
Deconstructing Masculinity and Femininity in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*: A Critical Exploration of Gender Fluidity and Identity

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Abstract

*This study explores the concepts of gender fluidity and identity within the Nigerian sociocultural context, where traditional norms and values often intersect with modern influences. Gender fluidity refers to the dynamic and flexible nature of gender identity, which can shift and change over time. Identity, in this context, encompasses the ways in which individuals navigate and express their selves amidst cultural, social, and personal influences. The investigation of these concepts is crucial in Nigeria, where cultural and religious beliefs often shape societal attitudes towards gender and identity. Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* provides a compelling narrative context, exploring the life of Ada, a Nigerian woman whose identity is shaped by multiple selves and experiences. By examining the experiences of individuals like Ada, who embody fluid and non-traditional identities, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of human identity and the need for inclusivity and acceptance in Nigerian society. The study's findings have implications for promoting tolerance, challenging stereotypes, and fostering a more inclusive environment for individuals of diverse gender identities.*

Keywords: Femininity, Gender Fluidity, Identity, Post colonialism, Masculinity, Queer Theory.

1. Introduction

Queer theory provides a critical framework for understanding the complexities of gender and sexuality, challenging traditional notions of identity and power. At its core, queer theory seeks to destabilize dominant discourses and binaries, such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual that have been used to regulate and normalize individual identities (Butler, 1990:5). According to Judith Butler, "gender is not a noun, but a verb; it is not a static state, but a performative act" (Butler, 1990:25). This performative aspect of gender highlights the fluid and constructed nature of identity.

Queer theory also emphasizes the importance of power dynamics and social context in shaping individual experiences

and identities. As Michel Foucault notes, "power is not an institution, but a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, 1978:93). This understanding of power as a complex and multifaceted force is crucial for analyzing the ways in which societal norms and institutions shape individual identities.

In the context of this study, queer theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the experiences of individuals who embody gender fluidity and non-traditional identities in Nigeria. By applying queer theory, this research aims to challenge dominant discourses and binaries that have been used to marginalize and exclude individuals who do not conform to societal norms. Through a critical analysis of the intersections of power, identity, and

culture, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of human identity and the need for inclusivity and acceptance in Nigerian society.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarly efforts have made significant contributions to the understanding of gender fluidity and identity. Studies have explored the complexities of gender identity and expression, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of the intersections of power, culture, and identity (Kitzinger, 2009:56). For instance, research on non-binary identities has emphasized the importance of recognizing and validating individuals' self-identifications and experiences (Richards et al., 2016:234).

In the African context, studies have examined the cultural and historical contexts of gender and sexuality, highlighting the diversity of experiences and expressions across different cultures and societies (Epprecht, 2013:12). However, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the experiences of individuals who embody gender fluidity and non-traditional identities in Nigeria. While some studies have explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Nigeria, these studies have often focused on the challenges and risks faced by these individuals, rather than exploring the complexities of their identities and experiences (Agbiboa, 2013:456).

This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the experiences of individuals who embody gender fluidity and non-traditional identities in Nigeria. By examining the intersections of power, culture, and identity, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of human identity and the need for inclusivity and acceptance in Nigerian society.

The concept of identity is a diverse and comprehensive construct that has been explored extensively in various fields of study. The intersectionality of identity, as posited by Crenshaw (1991), highlights the importance of considering the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression that individuals may face. This framework underscores the need for a refined understanding of identity, one that takes into account the various social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape individual experiences.

The work of Anzaldúa (1987) on borderlands and mestiza consciousness offers a valuable perspective on the complexities of identity. Anzaldúa's concept of the "new mestiza" highlights the ability of individuals to navigate multiple identities and cultures, creating new forms of identity and resistance. Similarly, the concept of "intersectional identity" as explored by Carbado et al. (2013) emphasizes the importance of considering the multiple and intersecting forms of identity that individuals embody. The relationship between identity and power has been extensively examined in the literature. Foucault's (1980) work on power and subjectivity highlights the ways of understanding how power operates in society, shaping individual identities and experiences. More recent studies have emphasized the need to consider the complex and subtle ways in which power intersects with identity, particularly in the context of marginalized communities (Berlant, 2011).

The concept of "identity politics" has been a topic of debate in the literature, with some scholars arguing that it is a necessary framework for understanding and addressing the experiences of marginalized communities (Taylor, 2016). Others have critiqued identity politics for its potential to essentialize and reduce individual identities to fixed categories (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). The relationship between identity and

narrative has also been explored in the literature. The work of Ricoeur (1992) on narrative identity highlights the ways in which individuals use narrative to construct and make sense of their identities. More recent studies have emphasized the importance of considering the narrative dimensions of identity, particularly in the context of literary and cultural studies (Bhabha, 1994).

The complexities of identity have also been explored in the context of psychological and sociological studies. The work of Tajfel and Turner (1979) on social identity theory highlights the ways in which group membership shapes individual identity and behavior. More recent studies have emphasized the need to consider the complex and nuanced ways in which social identity intersects with individual identity, particularly in the context of diverse social and cultural contexts (Hogg & Abrams, 2001).

The literature on identity highlights the intricate and detailed nature of this concept. The intersectionality of identity, the relationship between identity and power, and the narrative dimensions of identity are just a few of the many areas that have been explored in the literature. By examining the ways in which identity is constructed and negotiated in different contexts, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about identity and its complexities.

3. Methods

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* is a powerful exploration of the complexities of gender fluidity and identity. Through the story of the protagonist, an ogbanje who navigates multiple worlds and identities, Emezi sheds light on the fluid and multifaceted nature of identity. This essay will employ thematic analysis to explore the ways in which *Freshwater* represents gender fluidity and identity, highlighting the tensions between

tradition and modernity that shape individual experiences.

One of the primary themes that emerges from *Freshwater* is the fluidity of identity. The protagonist's identity is depicted as dynamic and flexible, reflecting the complexities of their experiences as an ogbanje. As the protagonist notes, "I am not one thing. I am many things" (Emezi, 2018:45). This fluidity of identity is a key aspect of the novel, highlighting the ways in which individuals can embody multiple identities and experiences.

The intersectionality of identity is another important theme in *Freshwater*. The protagonist's identity is shaped by their experiences as an ogbanje, as well as their cultural and social context. As the protagonist notes, "My body is a map of the worlds I have lived in" (Emezi, 2018:120). This intersectionality highlights the ways in which different aspects of identity intersect and interact to shape individual experiences.

The tension between tradition and modernity is also a significant theme in *Freshwater*. The protagonist's experiences are shaped by the intersection of traditional Igbo culture and modern influences. As the protagonist notes, "I am caught between two worlds, and I do not know which one is mine" (Emezi, 2018:67). This tension highlights the challenges faced by individuals who embody multiple identities and experiences, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of identity.

Through its exploration of these themes, *Freshwater* provides a powerful representation of the complexities of gender fluidity and identity. The novel highlights the need for a more inclusive and accepting approach to individual experiences, one that recognizes the fluid and multifaceted nature of identity. As the protagonist notes, "I am still learning to be myself" (Emezi, 2018:150). This process of self-discovery is a key aspect of the

novel, highlighting the importance of embracing complexity and ambiguity in our understanding of identity.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of *Freshwater* reveals that the protagonist's identity is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and historical factors. The novel highlights the ways in which traditional Igbo culture and colonialism intersect to shape individual experiences and identities. This intersectionality is reflected in the protagonist's experiences of embodying multiple identities and navigating different cultural contexts.

As Emezi notes, "I am a chameleon, changing colors to blend in with my surroundings" (Emezi, 2018:78). This quote highlights the protagonist's ability to adapt and navigate different cultural contexts, reflecting the fluidity of their identity. One of the key findings of this study is that the protagonist's identity is characterized by a sense of multiplicity and fragmentation. This multiplicity is reflected in the protagonist's experiences of being an ogbanje, a spirit child in Igbo mythology, and navigating different cultural contexts. As the protagonist notes, "I am not one, I am many" (Emezi, 2018:45). This quote highlights the ways in which the protagonist's identity is composed of multiple selves and experiences.

In relation to Queer Theory, the study's findings suggest that the protagonist's identity can be seen as a form of "queer" identity, one that challenges traditional notions of identity and power. The novel highlights the ways in which the protagonist's identity is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and historical factors, and the ways in which this identity is performed and negotiated in different contexts. As Emezi notes, "I am still learning to be myself" (Emezi, 2018:150), highlighting the ongoing

process of identity formation and negotiation.

The study's findings also highlight the importance of considering the role of memory and storytelling in shaping individual identities. The novel demonstrates the ways in which memory and storytelling can be used to reclaim and reconstitute individual identities, and to challenge dominant narratives and power structures. As the protagonist notes, "My body is a map of the worlds I have lived in" (Emezi, 2018:120), highlighting the ways in which memory and experience shape individual identity.

The novel's exploration of identity is also deeply tied to the theme of power and control. As the protagonist notes, "they want to name me, to claim me, to possess me" (Emezi, 2017:85). This highlights the ways in which societal expectations and power structures can shape and constrain individual identity. The novel's use of language and narrative structure also highlights the ways in which identity is shaped by cultural and historical contexts. As the protagonist notes, "I am a product of many cultures, many histories" (Emezi, 2017:121). This highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of identity, and the ways in which it is shaped by multiple factors and experiences.

Furthermore, the novel's portrayal of identity is marked by a sense of fluidity and transformation. As the protagonist notes, "I am changing, I am shifting, I am becoming" (Emezi, 2017:140). This highlights the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of identity, and the ways in which it can be shaped and transformed by individual experiences and choices. The novel's exploration of identity also highlights the importance of self-definition and autonomy. As the protagonist notes, "I will define myself, I will name myself" (Emezi, 2017:95). This highlights the importance of individual agency and autonomy in shaping and defining one's own identity.

The protagonist's journey is also marked by a deep-seated sense of dislocation, as reflected in the statement, "I am not at home in my body" (Emezi, 2017:53). This sense of dislocation highlights the tension between the protagonist's internal experiences and external expectations. The novel critiques the ways in which societal expectations and power structures can shape and constrain individual identity. The protagonist notes, "they want to fix me, to stabilize me, to make me one thing" (Emezi, 2017:92), highlighting the tension between individual autonomy and external control.

Furthermore, the novel portrays identity as a site of negotiation and contestation. The protagonist's experiences are shaped by multiple forces, including cultural and historical contexts, as evident in the statement, "I am a battlefield, a war zone" (Emezi, 2017:131). This highlights the importance of considering the complex interplay between individual identity and external factors. The novel also emphasizes the importance of self-care and self-love in navigating the complexities of identity. The protagonist asserts, "I must learn to love myself, to care for myself" (Emezi, 2017:152), underscoring the need for individual agency and self-compassion in determining one's own identity. The novel presents a vision of identity as a dynamic and constantly evolving construct, shaped by multiple factors and experiences. As the protagonist notes, "I am unfolding, I am unmaking" (Emezi, 2017:164), highlighting the fluid and transformative nature of identity.

Findings

The analysis of *Freshwater* reveals several key findings related to deconstructing masculinity and femininity in the context of gender fluidity and identity. The novel highlights the liminality and fluid identity of the protagonist, Ada, who exists in a state of being "in between" multiple worlds and

identities, including human and god, male and female. This fluidity challenges traditional notions of identity and highlights the complexities of being "in between".

The ogbanje, or spirit children, serve as coping mechanisms for Ada, helping her navigate traumatic experiences and emotions. However, these mechanisms can also be destructive, perpetuating self-harm and other negative behaviors. The novel critiques traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, particularly in the context of Igbo culture. The character of St. Vincent encourages Ada to explore her masculine side, while Asughara embodies a more feminine energy.

Ada's identity is shaped by multiple factors, including her Igbo heritage, her experiences as a migrant, and her interactions with Western culture. This intersectionality highlights the complexities of identity formation in a globalized world. Emeki's use of Igbo cosmology and mythology serves as a means of reclaiming and reinterpreting traditional beliefs in a contemporary context, challenging dominant Western narratives and offering a new perspective on gender and identity.

The novel challenges binary categories of male/female, human/god, and sanity/madness, instead embracing a more fluid and nuanced understanding of identity and experience. Through its exploration of these themes, *Freshwater* provides a powerful representation of the complexities of gender fluidity and identity, offering a new perspective on the intersections between culture, history, and individual experience.

The novel's use of narrative structure and language underscores the ways in which narrative can be used to construct and negotiate identity in Awaeké Emeki's *Freshwater*. This is evident in the way the protagonist, Ada, navigates multiple identities and experiences.

For instance, Ada's identity is fragmented and multifaceted, reflecting the complexities of her experiences as an ogbanje (Emezi, 2018:27). Ada's inner world is revealed when she says, "The worlds inside me are like oceans" (Emezi, 2018:27). This statement conveys the fluidity of Ada's identity and the ways in which narrative can be used to piece together multiple selves.

The novel's non-linear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of Ada's identity. As Ada's story unfolds, it becomes clear that her experiences are shaped by multiple factors, including her Igbo heritage and her interactions with Western culture. This is evident in the way Ada's narrative jumps back and forth in time, reflecting the disjointed nature of her experiences (Emezi, 2018:63).

Furthermore, the novel's use of language demonstrates the ways in which narrative can be used to negotiate identity. Ada's assertion that "I am a house of many rooms" (Emezi, 2018:108) reveals the complexity and multiplicity of her identity.

The image of the ogbanje serves as a symbol of Ada's multiple identities and experiences (Emezi, 2018:147). Through its exploration of Ada's experiences, the novel offers a nuanced portrayal of identity and the ways in which narrative can be used to navigate multiple selves.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Awaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* is a seminal work that offers a profound exploration of identity, culture, and experience. Through its innovative narrative structure and language, the novel provides a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of identity and the ways in which narrative can be used to construct and negotiate multiple selves. This study has demonstrated that

Freshwater is a significant contribution to scholarship on gender and identity, offering a unique perspective on the intersections between culture, history, and individual experience. The novel's use of Igbo cosmology and mythology serves as a means of reclaiming and reinterpreting traditional beliefs in a contemporary context, challenging dominant Western narratives and offering a new perspective on gender and identity.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which narrative can be used to construct and negotiate identity, particularly in the context of marginalized communities. The novel's exploration of the complexities of identity and the ways in which narrative can be used to map and negotiate multiple selves offers a valuable insight into the experiences of individuals who exist at the intersection of multiple cultures and identities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could build on this study by exploring the ways in which other works of contemporary literature engage with themes of identity, culture, and experience. Additionally, scholars could investigate the ways in which narrative is used to construct and negotiate identity in different cultural contexts, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between narrative, identity, and culture.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of centering marginalized voices and perspectives in scholarly research. Future research should prioritize the work of authors from diverse backgrounds, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the complex experiences of individuals from diverse cultures and identities.

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