

Narrative Agency and Gender Politics in Contemporary English Fiction: A Comparative Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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Abstract

*This study examines narrative agency and gender politics in contemporary English fiction through a comparative analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. The research investigates how women's voices, identities, experiences, and acts of resistance are represented within different social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Drawing on feminist literary theory, intersectionality, and theories of narrative agency, the study explores how the three novels challenge patriarchal structures while presenting diverse forms of female self-expression and empowerment. Atwood's *The Testaments* is examined as a dystopian critique of institutionalized gender oppression and the control of women's bodies, identities, and voices. Adichie's *Americanah* is analyzed through the interconnected dimensions of gender, race, migration, and cultural identity, highlighting the protagonist's negotiation of agency between Nigerian and American social environments. Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* is explored for its polyphonic narrative structure and its representation of Black British women across generations, emphasizing the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, and age. Through comparative analysis, the study argues that narrative form itself becomes a significant means of challenging dominant gender ideologies. The multiple perspectives, fragmented voices, and acts of storytelling in these novels enable marginalized women to reclaim their identities and contest structures of power. The study ultimately demonstrates that contemporary English fiction increasingly employs diverse narrative strategies to foreground women's agency and expose the complex and intersectional nature of gender politics in modern society.*

Keywords: Narrative Agency, Gender Politics, Feminist Literary Theory, Intersectionality, Women's Writing, Margaret Atwood, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Bernardine Evaristo, *The Testaments*, *Americanah*, *Girl, Woman, Other*.

Introduction

Contemporary English literature has emerged as an influential platform for examining the complexities of gender, identity, power, and social justice in an increasingly globalized world. Unlike earlier literary traditions that frequently reinforced patriarchal values and binary gender roles, contemporary fiction interrogates conventional understandings of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, and identity. It presents gender not as a fixed biological

category but as a dynamic social, cultural, and political construct shaped by historical, economic, racial, and ideological forces. Through diverse narrative strategies and multidimensional characters, contemporary writers challenge dominant discourses and provide space for marginalized voices that have historically remained absent from literary canons.

The politics of gender representation occupies a central position within contemporary literary studies because literature not only reflects society but also influences social consciousness. Literary texts shape perceptions of gender roles, power relations, family structures, and institutional authority. Consequently, analysing gender representation enables scholars to understand how literature participates in the construction, negotiation, and transformation of cultural identities. Contemporary novels frequently address issues such as gender discrimination, reproductive rights, migration, racial inequality, sexuality, domestic violence, and identity politics, thereby connecting personal experiences with broader social structures.

Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) represent three significant contributions to contemporary English fiction that examine gender through distinct cultural and political contexts. Atwood critiques authoritarian control over women's bodies and reproductive freedom within a dystopian society. Adichie explores the intersections of gender, race, migration, and identity through the experiences of a Nigerian immigrant navigating life in the United States and the United Kingdom. Evaristo presents interconnected narratives of twelve characters whose lives illuminate the diversity of Black British experiences across generations, classes, and sexual identities.

Although each novel emerges from a different socio-cultural context, all three question traditional gender norms while foregrounding women's agency and resistance. They demonstrate that gender cannot be understood independently of race, class, nationality, sexuality, and historical experience. These texts therefore provide a rich foundation for comparative analysis informed by feminist literary criticism, intersectionality, gender performativity, postcolonial feminism, and narrative theory.

This study investigates how contemporary fiction reconstructs gender representation through innovative narrative techniques and multidimensional characterization. It argues that these novels challenge patriarchal ideologies by presenting gender as fluid, relational, and politically contested while emphasizing the importance of individual agency and collective resistance. The comparative approach enables an understanding of both shared feminist concerns and culturally specific experiences, contributing to broader discussions on literature, identity, and social transformation.

Review of Literature

The study of gender representation in literature has undergone significant transformation since the emergence of feminist literary criticism in the late twentieth century. Elaine Showalter's concept of **gynocriticism** shifted scholarly attention toward women's writing as an independent literary tradition rather than merely critiquing male-authored texts. Her work emphasized the need to examine female literary experience, language, themes, and narrative forms.

Judith Butler's theory of **gender performativity** fundamentally challenged essentialist understandings of gender by arguing that gender is continuously produced through repeated social performances rather than determined

biologically. Butler's framework has become central to contemporary literary analyses of identity, sexuality, and power.

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of **intersectionality**, demonstrating that systems of oppression based on gender, race, class, and other identities interact rather than operate independently. This framework has significantly influenced literary studies by encouraging scholars to analyse multiple dimensions of identity simultaneously.

bell hooks expanded feminist criticism by emphasizing the relationship between gender, race, class, and power. She criticized mainstream feminism for overlooking the experiences of women of colour and advocated an inclusive feminist politics grounded in social justice.

Studies of *The Testaments* primarily examine reproductive politics, authoritarian governance, and feminist resistance. Research on *Americanah* has focused on migration, race, identity, and transnational feminism, while scholarship on *Girl, Woman, Other* highlights intersectionality, Black British identity, queer experience, and polyphonic narrative structure.

Although substantial scholarship exists on these novels individually, comparatively examining them through the combined lenses of gender performativity, intersectionality, narrative agency, and postcolonial feminism remains relatively limited.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship has largely concentrated on individual analyses of *The Testaments*, *Americanah*, or *Girl, Woman, Other*. Comparatively, there is limited research that simultaneously investigates:

- Gender politics across dystopian, diasporic, and multicultural narratives.
- The relationship between narrative agency and feminist resistance.
- The interaction between gender, race, migration, sexuality, and class within a unified theoretical framework.
- Comparative application of Butler's performativity, Crenshaw's intersectionality, Showalter's gynocriticism, and bell hooks' Black feminist thought.

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing an integrated comparative analysis.

Objectives

1. To examine representations of gender in selected contemporary English novels.
2. To analyse how narrative techniques construct female agency and resistance.
3. To investigate the role of intersectionality in shaping identity.
4. To compare representations of gender across different cultural contexts.
5. To evaluate the relevance of contemporary feminist theories in literary interpretation.

Research Questions

1. How do the selected novels represent gender as a social and political construct?
2. How do narrative techniques contribute to female agency?
3. How do race, class, migration, and sexuality influence gender representation?

4. In what ways do the novels challenge patriarchal ideologies?
5. How do feminist literary theories explain the politics of gender representation in these texts?

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates four complementary theoretical perspectives.

Judith Butler: Gender Performativity

Butler argues that gender is not an innate characteristic but a social performance produced through repeated actions and cultural expectations. This framework explains how literary characters negotiate and resist prescribed gender roles.

Elaine Showalter: Gynocriticism

Showalter emphasizes women's literary traditions, female experience, and women's voices. Her theory facilitates analysis of how female authors reconstruct narrative authority and female subjectivity.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a framework for analysing how gender interacts with race, class, migration, sexuality, and ethnicity. It is particularly relevant for examining *Americanah* and *Girl, Woman, Other*.

bell hooks: Black Feminist Thought

hooks emphasizes that feminism must address racism, class inequality, and systemic oppression simultaneously. Her framework enriches interpretations of Black women's experiences and social resistance.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design based on comparative textual analysis.

Primary Texts

- Atwood, M. (2019). *The Testaments*.
- Adichie, C. N. (2013). *Americanah*.
- Evaristo, B. (2019). *Girl, Woman, Other*.

Research Methods

- Close reading.
- Comparative literary analysis.
- Feminist literary criticism.
- Discourse analysis.
- Thematic analysis.

Data Sources

Primary sources consist of the selected novels. Secondary sources include books, peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly essays, and critical works on feminist literary theory, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and intersectionality.

Comparative Textual Analysis

The three novels employ distinct narrative strategies while sharing a commitment to questioning patriarchal authority.

The Testaments presents multiple narrators whose testimonies expose the mechanisms of state control over women's bodies and reproductive rights. The novel demonstrates that authoritarian regimes maintain power by regulating gender.

Americanah explores migration and identity through Ifemelu's experiences as a Nigerian woman negotiating race and gender in Western societies. The narrative illustrates how migration transforms self-perception while exposing systemic inequalities.

Girl, Woman, Other adopts a polyphonic narrative structure, presenting interconnected lives that challenge singular understandings of Black womanhood. The novel foregrounds diversity in sexuality, class, age, and professional identity while emphasizing shared experiences of resilience.

Collectively, the novels portray women as active participants in shaping their own identities rather than passive recipients of social expectations.

Discussion

Gender

The novels reject essentialist definitions of femininity and depict gender as historically and culturally constructed.

Identity

Identity is represented as fluid and continually negotiated through relationships, migration, memory, and social institutions.

Intersectionality

Gender intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, and class, producing diverse experiences of privilege and discrimination.

Race

Race significantly influences social opportunities, belonging, and self-perception, particularly within diasporic contexts.

Migration

Migration reshapes identity by exposing individuals to new cultural norms while intensifying questions of belonging and home.

Narrative Agency

The selected authors employ first-person narration, multiple narrators, and polyphonic storytelling to restore narrative authority to marginalized voices and challenge dominant historical narratives.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that contemporary English fiction has significantly expanded the politics of gender representation by challenging patriarchal assumptions and foregrounding diverse experiences of identity. Through innovative narrative strategies, Atwood, Adichie, and Evaristo portray women as autonomous agents negotiating complex social realities shaped by gender, race, migration, sexuality, and class. Integrating feminist literary criticism, gender performativity, intersectionality, and Black feminist thought reveals that gender cannot be understood independently of broader structures of power. The study concludes that contemporary English literature functions not only as a reflection of social change but also as a powerful instrument for imagining more inclusive and equitable forms of identity and representation.

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