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Deconstructing Colonial Discourse: A Linguistic Analysis of Power and Memory in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* uses language to expose and challenge the ideologies that sustained colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. By reversing the historical facts and roles of enslaver and enslaved, Evaristo reimagines slavery from an Afrocentric perspective, compelling readers to confront the constructed nature of racial hierarchies. The study draws on ideas from Paul Gilroy, Michel Foucault, and Gayatri Spivak to examine how narrative voice, metaphor, and dialogue in the novel represent trauma, power, and resistance. Using qualitative discourse analysis, the paper focuses on key episodes, such as the Middle Passage, the slave market, and the commodification of women, to show how linguistic patterns reflect the physical and psychological violence of slavery. Through close reading and linguistic annotation, the analysis highlights how Evaristo's language transforms silence into speech and oppression into resistance. The study argues that *Blonde Roots* not only revisits the horrors of slavery but also invites a broader reflection on how history and memory are shaped through words. By transforming language into a tool of resistance and remembrance, the novel demonstrates that storytelling can serve as a form of historical repair and social critique, connecting past injustices with ongoing struggles against racial inequality.

Keywords: Colonial Discourse Analysis; Linguistic Dehumanisation; Narrative and Trauma; Language and Power; Epistemic Violence; Living Memory; Slave Sublime; Commodification and Gendered Violence

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1. Introduction

The transatlantic slave trade involved the capture, enslavement, and forced transportation of millions of Africans who were sold as labourers to work on plantations, mines, and colonial enterprises across the New World. Historians have described it as one of the most brutal and dehumanizing events in human history, both for its sheer scale and its enduring legacy of racial inequality^[1]. The unimaginable violence of this trade began with kidnapping and displacement and culminated in the systematic dehumanization of African people. As Eltis et al.^[2] estimate, “Of the 11 million or more enslaved Africans forced to cross the Atlantic” (p. 673), many perished from starvation, disease, or abuse during the Middle Passage. Those who survived faced extreme physical and psychological violence, stripped of their identities and reduced to mere instruments of labor. Fanon^[3] encapsulates this historical trauma when he writes, “Two centuries ago I was lost to humanity, I was a slave forever. And then came men who said that it all had gone on far too long” (p. 120). Fanon’s reflection underscores the depth of psychological alienation and objectification inherent in slavery, which resonates profoundly with Bernardine Evaristo’s reimagining of this history in *Blonde Roots*^[4]. The novel is a satirical and revisionist reworking of the transatlantic slave narrative, inverting conventional racial hierarchies to critique the linguistic and ideological foundations of colonialism. Set in an alternate world where Africans enslave Europeans, the novel destabilises Eurocentric historiography and invites readers to confront the absurdity of racial constructs. As Evaristo^[4] reconfigures geography and linguistically exposes the arbitrary nature of racial categories and the discursive mechanisms through which power and hierarchy are sustained. This inversion, far from being a simple role reversal, compels readers to interrogate the psychological, cultural, and linguistic legacies of slavery that persist in modern societies.

The historical and theoretical underpinnings of Evaristo’s novel resonate with Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*^[5], where he conceptualises the Atlantic world as a “single, complex unit of analysis” (p. 7). Gilroy’s ideas of “living memory” and the “slave sublime” provide a framework for understanding how the traumatic past of slavery continues to shape collective identity and cultural expression across diasporic contexts.

As Gilroy^[5] argues, “The memory of slavery, actively preserved as a living intellectual resource in their expressive political culture,” continues to inform Black identity and transnational solidarity (p. 198). This idea parallels Toni Morrison’s concept of rememory, described as “an active process of reconstitution that involves passing on the story in such a way that it becomes real, embodied, lived through the storyteller’s mediation”^[6]. Through her narrative, Evaristo performs a similar act of cultural reconstitution, transforming memory into a living discourse that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. In *Blonde Roots*, the horror of the slave trade, the Middle Passage, displacement, and commodification is relived through the voice of Doris, a white European enslaved by Africans. By inverting racial roles, Evaristo makes readers experience the terror and degradation of slavery from an Afrocentric perspective. Her linguistic strategies, such as irony, inversion, and defamiliarisation, align with Gilroy’s notion of the “slave sublime”^[5], which grapples with the aesthetic representation of the unrepresentable trauma of enslavement. Evaristo^[7] confirms this intention in her *Manifesto*, stating:

“My plan had been to write about the transatlantic slave trade but to do something very different with this history, to defamiliarize it in order to offer new perspectives on it... This slave trade occupies four hundred years of world history, it devastated the lives of millions, and left a toxic legacy that remains today” (p. 135).

This declaration reveals Evaristo’s method of defamiliarisation, a literary technique drawn from formalist theory that makes the familiar strange to provoke critical awareness. By employing defamiliarisation, she linguistically and conceptually reconfigures the history of slavery to expose its ideological construction and continued resonance in modern consciousness. The “toxic legacy” she refers to is not only historical but linguistic and cultural, revealing how the discourse of slavery continues to shape power relations, racial hierarchies, and collective memory. *Blonde Roots* also operates as both a postcolonial critique and a linguistic experiment. It bridges personal memory and collective trauma, intertwining satire with historical realism to dismantle the epistemic structures that sustain racial domination. Through inversion, irony, and linguistic subversion, Evaristo trans-

forms history into a site of critical reflection, aligning her work with Gilroy's transnational vision of the Black Atlantic and contributing to the broader discourse on how language mediates identity, power, and historical consciousness.

2. Literature Review

Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* has generated considerable scholarly interest across critical discourse analysis, ecofeminist literary studies, genre theory, and dystopian/post-colonial frameworks. Recent scholarship examines the novel's representations of identity, power, history, humor and narrative innovation.

- Hameed and Alhusseini^[8] apply van Dijk's Ideological Discourse Analysis to examine how *Blonde Roots* manipulates language to serve discursive strategies of dominance, revealing a contrast between the positive self-presentation of Europeans and the negative depiction of Africans. Their analysis illustrates the novel's engagement with ideological structures, emphasising language's role in shaping social hierarchies.
- Hayircl^[9] approaches *Blonde Roots* alongside Laura Fish's *Strange Music* through ecofeminism and black British neo-slave narrative. Drawing on Buell, Glotfelty, and foundational ecocriticism, Hayircl uncovers intricate links between women's empowerment, nature, and cultural oppression.
- Dagbovie-Mullins^[10] foregrounds issues of identity politics, corporeality, and racial inversion. *Blonde Roots* is analyzed as a destabilizing intervention in the construction of whiteness, blackness, and commodification, where satirical subversion complicates and recontextualizes familiar historical narratives.
- Iromuanya^[11] explores humor as a "deconstructive apparatus" in Evaristo's work. Through satirical and ironic narrative strategies, the novel prompts readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about civilisation, savagery, and history. By shifting subject positions and employing humour to manage affective responses, Evaristo facilitates critical engagement and empathy that transcends traditional victim-oppressor binaries.
- Newman^[12] reads *Blonde Roots* as a dystopian revision of the Black Atlantic. Employing Bloch's concept of utopia, Newman contends that the novel's parallel

universe disrupts familiar historical accounts and challenges easy constructions of black British identity, foregrounding both the hope and unreliability that mark historical memory.

- Burkitt^[13] examines *Blonde Roots* as a meta-narrative engagement with the slave narrative form. Through ironic reversal and narrative multiplicity, Evaristo highlights the instability of historical vision and the ongoing relevance of Atlantic slavery's "shockwaves" to contemporary identities.
- Muñoz-Valdivieso^[14] situates *Blonde Roots* beside Levy's *The Love Song*, focusing on genre-blending and humor. She argues that Evaristo's playful approach, Augustan satire, speculative fiction, and comic voices create an aesthetic innovations that encourage ethical engagement with the past, revealing both the necessity and impossibility of complete reader identification with enslaved experiences.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), narrative pragmatics, and postcolonial linguistics to examine how Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*^[4] linguistically constructs power, trauma, and resistance. While interpretive in nature, the research incorporates systematic close reading and textual annotation to ensure transparency and replicability. The methodology is interdisciplinary, drawing from linguistics, postcolonial theory, and trauma studies.

3.1. Research Design and Theoretical Framework

The research design integrates discourse-analytic and stylistic methods, combining insights from Foucauldian discourse theory, Fairclough's CDA model, Spivak's notion of epistemic violence, and Paul Gilroy's concepts of living memory and the slave sublime. The central premise is that language functions as both a mechanism of domination and a site of resistance. The study proceeds from four theoretical perspectives:

- Language as Power: Discourse is treated as a social practice that produces and regulates ideology and hierarchy^[15].

- Epistemic Violence and Subalternity: Ambossan discourse is examined for its silencing and objectification of the subaltern subject^[16].
- Living Memory and Historical Trauma: The novel is treated as a linguistic archive of transgenerational trauma and diasporic consciousness^[5].
- Trauma and Linguistic Form: The analysis explores how trauma manifests linguistically through syntactic rupture, metaphorical density, and deictic instability^[17].

This interdisciplinary framework bridges linguistic form with ideological content, revealing how Evaristo's inversion of slavery interrogates colonial logic and racial identity.

3.2. Data Selection, Corpus Formation, and Coding

The primary data source is Bernardine Evaristo's

Blonde Roots^[4]. Passages were purposefully selected using criterion-based sampling, focusing on narrative segments that encapsulate enslavement, dehumanisation, commodification, gendered violence, and memory reconstruction.

Linguistic features like lexical choice, metaphors, syntax, and figurative markers were annotated using thematic coding. Coding categories included:

- Animalistic metaphor → dehumanisation
- Pseudo-scientific naming → power hierarchization
- Direct address → memory and resistance

A coding matrix was constructed to systematize the linkage of literary examples to analytical categories (see **Table 1** below). To ensure reliability, cross-reading and annotation were conducted by two coders, and analytic decisions were regularly reviewed for consistency.

Table 1. Coding.

Example from <i>Blonde Roots</i>	Linguistic Device	Function	Theoretical Lens
“Mumble-Jumble”	Mocking lexical label	Linguistic dehumanisation	Phillipson (1992)
“Tied me to a post, inspected my scalp...”	Tactile verbs	Commodification/violence	Hartman (1997)

3.3. Analytic Procedure

The analysis proceeded through:

- Systematic close reading and annotation
- Thematic grouping and interpretation
- Reflexive evaluation informed by secondary scholarship

4. Language as a Tool of Power: A Foucauldian Perspective

Blonde Roots^[4] operates as a historical revisionist fiction that reverses racial prejudice and dislocates conventional geography, replacing familiar Eurocentric maps with an inverted world order. Evaristo renames Europe as “Europa the Grey Continent” (p. 7) and positions the United Kingdom within the fictional country of “Aphrika” as the “Great Ambossa” (p. 6). Its locations are contrary to the common world map, except for the Middle Passage. This contradictory map is used to transform preconceived notions of Europeans. The map of the text is shown below in **Figure 1**:

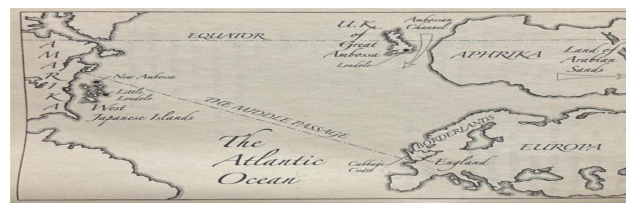


Figure 1. Map.

These cartographic inversions, though fantastical, are deeply symbolic. By transforming Europe into a peripheral, degraded space and elevating Africa as the centre of power, Evaristo subverts spatial hierarchies that historically structured colonial discourse. Except for the Middle Passage, the geography is entirely reimagined, a deliberate disruption of the world map that reflects centuries of Eurocentric dominance. This radical re-mapping exemplifies Foucauldian discourse theory, where spatial and linguistic constructions serve as instruments of power: “Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle”^[15] (p. 123). Through linguistic naming practices such as “Grey Continent” and “tribes”, the powerful European notions are

reduced and form Europeans into a primitive “Other” while positioning Ambossans as civilisers. This shows that the colonial powers get diminished only by renaming certain terms. It also exposed how the colonial project’s use of discourse to justify domination, illustrating that the perception of space is not neutral but ideologically charged. As Bleijswijk, C. van.^[18] mentioned “Bwana’s ethnological misrepresentations reveal his misjudgment of the other according to Ambossan standards of what constitutes civilization” (p. 64). The map inversion also emphasises the arbitrary nature of racial hierarchies and underscores Evaristo’s critique of biological essentialism. Doris reflects:

If I had to pinpoint a moment when the human race divided into several distinctions of blak and whyte, that was it: people belonged to one of two colours and in the society I was about to join my colour, not my personality or ability, would determine my fate^[4].

Here, race shifts from being a mere physical descriptor to a structural determinant of identity and opportunity, a transformation historically produced and sustained by discourse. Earlier, race was used to classify different people in a specific place, but after the slave trade, it became a means of discrimination. Doris encountered racial discrimination during the slave trade. This aligns with Paul Gilroy’s argument that race is not a biological reality but a “socially constructed category embedded in cultural and political practices”^[5] (p. 7). Evaristo satirises colonial science through the speech of Chief Koga, who asserts a hierarchy based on fictitious anthropometric measurements: “Classifications of humanity according to the exact science of Carniofaecia Anthropometry... The Negro belongs to the genus known as Mankind, while the Mongolo and the Caucaso belong to... Neo-Primate” (pp. 118–119). These lines parody pseudo-scientific discourse historically used to legitimise slavery and segregation, echoing the 19th-century theories of polygenism and craniometry that falsely claimed white superiority^[19]. By inverting these claims, Evaristo demonstrates the discursive contingency of racial superiority narratives, revealing them as products of ideologically driven knowledge systems rather than objective truth. Some Afrocentric thinkers, known as melanin scholars, propose that melanin, the pigment present in all humans, grants Black people en-

hanced intelligence, creativity, and physical ability. They even attribute the accomplishments of ancient African civilisations to the power of melanin. While these ideas attempt to challenge Eurocentric scientific racism, they ironically reproduce the same pseudo-scientific logic by grounding racial identity in biological determinism rather than cultural history or lived experience^[20].

Chief Koga’s pseudo-scientific justification shows how scientific discoveries can be manipulated, like “Craniofaecia Anthropometry” and hierarchical taxonomies, mirrors the way colonisers historically framed exploitation as benevolence, branding slavery as an “Act of Mercy” (p. 121). This satirical inversion deconstructs the linguistic architecture of racial ideology, where metaphors of evolution, biology, and civilisation are mobilised to rationalise systemic oppression. Furthermore, Evaristo incorporates linguistic ridicule of European identity through epithets such as “Grey Continent” and the claim that European languages are mere “Mumble-Jumble”. This reflects what Robert Phillipson^[21] terms linguistic imperialism, the dominance of one language to suppress another, except here the reversed suppression exposes its absurdity. The portrayal highlights how language serves as a marker of cultural value, with Ambossans framing their speech as logical and civilised while branding European tongues as unintelligible, thus enacting linguistic dehumanisation.

5. Epistemic Violence and Linguistic Construction of Inferiority

Bernardine Evaristo foregrounds epistemic violence, a concept theorised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who defines it as “The remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other”^[16] (p. 76). In *Blonde Roots*^[4], this form of violence is enacted through discursive redefinition of European cultural practices as markers of backwardness and inferiority. A striking example is the Ambossans’ critique of privacy:

The Ambossans didn’t believe in solitude and neither did I anymore... They said that the European need for solitude was further proof of our inferior culture, our inability to share. Privacy was a foreign concept to all Aphrikans.

Life was communal and for we slaves, by necessity intimate. (p. 69).

Here, solitude, commonly associated with autonomy and personal freedom in European traditions, is linguistically reframed as a cultural deficiency. By reinterpreting normative behaviours through an ethnocentric lens, the Ambossans impose their communal ideals as the universal standard of civilisation, branding European individuality as anti-social and underdeveloped. This process exemplifies Spivak's argument that the colonised subject is constituted through strategic misrepresentation and discursive erasure rather than overt physical domination.

Evaristo's satire demonstrates that epistemic violence is not limited to silencing voices; it extends to the manipulation of meaning systems, the rewriting of values, beliefs, and practices to justify racial hierarchies. Through such discursive strategies, Ambossan authority constructs a narrative of benevolence:

"You will soon discover, the European slaves have been saved from the most horrendous deaths, punishments, morally reprehensible indulgence and serfdom, whilst being given the opportunity to adopt the manners and customs of civilised man" (p. 121).

This rhetoric echoes historical colonial propaganda, which framed enslavement as a civilising mission, masking violence behind paternalistic language. Evaristo reveals the performative power of language in legitimising oppression, illustrating Foucauldian notions of discourse as an instrument of domination. Mockery becomes a linguistic tool of domination, as Ambossans ridicule European customs to assert cultural superiority. Even fundamental human behaviours like solitude are branded as proof of inferiority. "Privacy was a foreign concept to all Aphrikans. Life was communal and for we slaves, by necessity intimate" (p. 69). The ideological subtext is clear: Ambossan norms are universal, while European values are provincial and defective. This mirrors real-world colonial epistemologies, where colonisers discredited indigenous practices to justify intervention and governance. As Spivak^[16] argues, this "project to constitute the Other" involves redefining difference as deficiency, making cultural diversity synonymous with underdevelopment.

Evaristo, therefore, uses satirical linguistic strategies, mocking, renaming, and pseudo-scientific jargon, to dramatise how epistemic violence operates through discourse. The Ambossans' language does not merely describe Europeans; it actively constructs their inferiority, illustrating how racism is socially engineered through semiotic systems rather than anchored in biological reality. This aligns with Paul Gilroy's assertion that contemporary racism relies less on explicit biology and more on cultural essentialism and discursive practices^[5]. By reversing these dynamics, *Blonde Roots* lays bare the absurdity and contingency of colonial logic, revealing that racial hierarchies are not natural or immutable but ideologically sustained through language, knowledge, and representation.

6. Critical Discourse Analysis: Language and Ideological Control

In *Blonde Roots*^[4], Evaristo employs discursive inversion to challenge the hegemonic assumptions embedded in colonial discourse. The novel replaces the image of the colonised Other with the colonial Self, reversing power structures to expose the arbitrary nature of racial hierarchies. Through this reversal, the text dismantles the ideological foundation that historically positioned whites as masters and blacks as slaves. By situating Africans as the dominant group and Europeans as subjugated, Evaristo dramatises the constructedness of racial superiority, underscoring its dependence on discourse rather than biology. The Ambossans' narrative mirrors colonial rhetoric, portraying slavery as a moral obligation to civilise an allegedly primitive population: "The natives of those lands are just now emerging from the abominable depth of savagery which we civilised nation left behind in pre-historic times" (p. 118). This justification exemplifies the paternalistic tone of colonial discourse, where domination is framed as benevolent upliftment. By mimicking these linguistic strategies, Evaristo illustrates how language serves as an instrument of ideological control, shaping perceptions of civilisation, savagery, and progress. As Norman Fairclough asserts, "Language is a material form of ideology, and language is invested by ideology"^[22] (p. 73). The Ambossans' claims rely heavily on pseudo-scientific taxonomies to legitimise inequality:

“Negro is biologically superior to the other two types... the Mongolo and the Caucosoi... belong to the evolved species classified as Neo-Primate... Cranio-structural defects also produce a nonsensical language or languages; so unintelligible... whether Europa possesses one language, classified as Mumble-Jumble, several languages, or merely one language with several dialects” (pp. 119–120).

This fabricated classification parodies 19th-century racial science, particularly craniometry and polygenism, which were historically employed to naturalise white dominance. In the novel, these discursive strategies are reversed to assert African superiority, illustrating that racial hierarchies are not inherent truths but linguistically constructed fictions. The labelling of European languages as “Mumble-Jumble” exemplifies linguistic imperialism, a concept developed by Robert Phillipson^[21] to explain how dominant groups devalue minority languages as uncivilised, thereby maintaining control.

The ideological manipulation of language in *Blonde Roots* aligns with Teun van Dijk’s notion of elite discourse, which sustains systemic inequalities by controlling narratives about identity and power^[23]. The Ambossans’ use of scientific rhetoric, evaluative language, and mockery reflects how dominant classes impose their worldview as universal, while branding the cultural practices of the colonised as inferior. This resonates with Spivak’s theory of epistemic violence, which identifies the erasure and misrepresentation of subaltern knowledge systems as central to colonial domination. For instance, the Ambossans redefine solitude, valued in European culture, as proof of backwardness: “They said that the European need for solitude was further proof of our inferior culture, our inability to share” (p. 69). Here, linguistic reframing transforms cultural difference into deficiency, legitimising subjugation. Such acts of discursive redefinition echo the historical colonial project that sought to normalise European superiority by pathologising non-European customs.

Finally, Evaristo’s reversal of linguistic hierarchies—where African languages are positioned as logical and European languages as incoherent—highlights the performative nature of discourse in producing racialised identities. This inversion highlights the central argument of Critical Dis-

course Analysis: that language is never neutral but deeply implicated in power relations and ideological struggle. By exaggerating these discursive mechanisms, *Blonde Roots* exposes their absurdity and reinforces the poststructuralist claim that identity and hierarchy are socio-discursive constructions, not biological inevitabilities.

7. Living Memory: Representing the Trauma of Slavery through Language

From the earliest oral traditions to contemporary fiction, language has functioned as a key instrument for encoding historical trauma, preserving the memory of atrocities, and shaping communal identity. In the context of slavery, narrative becomes more than an act of recollection; it serves as a political intervention, ensuring that the unspeakable violence of the past remains present in cultural consciousness. Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots*^[4] exemplifies this function by employing linguistic strategies that both represent and critique the trauma of enslavement, transforming individual suffering into a collective act of remembrance. Paul Gilroy’s concept of “living memory” in *The Black Atlantic* underscores this process: “The telling and retelling of these stories plays a special role... to invent, maintain, and renew identity... redefined here as the living memory of the changing same”^[5] (p. 198). Gilroy views storytelling as a performative practice through which trauma becomes a cultural resource, sustaining Black identity across generations. Storytelling through music, performance and oral tradition acts as a communal activity that unites individuals within the same racial group and forms collective identity. The narratives shared through these cultural forms serve as repositories of historical memory that will be reinterpreted and passed down through generations^[9]. Similarly, in *Blonde Roots*, Doris’s narrative is an archive of affective memory, constructing meaning from experiences of capture, violence, and displacement. Through intimate address, as in “Dear Reader, It woe betides me to be the bearer of bad news” (p. 109), Doris converts her testimony into an interactive discourse, implicating the reader as a witness. This rhetorical move enacts what trauma theorists call testimonial urgency, the compulsion to narrate to resist erasure.

8. Linguistic Representation of Pain and Dehumanisation

Evaristo represents slavery's trauma through lexical and metaphorical choices that foreground the corporeality of violence. Doris recalls her abduction in stark physical terms: "I couldn't breathe properly, my hip bones dug into his shoulder, my head filled with blood that began to stream out of my nose. I remember that I wet myself"^[4] (p. 58). The syntax here is paratactic and fragmented, echoing what Cathy Caruth (1996) identifies as traumatic temporality, language struggling to keep pace with overwhelming experience. The image of being "dumped on the ground like a sack of beets" (p. 59) employs simile to encode objectification, reducing the human body to a commodity. Similarly, the metaphor "choked against the iron collar like a billy goat" (p. 60) performs dehumanisation through zoomorphic comparison, aligning with colonial discourse that historically animalised enslaved peoples. These choices not only depict brutality but also simulate its psychic disorientation through linguistic form.

Language in Doris's narrative also conveys the internalised rupture of selfhood. Her admission, "I had already lost my family... soon lose my language and my country" (p. 60), positions language loss as metonymy for cultural erasure, illustrating what Robert Phillipson terms linguistic imperialism: "Language dominance is an essential element of cultural subjugation and control"^[21]. Here, the anticipated silencing of her mother tongue signifies not only communicative dispossession but the obliteration of identity. The progression of Doris's inner monologue dramatises the psychological arc of trauma. Initially clinging to hope, imagining her father's rescue, she ultimately concedes, "I belong to him now" (p. 61). This statement marks a linguistic capitulation to bondage, reflecting the coercive power of discourse in producing subjectivity. The shift from active resistance to passive acceptance mirrors what trauma psychology frames as forced adaptation under systemic violence.

Evaristo transforms Doris's suffering into a communal narrative of historical trauma, invoking the slave sublime. Gilroy's term for the aesthetic strategies used to confront the enormity of slavery. The detailed recollection of captivity, its sensory density, metaphorical excess, and emotive tone, prevents historical abstraction by insisting on embodi-

ment: bruised flesh, choking iron, streaming blood. Through such imagery, language does not merely represent trauma; it performs its affective intensity, compelling readers into empathetic engagement. Moreover, structural features, such as direct reader address, modal verbs expressing uncertainty, and rhythmic repetitions, mimic oral testimony, aligning the text with the traditions of diasporic storytelling. In doing so, *Blonde Roots* reclaims the narrative function of memory as resistance, ensuring that the legacies of slavery remain visible and contested.

9. The Middle Passage: Dehumanisation and Linguistic Representation of Trauma

The Middle Passage in *Blonde Roots* marks one of the most harrowing stages of the transatlantic slave system, a period characterised by extreme violence, spatial confinement, and systemic degradation. Historically, this voyage was an ordeal of unimaginable suffering, marked by starvation, disease, sexual violence, and mortality rates so high that scholars describe it as a "*floating tomb*" for countless enslaved Africans. According to Fagel^[24], "Middle Passage—the very words conjure up violent images of movement, the wrenching of Africans from their homes, their families, and their freedom, and the ill-fated voyage to hostile territory" (p. 625). In *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo uses narrative detail and figurative language to reconstruct this historical terror, employing satire to unsettle the reader and expose the moral bankruptcy of slavery. Her linguistic choices amplify the corporeality of suffering while foregrounding its systemic character. One of the most striking linguistic strategies Evaristo employs is animalistic comparison to convey the complete erasure of human dignity: "Goats, sheep and chickens in coops were winched bleating and squawking on board" (p. 76). This simile collapses the boundary between human and livestock, signalling how commodification under slavery depends on linguistic practices that dehumanise. By pairing verbs like "bleating" and "squawking" with the silent suffering of human captives, the text critiques the semantic violence embedded in colonial logic, where language functions as a tool of hierarchy and dispossession.

10. Violence as Spectacle: Action Verbs and Rhythmic Repetition

The text dramatises the Middle Passage as a theatre of cruelty through dynamic, repetitive verbs: “Slaps, punches, pulls and kicks turned into a free-for-all among the women. The crew crowded into the hold, cheering, goading and roaring” (p. 82). This polysyndetic structure accelerates the rhythm of violence, creating an overwhelming sensory effect that mirrors the chaos of the hold. The alliterative harshness of “kicks...crowded...cheering” amplifies brutality, while the lexical shift from physical assault like slaps, punches, to performative verbs like cheering, roaring exposes violence as entertainment for the oppressors, a chilling reminder of how power converts pain into spectacle. The story narrated by Doris captures the psychological extremity of enslavement through first-person confessional syntax, “In the early days I tried holding my breath in a childlike attempt to suicide” (p. 83). Here, the juxtaposition of childlike with suicide produces a dissonance that accentuates innocence corrupted by structural violence. The utterance lacks subordinating clauses, mirroring fragmented cognition under duress. These linguistic features resonate with trauma theory, which identifies disrupted syntax as an index of psychic rupture.

Starvation as a silent protest emerges as a counter-narrative of agency, violently suppressed by the enslavers. “The punishment was to place hot coal so near the offender’s lips, they blistered” (p. 82). The lexical cluster of heat and flesh, hot, coal, blistered, condenses the materiality of punishment into sensory immediacy, compelling the reader to inhabit the embodied pain of resistance. This linguistic condensation dramatises the irony of rebellion in bondage: even passive refusal invites spectacular cruelty.

Evaristo juxtaposes corporeal detail with numerical abstraction to illustrate the fungibility of the enslaved body. “There were 400 slaves at embarkation, and 227 survived” (p. 91). This stark statistic enacts what Saidiya Hartman^[25] terms the reduction of personhood to exchangeable units of value. Yet Evaristo interrupts this cold arithmetic with hyper-specific corporeal imagery. “The right side of his face was twice its normal size. His left ear had been severed. His chest had collapsed. His genitalia were a mess” (p. 91). This linguistic catalogue of injury resists abstraction, insisting on the singularity of suffering against the anonymity of numbers.

Through these stylistic devices, Evaristo approaches what Stancy J. Lattman^[26] describes as the *Slave Sublime*:

The experience of captive Africans being chained so intimately together reduces individuality to the most fundamental degree... functioning as a key element of the collective, historical memory of depersonalization and objectification.

By layering violent metaphors with sonic density and visual excess, the text transforms the Middle Passage into a site of linguistic excess, where representation strains under the weight of atrocity. The chapter becomes a memorial space, translating silence into speech while acknowledging the insufficiency of language before systemic barbarity.

11. Slave Market and the Sublime

After the terror of the Middle Passage, the enslaved individuals in *Blonde Roots* arrive at the land of their oppressors, expecting respite from maritime suffering but instead confronting new forms of violence and commodification. The port of New Ambossa becomes a stage for systematic degradation, where human bodies are transformed into marketable objects within an exploitative economic order. This section explores how Evaristo represents the slave market as a spectacle of violence and commodification, invoking what Paul Gilroy terms the slave sublime, a mode of aesthetic excess that renders the moral enormity of slavery nearly unrepresentable^[5].

The slave market in *Blonde Roots* epitomises the logic of commodification, where identity is obliterated, and human beings are evaluated solely for their economic utility. Doris recalls:

Upon arrival at the port of New Ambossa, I was subjected to the traditional slave market scramble... They grabbed at the slaves they wanted, tied us up with rope or simply dragged us out of the pen by whatever limbs or the body parts they could lay their hands on. (p. 93)

This description employs graphic physicality and tactile verbs, grabbed, tied, and dragged, to evoke the violence of

possession. The syntax compresses multiple acts of aggression into a single breathless line, mimicking the chaos of the auction. The lexical field of corporeality, such as limbs, body parts, deconstructs individuality, reducing the enslaved to fragmented anatomical components, a semiotic strategy that mirrors historical records of slave inventories, where worth was calculated by age, strength, and reproductive capacity.

The brutality of restraint reinforces the normalisation of violence: “The victor bound my wrists with rope so tightly they bled, then dragged me out of the pen like I was a goat” (p. 93). The simile “like I was a goat” extends the animalistic trope introduced during the Middle Passage, embedding linguistic continuity between capture, transport, and sale. Such imagery illustrates what Hartman identifies as “the fungibility of the slave body”, where value resides not in personhood but in exchangeability. Gilroy asserts that slavery, though ethically reprehensible, was primarily an economic system of international scope^[5] (p. 28). Evaristo’s portrayal resonates with this thesis: the auction emerges not as an aberration but as the linchpin of a global capitalist order, where profit dictates every gesture of violence.

Beyond economic exploitation, the slave market becomes a gendered site of violation, dramatising the intersection of race, gender, and power. Doris and other enslaved women are subjected to relentless physical and sexual abuse. These abuses illustrate the gendered dimension of exploitation within the institution of slavery^[27]. The portrayal of Doris’s collapse and the stampede serves as a harrowing metaphor for the broader physical and emotional toll exacted on enslaved individuals, particularly women, in the brutal environments of forced labour. As Hartman^[25] notes, the enslaved female body was a “site of terror and pleasure, reproduction and labor,” (p. 79), embodying the contradictions of racial capitalism and patriarchal domination. These moments reflect not only the dehumanising conditions of their workplaces but also the systemic disregard for their well-being, where even their suffering becomes an afterthought amidst the chaos of exploitation. Evaristo’s depiction resonates with Spillers’ concept of “ungendering”^[28], wherein Black women under slavery were stripped of their subjectivity and reduced to mere instruments of labor and reproduction. Similarly, Hooks^[29] emphasizes that the sexual exploitation of enslaved women was central to the economic and ideological maintenance of slavery, revealing how race and gender

intersect to sustain structures of oppression. The physical and psychological trauma endured by Doris thus echoes the historical realities of enslaved women in the Atlantic world, whose bodies were commodified as sites of both production and domination^[30]. Through this lens, Evaristo not only exposes the violence inflicted upon women but also reclaims their narratives from historical silencing, transforming their suffering into an act of resistance and remembrance:

He tied me to a post, inspected my scalp and ears, pulled apart my lips and invaded my mouth with fingers ... He cupped my chest, slapped my bottom like it was a cow's shank and squeezed each thigh to test its musculature. Then he made me sit down and spread my legs so that he could inspect' my vagina, pushing those meaty fingers of his inside my virginal self. I didn't cry. I was determined not to cry. At the end, I had to stand up and bend over so that he could 'inspect' my anus too^[4].

This passage stages sexual violence as an institutional practice, transforming bodily intimacy into an instrument of domination. The repeated use of imperative-inflected verbs such as tied, inspected, pushed, and spread inscribes the totalisation of power over the enslaved female body, converting it into a text of patriarchal inscription. The grotesque simile “like it was a cow’s shank” collapses human subjectivity into meat, enacting what Angela Davis^[31] theorises as the dual exploitation of enslaved women for both productive labor and reproductive capacity (*Women, Race & Class*, pp. 23–24). Kolchin^[32] corroborates this historical reality, noting: “The transfer of bodies was marked by slave pens, auctions, sexual assaults, and eventually a difficult readjustment to a new environment and new work regime” (p. 220). The inspection of reproductive organs signals not mere economic valuation but the codification of sexual domination as a systemic practice. This aligns with Davis’s observation that rape during slavery functioned as a “weapon of domination”^[31], designed to extinguish resistance and perpetuate terror.

12. Maternal Dispossession and the Economy of Reproduction

The commodification of women in *Blonde Roots* extends beyond their own bodies to encompass their repro-

ductive capacities and offspring, illustrating the systemic logic of slavery as an economy of reproduction. Doris reflects: “My three were sold on... Each child was placed into the guardianship of a wet nurse, until they were sold” (pp. 21, 22). The lexical choices, such as sold, placed, reveal the transactional nature of motherhood under slavery, where kinship is reduced to a ledger entry and maternal bonds are severed by market imperatives. This language not only signifies the objectification of children as commodities but also reinforces what Hortense Spillers^[28] describes as a “genealogy of dispossession”. The violent rupture of familial structures is a foundational feature of racial slavery. Here, infants are rendered capital-in-waiting, not as autonomous beings but as economic units within a system predicated on biological reproduction for labour exploitation.

This linguistic economy mirrors the historical practices of chattel slavery, where women’s reproductive capacity was integral to the perpetuation of the labour force. Enslaved mothers bore children into bondage, ensuring the continuity of property relations across generations. As Spillers argues, such dispossession operates through a grammar of captivity, wherein language codifies the erasure of personhood and the conversion of flesh into fungible matter. Evaristo foregrounds this structural violence by saturating the narrative with verbs of transaction, constructing an unsettling semantic field that conflates intimacy with commodification.

The maternal dismemberment in Doris’s account does more than narrate an individual tragedy; it exposes the capitalist logic that weaponises biological processes to sustain racial hierarchies. This logic, far from being confined to the historical archive, persists in what Paul Gilroy^[5] calls the “counterculture of modernity”, the enduring entanglement of slavery, capitalism, and Western modernity.

Evaristo revealed that this discourse of slavery is not restricted to the trans-Atlantic slave trade; rather, it even continues in the contemporary era. In fact, slavery exists as a central element of modernity and an important moment in the development of Western economic systems. Even long after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, many former slave ports in Europe continued to memorialise slave traders and plantation owners as benefactors, celebrating their wealth and philanthropy through statues, plaques, and monuments^[33]. Doris’s final sentence hints at the slavery sublime in the present day, showing how the descendants of

slave owners continue to gain the benefits of the exploitative labour system established during slavery:

In the twenty-first century, Bwana’s descendants still own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside. The cane workers, many of whom descended from the original slaves, are paid. (p. 261)

This compressed narrative leap spanning four centuries in a single sentence functions as a linguistic device of temporal condensation, underscoring the continuity between past and present forms of exploitation. The nominal acknowledgement of “payment” offers an illusion of progress while masking the structural persistence of economic dependency and racialised labour. As Gilroy contends in *The Black Atlantic*^[5], the foundational violence of slavery does not vanish but mutates into new modalities, embedding inequality within the very architecture of modernity. The reference to the sugar estate evokes the colonial plantation as a site of capitalist accumulation, rearticulated in the contemporary neoliberal order where historical privilege continues to reproduce itself under the guise of legality and wage labour.

By juxtaposing the violent dismemberment of maternal bonds with the enduring wealth of the oppressor’s lineage, Evaristo dramatises the diachronic reach of commodification: what begins as the sale of bodies extends into a transgenerational economy of privilege. This linkage destabilises any narrative of historical closure, insisting instead on the afterlife of slavery as an epistemic and material condition, haunting the present through global economic asymmetries.

13. Conclusions

Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots* demonstrates that colonial discourse is not a static historical artefact but an ongoing ideological construct reproduced and resisted through language. By reversing racial hierarchies and relocating the violence of slavery onto European bodies, the novel deconstructs the myths of Eurocentric superiority and exposes the arbitrary nature of racial categorisations. Through a linguistic lens, the text reveals how metaphors, lexical choices, and narrative structures shape representations of trauma, power,

and identity, illustrating the central role of language in both sustaining and dismantling systems of domination.

The analysis of key sites, such as the Middle Passage and the slave market, shows that Evaristo employs animalistic tropes, rhythmic enumeration, and corporeal imagery to render the dehumanisation of slavery as both material and discursive. These strategies evoke what Paul Gilroy terms the *slave sublime*, an aesthetic of excess that captures the moral enormity of racial terror while situating it within a critique of capitalism and modernity. Similarly, the representation of gendered violence and sexual commodification highlights the intersectional dimensions of oppression, foregrounding how enslaved women's bodies became instruments of economic and patriarchal control.

Evaristo's narrative also engages with living memory, transforming individual testimony into a collective archive that resists historical erasure. The linguistic encoding of pain, fragmentation of syntax, and use of direct address convert trauma into an interactive process of remembrance, aligning with Gilroy's assertion that cultural expression functions as an intellectual resource for diasporic identity formation. In doing so, the novel foregrounds the pedagogical potential of literature to challenge epistemic violence and re-inscribe silenced voices into the historical record.

Ultimately, *Blonde Roots* illustrates that colonialism's legacy is sustained not only through material structures but through discursive regimes that construct and naturalise inequality. By destabilising these regimes through irony, inversion, and linguistic innovation, Evaristo invites readers to interrogate the ethics of historical narration and the ideological work of language. The novel thus serves as both a literary and linguistic intervention—a powerful reminder that dismantling systemic oppression begins with exposing the semiotic foundations upon which it rests.

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