

## BEYOND BINARIES: EXPLORING GENDER FLUIDITY IN EMEZI'S *FRESHWATER* WITH DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND BUTLERIAN PERFORMATIVITY

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### Abstract

*This research study tends to explore the convoluted portrayal of gender fluidity in Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity by using digital humanities methodologies. Butler's theory of Performativity suggests that human behaviors are not determined by their gender but by society, and gender roles are merely continuous performance rather than an innate trait, which she called Gender Performativity. This provides a crucial framework for understanding the protagonist Ada's fluid identity, which is influenced by the ogbanje spirits (the supernatural entities from Igbo mythology). By applying the theoretical perspective of Butler, the study tends to reveal how in *Freshwater* Emezi subverts the traditional norms of binary gender and presents a multifaceted narrative of identity. Through close textual analysis, the paper aims to demonstrate how Ada's interactions with the ogbanje spirits empower her to perform a spectrum of gendered identities, which challenge conventional gender roles. Additionally, the integration of digital humanities tools helps in exploring themes of the novel along with character interactions and narrative structure.*

**Keywords:** Gender Fluidity, gender Performativity, *Freshwater*, Igbo Mythology, non-Binary Identities.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Background of the Study

In recent years, the exploration of gender identity and fluidity has gained significant importance across various academic disciplines, including literature, cultural studies, and gender studies. The concept of genders as a non-binary and fluid spectrum seems to challenge the traditional norms. Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) is considered a profound narrative that embodies these complexities and offers a vivid portrayal of the protagonist navigating the composite dimensions of gender, identity, and selfhood. *Freshwater* is considered a semi-autobiographical novel that intertwines the complex elements of Igbo spirituality with the modern quest for identity. The story follows Ada, who is a young Nigerian girl whose sense of self is deeply influenced by the presence of ogbanje spirits. These spirits are represented as neither wholly male nor female, which blurs the boundaries of traditional gender categories and represents a broader spectrum of identity. The novel is considered an innovative contribution to contemporary literature, not only due to its narrative innovation but also for its portrayal of gender as a dynamic. Emezi is a non-binary writer

who brings a unique and personal perspective to the narrative, which shifts the traditional paradigm.

The main focus of the research is to understand the fluidity of gender in the novel *Freshwater* with the help of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler, who is considered an influential figure in gender theory, in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990), talked about how gender is not an inherent identity but rather created by society through a series of performances by using repeated social behaviors. According to Butler, the performances of genders are merely influenced by societal norms and expectations. In the novel, Ada's identity is demonstrated through her encounters with the ogbanje spirits. This performative element of Ada's identity is entirely in accordance with Butler's theory that gender is flexible and shaped by social context. By using Butler's theory to analyze *Freshwater*, we may investigate how the book disrupts conventional binary frameworks and depicts the fluidity and plurality of genders. Incorporating digital humanities techniques with Butler's theoretical framework tends to offer a thorough strategy for literary study.

Through the use of digital humanities approaches and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, this study aims to investigate how gender fluidity is represented in Akwaeke Emezi's work *Freshwater*. The goal of this research is to find out how the protagonist's encounters with ogbanje spirits offer a variety of gender identities that defy traditional binary frameworks. Furthermore, by offering a fresh viewpoint on the book's themes and narrative structure, the study demonstrates how digital humanities technologies can complement qualitative literary analysis of the novel.

## 1.2. Problem Statement

Rigid binary gender constructions still dominate mainstream narratives, despite an increase in discussion of non-binary and fluid gender identities in critical theory and literature. Analyzing how non-Western cultural frameworks like Igbo mythology intersect with modern gender theories to subvert these dichotomies is still lacking. Through the protagonist of the novel, Ada, whose identity is molded by ogbanje spirits (entities that transcend conventional gender categories). Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* offers a nuanced depiction of gender fluidity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and digital humanities approaches have not, however, been used to analyze the novel's complex layering of gender performance. By combining cultural, spiritual, and theoretical viewpoints, this study confronts the need to investigate how *Freshwater* challenges conventional gender beliefs and provides a nuanced picture of gender that goes beyond binary thinking.

## 1.3. Significance of the Research

This research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of gender fluidity by examining Akwaeke Emezi's work *Freshwater* through Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. The portrayal of the protagonist, Ada, in the novel, who throughout the novel navigates with complex identities influenced by ogbanje spirits, which challenges and subverts the traditional idea of gender binaries. By using digital humanities tools, the study intends to enhance traditional literary analysis by providing a deeper insight into the narrative structure and themes of the novel. The research contributes to the broader cultural conversations about non-binary and fluid identities, which tend to emphasize the transformative power of literature in shaping and reflecting societal concepts.

## 1.4. Delimitations of the Study

This research is delimited to the analysis of Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater*. It focuses specifically on the character of Ada to explore gender fluidity through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The study also incorporates cultural elements of Igbo mythology,

particularly the concept of ogbanje spirits, as portrayed in the novel. It does not include comparative studies with other literary works, empirical surveys, or broader sociological investigations of gender identity beyond the novel's framework. The scope is limited to textual and thematic analysis using qualitative content analysis and digital humanities tools.

### 1.5. Research Questions

1. How does the main character represent and question the traditional gender binaries?
2. In what ways does Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity help in understanding the construction of gender in the novel?
3. What kind of cultural and spiritual aspects of Igbo mythology are portrayed in shaping the representation of gender fluidity and identity in the novel?

## 2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have been done on the novel *Freshwater*, which is considered the debut novel of Akwaeke Emezi. (Ossana & E, 2021) has analyzed the portrayal of precolonial Igbo and Western narratives in the novel "Freshwater" by using the auto-fictional narrative mode for analysis, and the results show the cultural hybridity of Igbo and Western narratives along with the Challenges faced by singular identity with the portrayal of plural consciousnesses.

A similar study has been conducted by (Talabi & O. O, 2023), as the researcher examined the impact of Toni Morrison on writings of Akwaeke Emezi, particularly in *Freshwater* and explored how Emezi's narrative challenges the traditional notions of gender within literary awards and broader discourse by using the theory of Critical discourse analysis and the Results Demonstrates the challenges against established gender categories and its implications on future literature.

Furthermore (Schindler & M. E, 2023) has analyzed the novel to represent queer identities within African cosmologies by using the concept of Stuart Hall's cultural identity fluidity, and Maria Lugones's coloniality of gender. The results showcased that queer identities are not solely Western constructs but demonstrates the legitimacy within indigenous frameworks.

Moreover, (Di Pietro & A, 2023) has examined how the novel *Freshwater* addresses the complexities of diaspora identities and the reinterpretation of displacement within the postcolonial discourse by using the concept of diaspora. The analysis reveals that the novel redefines diaspora by presenting it as a dynamic, multifaceted experience, as it highlights the interplay between identity, migration, and the dichotomy of *self* and *other* in contemporary postcolonial narratives.

While (Zlámlová & K, 2023) in his work explored the concept of the ogbanje in the novel to examine individual identity as a means of empowerment and social negotiation by using queer theory the results show that the novel destabilizes conventional binary perceptions of gender and sexuality, by using the concept of ogbanje to challenge and redefine the identity in quest for self-discovery.

In addition, (Sidime & S. F, 2024) in his work *All Water Is Connected: African Earth Spirituality and Queering Identity in Akwaeke Emezi's 'Freshwater'*, explored the novel by using the ecofeminist theory, postcolonial theory, and African heritage traditions. The research focuses on how Emezi employed Igbo cosmology and gender fluidity to subvert Western gender norms and psychoanalytic categories.

Similar study had been conducted by (Ben-Iheanacho & E. O, 2022) in his work *Finding Self: Of Gods, Contestation and Containment in Akwaeke Emezi's 'Freshwater'*, examined the exploration of identity in the novel through the lens of queer literary analysis. The research deals with the presentation of individual identity as a means of social empowerment in the book by using the 'ogbanje' world. The study highlights the disruption and destabilization of traditional binary views on gender.

Additionally, (Cobo-Piñero & R, 2023), in "Queering the Black Atlantic: Transgender Spaces in Akwaeke Emezi's Writing and Visual Art," investigated how Emezi's work challenges Western notions of gender through an African lens. This research examined Emezi's experimental videos and photographs alongside their writing, and the study underscores the significance of Igbo traditions. The research highlights how Emezi presented indigenous beliefs from a decolonial perspective, by presenting multiple African, diasporic, and gender identities.

Likewise, (EMEZI'S & I. A, 2023) examined the concept of diaspora within the African context and its implications for identity. By analyzing the novel through diasporic and postcolonial identity, the research explored how Emezi's narrative reflects the complexities of African identity in the diaspora. The study discussed the historical as well as contemporary dimensions of diaspora and also highlights its role in shaping notions of self and other in Emezi's work.

Lastly, (Ukwueze & O, 2023), covered the comparative study of Woolf's and Emezi's novels. The paper argues that both works had a nomadic consciousness that drives the narrative structures and thematic explorations in both novels. This nomadism is reflected in the resistance of the characters to fixed identities and their continual struggle across various boundaries that may be sexual, physical, mental, or symbolic. He analyzed the novels under study through the postmodern theory of deterritorialization and nomadism.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, as the main focus of the study is on the textual analysis of Akwaeke Emezi's novel, *Freshwater*. The qualitative nature of this research is chosen for a deeper study of the complex portrayal of gender fluidity within the narrative of the novel. By applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and utilizing digital humanities perspectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the novel challenges the traditional gender binaries and explores the fluidity of identity through its characters and themes.

#### **3.2. Approach of Research**

The study uses a content analysis approach since it focuses on analyzing *Freshwater* to understand better how gender fluidity is portrayed in the book. By using this method, the study deliberately examines the text's themes, patterns, and essential ideas related to gender and identity.

#### **3.3. Data Collection**

The primary data source for this research is the text of *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi. Secondary sources include Scholarly papers, critical essays, and other pertinent theoretical works that offer different viewpoints on Igbo spirituality, digital humanities, and gender performativity as they are portrayed in the book. These secondary materials will offer additional context and support for the interpretation of the primary text, which helps to enrich the analysis and understanding of the novel's themes and their implications for gender studies.

### **4. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this research is grounded mainly in Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and also incorporates the cultural insights from Igbo mythology, particularly the concept of ogbanje spirits as depicted in the novel. This framework tends to focus on how fluid gender identities challenge the traditional gender binaries and how these identities are shaped through the narrative and characters of the novel. Additionally, digital humanities methodologies tend to enhance the qualitative analysis of these themes.

Judith Butler introduced the concept of gender performativity in her works *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler argued in these works that genders are not a natural quality,



but rather it is created by human societies and sustained by associating specific attributes with a gender. She further elaborates that gender identities are merely the performance of human beings, which is enacted through repeated behaviors and societal norms. According to Butler, such actions are simultaneously limited by and able to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes. The presence of ogbanje spirits, regarded as magical entities in Igbo mythology, influences the way Ada, the main character in *Freshwater*, presents her gender identity as multifaceted and fluid. Following Butler's theory that gender is created through performative acts, Ada's encounters with these ghosts constitute a sequence of gender performances. To understand how Ada's diverse gender expressions subvert society's conventional binary frameworks, this study will apply Judith Butler's theory. It is essential to consider the cultural and spiritual context of Igbo mythology to comprehend the novel's portrayal of gender fluidity. One of the novel's main ideas, the concept of ogbanje, describes spirits believed to be born into human families with the sole intent of continuously dying and reincarnating. In keeping with modern conceptions of gender fluidity, these spirits are frequently shown as having two or more gender identities. Digital humanities tools and methods were used in the research to deepen the knowledge of the themes of gender fluidity and identity in the novel.

## 5. Discussion and Analysis

### 5.1. Fragmented Selves and Performed Genders

Ada, the main character in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*, represents a multiplicity that defies accepted notions of gender identity. Ada's internal fragmentation through multiple spiritual selves, rather than presenting a stable or singular self, opens up a discourse of gender as naturally performative. This idea corresponds to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an inherent quality or a fixed trait. Still, rather, it is associated with a series of actions that are socially constructed, and we are repeatedly implicated to perform the duties assigned by society. In the novel *Freshwater*, this concept can be seen through the various identities of the protagonist Ada and the ways she navigates her existence throughout the novel. Butler believed that Gender is nothing more than an act that one performs under societal pressure, and it is not something one is in reality. Still, something one does through repeated actions and behaviors set by society. In the novel, we witness that the identity of the character of Ada is fragmented into multiple selves, and each identity has distinct behaviors and characteristics, which aligns with Butler's idea that gender identity is not singular or stable. Throughout the novel, Ada is inhabited by various spirits named (Asūghara, Saint Vincent, Yshwa, and The We), each spirit had its own gender expression and mannerism. These spirits perform genders that are sometimes contrary to each other and mostly opposite to Ada's assigned gender at birth. As Emezi writes

*"She could move between boy and girl, which was a freedom, for her and for us." (Emezi, 2018, p. 89)*

This quote directly supports Butler's theory that gender is a performed identity. This line captures the fluidity and performance of gender through Ada's multiple selves. By implying that gender is a sequence of behaviors, with various selves slipping into and out of forms, rather than a fixed identity, the line challenges strict gender binary thinking. Emezi suggests that being able to perform gender differently at different times is liberating rather than something abnormal. As she reinforced in the phrase "which was a freedom." Butler's assertion that gender is constituted through performance rather than biology is enacted in Emezi's narrative structure, wherein distinct spirits embody different gender traits. Through these spirits, Ada's identity is mediated, evolving into a dynamic interplay of gender roles that defies societal norms.

## 5.2. Subversive Femininity and Fluid Embodiment

In *Freshwater*, by giving voice and agency to spirits like Asughara, whose assertive femininity and sexual autonomy defy expectations, Akwaeke Emezi furthers their challenge to binary gender structures. Ada can represent a variety of gender expressions through these spirits, especially Asughara and Saint Vincent, as both challenge the male/female identity binary. This directly relates to Judith Butler's argument that gender norms are culturally enforced through repeated performances that coincide with societal expectations. Butler further elaborates that deviating from these societal norms reveals the true nature of human beings, as seen in the existence of Ada as an ogbanje, a spirit child that moves between the spiritual and human realms, inherently challenging the fixed gender norms of society. The spirits within her embody diverse and fluid identities that resist the conventional gender roles. For instance, the spirit Asughara represents a powerful, sexualized femininity that contrasts with the behavior of Ada when not influenced by the spirits. Emezi describes Asughara in the novel as

*"Asughara was the blade, forever flirting with the softness of people's throats... burning through the world"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 90)

In addition to being dangerously seductive, Asughara is described metaphorically as embodying power through femininity. In conventional frameworks, femininity is frequently associated with softness, submission, or passivity. By being compared to a blade, something sharp, intimidating and active, Asughara violently subverts the traditional ideas. Butler argued that, according to cultural expectations, women are "supposed" to behave in a particular manner. However, it becomes clear that these roles are not inherent; rather, they are performed and can be disrupted when a subject like Asughara portrays femininity as a source of danger and dominance. The poetic tone of the quote *"flirting with the softness of people's throats"* demonstrates how Asughara uses embodiment and attraction as weapons, rejecting victimization and moral authority. This is closely related to Butler's concept of *Gender Trouble* (1990), which refers to the way performances defy expectations, revealing the brittleness of gender itself.

*"She had lived as Ada, as Asughara, and as Saint Vincent. These selves inhabited her; moved through her, each bringing a different set of gestures and experiences."* (Emezi, 2018, p. 110)

This phrase exemplifies how the novel challenges and pluralizes notions of gender and selfhood. Ada is a host rather than a person with a fixed identity; her "selves," each with unique behaviors, moods, and gender expressions, inhabit her like performances. This supports Butler's argument that identity is a sequence of performances that are repeated over time rather than an essence. By alternating between Saint Vincent (associated with masculinity), Asughara (the hyper-feminine), and Ada (the human self), Emezi illustrates the fluidity of gender identity and how it is influenced by factors beyond biology or even conscious choice. In her work, *"Bodies That Matter"* (1993), Butler objects that gender is determined by one's actions, frequently under social pressure, rather than by one's identity. Despite being deeply internal, spiritual, and emotional, these performances in *Freshwater* nevertheless serve as gendered acts that undermine the binary.

## 5.3. Liminality and the Multiplicity of Selves

Using the Ogbanje mythology in particular, Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* examines identity as a plural and liminal experience rather than as a cohesive whole. Ada is portrayed in the novel as a vessel occupied by multiple consciousnesses rather than as a single self, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Being an ogbanje places her in a position that lies between the worlds of spirit and humanity, male and female, and the divine and the flesh. Essentialist conceptions of identity are challenged by this duality, which turns into a potent metaphor for ontological instability and gender fluidity.

*"Ogbanje are as liminal as is possible — spirit and human, both and neither. I am here and not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone. I am my others; we are one and we are many." (Emezi, 2018, p. 162)*

A fundamental metaphor for comprehending Ada's gender and identity as fundamentally fluid and fractured is provided by the idea of the *ogbanje*, which has its roots in Igbo spirituality. Emezi places Ada's existence in a transitional space by characterizing *Ogbanje* as **"spirit and human, both and neither... real and not real"**. Ada is a contradiction. Ada's identity performs this idea on a metaphysical and gendered level, supporting Judith Butler's contention that gender is not innate but rather created through a sequence of performed acts.

*"The Ada was living in multiple realities at once, floating loosely between them, forgetting what each one felt like as soon as she moved to a new one." (Emezi, 2018, p. 150)*

The quote highlights Ada's ability to manage overlapping identities. Instead of existing as a single, cohesive individual, Ada transforms into a changing landscape of consciousness, with each iteration of herself influenced by the prevailing spirit or situation. This supports Butler's contention that identity is a dynamic concept that is constantly negotiated. Emezi employs *ogbanje* to dramatize repetition and performance, a concept Butler theorizes. Ada is not just playing various roles; she inhabits them. She turns into a physical manifestation of gender diversity. Her performances are both cosmological and social, demonstrating that selfhood and gender are ephemeral movements along a spiritual spectrum rather than definitive ends.

#### 5.4. Dual Epistemologies: The Intersection of Igbo Spirituality and Western Psychiatry

Emezi's *Freshwater* juxtaposes Igbo cosmology with psychiatric discourse, challenging Western rationalist frameworks. Ada, the main character, experiences psychological collapses that could be classified as mental illness in a Western clinical setting. However, these same experiences are interpreted as signs of *ogbanje*, the spirit children who exist between realms, within the framework of Igbo spirituality. The line, "After all the doctors and the diagnoses and the hospitals, this thing of being an *ogbanjee*, a child of Ala—that was the only path that brought me any peace." (Emezi, 2018, p. 156), illustrates how psychiatric labels, despite their best efforts to diagnose and treat, ultimately fall short of explaining Ada's experience. The limitations of the Western medical model are subtly criticized in the text, particularly as they relate to non-Western, embodied spiritual experiences. According to Butler, social norms and institutional discourse shape identity. In this case, we observe two opposing discourses: one that sees Ada as spiritually gifted, and the other that sees her as clinically unstable.

Emezi challenges the legitimacy of medical diagnosis by combining ancestral mythology with psychiatric treatment. Ada becomes a composite being that defies straightforward interpretation by embodying both worlds rather than rejecting one for the other. The dichotomy between madness and divinity, biology and spirit, is undermined by her very presence. The Butlerian notion that identity is created, contested, and performed within ideological systems, which, in Ada's case, are frequently at odds with one another, is further supported by this epistemic hybridity, which also challenges Western hegemonic frameworks.

#### 6. Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the depiction of gender fluidity in Akwaeke Emezi's work *Freshwater* through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity while utilizing digital humanities methodologies. By analyzing the interactions of the protagonist Ada with the *ogbanje* spirits, this research tends to unmask how Emezi's work challenges and subverts the traditional binary frameworks of gender by providing a nuanced and fluid understanding of identity. The research offers a nuanced understanding of gender performativity by employing

Judith Butler's theoretical framework, which contends that gender is not an innate trait but instead is imposed by society through a series of repeated performances. This helps to explore the variety of identities depicted in *Freshwater*. Butler's claim that gender is created by socially prescribed performance is exemplified by Ada's experience serving as a cocoon for several spirits, each of whom represents a different gender. Igbo mythology is the source of the idea of the ogbanje spirits, which provides this investigation with a cultural and spiritual component while also representing the native African views on fluid identity.

Traditional literary analysis has been enhanced by the use of digital humanities techniques in this study, which offer a more thorough examination of the novel's themes, character interactions, and narrative structure. By using these methods, the research has been able to shed light on the complicated nature of gender fluidity and provide fresh perspectives on the connection between story structure and how non-binary identities are portrayed. Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* is a ground-breaking story that defies traditional Western gender stereotypes by offering a beautiful fusion of cultural, spiritual, and psychological aspects of identity. In addition to redefining gender norms, Akwaeke Emezi's book illustrates the wider transformative power of literature in influencing how society views non-binary and fluid identities. By using these instruments, the research has been able to shed light on the intricacies of gender fluidity and provide fresh perspectives on the connection between story structure and how non-binary identities are portrayed. Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* is a ground-breaking story that defies traditional Western gender stereotypes by offering a beautiful fusion of cultural, spiritual, and psychological aspects of identity. In addition to redefining gender norms, Akwaeke Emezi's book illustrates the wider transformative power of literature in influencing how society views non-binary and fluid identities. By highlighting the novel's importance in literary and cultural debate, this research tends to add to ongoing discussions within gender studies, digital humanities, and postcolonial literature.

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