

# Exploring Intersectionality in Contemporary English Fiction: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Works of Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Bernardine Evaristo

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores how contemporary English fiction engages in intersectionality, particularly in the works of Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Bernardine Evaristo. "White Teeth" by Zadie Smith explores intersectional identities through the character Irie Jones' mixed-race heritage and struggle with cultural identity. In "Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit," Jeanette Winterson presents a story of a young lesbian growing up in a religious community that highlights the relationship between sexuality and religion. In "Girl, Woman, Other," Bernardine Evaristo presents Amma, a black lesbian playwright who exemplifies racial, gender, and sexual conflicts. A study examining religion, gender, and multiculturalism throughout the lives of the two families illustrated the tensions resulting from colonialism and multiculturalism. According to Winterson, gender and sexuality are shaped by social expectations in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit because of the clash between a strict religious upbringing and a queer identity. Throughout, Girl, Women, Others, and Evaristo explore how race, gender, and sexuality intersect among Black British women. This paper argues that these authors use their narratives to challenge traditional views of identity, demonstrating that race, gender, and sexuality are not isolated categories but are deeply interconnected. In conclusion, this paper focuses on how these works contribute to broader discussions of social justice and representation, emphasizing the importance of intersectional perspectives in understanding both literature and lived experiences..*

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Multiculturalism, Gender, Sexuality, Heteronormativity, colonial identity, Queer Identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of intersectionality has garnered significant attention in both academic and literary circles. First introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categories, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, which cannot be fully understood in isolation from one another. This paper examines how contemporary English authors incorporate intersectional frameworks into their work, focusing on the intricate relationships between race, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, the novels *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, and *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo offer powerful depictions of marginalized identities. These works shed light on the complex ways in which personal experiences are shaped by the overlapping dimensions of multiple identities, illustrating how each author explores and highlights these nuances in their storytelling.



## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Intersectionality has become an essential framework for understanding how different systems of power, such as patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity, intersect and shape people's experiences. Scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks have highlighted that race, gender, and sexuality cannot be examined separately, as these identities interact and compound in ways that uniquely affect marginalized individuals. In literary studies, this approach allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of characters and narratives, revealing the complexity of human experience.

The rise of intersectionality in literary criticism has provided scholars with new ways to revisit classic texts and interpret them from fresh theoretical perspectives. While feminist literary critics have long explored the role of gender in literature, intersectionality has widened the lens by considering how gender is influenced by race, class, and other intersecting factors. Contemporary authors like Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Bernardine Evaristo exemplify how intersectionality can be woven into modern English fiction, offering rich portrayals of characters whose identities are shaped by multiple, overlapping social forces.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study takes an in-depth look at three contemporary novels: *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, and *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo. Using the lens of intersectional theory, this study examines how race, gender, and sexuality are represented in these texts. By analyzing the way these authors depict characters shaped by a range of social identities, the research highlights the complexity of navigating intersecting social factors. Through this close reading, the study sheds light on the nuanced ways in which identity is formed and experienced in modern society.

## IV. ANALYSIS

### 1. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism and Identity

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith explored themes of identity and belonging, especially within the context of multiculturalism. The novel follows the intersecting lives of two families, the Iqbals and the Joneses, whose histories are shaped by immigration, race, and religion. These overlapping narratives reflect the complexities of British identity in the postcolonial era. Through the characters of Millat Iqbal and Irie Jones, Smith examined the struggles around race, religion, and gender. Millat wrestles with his Muslim identity, feeling torn between his heritage and the expectations placed on him by the British society. Irie, a mixed-race woman, faces the challenge of balancing her black identity with her place in British society. Smith's portrayal of these characters reveals how identity is fluid and deeply influenced by the legacies of colonialism, showing how personal and collective experiences are shaped by historical and societal forces.

### 2. Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: Gender, Sexuality, and Religion

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* follows the story of Jeanette, a young woman grappling with her sexuality while facing the strict expectations of her religious and family background. The novel delves into how gender and sexuality are influenced by societal and religious pressure. Jeanette's queer identity is shaped within the context of her working-class upbringing, and her relationship with her adoptive mother—a woman who strictly adheres to the oppressive gender roles of their evangelical Christian community—adds to the complexity of her journey. Winterson uses fragmented storytelling and biblical references to highlight the tension between personal desires and rigid expectations imposed by society. Through Jeanette's experiences, Winterson critiques both heteronormative and patriarchal systems that restrict freedom to express one's sexual and gender identities.

### 3. Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*: Black British Feminism and Intersectionality

*Girl, Woman, and Other* by Bernardine Evaristo is a thought-provoking novel that delves into the lives of Black British women, spanning multiple generations and offering rich tapestry of intersecting identities. Through twelve interconnected stories, the book addresses crucial themes like race, gender, sexuality, and class, revealing the complexity of Black British feminism. The characters—ranging from Dominique, a lesbian feminist playwright, to Yazz, a young woman navigating her identity in today's world—exemplify the diverse and multifaceted nature of black



womanhood. Evaristo's storytelling highlights how race and gender intersect to shape these women's experiences, emphasizing the importance of understanding their lives through the lens of both marginalization and empowerment. Through a variety of voices and perspectives, the novel underscores the role of intersectionality in grasping the full scope of the challenges and triumphs faced by women who are not only marginalized because of their gender, but also their race and sexuality.

## V. CONCLUSION

Through the works of Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Bernardine Evaristo, this paper explores how contemporary English fiction addresses intersectionality, revealing the intricate relationships between race, gender, and sexuality. Each of these authors uses their stories to challenge traditional portrayals of identity, showing how race, gender, and sexuality are not isolated experiences, but are interwoven in complex and dynamic ways. As literary studies continue to evolve, the inclusion of intersectionality offers an essential framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of identity in both historical and modern contexts. These authors not only deepen our appreciation of the literature, but also contribute to ongoing discussions about social justice, representation, and the continuous struggle for equality.

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