy vary dependent on culture, though an Anglo-American model often dominates discussions. For example, Kandiyoti refers to African polygyny:

typically, it is the woman who is primarily responsible for her own and her children's upkeep, including meeting the costs of their education, with variable degrees of assistance from her husband. Women have very little to gain and a lot to lose by becoming totally dependent on husbands.¹⁵²

Traditional forms of feminism prioritise the experiences and perspectives of privileged women, neglecting intersectional realities of marginalised groups. As Butler asks 'is there some commonality among "women" that preexists their oppression, or do women have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone?'¹⁵³ Experiences of oppression can be understood to be inherently complex, which proves challenging when establishing a sense of commonality. However, women may identify with one another through sharing similar experiences. Such complexities are clearly demonstrated by both Smith and Evaristo, through the examples provided in their respective works.

Maureen, a minor but impactful character in Smith's narrative, serves to further illustrate the theme of performance. It can be argued that Smith utilises Maureen to reflect a conventional female archetype. As a white woman, Maureen possesses a degree of privilege. She holds professional status as an employee; however, her duties appear to include boosting the self-esteem of her male colleagues and providing entertainment of a sexual nature. Smith portrays Maureen as an active participant in this arrangement: 'Maureen laughed for a long time, her trademark laugh at Morgan~~Hero~~; shrill and loud, but without her mouth open, for Maureen had a dread of laughter lines'.¹⁵⁴ Focused primarily on her appearance and popularity with the men in Archie's office, she shows little solidarity with other women, exemplifying the stereotype of the office bimbo. As Millika Sunder explains, 'the bimbo is always unintelligent and in need of a man's help, which is why the patriarchy has painted the

¹⁵¹ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 33.

¹⁵² Kandiyoti, *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, p. 61.

¹⁵³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 69.

bimbo as a white woman'.¹⁵⁵ She adds that 'women of color, on the other hand, face the opposite consequences of a patriarchal society'.¹⁵⁶ Smith characterises Maureen as an ignorant racist, embodying deeply ingrained and misguided perspectives prevalent in the 1970s. Although Maureen fancies Archie a 'little bit', she is enraged that 'he'd gone and married one' (meaning a person of colour) and 'hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was'.¹⁵⁷ It is improbable that Maureen is a dedicated reader of Freidan, she does not identify as a feminist and exhibits no tendencies towards feminist ideology. Potentially, she finds contentment in her position and willingly accepts her subordinate position. This behaviour can be characterised as indicative of toxic femininity.¹⁵⁸ As Florence Given notes, 'we live in a patriarchal society which prioritizes our desirability above anything and everything'.¹⁵⁹ Arguably, Smith does not depict Maureen as a feminist.

The politics of representation is of importance to feminist discourse, challenging performance and addressing representation, questioning who gets to speak and who is heard. It can be argued that representation matters, and minority groups need to be listened to in order to challenge dominant narratives and associated power structures. It is also possible to question the notion of representation itself; asking whether it is truly possible to accurately capture the complexities and lived experiences of diverse people and communities. As Amy Hinterberger states:

feminist theorists must be attentive to how, through references to 'liberation/oppression', or to 'western/non-western', practices of representation end up reproducing the very categories that they seek to escape.¹⁶⁰

It can be argued that in *White Teeth*, representation is of paramount importance and to ensure authenticity, a range of diverse voices are used by Smith. Such dynamics

¹⁵⁵ Mallika Sunder, 'A Critique On Bimboism', *Brizo*, 2021 <<https://brizomagazine.com/2021/04/09/a-critique-on-bimboism/>> [accessed 17 March 2024].

¹⁵⁶ Sunder, *A Critique On...*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 69.

¹⁵⁸ Hannah McCann, 'Is There Anything "Toxic" About Femininity? The Rigid Femininities That Keep Us Locked In', *Psychology & Sexuality*, 13.1 (2022), pp. 9–22 (p. 9), doi:10.1080/19419899.2020.1785534.

¹⁵⁹ Given also explores privilege within the context of 'prettiness', referring to certain attributes such as being white, slim and non-disabled within patriarchal, western society. Florence Given, *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* (London: Cassell, 2020), p. 32.

¹⁶⁰ Amy Hinterberger, 'Feminism And The Politics Of Representation: Towards A Critical And Ethical Encounter With "Others"', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8.2 (2013), pp. 74–83 (p. 81) <<https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss2/7>>.

reveal the changes in women's attitudes that can be seen at the turn of the century, in line with the beginning of third wave feminism and greater acceptance of non-traditional sexual preferences.

Through Neena (Niece of Shame), Smith explores issues around respectability and of shame within the post-colonial Bengali culture in the UK, along with attitudes relating to lesbianism.¹⁶¹ Smith also looks at westernisation and the impact this has on gender roles, within the post-colonial multi-generational family. Alsana is 'young and old at the same time, Neena reflected. She acted so sensible, so straight-down-the-line in her long sensible coat, but you got the feeling.'¹⁶² Neena identifies Alsana's performance, the sensible coat representing her appearance and respectability in public but is aware Alsana has a different character privately. Neena publicly performs as both a feminist and a lesbian. Whilst Neena is not much younger than Alsana, she is more westernised and more British. This demonstrates a paradox relating to perceived respectability and an individual view on levels of compromise. For Alsana, lesbianism is certainly taboo. Smith, through Shiva, parodies the modern man. Shiva is well-intentioned, but has little understanding of the concept or any of the subjects he claims are important: 'female organism, gee-spot, testicle cancer, the menopause – mid-life crisis... Information the modern man needs at his fingertips.'¹⁶³ In this instance, Smith demonstrates an ill-informed and superficial performance, which amounts to little progress in relation to equality. It can also be argued that this represents a patriarchal view, which diminishes issues which are important to women. As Firestone comments:

the problem becomes political...though man is increasingly capable of freeing himself from the biological conditions that created his tyranny over women and children, he has little reason to want to give that up.¹⁶⁴

As Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana confirm, 'inequality and oppression are deeply woven into the tapestry of ... life...large disparities exist on

¹⁶¹ The term is issued to describe the shame Neena has brought on the family through identifying as a lesbian 'it used to come in longer sentences i.e., *You have brought nothing but shame...or My niece the shameful...*but now because Alsana no longer had the time or energy to summon up the necessary shock each time, it had become abridged to Niece-of-Shame, an all-purpose tag that summoned up the general feeling'. Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 63.

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 64.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 145.

¹⁶⁴ Firestone, *The Dialectic Of Sex*, p. 18.

measures of income, wealth, education, housing, occupation and social benefits'.¹⁶⁵

Smith both portrays and challenges this position in *White Teeth*, along with demonstrating societal change through an array of characters with differing feminist perspectives.

Representation is of equal importance to Evaristo who explores gender performance in detail, along with providing an ongoing narrative relating to the influence and power of the patriarchy. As a middle-class woman, Penelope 'decided she would go to college, marry a man who idolized her, become a teacher and have children'.¹⁶⁶ Whilst Evaristo aligns Penelope's ambitions for equality to those outlined by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, she explains that they fail to materialise. Motherhood presents compromises, illustrating that the aspired performance of her gender role, is not entirely achievable:

she was beginning to feel quite side-lined from the greater scheme of things...the various cultural revolutions erupting globally, including the women's liberation one meanwhile, she was knee-deep in kiddie poo and vomit.¹⁶⁷

Evaristo further suggests that the pursuit of equality does not always receive endorsement from men. Like Smith, she employs irony to portray Phillip, Penelope's husband, initially claiming that he is 'in touch with modernity... a New Man'.¹⁶⁸

Evaristo subsequently reveals his true nature, he is misogynistic and controlling, holding patriarchal views in respect of gender roles, especially in relation to motherhood. Penelope:

raised the issue of returning to her job as a teacher with him, it's not like we can't afford a childminder

he replied that it was impractical to have two masters; a boss at work and a husband was he joking? Not by the look on his face.¹⁶⁹

Evaristo further comments on the conflicts that arise between second wave feminists and societal, patriarchal norms, again, highlighting the central issue of

¹⁶⁵ Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana, 'Critical Thinking About Inequality - An Emerging Lens', in *Feminist Theory Reader - Local And Global Perspectives*, ed. by Carole R McCann, Seung-kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun, 5th edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 108-116, p. 108.

¹⁶⁶ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 283.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 287.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 291.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 287.

homogenisation of women. As Kandiyoti goes on to explain, class and patriarchy are closely linked 'among the wealthier strata, the withdrawal of women from non-domestic work is frequently a mark of status'.¹⁷⁰

Evaristo also uses Penelope to exemplify a rigid and judgemental approach to feminism. Penelope 'loathed that feminism was on the descent, and the vociferous multi-cultural brigade was on the ascent'.¹⁷¹ In this instance, she is commenting on the lack of and resistance to consideration of intersection, discrimination towards different cultures and the absence of solidarity. Interestingly, Evaristo later reveals that Penelope discovers her ancestry is 13% African.¹⁷² However, her views continue to represent those of white feminism.

Like Smith, Evaristo uses inter-generational dialogue to detail conflicting views within a post-colonial British setting:

I tell mum she married a patriarch
look at it this way, Amma, she says, your father was born male in Ghana in the 1920s
whereas you were born female in London in the 1960s
and your point is?
you really can't expect him to 'get you' as you put it
I let her know she's an apologist for the patriarchy and complicit in a system that
suppresses all women
she says human beings are complex
I tell her not to patronise me'.¹⁷³

Amma's mother can be perceived to be passively accepting of the patriarchy, justifying male power and privilege and defending gender role performance, by excusing behaviours as 'being of their time'. Evaristo is commenting on performance of gender roles, from a cross-generational perspective. She implies that Amma's mother's experience of oppression is more profound than Amma's, primarily due to her status as a first-generation immigrant. Consequently, this may result in greater acceptance on Amma's mother's part to perform the gender role prescribed

¹⁷⁰ Kandiyoti, *Bargaining With Patriarchy*, p. 62.

¹⁷¹ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 298.

¹⁷² Evaristo demonstrates that Penelope justifies this by explaining that 'her African ancestors were probably nomads roaming over the continent killing each other before the British demarcated regions into proper countries and thereby imposed discipline and control'. Ibid, p. 448.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p. 11.

by her husband, despite not fully agreeing with it. Evaristo also reflects shifts in attitudes towards gender and changes in feminist theory. As Strauss comments, 'she looks at gender roles and...attitudes towards patriarchy, feminism and sexual orientation...*Girl, Woman, Other* also mirrors the historical development of the different waves of feminism'.¹⁷⁴

Amma's conversation with her mother can be compared to her dialogue with her daughter Yazz, to identify similarities. Both conversations reflect differences in opinions that are indicative of shifts in feminist views and performance of gender roles between the second and fourth waves. Amma wanted her daughter to be free, feminist and powerful¹⁷⁵ but 'a year later Yazz was calling her a feminazi' when Amma 'dared suggest she lower her skirt and heels and raise the scoop neck of her top'. Evaristo is commenting that equality is conditional. Whilst Yazz is encouraged to develop her own views, she is also expected to adhere to a code of dress that deflects male attention and promotes modest. Arguably, this is an outdated expectation based on patriarchal norms and notions of femininity, which can also be considered 'being of its time'.

Evaristo positions Yazz as a spokesperson, but also employs her to critique performance activism. Yazz carries out actions for the purpose of appearing progressive or socially conscious, without little evidence of actively challenging oppressive systems or working towards structural change. Sincerity is therefore challenged, which questions the effectiveness of performative gestures within feminist movements. Yazz labels Courtney an 'honorary sistah with a *h*', a term that originated with black women which was now being appropriated (typical!) by those who weren't'.¹⁷⁶ In doing so, she reinforces such appropriation, implying that she has the authority to decide who can and can't be an honorary 'sistah'. She justifies her action by stating that 'being a sistah was a response to how we're seen as much as who we are, which actually defies simplistic reductionism'.¹⁷⁷ This presents as

¹⁷⁴ Strauss, *Intersectionality...*, p. 16.

¹⁷⁵ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 38.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 65.

contradictory, as the term 'sistah' is usually used for purpose of endearment and unity, by African/ American women.

Like Smith, Evaristo considers the politics of representation, identifying that the person is political. Her character Carole expresses a desire to be like 'one of the privileged of this world who take it for granted that it's their right to surf the globe unhindered, unsuspected, respected'.¹⁷⁸ Carole understands her propensity for marginalisation as a woman of colour, taking action to ensure that this does not affect her status, value and privilege in life. She therefore performs within a life that she chooses, which whilst self-engineered, could be seen to lack authenticity: 'she would fit in, she decided'¹⁷⁹ and 'amended herself to become not quite them, just a little more like them'.¹⁸⁰ Carole both modifies and anglicises herself, speaking in received pronunciation. This can largely be attributed to her professional setting and status as Vice President of a major bank:

her first day on the job she was expected to be as groomed as her counterparts on American television...women who miraculously spent their working day wearing bondage-tight skirts and vertiginous, destabilizing heels which made their feet look bound.¹⁸¹

Carole wears a patriarchal uniform to fulfil the gender role expectations that relate to her profession, which are further perpetuated by the media. It can be perceived that Carole's decision to conform is deeply rooted in her fears regarding potential further marginalisation and the repercussions that accompany this. As a teenager, she made a firm decision to avoid becoming a school dropout or a 'baby-mother,' despite experiencing significant trauma, resulting from a gang rape.¹⁸² As Strauss notes, Carole has 'determination to break with this tradition' paired with the 'ability to overcome these intergenerational routines of marginalization'. It can also be contended that Carole has achieved a key feminist objective, by obtaining a position which has historically been occupied by men.

When considering performance, one could content that any form of feminism, despite its limitations, may be regarded as beneficial to some extent, if it advocates

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 119.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 134.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 137.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 140.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 128.

for greater equality and rights for women. I maintain therefore, that the characters presented by Evaristo, including Carole, are all 'bad feminists'.

Difference

Difference is not limited to race or ethnicity, but extends to sexuality, gender, class, social status and other factors such as disability. It should be noted that there are some essential characteristics that define the experience of the woman; essentialist perspectives for example, as discussed by Simone de Beauvoir imply that there are universal experiences that transcend others. She explains that 'clearly, no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex' and that a woman is 'nothing other than what a man decides'.¹⁸³ It can be argued that essentialising categories such as 'woman', reinforce and promote stereotypes, limiting the understanding of diverse experiences. However, it can also be said that essentialising categories can be useful for addressing specific forms of oppression faced by women. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak¹⁸⁴ takes a cultural relativist stance, emphasising the importance of respecting and valuing diverse cultural practices and beliefs even if they conflict with western feminist ideals. This presents the challenge of navigating cultural differences while continuing to advocate for gender equality and women's rights.

Both Smith and Evaristo explore these points, promoting a more inclusive feminism that amplifies the voices and addresses the needs of women from different socio economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. As Strauss summarises:

with its representation of the intersectional experience of women of different ages, multicultural back grounds and diverse sexual orientations, *Girl, Woman, Other* can be considered as one of the foundational literary texts of what we may see as a fourth wave of feminism, currently gathering momentum.¹⁸⁵

Smith and Evaristo survey the complexities of female sexuality and desire, making reference to lesbian feminism. As Elise Chenier explains, 'lesbian feminism was the

¹⁸³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex (Extracts From)* (Great Britain: Vintage, 2015), p. 5 -7.

¹⁸⁴ She explains in more detail in 'Righting Wrongs'. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Righting Wrongs', in *Indian Political Thought: A Reader*, ed. by Aakash Singh and Silika Mohapatra (Routledge, 2010), pp. 523-581.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 16.

dominant ideology among politicized lesbians during the 1970s and 1980s'.¹⁸⁶ She goes on to add that 'based on the premise that lesbianism and feminism were inextricably linked, the two words were often hyphenated'.¹⁸⁷ In *White Teeth*, Smith critiques female attitudes and taboos relating to same sex relationships, within a range of cultural contexts. In doing so, she demonstrates changes in attitudes that take place from the 1970s to the late 1990s, whilst highlighting varying levels of both discrimination and social acceptance. Joyce Chalfen states she is not 'a homophobe',¹⁸⁸ however, she has difficulties accepting gay women:

It wasn't that she disliked them. She just couldn't *comprehend* them. Joyce understood why men would love men; she had devoted her life to loving men and she knew how it felt.¹⁸⁹

She wasn't offended by it, she just couldn't see the *point*.¹⁹⁰

Through Joyce, Smith demonstrates the prevalence of internalised sexism (or misogyny), which occurs when women hold prejudiced views or display discriminatory behaviour towards other women. They may lack empathy and compassion, exhibiting homophobic attitudes towards other women, but not to men. Such actions perpetuate gender inequality and hinder solidarity, creating factions. Joyce is also used to demonstrate how women can perpetuate western models of patriarchy, by conforming to traditional male/ female relationships and/ or marriage.

Smith comments on homosexuality from a female viewpoint, influenced by male oppression. Alsana has some degree of choice and control in relation to her marriage, but ultimately it is founded on patriarchal domination, at least within the public sphere. She states that she 'cannot believe homosexuality is that much fun. Heterosexuality certainly is not'.¹⁹¹ Smith also notes the absence of female desire for either sex, resultant from a culture of subjugation and lack of intimacy within an arranged marriage. In contrast, Neena openly declares herself a lesbian and explores her desires, earning the title 'Niece of Shame'.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁶ Elise Chenier, 'Lesbian Feminism', *GLBTQ*, 3 (2015), p. 1.

¹⁸⁷ Chenier, *Lesbian Feminism*, p. 1.

¹⁸⁸ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 348.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 348.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 348.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 285.

¹⁹² Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 63.

Here, Smith demonstrates discrimination between women within the extended family, based on difference emerging from sexual preferences. Alsana who is more traditional and subsequently more oppressed, sees women desiring other women as shameful; thus, projecting her own shame regarding intimacy, onto her niece. Potentially, Alsana sees sexual preference as a choice, in line with prevalent societal misconceptions. As Clarke argues, 'to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture...is an act of resistance'.¹⁹³

Evaristo further contributes to this discussion, by examining the concept of political lesbians, who are defined by Clarke as 'resisting the prevailing culture's attempts' to be kept 'invisible' and 'powerless'.¹⁹⁴ Penelope states that 'women became political lesbians years ago, choosing to have sexual relationships with women because they'd had enough of sexist men'.¹⁹⁵ Although Penelope challenges patriarchal structures, her perspective reflects a misunderstanding that leads to discord between groups of feminists and is also representative of Friedan's anti-lesbian stance. Within the capacity of her role as President of the National Organization of Women (NOW) Friedan refers to 'advocates for the inclusion of lesbian issues in NOW's platform as a "lavender menace."'¹⁹⁶ Evaristo implies that Penelope is unable to empathise with oppression that she does not experience. One of the key themes identified in *Girl, Woman, Other* is the understanding that sexual desire and attraction between women has always existed. However, these inherent instincts have been oppressed by patriarchal structures. The institution of heterosexual marriage, along with societal expectations regarding gender role fulfilment and associated notions of stigma and shame, play a significant role in shaping behaviour. This phenomenon may lead to coerced heterosexuality, a situation in which many second wave, white feminists were complicit. Lesbianism should not be understood as an act of resistance or a conscious choice; it is essential to acknowledge the natural and intrinsic desires that exist within the individual. As Clarke explains, 'any woman who calls herself a

¹⁹³ Clarke, *Lesbianism...*, p. 54.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 57.

¹⁹⁵ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 338.

¹⁹⁶ In response to Friedan Gloria Steinem argues that feminism is 'a revolution, not a public relations movement; and in 1971 NOW members voted overwhelmingly to affirm the legitimacy of lesbian oppression as a concern of feminism'. Chenier, *Lesbian Feminism*, p. 1.

feminist must commit herself to the liberation of *all* women from *coerced* heterosexuality as it manifests itself'.¹⁹⁷

Evaristo examines this concept more thoroughly through her character Bummi, who encounters the possibility of a sexual relationship with another women, reflecting her natural instincts:

she found herself longing to touch her new friend in ways that were not acceptable
she imagined them lying together as man and wife
and instead of it feeling bad, it felt right¹⁹⁸

Bummi swiftly dismisses her potential partner, not out of uncertainty, but rather due to the anticipated judgements of others and possibly the cultural and patriarchal factors that promote heterosexual romantic and sexual dynamics. Evaristo, like Smith examines shame:

the shame she had tried to suppress began walking towards her
she did not want to be that sort of person
it was not who she was¹⁹⁹

Evaristo demonstrates that this powerful emotion can override natural instincts. Bummi, like Alsana, conforms to a performance that she perceives to be appropriate and respectable, within the public sphere.

Evaristo deconstructs myths relating to lesbianism through drawing attention to separatism, toxic feminism and domestic abuse perpetrated by women. This is accomplished by incorporating a range of lesbian voices, each with unique experiences and oppressions. She also looks at difference perpetuated by non-binary and transgender status, highlighting tensions with groups of women who identify as lesbians. Whilst Clarke rightly notes that 'the black lesbian is coerced into the experience of institutional racism',²⁰⁰ Evaristo indicates that experiences of oppression relating to the black feminist lesbian are much more complex. Amma, Dom and Nzinga's inter-connected relationships are used primarily to identify multiple levels of difference, rather than an idealised collective experience. Amma is 'considered hot in the lesbian world her girlfriends du jour'... 'are two white women,

¹⁹⁷ Clarke, *Lesbianism...*, p. 54.

¹⁹⁸ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 178.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 180.

²⁰⁰ Clarke, *Lesbianism...*, p. 55.

Dolores and Jackie'.²⁰¹ Nzinga is a 'radical feminist separatist lesbian housebuilder'²⁰² and Dom 'a drinking, drug-dabbling, chain-smoking lesbian feminist carnivorous clubber'²⁰³ who agrees to 'a marriage of convenience with a gay man'.²⁰⁴ Through Nzinga and Dom's toxic relationship, Evaristo critiques separatist lesbianism, along with raising awareness of abuse in the form of control, coercion and toxic feminism. Clarke notes that 'the black lesbian has had to survive ...the psychic mutilation of heterosexual superiority'.²⁰⁵ It can be argued that all lesbians, irrespective of race or ethnicity may encounter such forms of superiority; a notion that Evaristo critically examines. Nzinga adopts stereotypically male characteristics, assuming lesbian superiority within a black lesbian relationship. She claims to take Dom 'on as an apprentice' showing her 'how to be fully womanist in a misogynist world'.²⁰⁶ When Dom eventually escapes the relationship, she chooses to attend 'a weekly counselling group for female survivors of domestic abuse'.²⁰⁷ Evaristo's depiction of such a relationship contrasts with the principles of cultural feminism, which as Chenier explains, are based on the 'conviction that rejecting male culture and identifying solely with women would lead to the end of all forms of oppression'.²⁰⁸ Evaristo argues that this is not always the case, that women are also capable of perpetuating abuse and oppression, despite experiencing it themselves. Consequently, Nzinga may be viewed as a representation of toxic feminism.²⁰⁹

Evaristo goes on to look at misandry. It is important to note, that whilst Amma and Dom are initially presented as black radical lesbian feminists, they do not always embody radical feminist stereotypes. Evaristo's depictions do not align to the archetypes of the 'man-hater' or separatist; rather, she demonstrates that Amma and

²⁰¹ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 51.

²⁰² *Ibid*, p. 84.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 85.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 108.

²⁰⁵ Clarke, *Lesbianism...*, p. 55.

²⁰⁶ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 110.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 109.

²⁰⁸ She also adds that Cultural Feminism is 'based on the belief that once unchained from patriarchy, women will emulate the utopian visions of anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist movements'. Chenier, *Lesbian Feminism*, p. 3.

²⁰⁹ Sean Galla explains this as a 'term used to refer to how most women react to gender-specific expectations and behaviors meant to keep them quiet, subservient, and submissive in the midst of male aggression and domination. It is also a term used to describe women who use their femininity to get privileges, and mask indirect confrontation using 'gentleness'. Sean Galla, 'Toxic Feminism - The Dangers It Poses To Men And How To Deal With It', *MensGroup.Com* <<https://mensgroup.com/toxic-feminism/>> [accessed 9 September 2024].

Dom have the capacity to distinguish men, both on an individual and collective level, from the patriarchy. Evaristo also explains that feminist stances can shift. Dom adopts an 'anti-men' stance, which is likely influenced by Nzinga's views and her personal experience of abuse, which paradoxically bears resemblance to patriarchal oppression. Amma challenges this shift in perspective:

I've always known you to like men, Dom, we even love those who are close to us, we might understand the patriarchy (thanks for telling me how it works by the way), but we see men as individuals, don't we? you were never separatist or misandrist, what's happened to you? ²¹⁰

Evaristo further asserts that 'feminism isn't about man-hating! It's about women's liberation, equal rights and freedom from limiting expectations and not about 'parroting the patriarchy'.²¹¹ This suggests that Evaristo advocates for, and supports inclusive feminisms that encompass everyone. However, as Stephen Heath notes, men find themselves in a challenging position. They have a 'necessary relation to feminism'²¹² but the relationship 'is an impossible one'. The relationship between men and the patriarchy is fundamental, and the system is viewed as a pervasive force of oppression against women. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie adds, 'the word feminist is so heavy with baggage'.²¹³

As Laura Bates notes, 'being a feminist means listening to a lot of really stupid arguments. It simply comes with the territory'.²¹⁴ Her intention, like Gay's, should not be taken literally. Instead, she seeks to highlight the complex dynamics of arguments within feminist discourse, the difficulties in attaining a cohesive position and the stagnation of societal progression concerning the fight against misogyny.

Evaristo employs the character Dom, to explore the complexities and intricacies present within trans feminist discourse. Key arguments centre around inclusion, self-identification, gender essentialism, transmisogyny and access to resources and

²¹⁰ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, pp. 102–3.

²¹¹ Ibid, p. 319.

²¹² Stephen Heath, 'Male Feminism', in *Men In Feminism*, ed. by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (Meuthen, 1987), pp. 1–32, p. 1.

²¹³ Her response is as she describes, 'tongue-in-cheek' but explains this as 'negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should be in charge, you don't wear make-up, you don't shave, you're always angry, you don't have a sense of humour, you don't use deodorant'. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 4.

²¹⁴ Laura Bates, *Misogynation* (London: Simon & Shuster UK, 2018), p. 1.

services.²¹⁵ Evaristo observes that whilst Black feminists, lesbian feminists and Black lesbian feminists face additional layers of oppression, transgender women can encounter discrimination from gender critical feminists, belonging to such groups:

another thing that bugs me is the trans troublemakers, you should have seen the stick I got when I announced my festival was for women-born-women as opposed to being women-born-men, I was accused of being transphobic, which I'm not...a man raised as a man might not feel like he's one but has been treated as one by the world, so how can he feel exactly the same as us?²¹⁶

Acknowledging the intersectionality of transgender women, along with lesbians, woman of colour and working-class women is crucial to discussions of gender identity. Advocates within the trans feminist movement stress the importance of self-identification, contesting the conventional notion that gender is inherently linked to sex assigned at birth. The biases faced by transgender women share parallels with those experienced by women identifying as lesbians. As Evaristo points out, there can be a lack of empathy and/or solidarity from cisgender women, who may regard trans identities as a matter of choice. Evaristo challenges this notion, explaining that 'being trans wasn't about playacting an identity on a whim'.²¹⁷

Trans feminists highlight the distinct experiences of transgender women, particularly focusing on the intersection of transphobia and misogyny, which is referred to as transmisogyny. They advocate for the recognition of these specific forms of oppression and stress the importance of addressing them within feminist movements. Kendall articulates that 'trans women are often derided or erased'.²¹⁸ Evaristo appears to agree with this perspective as she demonstrates through Bibi, who, after transition, experiences oppression due to gender identity, along with other intersections:

²¹⁵ As Craig McLean explains 'trans people in the UK can already transition fully into their identified gender, change official documents, and use bathrooms matching their gender identity. None of this is new. What was new in the mooted change to the GRA, however, was the proposal to allow trans people to self-identify as their adopted gender, rather than to have to go through the laborious process of obtaining a gender recognition certificate, which the government consultation had identified as problematic. This provoked a storm of controversy by many Gender Critical (GC) feminists'. Craig McLean, 'The Growth Of The Anti-Transgender Movement In The United Kingdom. The Silent Radicalization Of The British Electorate', *International Journal Of Sociology*, 51.6 (2021), pp. 473–82 (p. 474), doi:10.1080/00207659.2021.1939946.

²¹⁶ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 437.

²¹⁷ Ibid, p. 338.

²¹⁸ She adds that 'prominent feminist voices parrot the words of conservative bigots, framing womanhood as biological and determined at birth instead of as a fluid and often arbitrary construct'. Kendall, *Hood Feminism*, p. 2.

I learnt first hand how women are discriminated against, which is why I became a feminist after I transitioned, an intersectional feminist, because it's not just about gender but race, sexuality, class and other intersections which we mostly unthinkingly live anyway.²¹⁹

Critics of trans feminism argue that it perpetuates gender essentialism by prioritising gender identity rather than interrogating societal constructs surrounding gender.

They raise concerns about how closely gender identity corresponds with the feminist goal of eradicating gender-based oppression. As Emi Koyama explains:

Some feminists, particularly radical lesbian feminists, have argued trans women and men of benefitting from male privilege. Male-to-female transexuals, they argue, are socialized as boys and are thus given male privilege, female-to-male transexuals, on the other hand, are characterized as traitors who have abandoned their sisters in a pathetic attempt to acquire male privilege.²²⁰

Evaristo also considers non-binary gender identity, experienced by people of colour. Megan's mother repeats patterns of oppression based on gender²²¹ as she is intent on dressing 'Megan up for the approval of society at large, usually other females'.²²² Upon reaching adulthood, Megan transitions to Morgan and explains that from their perspective 'what makes most sense... is the concept of gender-free, being born female isn't the problem, society's expectations are'.²²³ As Caroline Sánchez-Palencia states, Evaristo draws attention to the 'crucial role race has played in the shaping and representation of transgender subjects'.²²⁴ The incorporation of non-binary gender within feminist discourse acknowledges the distinct experiences of those who face multiple forms of marginalisation, as exemplified by Morgan, who navigates both gender and racial discrimination. By validating non-binary gender identities along with racial considerations, feminism can strive to eliminate harmful expectations and negative stereotypes, thereby fostering a more inclusive society, which encourages individual self-expression and authenticity. As noted by Merve Sarıkaya-Şen:

Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* presents a transmodern, plural and inclusive cultural world that intermingles various cultures and respects otherness and difference

²¹⁹ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 323.

²²⁰ Koyama, *The Transfeminist Manifesto*, p. 84.

²²¹ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 307.

²²² *Ibid*, p. 308.

²²³ *Ibid*, p. 325.

²²⁴ Carolina Sánchez-Palencia, 'Feminist/Queer/Diasporic Temporality In Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2022, 29.2 (2022), pp. 316–30 (p. 320).

including, but not limited to, the lives of lesbian and gender-free black British women.²²⁵

Therefore, individuals such as Bibi, who identifies as a trans-feminist or Morgan, who identifies as non-binary, may be considered ‘bad feminists’.

Conclusion - We Are All ‘Bad Feminists’!

I argue that feminism is fundamentally individualistic, making it impossible to strictly conform to a single theoretical framework. As illustrated by both Smith and Evaristo, one can observe various tensions and instances of conflict, that arise even among marginalised groups of women whose experiences of oppression are unique. Several key concepts relating to difference have influenced the development of intersectional feminist theory and activism, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Smith explicitly states that she is ‘not here to represent anybody’, adding, ‘I barely represent myself. My job is to think about things and to express them in language...I want people to read me because I can write’.²²⁶ *White Teeth*, therefore, is perhaps best described as a social rather than a feminist novel, although it clearly delves into feminist themes, particularly concerning performance relating to gender roles and the dynamics of patriarchal oppression across varying cultural and class settings. As noted by Niklas, Smith takes ‘the family as the nucleus of society and topicalise[s] social, racial, religious, cultural, and gender politics at a grass roots level’.²²⁷ It is essential to recognise that Smith was in her twenties when she wrote *White Teeth* and the depiction of the United Kingdom she offers, although reflective of the era in which it was written, bears little resemblance to today. The evolution of feminist discourse has been significant; while there have been advancements in legislation and social views relating to gender, sexuality, equality and diversity, the journey toward true equality remains extensive. I argue though, that Smith’s feminist representations are crucial to and have significantly advanced

²²⁵ Merve Sarıkaya-Şen, ‘Reconfiguring Feminism: Bernardine Evaristo’s Girl, Woman, Other’, *The European Legacy*, 26.3–4 (2021), pp. 303–15 (p. 307)
<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epub/10.1080/10848770.2021.1898109?needAccess=true&role=button>>
[accessed 18 July 2023].

²²⁶ Allardice, *Zadie Smith...*, p. 5

²²⁷ Nicklas, *The Feminine Voice...*, p. 126.

discussions around intersectionality. In her subsequent novel NW, Smith delves into gender roles, feminism, and sexuality with greater complexity, and her recent essays continue to contribute valuable social commentary. Her approach, therefore, I argue is distinct to Evaristo's, but of equal significance.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo also articulates her perspectives to effectively advocate for intersectional feminism. Her stance reflects the principles of the fourth wave and aligns directly with Gay's concept of the 'Bad Feminist'. As Gay says:

Maybe I'm a bad feminist, but I'm deeply committed to the issues important to the feminist movement. I have strong opinions about misogyny, institutional sexism that consistently places women at a disadvantage, the inequality in pay, the cult of beauty and thinness, the repeated attacks on reproductive freedom, violence against women, and on and on. I am as committed to fighting fiercely for equality as I am committed to disrupting the notion that there is an essential feminism.²²⁸

The future trajectory of feminism, therefore, must recognise the overlapping forms of discrimination²²⁹ experienced by individuals, which include factors such as race, socioeconomical status, gender identity, and sexual orientation. As noted by Sarıkaya-Şen 'contemporary feminism seems to demand a large-scale transformation along the lines of the transmodern philosophy of relationality'.²³⁰

Notably, Smith, Evaristo and Gay do not tackle the oppression faced by women in relation to disability and/or neurodiversity; however, such intersections are equally important to feminist debate. In addition, it can be argued that in general, Black British male voices, along with perspectives relating to feminism are both underrepresented and misunderstood. As Derek Owusu notes, 'many Black British males are stuck in this tragedy of being unseen and silent'.²³¹ Evaristo challenges this in her 2013 novel *Mr Loverman*, which looks at the experience of the gay, black, immigrant, closeted male.²³² As she explains she 'has always been interested in

²²⁸ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. 317.

²²⁹ As Bates notes in 2018, that in the UK our 'senior judiciary is overwhelmingly dominated by white men; our criminal justice system remains institutionally saturated with prejudice...women make up less than a quarter of professors at UK universities and that, at the time of writing, no black academics have worked in senior management in any British University for the past three years'. Bates, *Misogynation*, p. xi.

²³⁰ Sarıkaya-Şen, *Reconfiguring...*, p. 312.

²³¹ Derek Owusu, 'Introduction', in *Safe - 20 Ways To Be A Black Man In Britain Today* (London: Trapeze, 2020), p. 3.

²³² Lucy Mangan, 'Mr Loverman Review – Magnificent TV That Will Tear Your Heart Open', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2024, section Television & radio <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/oct/14/mr-loverman-review-magnificent-tv-that-will-tear-your-heart-open>> [accessed 21 October 2024].

writing marginalised figures, to fill the silences in our society with fiction from underexplored demographics'.²³³

Ultimately, Evaristo, like Smith, advocates for a humanitarian perspective, which in turn encourages a feminism, or perhaps more accurately, **feminisms** for all:

For the sisters & the sistahs and the sistern
& the women & the womxn & the wimmin & the womyn
& our brethren & our bredrin & our brothers & our bruvv
& our men & our mandem & the LGBTQI+ members
of the human family.²³⁴

²³³ When challenged on main character Barry's sexist views, she replies 'they ask me how I can justify this when I am a feminist. My answer is that I don't impose my politics on my characters, although of course my politics underpin the themes of my novels'. Bernardine Evaristo, "'I Had A Crush On Him": Bernardine Evaristo On Writing Mr Loverman', *The Guardian*, 12 October 2024, section Books
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/oct/12/i-had-a-crush-on-him-bernardine-evaristo-on-writing-mr-loverman>> [accessed 21 October 2024].

²³⁴ Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*, p. Dedication.

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