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Study of gendered ageism in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

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Abstract:

*This study examines the nuanced portrayal of gendered ageism in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, focusing on how gendered ageism creates disharmony in families and societies. Drawing on Robert N Butler's concept of "ageism", the research investigates how literary narratives, as exemplified in the characterization of Penelope and Shirley, challenge marginalization through gendered ageism. A close reading of the novel through the lens of available literature about gendered ageism shows that it disparages a person's abilities thanks to unjustified discrimination based on chronological age. Evaristo's word images of the causes and effects of gendered ageism impact the reader's mind, showing how gendered ageism ensnares its prey and what its side effects are. Analytically, the findings reveal the true triggers behind the discrimination that manifests itself in employment, working capability, general treatment, and distribution of shared resources. The research throws its laser light on the fact that gendered ageism entraps mostly the female sex, ensnaring both the aged and the young. This research underscores how fiction can act as a vehicle for social critique, challenging deeply ingrained prejudices based on gender and age while advocating for more inclusive roles for women in societies without any bias.*

Introduction

In the post-modern era, the mutual harmony in joint families and societies is shivering, shattering and collapsing, which sprouts the disharmony that attracted the attention of scholars to coin the new term ageism. Ageism refers to discrimination or prejudice based on a person's age, and gendered ageism specifically addresses how age-related biases intersect with gender. Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* offers a rich and diverse portrayal of various women from different generations and backgrounds, providing an excellent platform for examining the impact of ageism on women's experiences. Evaristo's novel serves as a compelling literary canvas that brings this issue to light. Through her multidimensional female characters, Evaristo critiques the societal norms that marginalize ageing women. By embedding their narratives within the broader social and historical fabric, the novel provides a rich exploration of how gendered ageism functions within families and societies, affecting relationships, self-worth, and economic independence. By delving into this study, the research aims to shed light on the specific challenges faced by women from youth to the end of life and how these challenges intersect with their gender identity.

When the irony "she is a woman" subtly shifts to "she is a woman of a certain age", it turns gender study into gendered ageism, a form of double discrimination that disproportionately affects women in various aspects of life and social status. In today's world, contemporary popular prejudice plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of the ideal female image. "It is very unlikely that anyone would perceive a forty year old woman as a crone" (Danylova et al., 2024, p. 81). A woman's body – its shape and colour, often beyond her control – unfortunately becomes a focal point for her exploitation, vulnerability, and degradation. It establishes certain negative stereotypes that become deeply embedded in public consciousness. The novel's unflinching exploration of ageism – particularly gendered ageism – offers a necessary and timely intervention into contemporary discourse. The text dismantles conventional binaries of youth and wisdom, beauty and decay, and relevance and redundancy, allowing women of all ages to narrate their lives in their own terms. By examining these layered experiences through the lens of gendered ageism, the study seeks to contribute to broader conversations in feminist and literary studies, emphasizing the urgent need to reframe how gendered ageism is perceived, represented, and politicized in literary narratives and beyond.

Literature review

Gendered ageism and its intersection with literature have gained significant attention in recent years. However, when it comes to specifically analysing gendered ageism in Bernardine

Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, the existing literature remains limited. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the novel's portrayal of gendered ageism and its significance within the broader context of ageism. Existing literature on ageism predominantly focuses on the experiences of older adults, often overlooking the gendered dimensions of age-related biases. Scholars such as (Palmore 2005 and 2015) and (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2017 and 2018) have examined ageism from a social and psychological perspective, highlighting the negative stereotypes and discrimination faced by older individuals. Similarly, feminist scholars like (Calasanti 2016), (Rochon et al. 2021), (Román et al. 2022), and (Ross K. 2023) have explored ageism within the context of gender inequality, emphasizing the unique challenges faced by older women. (O'Neill & Ní Léime, 2022) and (Reul et al. 2023) consider that vulnerable, passive, and dependent older people are discriminated from active and productive older people. (Makita et al. 2021) have the view that the media also plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of ageing and attitudes toward older adulthood.

Thus, there is a clear research gap regarding the specific analysis of gendered ageism in literary works. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo provides a compelling opportunity to explore gendered ageism in literature due to its diverse cast of female characters and their unique journeys through different stages of life. By examining the interactions between age and gender within the novel, this research aims to fill the gap in the literature. Most studies on gendered ageism primarily focus on aged people, often overlooking its impact on the young. This study, through evidence, establishes that ageism does not victimize the elderly only; the young, too, are not exempt from its effects.

The term "ageism" was coined in 1969 by Robert N Butler. Butler defines ageism as "prejudice by one age group against another age group" and it is "a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender" (Butler, 1969, p. 243). Van den Bos Kees defines ageism as "the tendency to be prejudiced against older adults and to negatively stereotype them" (Kees, 2009, p. 199). The aged often find themselves excluded from their families and societies. Addressing the issue of ageism in its various manifestations, the WHO Report on Ageism provides a compilation of instances of interpersonal ageism, which pertains to interactions involving two or more individuals: "Interpersonal ageism includes disrespecting or patronizing older and younger adults, ignoring their points of view in decision-making or avoiding contact and interactions" (WHO, 2021, p. 7). Many of these stereotypes may be perpetuated by institutions, often leading to interpersonal and intrapersonal ageism. "Institutional ageism refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions

that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals on the basis of their age” (WHO, 2021, p. 5).

The discrimination between two or more persons is interpersonal; when the discernment works in one person’s mind, reflecting his/her various statuses according to chronological age, it is intrapersonal. These discriminations generally manifest themselves in employment, working capability, general treatment, bodily figures and distribution of shared resources. Thanks to the varied notions about ageism in different civilizations, the old in society feel that they have been demoted from a position of great prestige, demanding respect, authority, and reverence, to one of almost no power, commanding minimal respect. The young feel suppressed, tortured, and devoid of freedom. It is not so that the concept of ageism makes its victim the aged only. The young are not the victors of ageism. Ageism isn’t just about the way society treats older people; it’s about how it discounts the potential of young people, too. Both parties have their own notions: “older generation has RUINED EVERYTHING and her generation is doooooomed” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 39). Further, the two illustrations make it crystal clear that both parties are victims of ageism; Bummi’s response to her mother, “You are too old for such things” (to understand) (Evaristo, 2019, p. 137), and most of the teachers “ignored Shirley, who was too young to notice” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 235). When ageism intentionally victimizes only a particular sex, it becomes gendered ageism. Generally, ageism victimizes both sexes, but the present article focuses on the female sex.

In the world’s major mythology, the highest powers are often attributed to female deities, yet paradoxically, the phrase “Frailty, thy name is woman” persists (Raffel, 2003, p. 21). Woman has been deliberately cast into the stereotype of weakness – an identity that she neither had, nor has, nor will have. Gendered ageism is more fatal as it deepens the sardonic label of “frailty” on women by adding another layer of discrimination, making them even more detrimental. In reality, the birth of a female is always a twin one. With the birth of a girl child, there always takes the birth of her twin, the “unjustified discrimination” that worsens with ageing. Some social rituals are reserved for the occasion of the birth of a male child only. Many discriminations run throughout life, whether it is a matter of nutrition, clothes, education, honour, freedom, decision-making power, etc, as these are evident from the pages of Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*. Shirley speaks on such discrimination: “The truth is that hierarchies of power and privilege won’t disappear, every historian knows this, it’s innate to human nature and inherent in all societies in all eras” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 208). But how can a woman – who is a creator, the first teacher, and the emblem to generate the mother tongue – be reduced to a symbol of fragility? A female, the creator and nurturer of civilization, “a female with a capacity

to voice and express,” has been made a victim of the patriarchal system. (Patni and Sharma, 2025, p. 93)

Not all women choose to get married and have children, and those who do are more than capable of juggling a family and a profession. However, their true abilities and capabilities are always neglected in patriarchal societies. Shockingly, females are discriminated against by the perception that females under 25 aren't yet serious about their jobs and that females between 25 and 50 are preoccupied with their families, so they are half-devoted to their jobs. They are penalized for being a woman and for being a woman of a particular age, which is a one-two punch. As a girl, she ought to submit and seek her father's shield, as a married woman of her husband, whom she always worships as a god, whether he is a drunkard, gambler, or criminal and as a widow of her son. Thus, throughout their lives, they are prone to gendered ageism. They are always fighting “a very worst sort of war in their own kingdom of family and society. A war that made them adore their conquerors and despise themselves” (Tiwari and Sharma, 2018, p. 274). But the truth is that “Wives are young men's mistresses, companions for middle age, and old men's nurses” (Chaudhuri, 1999, p. 60). And “It is often seen, that bad husbands have very good wives” (Chaudhuri, 1999, p. 61), so a man becomes the supremo in the patriarchal system. About this situation, I reflect EC Stanton's (et al.,) views that “I consider women a great deal superior to men. Men are physically strong, but women are morally better ... It is woman who keeps the world in the balance” (Stanton 1881, p. 59). But women are discriminated against “all over the globe in the name of culture or religion” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 39).

The discrimination between a girl-child and boy-child by their parents is very clear from Amma's concern: “Amma explained, blowing smoke into the already thickening fug of the room my three older brothers became lawyers and a doctor, their obedience to the expectations of our father meant I wasn't pressurized to follow suit his only concern for me is marriage and children” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 16). On this situation I reflect JS Mill's views that a woman is “actual bond servant of her husband” (Mill, 2006, p. 36). Bryson's views are very similar to that of Mill's: “When a married woman was effectively her husband's possession, there seemed to be a clear analogy between the situation of women and slaves” (Bryson, 2003, p. 31). The role of women in the home is always subordinate and undervalued. Traditional family structures designate men to be the family head while assigning women to support tasks such as housekeeping and childrearing, as Penelope ponders painfully, “who (husband) still insisted she remain at home as it was the natural order of things going back to time immemorial: me hunter – you homemaker me breadwinner – you bread-maker me child maker – you child raiser”

(Evaristo, 2019, p. 286). “They are fated to bear with all-pervading and all types of ordeals”, and “traditional family institutions”, at that (Sharma and Agrawal, 2017, 14).

The novel *Girl, Woman, Other* intricately weaves the narratives of 12 herstories. It encompasses a rich tapestry of experiences spanning various dimensions, including age, era, culture, class, sexuality, gender, race, occupation, ambition, politics, migration, family dynamics, relationships, British geographies, and countries of origin. This expansive exploration unfolds over more than 120 years, providing a comprehensive and diverse portrayal of the characters’ lives and their interconnectedness.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing textual analysis to examine the representation of gendered ageism in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*. By closely analysing the novel’s narrative structure, character development, and thematic concerns, the research investigates how age and gender intersect to shape societal perceptions and experiences of aging, particularly for women. Drawing on feminist and age studies theories, the study critically engages with how Evaristo challenges stereotypes associated with aging and femininity. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and critical essays, are consulted to contextualize the findings within broader literary and sociocultural discussions. This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of how the novel critiques and redefines conventional narratives surrounding aging and gender.

The research focuses on the causes and effects of the globally boiling concept of gendered ageism via discussion of the text with the reflections of the scholars on feminism and gendered ageism. The discussion works out the theoretical opinions on ageism and its application to life situations through the herstories told in the novel and the implications thereof. The discussion analyses ageism and its related prejudices and stereotypes that exist in society and how they affect people’s perceptions of ageing. To clarify the concept of gendered ageism with its causes and effects, its insidious presence in everyday life is critically discussed. So, here are several narrations of the characters of *Girl, Woman, Other* put into analytical discussion. The analytical discussion is worked out on the grounds of contrast and comparison with the reflection on the causes and effects of ageism in real-life situations.

Findings

The study reveals a layered and deeply embedded narrative of gendered ageism that transcends simplistic categorizations of age and identity. Evaristo dismantles prevailing

societal assumptions by positioning both younger and older women within a web of intersecting biases – where age becomes not just a number but a determinant of visibility, voice, and value. Characters like Shirley and Penelope demonstrate how women are doubly burdened – first by gender, then by age – and subjected to institutional scepticism, diminishing respect, and even erasure in both personal and professional spheres. The novel gives form to subtle linguistic patterns and social cues that reinforce ageist ideologies, such as dismissive references to physical appearance or mental acuity. Yet, Evaristo’s text does more than portray marginalization; it resists it. Through a tapestry of voices, the narrative reclaims space for older women to be complex, sexual, intellectual, and resilient. The findings underscore that gendered ageism operates both overtly and insidiously, often masquerading as concern or tradition but ultimately reinforcing hierarchies of worth. The result is a compelling call to reassess the language, structures, and perceptions that continue to shape how women – particularly those aging – are viewed and valued in contemporary culture.

Given the focus on gendered ageism within this research, it is evident that there remains ample scope for further investigation of the umbrella term intersectionality. There is potential for deeper analysis in comparison with other fields, such as race, sexuality, colourism, cultural relevance, etc. Not all the herstories are covered in the present study. Additionally, it underscores the relevance of exploring other research domains that could apply to various topics while emphasizing the significance of representation in addressing these concerns.

Discussion: Visualization of gendered ageism

In *Girl, Woman, Other* ageism emerges not merely as a marginal undercurrent but as a persistent thread woven through the characters’ lived experiences. Crucially, it is not restricted to the elderly but casts its shadow across all age groups. The narrative subtly captures the everyday expressions that reinforce age-based assumptions – phrases like “too young to understand” or “too old for that now” slip by unnoticed in casual speech, yet they carry significant weight. These seemingly innocuous remarks reflect a broader cultural tendency to define individuals by their position along the age spectrum. The novel exposes how ageist attitudes appear across different social contexts – be it in jokey anecdotes, advertisements, or even in formal and informal talks.

Through Shirley’s account, Evaristo brings into sharp focus the entrenched biases young women face – particularly in school, the very institution revered as sanctuaries of knowledge in almost every society! The portrayal of a young female educator navigating a professional landscape riddled with gendered ageism is both unsettling and illuminating. Shirley, full of

ambition and academic promise – of being “not a good teacher but a great one” – confronts subtle yet corrosive dismissals that chip away at her identity and confidence (Evaristo, 2019, p. 218). Her vibrant hope, motivated attitude, and aspirations are gradually undermined by prejudices that tie authority and competence to age and gender. The disillusionment that follows is not born of personal inadequacy but of a system that quietly resists change and clings to outdated hierarchies.

In this horrible situation, Shirley’s long-desired field of teaching proves not to be an easy job, but it “brings more problems than solutions” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 215). The temple of education turned into such a place where all types of criminal activities and abuses have taken root. The grim observation that in school, “there were increased sexual assaults on girls and more girls becoming mothers when they were still children themselves” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 215) does more than chronicle a disturbing societal failure – it underscores how gendered ageism operates insidiously at the intersection of youth, vulnerability, and power. Society’s inability – or unwillingness – to listen to and protect young female voices reveals an enduring discomfort with female agency, particularly when it manifests in those who are still developing their sense of self. The consequence is a cruel erasure, where victims are dismissed and justice is deferred. Gendered ageism, in this context, is not merely a matter of workplace bias or cultural stereotype – it is complicit in silencing, violating, and failing generations of girls before they have even had a chance to fully become.

However, as a new and young teacher, Shirley forms a bond with her colleagues who are also in the early stages of their careers. Unfortunately, they are depicted as a marginalized group within the school, overshadowed by the more senior staff members. The majority of those responsible for organizing the weekly assemblies are male, except Penelope Halifax who “is the only woman to speak up at staff meetings where everyone sits in a large circle in the assembly” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 206). The power politics of older teachers suppress the young teachers “when Shirley and the other women try to interject, their less assertive voices struggle to be heard, are cut off by the alphas before they’ve even finished making their points” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 206). One would anticipate Penelope to serve as a powerful female role model for the younger teachers, but surprisingly, that is not the case. Penelope also has suffered from the darting arrows of both gender discrimination and ageism in the same school:

the older boys who were disrespectful and the bullish male teachers who still behaved as if they owned the planet the type who used to patronize her when she’d started the job years ago, to the point of tears who never included her in their conversations except to look at her tits. (Evaristo, 2019, p. 299)

But a certain solution always lies in both sympathizing and generalizing “she (Penelope) realized then that what she’d hitherto thought personal to her was, in fact, applicable to many women, masses of them” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 286).

It is not so that gendered ageism triggers the opposite gender, but it intentionally triggers the same gender also. Shirley holds such strong disdain for Penelope that she goes as far as contemplating, “she should be forcibly retired, in Shirley’s opinion out with the Oldies.” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 206)

This conflict between Shirley and Penelope highlights the challenges that can arise due to ageism in a professional workplace. From Shirley’s perspective, Penelope symbolizes a remnant of the past, while Penelope views Shirley as a symbol of youthful inexperience and naivety. “I really think you need more than two terms on the job before you challenge someone with fifteen years’ experience” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 207). Penelope becomes infuriated when young women like Shirley challenge her, as she believes they should direct their dissent towards “the male chauvinist pigs” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 289) within the assembly, rather than towards her, the only other woman who dares to speak her mind.

Ageism and its effects on the psyche

Ageing etches itself not just upon the body but into the psyche, where once-stable self-perceptions begin to waver. The mind mirror becomes an unkind historian, reflecting a face that feels both familiar and estranged, while the echoes of past admiration grow fainter. In this quiet betrayal, the self turns against itself, mourning what was while resenting what is, caught in the inescapable tension between memory and time. The intrapersonal reflections about ageing effects on the psyche become sharper.

Bernardine Evaristo masterfully explores the silent battle of intrapersonal animosity that unfolds with ageing, a theme poignantly encapsulated in various characters’ quiet lament. The erosion of youthful beauty becomes not merely a physical transformation but an existential crisis, where the self fractures under the weight of negative reflection about the self. In the textual lines below, there is a sense of lamentation for Penelope’s physical changes, such as the loss of her waistline and the youthful buoyancy of her breasts. “She mourned the waist that wouldn’t return to its original measurement, and she mourned the lost bouncy ball quality of her breasts how devastatingly beautiful she was” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 294).

Penelope’s mourning is twofold: she grieves not only the tangible – her reshaped waist and the deflation of her once-elastic breasts – but also the intangible, the vanishing reverence

that once reaffirmed her desirability. The cessation of beauty exposes an unsettling truth: admiration had woven itself into the fabric of her identity, and its absence leaves a void that gnaws at her sense of self-worth. Ageing, in this light, does not merely alter the body; it destabilizes the mind, compelling one to reckon with an identity no longer mirrored in the gazes of others.

Ageism finds poignant expression in Penelope Halifax's inner monologue, where the weight of societal expectations corrodes personal confidence and self-worth. Her reflection – “Her thighs, chunky and pock-marked, were no longer the streamlined contours of old, her breasts weren't the pumped-up balloons of her youth, and she'd spend sleepless nights wondering if she should dye her lady garden for him” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 453 – lays bare the internalized pressures that compel women to mourn their aging bodies as if they were betrayals. This form of ageism does not require external voices; it festers quietly within, shaped by a lifetime of gendered conditioning that equates value with youth and desirability. Penelope's internal dialogue reveals not vanity but vulnerability – an anxious desire to remain legible in a world that dismisses women once they drift beyond certain aesthetic ideals. Her turmoil encapsulates the psychological toll of gendered ageism: a crisis of identity where natural bodily changes are not embraced as symbols of lived experience, but rather, as deficits to be disguised. Such moments in the novel invite readers to confront how deeply entrenched narratives of worth continue to echo within the self, long after the voices that first imposed them have gone silent.

Here, Penelope's ideas offer an additional perspective for understanding the situation. However, as the reader delves into Penelope's story, they catch glimpses of her animosity towards younger teachers intensifying as she grapples with her own ageing process. Furthermore, Penelope's experiences of being changed into an aged person only contribute to her growing aversion towards the young and new. The “Constant anxiety about aging” pushes her into nervousness, anger and social detachment (Danylova, T. et al., 2024, p. 81) .

Evaristo deftly captures the silent war that ageing and motherhood wage upon a woman's sense of self, particularly when desire – once effortless – begins to wane. Penelope's admission that “sexual chemistry failed to ignite” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 293) thanks to her “lactating breasts” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 294) after their first child was born is more than just a reflection of physical exhaustion; it is an unspoken confrontation with a body that no longer feels like her own. The transformation brought on by childbirth – her “lactating breasts” marking a shift from lover to mother – unsettles her identity, making her question whether she still possesses the allure that once came so naturally. In response, she does not seek to reclaim herself as she is now but rather as she once was, attempting to mould herself into a “younger

version of herself” like “nineteen-year-old Melissa”, one of Giles’s clients (Evaristo, 2019, p. 297). Her fixation on Giles’s client is telling – not just of jealousy but of self-directed animosity, an unspoken belief that the younger, untouched version of herself is the only one worthy of desire as women “adhere to sexist and ageist beauty standards” (Hesse, 2023, p. 78). Here, Evaristo exposes the cruel paradox of ageing: the body changes, but the need for validation remains, leading to a futile pursuit of an illusion that time has already rewritten.

Thanks to the fear of ageism, the characters adopt a habit where the idea of honour has been quietly retired, replaced by a cultural fixation on surface allure. The elegance once associated with formal clothing gives way to the casual comfort of tights, and the reverence once attached to being a “gentleman” or a “cultured lady” is now eclipsed by the more fleeting appeal of being “hot” or “sexy”. Identity is too often curated not through depth but through curated glances and stylised quirks – “funny in a silly way” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 118) – as if charm lies solely in levity. Shirley’s portrayal encapsulates this tension perfectly: “still divinely sexy in a dykey-bikey way, even in her fifties, also being swamped by a group of drooling fangirls” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 429). Here, desire persists, but so too does the reduction of complexity to image. In this brave, bewildering new world, the terms of admiration have shifted; dignity is no longer a cultural currency. What lingers instead is a spectacle-driven ethos, one that dazzles but rarely asks us to listen beneath the glitter.

Bernardine Evaristo exposes the corrosive self-doubt that ageing can inflict, particularly on women navigating professional spaces that increasingly prioritize youth over experience. After the interviews, Shirley imagines the rejection letters as “unfortunately for you we decided to make an offer to someone younger, prettier, slimmer, less experienced, more enthusiastic, gullible and pliable as opposed to a bitter old workhorse such as yourself” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 217). Shirley’s imagined rejection letter is not merely a projection of external biases but a stark manifestation of intrapersonal animosity – her own internalized fears and resentments turning against her. The juxtaposition of “younger, prettier, slimmer” with “bitter old workhorse” reveals the brutal dichotomy society imposes, reducing women to their perceived utility and aesthetic appeal rather than their competence. What makes this moment particularly poignant is not just the implied institutional ageism but the way Shirley has absorbed and weaponized it against herself, pre-emptively internalizing rejection before it arrives. Ageing, then, becomes not just a biological process but a psychological battleground where one must fight to maintain self-worth in a world that values the fresh and flexible over the seasoned and self-assured. So, the aged behave like adolescents “in a quite ridiculous manner in the middle of the turmoil of young, sexy bodies” lest they should be ignored (Bustamante, 2023, p. 23).

Bernardine Evaristo lays bare the unsettling reality of ageing's psychological toll, particularly in the sphere of intimacy, where self-perception becomes both armour and adversary. As Shirley "noticed she wasn't as pally with Lennox as before so she wore sexy underwear, looked younger than her age." (Evaristo, 2019, p. 241) Shirley's realization that her dynamic with Lennox has subtly shifted – her presence no longer holding the effortless allure it once did – sparks an internal reckoning that manifests in desperate countermeasures. By donning "sexy underwear" and striving to "look younger than her age", she does not merely seek to entice Lennox but to resist the creeping erosion of desirability that time insidiously imposes. This performative act of youthfulness reveals a deeper unease: the fear that ageing does not merely alter how one is seen but how one is valued, even in the most personal spaces. The tragedy is not just in society's relentless prioritization of youth but in the way, Shirley internalizes it, waging a quiet war against her own reflection, where the past version of herself becomes both an aspiration and an impossible standard.

Evaristo juxtaposes generations through the stark contrast of ageing bodies and youthful vitality, exposing the quiet insecurities that time etches onto the flesh. The image of "bellies spilling over belts" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 344) carries more than just physical weight – it is a testament to years lived, experiences gathered, and a body that has softened under the gravity of time. Yet, "the younger ones wearing outfits so tight you can see their hearts beating" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 344). Young people like their wearing clothes like a second skin, their outfits clinging so tightly that their very life force seems visible, pulsating, undeniable. Here, the reflections remind the words of Stillinger "strongest and tenderest friendship cannot exist between a man and a woman without a sensual relation" (Stillinger, 1971, p. 137).

Bernardine Evaristo lays bare the ruthless commodification of women's worth, exposing how ageing becomes a slow erasure in a world that equates visibility with desirability. The observation that "if women are young, beautiful and fuckable, they get the coverage, whether they're musicians or paediatricians" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 448) is not merely a critique of media bias but a reflection of a deeper societal truth – where a woman's relevance is tethered to the fleeting currency of her youth. Whether she is a musician commanding a stage or a paediatrician saving lives, her professional identity is not enough to grant her the same recognition if she lacks the effortless allure of youth. This skewed perception does not just silence older women in public discourse; it seeps into their self-perception, forcing them into an exhausting struggle to maintain a version of themselves that the world deems worthy of attention.

Ageing, then, becomes not just a biological process but an existential reckoning, a confrontation with one's own diminishing cultural value. The insidiousness of this reality lies in how deeply it infiltrates the psyche, making women internalize their own fading visibility as a personal failure rather than a systemic injustice. It is why so many fight against time, clinging to beauty rituals, cosmetic interventions, or the simple desperation to remain seen. The tragedy is not that women age but that society trains them to fear it – as if growing older is not an accumulation of wisdom and experience but a slow descent into irrelevance.

Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other* may be critically labelled as the harbinger of the fourth wave of feminism with a bitter attack on the concept of gendered ageism that fuels the current global feminist movement colouring it with gendered ageism that was also powered by the publication of Evaristo's *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* in 2021. Her wit seems unfathomable when one considers such brilliant and realistic remarks. "be a person with knowledge not just opinions" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 210) then one can comprehend that "gender is one of the biggest lies of our civilization" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 328) and "... ageing is nothing to be ashamed of especially when the entire human race is in it together" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 11). Really, one should be ashamed of the "psychologically raped" status of almost every female (Evaristo, 2019, p. 292).

Ageism is an important concept which can be tracked throughout Evaristo's novel. This concept is not limited to the aged, as it also sheds light on discrimination faced by both the young and the old. The novel features a diverse range of characters, spanning from teenagers to centenarians. However, Evaristo's emphasis on portraying a realistic experience of ageing with magic realism is particularly noteworthy, as it challenges prevalent prejudices and stigmas associated with getting older. Literature plays a significant role in shaping one's understanding of ageism. While the representation of characters from various age groups is important, it can also perpetuate stereotypical and negative attitudes. The study "Ageing in Literature" works out some of the stereotypical illustrations of aged people as "[t]he aged are pictured... in passive roles" and "senility is considered to be synonymous with older age" (Dodson & Hause, 1981, p. 5).

Breaking barriers and celebrating diversity

Through 12 herstories, Evaristo tries to break the barriers of ageism, demonstrating that every individual, regardless of age or gender, possesses wisdom, creativity, and a voice that deserves to be heard. By celebrating the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the female community, Evaristo invites readers to challenge ageist stereotypes and recognize the immense

potential that exists across all age groups. Through different stories, Evaristo challenges stereotypes and fosters a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by women across different generations. By amplifying their voices, she invites readers to confront their own ageist beliefs and celebrate the diversity of experiences and contributions that women of all ages bring to society. Evaristo challenges societal norms by depicting older and younger women as multidimensional characters with unique herstories to tell. By focusing light on the gendered aspects of ageism, she encourages readers to confront their own biases and re-evaluate the value assigned to women based on age and gender.

Reading the novel evokes a paradoxical blend of delight and distress – a kind of pleasing anxiety that lingers long after the final page. Each line pulses with vitality, often prompting a smile of recognition or admiration, while others land with a weight that bruises the conscience. The sharp wit of the narrative offers glimpses of hope, of social healing through humour and insight, while its raw, unfiltered truths expose wounds that, if ignored, risk festering into societal decay. As educators, the text compels us to pause and reckon – with dampened eyes and heavy hearts – at the reality it reflects.

Some of the female pupils were harassed by male teachers who groped them, and honestly, did anybody take it seriously when girls complained that this male teacher had stroked her breasts, or that male teacher had smacked her on the bottom, or another male teacher had put his hand up her skirt? (Evaristo, 2019, p. 300)

Moments that depict the violation of innocence and the betrayal of trust by those meant to protect and guide are not just literary devices; they are urgent calls to consciousness. Such atrocities must never be normalized or brushed aside. One owes it to one's shared future to ensure these shadows do not stretch further into the generations to come.

Evaristo aims to challenge stigmatized stereotypes that perpetuate the fear of ageing and unrealistic expectations associated with different age groups. Evaristo elucidates the changed perspective on the world and the concept of gender and age, influenced by her first-hand experiences. In the novel, characters try to lead vibrant and fulfilling lives regardless of their age, effectively conveying the message that life remains vibrant and engaging beyond any particular milestone. As Evaristo states, "Life is an adventure to be embraced with an open mind and loving heart" (Evaristo, 2019, p. 112).

Now, it has become a cliché that old women inevitably suffer from dementia. Evaristo counters it: "The older women should be *compos mentis* and not suffer from dementia, which has become something of a cliché in contemporary culture" (Evaristo, 2021, p. 143). I

personally reflect with wet eyes that “the domain of immorality and crime” against females should be stopped altogether for the sake of our golden society (Sharma and Sharma, 2010, p. 61). One should adore females and appreciate them without pulling a face. There should not occur such morality-marring remarks “now here she is, a bit older, greyer, fatter” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 437) but “the female form should be accepted in all its different shapes and sizes” (Evaristo, 2019, p. 299) to secure a brighter future for our civilization. Then the Indian Vedic concept *yatra naryastu pujoyante ramante tatra devata* (‘Where women are honoured, there the deities are pleased’) (Manusmriti 3.56) can be visualized as the golden era of our civilization in the form of a holy world family.

Conclusion

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernardine Evaristo does not simply narrate the lives of Black British women; she holds a mirror to society’s quiet cruelties, particularly those shaped by gendered ageism. Through a polyphonic narrative that spans generations, professions, and personal histories, the novel compels readers to confront the prejudices that often remain unspoken yet deeply entrenched. Evaristo refuses to let age determine relevance or capability; instead, she allows her characters to evolve, stumble, reclaim, and redefine themselves across time. This study has shown how ageing women in the novel are not sidelined but brought to the foreground, exposing the social scripts that often silence them. Whether it is the mocking undertone in everyday language, the institutional biases against younger educators like Shirley, or the reduction of elder women to clichés of frailty, the text interrogates these assumptions with a deft but unwavering hand. Ultimately, Evaristo’s work demands a reimagining – not only of how we perceive age but also of how literature can challenge cultural narratives that bind women to diminishing roles as they age. It is in this resistance that her novel finds its greatest strength, and it is here that the call for a more inclusive, dignified societal outlook truly begins.

It is a sobering reflection on how young women are too often seen as inexperienced and older women as outdated – both unjustly sidelined in public and private spaces. This age-based bias, particularly when tied to gender, corrodes not just individual worth but the cultural and intellectual fabric of society. Its presence in educational and professional spheres silently undermines growth and equality. The narrative does not merely expose this injustice; it urges an ethical reckoning. One is called upon to bear witness, to resist complacency, and to acknowledge the human cost of such bias. Only by valuing voices regardless of age and gender

– and understanding their significance in shaping one’s collective path – can one begin to restore dignity where it has long been denied.

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