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The Feminist Dialogics of Black Womanhood: Maya Angelou and Bernardine Evaristo

Ms. Aradhana Jyala
Research Scholar,
Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,
SSJ Campus, SSJU, Almora &
Assistant Professor (Guest),
Dept. of English,
LSM Campus, Pithoragarh,
Soban Singh Jeena University,
Uttarakhand, India.
aradhana.jyala@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9346-3535
Prof. A S Adhikari
Professor and Research Supervisor,
Dept. of English,
DSB Campus,
Kumaun University, Nainital,
Uttarakhand, India.
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Abstract:
This study examines the texts of Maya Angelou and Bernardine Evaristo from the frame of reference of Black feminism, particularly their attempts to redefine Black womanhood through their reinvention of narrative technique. In light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical perspective regarding notions such as polyphony, heteroglossia, and novelization, this paper examines how both Angelou and Evaristo defy the conventional monologic nature of literary genres in their respective literary works. By examining elements of linguistic hybridization, the multi-voiced structure of narration, and other stylistic features, this analysis reveals how both authors challenge monolithic portrayals of Black women in literature. While Angelou employs the autobiographical *I* in order to link individual trauma to Black American history, Evaristo uses fusion fiction to represent the lived experiences of vibrant and diverse Black Britons. Their experiments with narration are a defiance of racialised and gendered displacement and establish the literary means to develop a resilient subjectivity. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the practice of linguistic plurality is not merely a literary style but a means of self-definition.
Keywords: Polyphony, Heteroglossia, Black Womanhood, Maya Angelou, Bernardine Evaristo.

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Introduction

Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in her article "Speaking in Tongues", describes how the writings of Black women operate on the basis of an "interlocutory" and "dialogic" nature, whereby they navigate the intersections of race and gender by engaging in an internal dialogue with multiple facets of self (61). Within the context of this study, this literary dialogue becomes the precise structural device through which Angelou and Evaristo engage with the idea of intersectionality outlined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Since "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism," Crenshaw contends that "any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). In the narratives of Angelou and Evaristo, these intersecting identities do not exist in the abstract but rather must resist what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the "matrix of domination," a system that determines "how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized" (18). It is within this expanse of "otherness" that Black women writers confront this matrix, addressing not only the manifestations of the oppressive system but also the complexities of their diverse subjectivities (Henderson 61).

Both Maya Angelou and Bernardine Evaristo belong to this space. For Angelou, the autobiographical *I* connect personal trauma with collective memory, creating the polyphonic space in which the voices of the oppressed are validated. Evaristo, on the other hand, employs conscious hybridization of *fusion fiction* that captures the fragmented and multifaceted identities of modern-day Black Britons and diasporans. Both the testimony form of autobiography practiced by Angelou and the choral, multi-voiced narratives written by Evaristo are engaged in subversion as they simultaneously articulate racialised, gendered, and sexualized subjectivities. Though much academic work has demonstrated how Angelou resists the traditional genre of autobiography (Braxton; Stover), and contemporary discourse

emphasises Evaristo fracturing the single, homogeneous representation of Black British people (Ledent; Upstone), this study addresses an important comparative lacuna by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical framework, which has been historically utilised for the decoding of marginalised voices (Bauer and McKinstry; Henderson), to connect both authors through their common linguistic discourse of resistance. Through an understanding of Bakhtin's concept of *polyphony*, which refers to the "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 6), and *heteroglossia*, which is described as a "diversity of social speech types" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 262), this analysis uncovers the structural foundation of their texts. Furthermore, by employing Bakhtin's theories of *hybridization*, which is described as the mixture of two social languages "within the limits of a single utterance" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 358), *double-voiced discourse*, which expresses "simultaneously two different intentions" (324), and *unfinalizability*, the idea that a subject "is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 59), this analysis reveals the way Angelou and Evaristo create a Black feminist literary tradition that is both dialogic and resistant.

Even though the Bakhtinian approach is widely identified with the traditional prose novel, this analysis provides reasons to use it across genres in reference to his structural understanding of the novelistic form. Michael Holquist states that for Bakhtin the novel is not simply a fixed canonical genre, but rather "whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* xxxi). This anti-canonical force "will not permit generic monologue" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* xxxi). Bakhtin argues that when rigid genres are subjected to this force, they become "novelized": they become more flexible, insert "a certain semantic openendedness," and renew their language "by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 7). Thus, the process of novelization is not a submission to foreign standards, but rather a "liberation from

all that serves as a brake on [its] unique development" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 39). Both Angelou and Evaristo have harnessed this novelistic force to liberate their respective forms from the chains of monologism. Angelou novelizes her autobiographies through the use of the distinct voices of her community without fusing them, surpassing the monologic voice of typical life narratives. Like Angelou, Evaristo uses hybridization in order to transcend the monologism of poetry in her verse novels, such as *Lara* and *The Emperor's Babe*.

Orchestrating the Autobiographical *I*: Novelization and Polyphony in Maya Angelou's Memoirs

Maya Angelou, through her multi-volume autobiographical series that includes *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013), novelizes the traditionally monologic genre of conventional autobiography and converts it into a polyphonic space. Polyphony, as Bakhtin notes, allows for multiple voices to coexist without one being silenced or fully subsumed by the authorial *I* (*Problems* 12-13). By means of this novelistic force in her memoirs, Angelou ensures that the people from her past do not become one-dimensional reflections of her memories. Instead, they express a multitude of conflicting ideologies, and she presents these views without committing any of her characters to a singular moral stance. One of the central polyphonic clashes in Angelou's work is between her two maternal figures. First, there is the pragmatic, extremely religious Grandmother Annie Henderson (Momma) residing in the Jim Crow South. When Maya defies a white clerk out of "principle" (Angelou, *Gather Together* 97), Momma slaps her, hitting home the brutal reality of domestic terrorism: "You think 'cause you've been to California these crazy people won't kill you? . . . Ain't nothing to protect you and us except the good Lord and some miles" (98). Angelou does not frame Momma as being too cautious but rather grants her the full, unmerged

ideological weight, which Momma rightly views as a necessity for survival in the South. Vivian Baxter (Angelou's mother), conversely, embodies secular, aggressive independence. When Maya is beaten by her boyfriend, Vivian organises a rough crew of pool players to rescue Maya, telling them, "Break the son of a bitch down. My baby's in there" (Angelou, *Mom & Me* 85). Her voice injects a radically different kind of ideology into the story, one that believes in militant self-defence and the need for self-protection, actively opposing Momma's philosophy of stoic endurance. In this context, Vivian makes her point to Maya by not allowing her to suffer silently: "People will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially Negro women . . . If you haven't been trained at home to their liking tell them to get to stepping" (Angelou, *Gather Together* 135). When Vivian speaks of Black women specifically being targets of exploitation, she reflects the lived reality of Crenshaw's intersectionality, affirming that their oppression cannot be dismantled by addressing race or gender in isolation.

Furthermore, when Maya contemplates being a sex worker to support her child, Vivian responds with stark moral relativism: "If you want to be a whore, it's your life. Be a damn good one. Don't chippy at anything. Anything worth having is worth working for" (Angelou, *Gather Together* 32). Momma and Vivian allow Angelou to devise a rich polyphonic counterpoint that reveals two fundamentally opposed survival mechanisms to navigate the matrix of domination Collins identifies in America. More importantly, she develops them not as "objectified images" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 39), but as living consciousnesses that have an element of "unfinalizability" (53). In this way, since neither of these maternal worlds is finalized or dismissed by the narrator, they function as examples of "autonomous discourse, pure voice" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 53).

These unfinalized worldviews echo in the narratives of the criminal world, especially in Bailey's understanding of his self-destruction. When Maya attempts to rescue him from the brink of addiction in a heroin den where he is surrounded by his illicit trade, he vehemently

rejects her saviour ideology, stating, “This is my life. I want you to go home . . . I’m a fence. I sell hot goods to people who want bargains. I’m not hurting anybody but myself” (Angelou, *Mom & Me* 182). Angelou validates his perspective with full philosophical weight rather than reducing him to a mere cautionary tale. In Bakhtin’s theory, Bailey possesses the “final word about himself,” refusing to be defined by Maya’s objective view of him (Bakhtin, *Problems* 53). Later, when Maya becomes involved with an older gambler and pimp, L.D. Tolbrook, he manipulates her through reverse psychology, stating, “I don’t think my life is worth a nice woman…giving up that much of herself” (Angelou, *Gather Together* 166). This act of feigned unworthiness is meant to make Maya realise that sacrificing her body to pay his debts is the greatest proof of her love.

Instead of employing a monologic voice to critique the act, the mature author constructs what Bakhtin describes as a double-voiced discourse, where there is expression of “simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 324). Through this orchestration, the story is able to capture both the older narrator’s retrospective, critical irony and the immediate, naïve voice of young Maya as she begins to periliously absorb the world view of Tolbrook. Consequently, the young Maya assures Tolbrook that “Love is blind” and that sex workers have “great integrity because they are doing it for a purpose” (Angelou, *Gather Together* 166-67). This juxtaposition of the romantic innocence of Maya and the predatory machinations of Tolbrook operates as “upheavals on the surface of the unruly elements of social heteroglossia” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 326). Through these encounters, Angelou shows how the developing *I* of the autobiography keeps shaping itself in response to voices it meets and thus stays “internally dialogized” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 46).

In addition, there is a deep dialogic connection between the innocent, sensitive perception of young Maya and the thoughtful, self-realised tone of the adult narrator, Angelou. It results in an internally dialogic narrative discourse, wherein both past and present versions of the author coexist in the story. A clear example of such double-voicedness is a scene in which young Maya finds herself in the shocking and muffled confusion caused by the horror of her childhood abuse. Here, the older, cognizant narrator intervenes and brings a retrospective clarity to the trauma: "The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot" (Angelou, *Caged Bird* 84). In this way, Angelou engages with the naïve little girl she used to be, to give the critical psychological explanation she could not grasp when she was eight.

Angelou strategically employs a phenomenon which scholar Johnnie M. Stover dubs a "Black woman's *mother tongue*" as a subversive, heteroglossic tool to dismantle established literary forms (Stover 6). Rather than a mere regional dialect, Stover describes this method of communication as "a combination of words, rhythms, sounds, and silences that women have encoded with veiled meanings," serving as an "attitude of resistance" that uses irony and deflection to subvert traditional, white-male narratives (Stover 7). This *mother tongue*, viewed from a feminist dialogics perspective, becomes the particular linguistic means by which Black women resist the matrix of domination by appropriating and subverting the dominant structure of language under white, patriarchal hegemony. Though heteroglossia, as defined in Bakhtin's theory, is the presence of different speech types, languages, registers, and dialects that coexist within the same text (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 262), it is Angelou who consciously engineers this socio-linguistic stratification. Through hybridization of these different linguistic terrains, she portrays the socio-economic and racial landscapes of mid-century America, creating a dissenting space against white supremacist hegemony.

Heteroglossia in Angelou's early autobiographies draw attention to the conflict between formal education, regional dialects, and marginalised vernacular languages. When Maya poses a question to her dancing partner in a Mexican cantina using formal Spanish learned at school, she mentions the linguistic dissonance: "'Dónde está mi padre?' I asked my dancing partner. My formal Spanish must have sounded as pretentious to the ears of the paisano as 'Whither goeth my sire?' would have sounded to a semi-literate Ozark mountaineer" (Angelou, *Caged Bird* 251). Through Maya's recognition of the pretentious nature of her speech, the text demonstrates a double-voiced discourse; the mature writer utilizes parody to emphasize how institutional language isolates the individual from his or her immediate environment. In *Gather Together in My Name*, the linguistic diversity extends into sub-cultural codes. The older travelling hustlers, such as Papa Ford, employ very specific slang to express their philosophy: "Them geechees can't live without swamp seed" (Angelou, *Gather Together* 14). This vernacular becomes a site of resistance to standard English language and its conventions, hence creating an autonomous cultural identity. Alternatively, Angelou captures the harsh, uneducated drawl of a racist white clerk from Stamps as he asks Maya: "Whakin I dew fer yew?" (92). Angelou avoids reducing these different dialects to mere devices of style. Instead, she intentionally manipulates them to reveal how hierarchies are formed within social and racial stratification based on sound. Since she does not translate or standardize these various dialects, the narrative evolves from a simple documentation of heteroglossia into an active hybridized conflict between socio-linguistic worlds.

Angelou illustrates the friction between the language used by different generations and regions in *Mom & Me & Mom* through Momma, who reprimands her more urbanised grandson, Bailey, in a very distinct Southern vernacular: "Junior . . . you been downtown showing out? Don't you know these white folks will kill you for poking fun of them?" (7). Here heteroglossia is deliberately weaponised to illuminate the contrast between the urban assimilation of Bailey

and Momma's linguistic survival tactics. The linguistic diversity is further amplified through the depiction of Angelou's multiethnic origins by incorporating the distinct speech patterns of her grandparents: a grandfather who had a "heavy Caribbean accent" (Angelou, *Mom & Me* 1), and a grandmother who spoke with a "German accent" (2). Through the inclusion of varied speech types, Angelou crafts a hybridized linguistic lineage that challenges monolithic Black American history. In *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou uses vernacular as a mode of social criticism. She portrays the marginalised African-American community using its own linguistic tradition to interrogate the socio-economic status of poor whites with the following expression: "'You been white all your life. Ain't got no further along than this? What ails you?'" (Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin'* 118-19). Through this subversive use of dialect, the vernacular serves to disrupt white privilege, making marginalised speech a tool of double-voiced racial criticism. Furthermore, there is also a clear contrast between official state discourse and oral tradition, which Angelou illustrates by comparing her ancestors, who were "illiterate when their fellow men were signing the Declaration of Independence", with the vibrant dialectal tradition preserved in spirituals like "Deep River, My home is over Jordan" (*Singin' and Swingin'* 219). By placing these spirituals on par with the founding documents of the nation, Angelou shows how the Black oral tradition is not one of illiteracy but a parallel, enduring, and unfinalized tradition.

Architecting *Fusion Fiction*: Stratification and Unfinalizability in Bernardine Evaristo's Narratives

According to Bakhtin, novels are unique in their ability to assimilate heteroglossia, given their flexibility in accommodating other genres such as letters, poetry, diaries, and journalistic prose within their form (*Dialogic* 32-33). Evaristo's work exemplifies this structural flexibility even further by novelizing the conventionally monologic form of poetry.

By blending the sprawling narrative scope of her novels with the spatial, rhythmic and associational field of poetry, she successfully distances herself from the conventions of both. She uses this hybridized form of verse-prose, frequently referred to as *fusion fiction* or the *verse novel*, to produce texts that orchestrate an internal dialogism to articulate Black women's subjugation and resistance within the matrix of domination.

In her experimental verse novels *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), Evaristo harnesses this novelized verse form to rewrite forgotten histories. In *Lara*, the poetic episodes function as independent voices within a larger ancestral chorus, enabling the story to flow fluidly across spatial and chronological boundaries to construct a diasporic polyphonic novel. The xenophobia of Grandmother Peggy, seen when she cautions her daughter that she will "ruin [her] life / by marrying a . . . darkie" (Evaristo, *Lara* 69), operates independently alongside the survivalist spirit of the Nigerian Taiwo and the radical anti-colonial stance of the Irish Caitlin. This allows Evaristo to assign voices that are autonomous and unfinalized to characters who would otherwise be enemies or whose socio-political spheres would be poles apart. Evaristo shifts the linguistic register from one ancestor to another by employing dialect, foreign languages, and historical vernaculars, to effectively represent one hundred and fifty years of geographical and cultural migration as fundamentally hybridized. For instance, the immigrant German-English of great-grandfather Louis, seen when he complains he must "vurk like pig in schob" (Evaristo, *Lara* 85), interacts dynamically with the Irish Gaelic speech patterns of Emma, such as her reference to "Sasanach words" (32). Beatrice's language, which includes regional exclamations like "Eeeh," colloquialisms such as "lovey" and "soppy," and the deliberate use of provocative racial slurs, breaks down Lara's insular linguistic environment (Evaristo, *Lara* 127-29). This conscious arrangement of socio-linguistic difference (heteroglossia) establishes the foundation for the ideological diversity (polyphony) required to accurately map the intersectional experience of Black women within the regions of Britain.

The Emperor's Babe takes this linguistic hybridization a step further through the contestation of the exclusivity of the Western epic genre. The world of Zuleika, a Nubian teenager living in Roman Londinium in 211 AD (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 9-13), is described using an anachronistic mixture of Latin, Cockney rhyming slang, Scottish pidgin, and contemporary American colloquial speech. This hybridization, as opposed to simple code-switching, works as a double-voiced discourse that deconstructs the mystique surrounding the conventional classical canon. The clash between the ancient high-status language and modern urban vernacular helps Evaristo generate a heteroglossic space that asserts the recognition of Black people in ancient Britain. For example, Zuleika incorporates Latin grammar with contemporary London youth vernacular through expressions like "Zuleika bloody goody-two shoes est" (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 5) and "futuo-off" (10), whereas enslaved Valeria uses a distinct Scottish dialect: "Oor hame was a big roon stone hoose" (57). This is not merely about linguistic style; it is about double-voiced refraction, whereby the language of the empire is subverted through the voice of those marginalised. The clash of languages obliterates historical distance, compelling the ancient world to speak through the dialects of modern disenfranchisement. Beyond this linguistic synthesis, a polyphony of marginalised voices protests the ideological foundations of the empire. For example, Venus, a transgender bar owner, disrupts multiple axes within the matrix of domination, particularly class and gender, by deconstructing the Roman patriarchy through an unapologetic, working-class realism, often puncturing Zuleika's romantic, poetic, and class illusions: "You've got to maintain it . . . Red is the new orange" (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 101). By allowing Venus's pragmatic survivalism to exist separate from the romanticism of Zuleika, Evaristo sustains a true polyphonic conflict of class ideologies, endowing Venus with an entirely unfinalized consciousness. Another instance is the addition of Hrrathaghervood, "The Authentic Pict," to Zuleika's poetry recital at her home (195). The Pict's anti-Roman and anti-Christian diatribe,

"There're only three groups of fowk I hate, / De Romans who're trying tae thief Scotland" (196), brings the ideology of the colonized into the very heart of the colonizer. By situating this dissenting, autonomous voice in an imperial Roman domestic context, Evaristo proves how the power of polyphony can disrupt the authoritative, monologic narrative of the empire and undermine it from within.

Evaristo's joint Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) paradigmatically demonstrates intersectional polyphony. As opposed to portraying Black womanhood in its monolithic or universal form, Evaristo deploys a plurality of marginalised voices to effectively represent the complexities of the issues of race, class, and generational difference. Crucially, this polyphony is constructed by the nature of the text itself: the lack of full stops and other punctuation makes the structure open-ended, unfinalizable and fluid, mirroring her disruption of society's binaries. In the novel, feminist issues, race and class are continually discussed by autonomous consciousnesses, and none of them is recognised as the absolute authorial truth. A prime example of this orchestration appears in the ideological struggle between Bummi, a hard-working Nigerian immigrant mother, and her daughter Carole, who has assimilated into the upper echelons of British society. Carole distances herself from her working-class background to win elite spaces and rejects the "boring ordinaries" (Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* 134). On the other hand, Bummi's worldview revolves around survival within the diaspora and pride in being Nigerian, which results in Bummi seeing Carole's success in her career and marriage to a white English man as an act of betrayal against their heritage (153). In the text, both these worldviews are positioned in a state of dialogical tension, leaving no space for resolution of either of the two characters' worldviews and providing justification for not only the immigrant mother's desire to preserve her culture but also the desire of the first-generation daughter to move socially upward. Truth is born between these characters through their dialogic interaction.

Evaristo, in this novel, develops speech diversity as a structural principle by deliberately stratifying the narrative through the highly individualized speech styles of her twelve protagonists to represent their social, ethnic, and generational identities. Bummi's internal and external monologues are heavily infused with Nigerian pidgin, spoken by the West African diaspora in London, as attested in lines such as "why you like to dey like cause so much wahala for me... I no sabi you at all" (Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* 153). Conversely, LaTisha's Black British working-class dialect is rhythmic, defiant and firmly rooted in her own particular social reality: "love, I is for immortal, F is for family, E is for eternal" (193). It carries the same narrative weight and significance as the academic jargon that Yazz uses, such as "media-whore," "take-down," and "court sycophants" (47-48), or even the formal, corporate English adopted by Carole. In this way, the text does not create a single, monologic narrative of *Black Britishness*, but rather an unfinalized, polyphonic network of dialogue, in which there are many equally valid realities and autonomous consciousnesses for the reader to negotiate.

The Serial *I* versus the De-centred *We*

The narratives of both Angelou and Evaristo exemplify the processes of dialogics as tools for destabilising monologic representations of Black women. However, this analysis reveals that these authors construct their subversion in fundamentally inverted ways. Angelou's narrative achieves polyphony through her use of the *serial I*, which acts as a *synecdochic I*. She is not merely recounting her personal history; rather, her mature and retrospective narrating *I* becomes a dialogic container, incorporating different speech genres of individuals like Momma and Vivian into her own voice. Through the juxtaposition of the standard literary English of the narrator with the vernacular of her working-class Black community, Angelou creates a double-voiced discourse. This linguistic hybridization enables Angelou's singular *I* to embody

the communal forms of resistance of her wider Black community as it navigates the "matrix of domination" (Collins 18). Additionally, Angelou actualises the *serial I* by resisting narrative closure in one single autobiography. Instead, she allows the narrative to continuously breach its own borders and spill across seven books, ensuring that her identity remains unfinalized.

Polyphony emerges in Evaristo's novels, as is seen in the analyses of *Girl, Woman, Other* and *The Emperor's Babe*, through the abandonment of the protagonist and the adoption of a *de-centred We*. This *We* is different from Angelou's *serial I*, in that Evaristo crafts it through the unfinalized syntax of fusion fiction. By stripping away traditional punctuation, including quotation marks and full stops, Evaristo eliminates the separation between the author's frame of reference and character consciousness, making double-voiced discourse possible. This very stylistic technique shapes the polyphony in the story: Bummi's Nigerian pidgin, LaTisha's working-class dialect, and Zuleika's anachronistic mix of Latin and Cockney are forced to exist in one text without any central narrator moderating them. This conflict of different voices within the text is a literary embodiment of the concept of intersectionality formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (124), as it proves that intersecting social identities cannot fit the monologic voice, but create a new dialogical form for feminist dialogue.

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