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## On Liminality and Existences Outside the Binary in Awkaeke Emezi's Freshwater and The Death of Vivek Oji

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On Liminality and Existence Outside the Binary in Akwaeke  
Emezi's *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Overview

In *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, non-binary author Akwaeke Emezi challenges preconceived notions and norms through the representation of Ada and Vivek, as well as their community, whether it is a spiritual community or a human community. This dissertation will explore the complex relations between the protagonists and their community as well as with their own selves. To do this, the prisms of spirituality, gender, and sexuality will be applied with a focus placed on liminality and on narrative devices.

The first chapter will explore the representation of spirituality in both novels and the ways it influences the characters' perspectives. In *Freshwater*, Ada is an *ogbanje* raised in Nigeria in a Catholic household. Therefore, both *Odinala* and Christianity participate in Ada's inner and outer life. Being an *ogbanje* means that Ada's existence situates itself between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, as she shares her body with entities like *Asughara* and Saint Vincent who emerged from the shifting cloud of spirits that are the brothersisters. Furthermore, she is the territory of a tension between life and death as the *ogbanje* is supposed to have the child die before puberty. However, Ada manages to survive through perpetual self-harm. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's life and death are influenced by three belief systems: *Oḍinani*, Christianity, and Hinduism. These three religions shape his journey of self-discovery as they provide ways of understanding identities outside the norm. However, Christianity is also depicted as a source of misunderstanding.

The second chapter focuses on sexuality as well as on the interconnectedness of spirituality and gender identity and expression in both novels. This chapter will cover the fluid representation of sexuality in *Freshwater*, where Ada's desire fluctuates depending on the spiritual entity guiding the body and existing at the forefront of the mind. Her inner life also impacts her gender identity: as a holy figure, human-created categories cannot encompass her multiplicity. Similarly, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's spirituality leads to self-discovery as his being *Ahunna* reincarnate is depicted as being linked to his genderqueerness. Furthermore, Vivek and Osita are represented as having an unlabelled sexuality which they explore and attempt to understand and accept.

This dissertation's third chapter, on liminality, will examine the different ways in which both Ada and Vivek's existences are inherently liminal. In *Freshwater*, Ada's existence situates itself between the realm of the spirits and that of the humans. The novel follows her journey of

self-understanding and acceptance as she learns to stop fighting against her true nature as a holy figure. Ada is also the territory of a tension between life and death as Asughara compels her towards taking her own life. Similarly, Vivek also exists within liminal spaces. Being a narrative voice beyond death, making him a hinge between life and death. Moreover, his self-actualisation journey takes place in queer liminal safe spaces which allow him to explore his identity and his gender expression, but which also become enforced spaces as he tries to exist outside of them but cannot, leading to his death on the day the market burns. The market burning is a focal point in the novel. It is a time mark and the point of convergence of Vivek, Osita, Ebenezer, and Chisom's narratives. It serves throughout the story as a way for characters to hypothesise on the reasons and causes of Vivek's death.

Overall, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which the novels stray away from binary perception and categorisation by using literary devices. To this end, it will analyse the representation of spirituality, especially as a channel to depict complex identities, the way gender and sexual binaries are challenges, as well as the liminal spaces which simultaneously empower and imprison queer beings.

## **1.2. On Akwaeke Emezi**

Akwaeke Emezi is a Tamil-Nigerian author born in 1987 in Umuahia. Emezi is non-binary and uses the pronouns they/them. They also characterise themselves as inhabiting liminal spaces. Emezi's parents met in London, they have an older brother and a younger sister, Yagazie. When Emezi was eight years old, their mother moved to work in Saudi Arabia. They grew up within the Nigerwives community and then moved to the United States when they were sixteen years old. They started studying veterinary sciences but dropped out and then attended a master's program at New York University. They married and divorced, and a year later attempted to commit suicide by overdosing. After surviving, they started creating their online community on social media. They identify as an *ogbanje* and as trans. In 2018, they published their first novel, *Freshwater*. After that, they published *The Death of Vivek Oji, Bitter* (a young adult novel), *Content Warning: Everything* (a collection of poems), as well as *Dear Senthuran* (a memoir) and *You Made a Fool of Death with your Beauty* (a romance).

### **1.3. Methodology**

This dissertation explores the way in which identities challenging binaries and norms are represented in the novels of non-binary author Akwaeke Emezi. Both protagonists, Ada and Vivek, are represented as non-binary in terms of gender, but also in terms of their sexuality and their existence as a whole. For this reason, it appears crucial to establish a methodology explaining choices made in the writing of this paper. The main point that will be addressed in this section is the use of pronouns and names of the characters.

Firstly, the author uses they/them pronouns and will always be addressed accordingly. When talking about Ada, the pronoun “she” will be favoured as she is addressed as such in *Freshwater*. When talking about the օgbanje, there was a need to decide whether to describe it in the plural or in the singular. It might seem logical to use the plural as they are a multitude of clustered beings. However, it was decided to describe it using the singular, and thus to treat it as a compound, as an entity composed of entities. When it comes to *The Death of Vivek Oji*, the names Vivek and Nnemdi are used in alternation in this dissertation as to acknowledge fully the character’s identity as a genderqueer person. In the same line, the pronouns “he/him” will be used with the name Vivek and “she/her” with Nnemdi. At points in the paper in which there will be the objective to encompass their full being all at once, the character will be presented as Vivek/Nnemdi and talked about using the pronouns “they/them”.

By employing this methodology, the paper aims to represent the complexities of non-binary identities accurately and respectfully in the novels of Akwaeke Emezi, providing a comprehensive exploration of the portrayal of the characters.

### **1.4. Positioned Viewpoint**

Given the subject of my dissertation, I felt it was important to write a section describing my point of view. Talking about non-binary identities and LGBTQ+ issues in general implies a responsibility in terms of representation. Indeed, although the author is the one providing the primary representation, the research I do based on their writings cannot be objective, especially since I believe that academic objectivity does not exist. In other words, I am conscious that my societal situation has an influence on my writing and to ensure transparency, I have chosen to articulate my perspective.

Firstly, in terms of race, I am a mixed race and white passing. Coming from a North African background makes that I have a consciousness in terms of race although the situation

of a white-passing person is vastly different from that of a darker skin one due to colourism and the valorisation of proximity to whiteness. This means that I have strived to keep in mind my privilege as white passing and the power dynamics existing between white people and brown people, as well as those existing between brown people and Black, especially African in this case, people when writing my dissertation.

Furthermore, I identify as a non-binary lesbian person and use the pronouns she/her/they/them. Being genderqueer implies a willingness to explore identities existing outside strict categories but also a personal understanding of the non-conforming experience. However, I believe it is important to mention that I do not suffer from gender dysmorphia and that, therefore, my understanding of a complex relationship with gendered aspects of the body is purely that of an outsider.

In conclusion, the inclusion of this positioned viewpoint in my dissertation serves the purpose of transparency and acknowledges the responsibility that comes with discussing non-binary identities and LGBTQ+ issues. Recognising the inherent subjectivity of research and the absence of complete objectivity, I have expressed my perspective to foster openness and clarity.

### **1.5. Summary of *Freshwater***

*Freshwater* recounts the life of Ada as she grows up in Southern Nigeria with her Tamil mother, Saachi, her Igbo father, Saul, as well as her siblings Añuli and Chima. Ada is different from her siblings as she is an *ogbanje*, a malevolent spirit that inhabits the bodies of children still to be born and has them die before puberty to cause grief to the family. Moreover, Ada is also a child of Ala, the Igbo goddess of earth and the ruler of the underworld; and her name shows that, as Ada means ‘the egg of a python’ and the python is described as the flesh form of the goddess Ala.

At the moment of her birth, the gates between the world of the spirits and the world of the living should have been closed within Ada’s mind, which would have meant that the *ogbanje* would have merged with her. However, the gates stay open, so the *ogbanje* and Ada stay two distinct entities. As a child, Ada is temperamental and loud, unlike her siblings. When Saachi leaves to go work in Saudi Arabia, she feels lonely and seeks company by praying, hoping for the Christ, called Yshwa in the novel, to appear; he does not. However, other beings navigate Ada’s mind: she names them Smoke and Shadow. Her giving them a name is qualified as a second birth. As a child, Ada also witness her little sister, Añuli, getting run over by a truck. This traumatic moment participates in the shaping of her identity.

As a teenager, Ada goes to the United States, to Virginia, where she studies veterinary sciences. She starts experimenting with self-harm, which, she finds out, relieves the spirits' bloodthirst and allows her to survive puberty, although *ogbanjes* are supposed to die. In Virginia, she meets another student, named Soren, and the two begin a romantic relationship. However, Ada discovers that Soren rapes her, either during her sleep or during blackouts, which instigates the third birth: that of Asughara and Saint Vincent. Asughara emerges from the shifting cloud that is the brothersisters to protect and take control of Ada's body after the acknowledgment of her rape. As a result of her traumatic birth, Asughara, a feminine entity, is hypersexual and enjoys making men suffer. Saint Vincent appears at the same time as Asughara. He, on the other hand, is a gentle masculine entity who prefers to have sexual intercourse with women.

As both can take control of Ada's body, their existence impacts her perception of her sexuality and of her gender. When Asughara exists at the forefront of the mind, Ada likes her breasts and her curves, usually associated with femininity. When Saint Vincent starts taking control of the body, Ada prefers her large shoulders and narrow hips, usually perceived as masculine. Ada, therefore, must understand her complex inner life and find a way to have her bodily and spiritual existences converge peacefully. This proves to be difficult for her as she struggles with understanding and accepting her selves. In order to manage her many selves, Ada starts drinking and continues self-harming. Her misery culminates in her suicide attempt. Indeed, Asughara tries to achieve her purpose as an *ogbanje*, which is to have Ada die and manages to push Ada to take painkillers by summoning the spectre of Ada's cousin, Uche, who had died shortly before.

However, Ada survives and starts her journey of self-acceptance as she understands that she is non-binary with the help of her therapist. The protagonist undergoes gender-affirming surgery: she gets a breast reduction. Ada also returns to Nigeria to understand her roots. There, she meets a priest who understands her existence as an *ogbanje* and helps her to break open in order to put herself back together afterward. This proves to be a leap in Ada's journey of healing and self-understanding. She slowly comes to terms with her identity as an *ogbanje* and as a child of Ala as she prays to her godly mother who helps her see that she is a snake, a circular being. Following the advice of her friend Malena, who is also a spiritual being, Ada returns to Umuahia and manages to stop fighting her true nature as a spiritual being and as an individual who is many. Ada therefore finally embraces her human and divine facets.

## 1.6. Summary of *The Death of Vivek Oji*

On the day the market burns, Kavita finds the lifeless body of her child in front of her house. Vivek is naked, his nakedness hidden by colourful fabric. His skull is open and the silver Ganesh necklace he wore every day of his life is missing. *The Death of Vivek Oji* is a novel set in the 1990s that tells the events surrounding Vivek's death, leading up to it and resulting from it. The narrative unfolds through multiple perspectives: Osita, Kavita, Ebenezer, and Vivek are focalisers or narrators.

The story begins with Chika, Vivek's father, as a young man. He is tall and muscular and lives on his mother's farm with his brother's betrothed, Mary. Chika and Mary have a good relationship that Chika mistakes for romance. After being rejected by Mary, Chika tries to find a wife. He encounters shortly after. Kavita is a Tamil woman, the adoptive daughter of a doctor who migrated to Nigeria from India who will become his wife. Kavita, who has lost her mother, quickly creates a strong bond with Ahunna, whom she comes to consider as her own mother. Then, Chika and Kavita get married and have a child, Vivek.

However, on the day Vivek is born, Ahunna dies of heart failure. Stranger even, Vivek has on his foot a scar identical to one present on Ahunna's foot following an injury. Vivek grows up close to his cousin, Osita, the son of Mary and Ekene. They both socialise with the daughters of the Nigerwives. The Nigerwives form a community of foreign women who have married Nigerian men and moved to Nigeria as a result. They support and help each other settle into the country and learn its culture. Their children, Vivek, Juju, Elizabeth, Somto, and Olunne, form a subgroup. They exist in the same spheres and get closer as they grow up. Osita, for instance, has a romantic relationship with Elizabeth which comes to an end because of one of Vivek's episodes. Indeed, from his childhood on, Vivek appears to have blackouts, moments where his consciousness appears to leave his body, which stays frozen.

As a teenager, Vivek becomes more feminine in appearance as he grows his hair long. He also loses a lot of weight, which is the reason why his parents believe he is ill. In hopes to cure him of possible homosexuality, his father decides to send Vivek to a military boarding school. However, Vivek comes back early from his boarding school in even worse shape. Still struggling to understand her child and to help him overcome his illness, Kavita sends Vivek to Mary's church with the optimism that the congregation will support him. However, Vivek returns from church infuriated as he was physically abused by the believers who thought he was possessed by an evil spirit. A rupture happens between Vivek and his parents at this moment and Vivek starts isolating and stops taking care of himself.

It is the visit of Somto and Olunne, the daughters of a Nigerwife, which brings Vivek outside his bedroom. Indeed, the two sisters visit Vivek and talk to him in a manner he has not been spoken to for a while: with honesty. They tell Vivek that his hair is beautiful but that he should take care of himself. Following the sisters' visit, Vivek starts going out of his room and taking care of himself again by washing his body and eating. From this moment on, he grows closer to the daughters of the Nigerwives, especially Somto, Olunne, and Juju. Juju herself is on a journey of self-discovery of her sexuality as she is in a tumultuous relationship with Elizabeth. Their mutual understanding makes Vivek and Juju become a safe space for each other, concretised by Juju's room, which becomes a place where Vivek can explore his gender identity and expression. Indeed, it is in this room that Vivek starts wearing makeup and feminine clothing. Simultaneously, he starts having consensual sexual intercourse with men, for instance, his neighbour Tobeckukwu. He and Osita also grow closer as Osita confronts his desire for Vivek and initially refuses to acknowledge it. This, at first, creates a distance between the two as Vivek is subjected to Osita's projections of insecurity and shame. Yet, the pair starts a romantic and sexual relationship which comes as an awakening for both.

Although he is safe in Juju's bedroom, Vivek strives to exist as his feminine self, Nnemdi, in public. Consequently, he starts going outside wearing dresses and makeup, which makes Osita afraid for his lover's safety. Osita's fear culminates on the day the market burns as mobs spread in the streets and attack people. He goes outside trying to bring Nnemdi inside, but Nnemdi resists, both mentally and physically, which causes her accidental death as she falls on the ground and hit her head trying to pull away from Osita. Terrified and devastated, Osita tries to bring Nnemdi to the hospital but realises it is too late. He thus brings her lifeless body to her parents' house but, before leaving, takes her feminine clothes away and the Ganesh silver chain she wore since her childhood.

After Kavita discovers her child's body before her front door, she embarks on a quest for truth. She and Chika are devastated by Vivek's death and try to hold together, however, Chika cheats on Kavita with a Nigerwife, and Kavita becomes obsessed with finding the truth, as well as finding the Ganesh necklace. The pair grieve Vivek, as is the case for the daughters of the Nigerwives and Osita, who in addition to overcoming his sadness has to deal with guilt. As a result, he leaves for Port Harcourt where he drinks to forget and has sexual relations with anonymous women. Kavita and Osita's journeys merge when Kavita drives to the coastal city to bring Osita back home, still in hopes of finding the truth about her child.

Osita, who is the only one knowing about Nnemdi's death, and the daughters of the Nigerwives, who know about Nnemdi's genderqueerness, decide to bring the partial truth to

Kavita: they explain to her that Vivek was genderqueer, asked to be addressed using masculine as well as feminine pronouns and liked to present femininely. Kavita is, at first, overcome with disbelief, and then by shame and sadness as she realises that she and Chika did not allow their child to exist as her true self. She thus visits Vivek's grave, on Ahunna's compound, and destroys the tombstone with a garden hoe to force Chika to replace it with one fully representing Vivek. Osita discovers the new tombstone, engraved with Vivek's full name —Vivek Nnemdi Oji— on the day of Vivek's birthday, when he visits the grave.

The novel ends with a chapter narrated by Nnemdi herself, explaining that life is circular so she will be alive again.

## 2. Transcendence and Sacred Hybridity: Spirituality in *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework: Bridging Worlds of Beliefs

In both *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Freshwater*, Akwaeke Emezi confronts different belief systems through the representation of characters whose life is variously impacted by Ọdịnani, Christianity, and Hinduism. These religious systems are represented as interacting rather than as opposites. The three of them shape the characters' lives on multiple levels. This section will discuss the different spiritual beliefs represented in both novels and will focus more specifically on the aspects of these religions that impact the characters and their lives. The first spiritual system is Ọdịnani, a religion that emerged in Igboland before Christianity was introduced through colonisation. Ọdịnani is central to both novels as, in *Freshwater*, Ada is an ọgbanje and in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek is presented as a reincarnation of his grandmother. Both of these representations transcend the binary opposition between life and death. The second doctrine that has an influence on Ada and Vivek is Christianity. Christianity is represented as a source of misunderstanding for people whose existence is outside the norm, as is the case for Vivek who is the victim of violence at his aunt's church because he presents femininely. Moreover, the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria is perceived in the novels as having induced a lapse in the country's spiritual memory. The third religion represented in the novels is Hinduism. Hinduism is mostly present in *The Death of Vivek Oji* as, during his whole life, Vivek wears a silver pendant that represents Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu god (Doniger). This pendant becomes an obsession for Kavita, who restlessly searches for it after it has disappeared from Vivek's lifeless body.

Ọdịnani, the Igbo religious system, has been mapped out by Emmanuel Ojiaku in *Odinani: The Igbo Sacred Tradition* (2021). As Ojiaku explains, Ọdịnani, also called Odinala, "comprises the traditional religious practices and cultural beliefs of the Igbo people of southern Nigeria" (Ojiaku 5). It is a monotheistic and panentheistic religion, which means that it has "a single God as the source of all things" (Ojiaku 5). There is a supreme God, called Chukwu or Chineke, who is believed to have created everything (Ojiaku 5). A pantheon of spirits also exists, with spirits such as Ala, Amadiọha, Anyanwụ, Ekwensu, and Ikenga (Ojiaku 5). Ala will be discussed later as she is an important presence in the novel. These spirits, called alusi, are considered to be incarnations of Chukwu (Ojiaku 12). An important aspect of Ọdịnani is reincarnation, called ilo-uwa in Igbo (Ojiaku 10). In Odinala, members of a family are believed

to reincarnate into their own family seven times, thus giving them seven opportunities to lead a good life and thereby “enter the spirit world successfully as an ancestor” (Ojiaku 10). Consequently, a child can be a reincarnation of a late family member. Families can hire fortune-tellers who can reveal the child’s identity in their former life (Ojiaku 10) so that the family can name the child after the ancestor who has been reincarnated. However, even though a child can be an ancestor reincarnate, the child’s personality will not be identical to that of the ancestor (Ojiaku 10). Rather, the child, after their birth, can give clues as to whose reincarnation they are or the relative can, before their death, give clues as to whom they will be reincarnated as in the family (Ojiaku 10). For instance, the child can show signs that are behaviours or physical traits that link them to an ancestor (Ojiaku 10). A male ancestor can be reincarnated as a female; however, this is considered “an insult” (Ojiaku 10). Another form of reincarnation existing in Ọdịnani, although it is not a human form of metempsychosis, is the ọgbanje. An ọgbanje is a “reincarnating evil spirit that deliberately [plagues] a family with misfortune” (Ojiaku 11) by inhabiting the bodies of children still to be born and by purposefully prompting the children’s death, usually before puberty, to cause grief to their family. When the child dies, the ọgbanje reincarnates in the next child that is born in the family and dies again and again, causing perpetual grief to the same family. The ọgbanje thus torments the same family for generations, unless the evil spirit’s Iyi-uwa is found and destroyed. The Iyi-uwa is a stone that is used by the spirit to come back into the human world again and again. It is also through the Iyi-uwa that the ọgbanje can find its targeted family (Ojiaku 11). The stone is usually buried in a secret location and must be found and then destroyed by a priest to ensure that the family is freed from the ọgbanje. The figure of the ọgbanje features in *Freshwater* as Ada, the protagonist, is an ọgbanje as well as a child of Ala, an alusi. Alusi are “Chukwu's incarnations and ministers in the world (ụwà) [as well as] supernatural forces that regulate human life” (Ojiaku 12). All alusi are considered to be channels to Chukwu originating from Ala (Ojiaku 12). Ala is a feminine earth spirit who is “responsible for morality, fertility, and the dead ancestors who are stored in the underworld in her womb” (Ojiaku 13). Although Ala holds the spirits of the dead in her womb, she “stands for fertility and things that generate life including water, stone and vegetation, colour (àgwà), beauty (mmá) which is connected to goodness in Igbo society, and uniqueness (áfà)” (Ojiaku 13). The python is central to Ọdịnani as it is considered to be an agent of Ala (Ojiaku 13). Because Ala is the goddess of the Earth and is the ground itself, crimes and taboos are known as “ńsọ Ala” (Ojiaku 13), which means that they are a desecration of Ala. In traditional Igbo society, prohibitions included “murder, suicide, theft, incest, and abnormalities of birth such as in many places the birth of twins and the killing and eating of pregnant animal”

(Ojiaku 13). When individuals die by breaking a taboo or by committing suicide, they “are not buried in the ground or given burial rites but cast away in order not to further offend” Ala (Ojiaku 13). Furthermore, people who die such death are denied to right to become ancestors. (Ojiaku 13). People who died a bad death thus do not get buried in the earth, but rather are “discarded in a forest so as not to offend Ala” (Ojiaku 13). Although Ala is an alusi, a guardian spirit, associated with goodness, she has the ability to be malevolent in response to offence (Ojiaku 13).

As previously mentioned, Christianity also plays a central role in both novels. In *The Death of Vivek Oji* it is represented as a source of misunderstanding and violence to Vivek. In *Freshwater*, Christianity is not only an oppressor but also a part of Ada, as she contains everything. Christianity was introduced in Igboland in 1857 by missionaries from the Anglican Church (Ezeugwu 85) who established their mission in Onitsha (Ezeugwu 85). Their purpose was to profoundly Christianise Nigeria (Ayandele qtd by Ezeugwu 87). The arrival of the missionaries started the westernisation of Igboland. Aghaegbuna and Obiamalu explain that westernisation is the adherence to Western customs and practices. Prior to European influence in Africa, including Nigeria, each ethnic group had its own distinct belief system and educational system through which knowledge about their way of life was transmitted from one generation to another (Aghaegbuna and Obiamalu 518). The Church as well as the British authorities forbade Igbo cultural practices such as festivals, folktales, and traditional dances. For instance, the Church preached against masquerading and considered people practicing it as doomed to go to hell (Aghaegbuna and Obiamalu 520). Indeed, Christian missionaries considered Igbo society to be “in a confused state” (Aghaegbuna and Obiamalu 520) because they did not share Christian or traditional British values (Aghaegbuna and Obiamalu 520). Westernisation, therefore, meant that Igbo people had to abandon their customs to adopt those of the British coloniser.

The third religion that impacts the characters of *The Death of Vivek Oji* is Hinduism. Hinduism is one of the major world religions. It originated on the Indian subcontinent. Although the name “Hinduism” is relatively recent as it was coined by British writers at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Llewellyn Basham et al.), the religion refers to text practices that date back to the second millennium BCE or possibly earlier (Llewellyn Basham et al.). Indeed, Hinduism is believed to find its source in the Indus valley civilization (Llewellyn Basham et al.) and if such is the case, then Hinduism is the oldest living religion of humanity (Llewellyn Basham et al.). Currently, Hinduism has nearly one billion adherents worldwide (Llewellyn Basham et al.) and is the religion of about eighty percent of India’s population (Llewellyn

Basham et al.). Hinduism has different regional manifestations (Llewellyn Basham et al.) that give the religion an “organic, multileveled, and sometimes pluralistic nature (Llewellyn Basham et al.). This is possible because Hindus share a view that “truth or reality cannot be encapsulated in any creedal formulation” (Llewellyn Basham et al.). The Hindu pantheon includes gods and goddesses such as Krishna and his lover Radha, Rama and his wife Sita, Shiva and his consort Parvati, and the Great Goddess Durga (Llewellyn Basham et al.). Another important figure in Hinduism is Ganesh. Ganesh, also called Ganesha or Ganapati, is an elephant-headed Hindu god, the son of Shiva and Parvati (Doniger). He is the god of beginnings and the patron of intellectuals, bankers, scribes, and authors (Doniger). His vahana, that is, his vehicle, is the large Indian bandicoot rat, which symbolises his ability to “overcome anything to get what he wants” (Doniger). Indeed, Ganesha is considered to be a remover of obstacles, like a rat and like an elephant (Doniger).

## **2.2. Multiplicity, Hybridity, and Divine Fusion: Spirituality in *Freshwater***

In *Freshwater*, spirituality holds a central role in the growth of Ada, the protagonist. Spirituality in the novel exists through the representation of Ọdịnani, the Igbo spiritual system, and Christianity, introduced into Nigeria by British missionaries. One of the ways Ọdịnani is represented in *Freshwater* is through the fact that Ada is not human; she only has a human body inhabited by an ọgbanje. As previously mentioned, an ọgbanje is a malevolent spirit that inhabits the bodies of children still to be born and that aims at having the children die, usually before puberty. Ada survives through self-harm as the sacrifice appeases the brothersisters, that is the ọgbanje. More than that, Ada is also the daughter of Ala, the Igbo goddess of the earth and the ruler of the afterworld. This means that she holds not one, but two spiritual aspects to her identity. The only human thing about her is her appearance, her flesh body, and her faith in Jesus Christ, addressed as the christ in the novel. This although Christianity is considered a blindfold that prevents Igbo people from seeing their ancestral spiritual traditions, Ọdịnani. However, this does not mean that *Freshwater* negates the existence of a Christian God and of Christ. The Gods in the novel are plural and Christ is depicted as real and is called Yshwa by the brothersisters. Therefore, the novel confronts Ọdịnani and Christianity. More than just confronting aspects of the two religious systems, it also transcends the binary opposition between these two sets of beliefs by presenting them as coexisting within Ada. In other words, Emezi uses spirituality in *Freshwater* to transcend fixed religious categories.

In *Freshwater*, Ada, as an *ogbanje*, is supposed to die before during her childhood. However, she survives puberty, which makes her exceptional. Furthermore, unlike other *ogbanjes*, when Ada is born, the gates between the world of the spirits and the world of the living do not close:

We should have been anchored in her by then, asleep inside her membranes and synched with her mind. That would have been the safest way. But since the gates were open, not closed against remembrance, we became confused. We were at once old and newborn. We were her and yet not. We were not conscious but we were alive—in fact, the main problem was that we were a distinct we instead of being fully and just her. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 5)

The first sentence of the excerpt implies a dual identity within Ada: the “we” and the “her”. This is explained by the next sentence where the narrative “we” describes the ideal situation: at the time of birth, the *ogbanje* should be embedded completely in Ada’s body and mind. This suggests that when the bodies inhabited by *ogbanjes* are born, the gates between the two realms, that of the living and that of the spirits, usually close. This anchors the *ogbanje* in the human body and blends the different entities, the child’s identity and the *ogbanje* together to make one. However, this is not the case for Ada since the gates stay open. As a consequence, her personal identity is distinct from that of the *ogbanje*, who stays a “we” that can freely move between the world of the spirits and Ada’s mind. Still, at this point in the novel, the *ogbanje* are not conscious within Ada, which suggests a dormant state within the mind and the body of the newborn. The physical birth of Ada and her coming into the world as a different entity than the *ogbanje* is described in the novel as Ada’s first birth. The second birth happens when Ada is a child. In her journals, brought by her mother Saachi from Saudi Arabia where she works, Ada names the entities she feels live inside her:

Our forms were young and indistinct, but this naming was a second birth, it sorted us into something she could see. The first of us, Smoke, was a complicated gray, swirled layers and depths, barely held together in a vaguely human shape. We lifted our fogged arms, clumsy fingers exploring a blank and drifting face. The second of us, Shadow, was a deep black, pressed malevolently against a wall, hints of other colors (mother color eyes, yellowed teeth) that never made it past the fullness of the night. The Ada made us [...]. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 42)

In this passage narrated by the “we”, it is explained that the act of naming the entities that inhabit Ada’s body and mind makes them exist concretely. In other words, the act of naming them generates the second birth as it makes the *ogbanje* distinct in Ada’s mind: “We were distinct in her head by then: we had been Smoke and Shadow since the naming, since the second birth, little nagging parts that the Ada tried to ignore” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 53). The passage first introduces Smoke, portrayed as a complex grey with swirling layers and depths. The second birth does not suffice to completely materialise the entities as Smoke is described as being barely able to hold a human shape. Then, Shadow is introduced as black and malevolent, linking him to the purpose of the *ogbanje* on earth, which is to have the child die, but also to Asughara whose energy is darker than that of Saint Vincent. Intensity and hostility seem to characterise Shadow who is associated with darkness and the night. However, other colours form part of the spirit’s appearance: the yellow colour of the teeth and the mother colour of the eyes. “Mother color eyes” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 42) implies a presence of inherited femininity in the appearance of Shadow, which could once more allude to Asughara who has a dark and powerfully feminine energy. The third and final birth happens when Ada moves to Virginia, in the United States, to study veterinary science at university. The entity which newly emerged within Ada’s mind, Asughara, narrates this third birth as follows:

This third birth of a thing was a shock. I had been there, just minding my own business as part of a shifting cloud, then the next thing I knew, I was condensing into the marble room of Ada’s mind, with time moving slower for me than for her. The first thing I did was step forward so I could see through her eyes. There was a window in front of her face and one useless boy beside her. It was cold. I looked around the marble for Ada and there she was, a shred in the corner, a gibbering baby. I didn’t touch her—that wasn’t my style. I’ve never been the comforting type. Instead I sank my roots into her body, finding my grip on her capillaries and organs. I already knew that Ada was mine: mine to move and take and save. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 61-61)

The third birth happens following Ada’s sexual assault. As this passage shows, it is more brutal than the second one. Two individual spirits then appear successively in the novel: Asughara and Saint Vincent. Asughara appears out of the ‘we’ after Ada gets raped by her then-boyfriend, Soren, a Swedish boy of Eritrean descent whom Ada gets to know and falls in love with during her time at university in Virginia. As they start dating, Ada does not want to have sexual

intercourse with him because she does not feel sexual desire. One day, she realises that Soren has been sexually assaulting her and the traumatic discovery instigates Asughara's birth. Asughara narrates her own birth with a point of view internal to Ada's body as she emerges out of the "shifting cloud" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 61) into the marble room that is Ada's mind, which is described as cold. Asughara's immediate action is to step behind Ada's eyes to watch her physical surrounding. She notices a "useless boy" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 61), that is Soren. The fact that, from Asughara's perspective, Soren is immediately described as useless and as a boy coincides with the way she treats men when she takes control of the body. Only after looking through the body's eyes, Asughara searches for Ada within her own mind, in the marble room. She sees Ada and describes as a gibbering baby, emphasising her emotional distress and helplessness in the face of her traumatic experience. Asughara, rather than providing comfort, asserts her nature as an entity that does not offer consolation and support. Rather, she takes control of the body in order to save Ada as she considers that Ada is hers. As Asughara travels through the open gates to materialise in Ada's mind, Saint Vincent follows her:

Asughara could not be left alone; that would be unnatural. When something stands, something else stands beside it. So on the day she was born in Virginia, there was another one born with her as she tore through that window. His name was Saint Vincent, because when he sloughed off Asughara's side, he fell with holiness on his hands. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 121)

This excerpt narrated by the "we" explains the birth of Saint Vincent. He is being born at the same time as Asughara because she could not exist on her own as a concrete entity in Ada's mind. The sentence "when something stands, something else stands beside it" is an Igbo proverb highlighting duality and the fact that difference is a "necessary [condition] of existence" (Scafe 119). The use of this proverb brings to light the opposite identities and desires that Asughara and Saint Vincent have. As the idea of balance is transmitted through the proverb, Asughara's brutal presence must be counterbalanced by another presence. In this case, it is that of Saint Vincent who is gentle and masculine. His being a saint also suggests that Asughara would be a sinner as the link between Saint Vincent's name and his emergence on Asughara's side is highlighted. Finally, the opposite personalities of Asughara and Saint Vincent are foreshadowed by their way of emerging: Asughara tears through the window and Saint Vincent sloughs off her side (Emezi, *Freshwater* 121). Ada's identity as an *ogbanje* is therefore plural and ever-changing in the sense that new entities extract themselves from the "shifting cloud" (Emezi,

*Freshwater* 61) to emerge as individual beings in Ada's mind. Moreover, the use of the Igbo proverb implies that within Ada, opposites exist in order to create a balance.

Having previously discussed Ada's identity as an *ogbanje*, the focus will now shift to examining the representation of her being a child of Ala in the novel. Ala is described as follows in *Freshwater*:

Before a christ-induced amnesia struck the humans, it was well known that the python was sacred, beyond reptile. It is the source of the stream, the flesh form of the god Ala, who is the earth herself, the judge and mother, the giver of law. On her lips man is born and there he spends his whole life. Ala holds the underworld replete in her womb, the dead flexing and flattening her belly, a crescent moon above her. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9)

The first important element in the above quotation is its beginning, which suggests that with colonisation and the expansion of Christianity, precolonial systems of beliefs have been disregarded. Moreover, the python, a recurrent and key motif in the novel, is defined as the "flesh form of the god Ala" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9) and as the "source of the stream" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9). This implies that the python, as an earthly manifestation of Ala, is the source of life, especially since the *alusi* is described as the "mother" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9) on whose lips "man is born and [...] spends his whole life" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9). Moreover, as the flesh form of Ala, the python, like Ada, is a holy physical presence on Earth. The importance of the python in the novel is reflected in Ada's name:

Years later, Saul told the child that the name just meant "precious," but that translation is loose and inadequate, both correct and incomplete. The name meant, in its truest form, the egg of a python. [...] The egg of a python is the child of Ala. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9)

Ada's name, therefore, represents her identity as an offspring of the Igbo deity. Saul, Ada's father, tells her that her name means "precious", which reflects how he is disconnected from Igbo cosmology. Initially, Saul wanted to call her after her grandmother, as it is believed in Igbo tradition that grandchildren can be reincarnations of their grandparents if they have passed away at the time of the birth. However, Saul's brother, Obinna, suggested the name Ada for the baby. As the daughter of Ala, Ada is associated in the novel with pythons, as is the case with her name

meaning “egg of a python” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9), but also with her way of moving as a baby, characterised as “slithering on her stomach, pressing herself to the floor” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9). Another event related to Ala during Ada’s childhood occurs when Ala visits her in the form of a python:

The python raised its head and a length of its body, the rest coiled up, scales gliding gently over themselves. It did not blink. Through its eyes Ala looked at us, and through the Ada’s eyes we looked at her—all of us looking upon each other for the first time. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 11)

The python stares at the toddler who, scared of the snake, cries for help. Saul arrives in the room and hacks the python with a machete, thus dissolving Ala’s presence at this moment. The act of killing the python further exemplifies the disconnection between Saul, called a “modern Igbo man” having studied medicine in the Soviet Union and having lived in London (Emezi, *Freshwater* 13) and his ancestral culture. When he sees a python, to him, it cannot “mean anything other than death” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 13). This further shows that in the novel, colonisation has created an “amnesia” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9) that had Igbo people forget their ancestral spiritual traditions. However, these traditions are still an inherent part of Igbo people’s identity whether they want it or not, as is the case of Saul who kills the snake but who still named his daughter after her godly mother. The quote also depicts a moment of reckoning between two spiritual entities inhabiting flesh bodies: Ala looking through the eyes of the snake and the *ogbanje* looking through Ada’s.

The name of Ada, as shown in the previous paragraph, reflects her holy nature as it is said to mean “egg of a python” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 9). Interestingly, the name Akwaeke, that of the author, is also associated with the egg of a python as the python, in Igbo, is called Eke (Gurus n.p.) and the word egg is akwa (Aja n.p.). In other words, the author’s name references the egg of a python present in the novel, which creates a bond between Emezi and Ada. There are other similarities between the two: the fact that they have an Igbo father and a Tamil mother, they both study or have studied veterinary sciences in the United States, they both had a breast reduction and a hysterectomy that was paid with student loans, they are both non-binary transgender people, and they are both *ogbanjes* (Emezi, “Transition” n.p.). The fact that Emezi and their character share traits has a generic influence on the narrative. Indeed, the coexistence of fictional and factual elements within a single text, which presents itself as a work of fiction, is within the scope of autofiction. Autofiction is a boundary-transcending literary genre usually

associated with a combination of real and invented elements, an onomastic correspondence between the author and the protagonist, as well as stylistic experimentation (Effe & Lawlor 1). These characteristics are representative of *Freshwater* as, as mentioned above, the novel consists of real and fictional elements. There is also an onomastic correspondence between the author and the protagonist through the Igbo meaning of their names: they both refer to the egg of a python. Thirdly, the novel itself becomes a platform for Emezi to delve into and experiment with stylistic and generic elements as its fifteenth chapter, narrated by Ada, is a poem. The poem is divided into six stanzas of four lines each. Repetition is a stylistic device dominating the poem as it allows for the expression of fear and despair. The poem narrates Ada's existence as an offspring of gods and the influence it has on her life as well as on her Saachi's. It tells about the feeling of fear the mother experiences as she witnesses her child lose her sanity:

My mother does not sleep at night.  
She worries. This is the way of things  
when cold gods give you a child.  
I sleep like swollen opium.

She worries. This is the way of things.  
I went mad so young, you see.  
Sleeping like swollen opium,  
screaming on my better days. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 162)

These lines demonstrate the use of repetition to express the anguish of the narrator, Ada, as she tells of her mental health issues and the negative impact it has on her mother. The phrase "cold gods" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 162) suggests a sense of detachment or indifference from the gods who brought Ada to life, as is expressed when Ada prays to Yshwa as a child. It implies that the narrator's nature as a child of cold gods brings a specific kind of burden or challenge that contributes to Saachi's constant worry. In contrast to her mother's sleeplessness, Ada describes her own sleep as resembling "swollen opium" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 162). This metaphor implies a heavy sleep and even a sedated state. It hints at a certain disconnect or escape from reality during sleep, which may serve as a respite from her struggles. Overall, the presence of this poem within the novel adds to the autofictional aspect of *Freshwater* as there is the mention of Ada as a narrator of the chapter, yet the poetic subject, "I" can refer to Emezi themselves. The poem also blurs the lines between different literary genres, that is autobiography, poetry, and

fiction. In other words, the novel itself belongs to a genre transcending and challenging literary categories and norms. Furthermore, a critical aspect that reinforces the autofictional aspect of *Freshwater*, but also its challenging of norms is the presence of a multiplicity of selves, as is the case of Ada. Indeed, Serge Doubrovsky, when first theorising the genre, replaced “the idea of the authorial self with a multiplicity of different textual selves” (Dix 187) as is represented in *Freshwater* through the narrative “we”, but also through the presence of Ada and Asughara, as well as Saint Vincent. The novel is also considered a decolonised Bildungsroman by Cédric Courtois (187) as it decentres the white straight male protagonist.

As Igbo spirituality is represented in the novel through the existence of Ada as an *ogbanje* and as a child of Ala, Christianity mainly features through Yshwa, the name under which the spirits know Christ:

They had been taking [Ada] to Mass every Sunday, telling her about the christ, the man who was a man and not. [...] We knew him; we knew his name was Yshwa, we knew that he looked like everyone, all at once, at any time. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 37)

Here, the narrative “we” introduces the figure of Yshwa in the novel. They say that Ada is exposed to Christianity by her parents who bring her regularly to mass and share stories about Christ. The emphasis on the dual nature of the christ as a man who is not a man links his figure to Ada who is human and not human at the same time. Christ is described vaguely: as “someone who “looked like everyone, all at once” (Emezi, *Freshwater*, 37). This description suggests a sense of universality and the potential for Yshwa’s image to embody different identities and experiences. However, as the following excerpt shows, Christ willingly chooses to not accompany humans in their experience of pain. Indeed, Christ is presented as the recipient of Ada’s prayers as a lonely child since her mother’s working abroad and her father’s emotional absence, Ada feels lonely and prays to Christ in the hope that he will “come down and hold [her], just for a little bit” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 36). However, Yshwa does not manifest for Ada:

While he loves humans (he was born of one, lived and died as one), what they forget is that he loves them as a god does, which is to say, with a taste for suffering. So he watched the Ada cry herself to sleep [...]. He ran his hands along the curve of her faith and felt its strength, that it would remain steadfast whether he came to her or not. And even if it did not hold, Yshwa had no intentions of manifesting. He had

endured that abomination of the physical once and it was enough, never again.

(Emezi, *Freshwater* 37)

Yshwa is represented in *Freshwater* as slightly callous, even sadistic. As described in the previous passage, he does not materialise for Ada as he feels her faith will endure even though he stays absent. He is also said to “[love] [...] as god does, which is to say, with a taste for suffering” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 37), which means that his love for humans is accompanied by an appreciation of seeing them suffer. This reinforces the idea that Yshwa would be unwilling to act in order to help to stop Ada’s suffering. The physical aspect of humanity is the final reason why Yshwa does not want to materialise for a lonely Ada. Humanity is described as an abomination (Emezi, *Freshwater* 37), reflecting Ada’s own experience as a godly figure trapped in a human body. However a distance between the two is highlighted: Ada is still trapped within a flesh body and Yshwa is not anymore. This foreshadows the difficulties Ada will have to face throughout her life as a godly figure existing in a human body. It is mentioned in the excerpt that Yshwa runs “his hands along the curve of [Ada’s] faith and felt its strength” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 37). In this clause, the metaphorical language used to describe Yshwa’s movement highlights physical touch and thus a tactile relationship between Ada and Yshwa. As he interacts with Ada’s faith, he notices its strength, which further comforts him in the idea of not materialising for Ada. It is when Ada’s faith in Yshwa starts declining with Asughara’s emergence that Yshwa starts materialising in Ada’s mind to help her. However, Asughara does not let him approach Ada because she considers it is her role to protect Ada. Furthermore, years before, Ada distanced herself from Yshwa after her prayers remained unanswered:

After Soren was done with her, Ada walked away from Yshwa and straight into my arms, where she belonged. Yshwa’s teachings included a lot about repentance and forgiveness and being white as the snow of a bleached lamb, the general gist being that you could fuck up and start over, and Ada believed in it until I was born and then she didn’t. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 83)

After being sexually abused by Soren, and consequently, after Asughara’s materialisation, Ada strays away from her belief in the christ and his teachings of forgiveness. This quotation also implies a disdain felt by Asughara towards the christ and his religion through her exaggeration in the clause: “Yshwa’s teachings included a lot about repentance and forgiveness and being white as the snow of a bleached lamb” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 83). The quote represents the ideal

of humanity from Yshwa's perspective. As said, exaggeration is central in it, as can be seen in the clause "white as the snow of a bleached lamb" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 83). This clause portrays purity and cleanliness to an extreme, unachievable level, as the lamb, already considered a symbol of purity, is bleached, a harsh whitening technique. This quote thus hints at the fact that Yshwa's ideal is unattainable. Furthermore, the excerpt shows an antagonistic relationship between Yshwa and the *ogbanje*, reinforced by Asughara's reaction to his presence in the marble room:

Yshwa had this way of looking at me, with this half-loving, half-sad face, his head tilted to one side and darkness drifting off his shoulders from the shadows I tried to throw on him.

"I'm just trying to help her, you know." His voice was tucked and soft. I didn't care.

"I don't care," I told him. "Just go away."

"I want to help you too. I can help you too."

"I don't need your help. Go away."

"Asughara," he said, and my name sounded like a spring bubbling in his mouth.

I glimmered in and out impatiently. He was sitting cross-legged on the marble, wearing bone-colored linens, his hair short and curled this time. I stood by her eyes, looking out, dressed in matte black. The shadows were good at sticking to me.

(Emezi, *Freshwater* 84-85)

In this passage, Yshwa asserts that he wants to help Ada, even though he ignored her prayers when she was a lonely child as he was convinced her faith would endure through the years. However, with her sexual assault, Ada starts sharing control of her body with Asughara and therefore strays away from Christ, and Christianity in general. It is at this moment in her life that Yshwa finally materialises in Ada's mind. This passage furthermore depicts hostility between Asughara, who represents Igbo spirituality, and Yshwa, who represents Christianity. The antagonism between the two is clear as Yshwa tries to help Ada after her rape by Soren, but Asughara rejects him sternly. Moreover, as Yshwa is depicted as kind and patient, Asughara shows anger and brutality in her demeanour. The imagery in the novel further strengthens this opposition between the two entities as the Christ is represented as wearing "bone-colored linens" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 84) and, on the other hand, Asughara wears matte black because "the shadows [are] at sticking to [her]" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 85). Asughara thus appears to be wearing the shadows, that is black, in reflection of her core and her attitude. Indeed, throughout the

novel, she is represented as dark and brutal, which means that “the shadows” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 85) are an external element representing her inner life and her values. On the other hand, Yshwa wears white clothes, which is significant as whiteness is usually associated with goodness and purity. The colours worn by the two characters thus seem to represent their interiority, or rather the way they perceive themselves and are perceived.

However, the representations of Igbo spirituality and Christianity are not opposed; they rather transcend the binary as Ada encompasses everything. Indeed, the novel uses spirituality and its impact on the protagonist’s existence as a way to transcend the binary. Ada holds within herself elements of Christianity as well as of Ọdịnani. First of all, Ada is called “The Ada” by the narrative “we”. This way of naming her is reminiscent of the christ, thus placing Ada as a sacred figure, even holier than the christ as his name is not capitalised in the novel and preceded by the determinant “the”. The texts places Ada at the centre as a holy figure and therefore decentres Christianity by decentring the christ. Ada’s sacredness is further reinforced by the presence within herself of Saint Vincent, a holy figure —a Saint, associated with Christianity, yet placed on Ada’s side who stands at the centre of the novel, but also of her mind. Saint Vincent, as explained, materialises within Ada at the same time as Asughara. He is described as soft and gently masculine; he is not menacing and counterbalances Asughara’s dark and violent presence. Ada is also assimilated to the figure of Christ by being an offspring of the goddess Ala. She is, like Christ, the human incarnation of the child of a god. Nevertheless, her role on earth seems to diverge from that of Christ as, throughout the novel, she searches for struggles to understand her own existence in order to overcome the abomination that is her existence as a spiritual entity in a human body. Although Christianity is not represented as the dominant belief system, Yshwa still appears in the novel and in Ada’s mind as he tries to help her overcome her rape by Soren. The presence of Christ in Ada’s mind is not merely symbolic but literal, as she experiences his comforting presence, distinguishing her from individuals who perceive God and Christ as figuratively present within them. References to Ada’s inner spirituality abound in the novel. A significant instance is the description of her birth: Ada was born on the sixth of June and Saachi’s labour lasted six hours, although her previous labour was quick. The presence of the three sixes in relation to Ada’s birth is highlighted in this passage and refers to religion in a different way: it recalls the Antichrist and the number associated with it, which is 666, the mark of the beast. This means that Ada contains everything that is good, but also everything that is evil. This makes her a holy figure who transcends the binary perception of good and evil as she encompasses both the holy and the unholy. This is reinforced in the novel as the novel describes Ada, Saint Vincent, and Asughara as complete when reunited:

“They were balanced now—the Ada, her little beast, and her saint—the three of them locked in marbled flesh, burning through the world” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 126). This quotation highlights the holy character of Ada surrounded by “her saint” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 126) and “her little beast” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 126), which can be perceived as a Holy Trinity of their own. Furthermore, the comparison between Ada and the unholy figure does not stop there as when Ada encounters the python in the family’s bathroom, she is described as being “three years old, half of six, something” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 11). At the time of the encounter, Ada is only three years old, but the narrative “we” describes her as being “half of six” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 11) therefore highlighting once again the number six. Ada's association with the number six and the beast serves as a metaphor for the disruption as well as the subversion of traditional religious narratives.

To conclude, *Freshwater* distances spirituality from any binary vision by representing Ada as compounds. Ada is a compound of identities, as she is an *ogbanje*, a genderless cluster of spirits. This impacts her in different ways, from her perception of spirituality to her gender and sexuality, as will be seen in the following chapter. She is raised Christian and believes strongly in Christ, called Yshwa, while discovering that she is more than just human. She is indeed the child of the Igbo goddess Ala, which adds another spiritual identity to her already multifaceted self. This is reflected in her name which means “the egg of a python”. In the same manner as she encompasses different Igbo spiritual identities, Ada also encompasses elements of Christianity: she is called The Ada by the narrative “we”, assimilating her to the christ, whose name is only capitalised in the novel when he is called Yshwa, while The Ada is always capitalised. Magaqa and Makombe argue that her depiction as “The Ada” is “encapsulates her identity as a human with a spiritual connection and a spirit with a human connection. To call her “the Ada” is to acknowledge her borderline existence as “another” way of being human” (28). In other words, according to them, calling her The Ada is a way to acknowledge Ada’s liminal existence between the realm of the humans and the realm of the spirits. Ada also holds within her an entity called Saint Vincent, who is described as holy and soft and thus represents a facet of Ada’s identity that is holy and Good. On the other hand, Ada also contains Asughara, a dark and vengeful entity appearing after Ada’s acknowledgment of her rape. Asughara represents an unholy side of Ada, reinforced by her birth associated with the number 666, a numeral symbol for the antichrist and all that is Bad. This shows that different systems of belief are represented in *Freshwater* but that they are also all encompassed by Ada, who transcends the religious categories of Christianity and *Odinani*, but who also exists in-between the world of the living and the world of the spirits as the gates between the two realms stayed opened

when she was born. Saint Vincent and Asughara counterbalance each other as is explained in the passage narrating Asughara's birth. The idea of hybridity and duality is important in the novel in the sense that an equilibrium is slowly created within Ada through the acceptance of the different parts of her selves which are sometimes extreme.

### **2.3. Beyond Life and Death: Spirituality in Vivek Oji**

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, as in *Freshwater*, spirituality is used to transcend binaries and fixed categories of existence. The novel represents aspects of three religions, Christianity, Hinduism, and Ọdịnani, and each religion plays a central role in Vivek's life. Just like Ada, Vivek's spiritual experience encompasses more than just one system of belief and his existence does not fit in the life/death dichotomy. In the novel, Vivek is the reincarnation of his grandmother, Ahunna. This means that beyond death, Ahunna still lives within Nnemdi. Reincarnation is crucial in Ọdịnani, where ancestors can reincarnate seven times and usually reappear in the world of the living as their own grandchildren. Hinduism also impacts Vivek's life through a singular salient motif: the Ganesh silver chain that Kavita gives to Vivek as a child. This pendant is the catalyst of Kavita's search for answers after her child's death. When Kavita finds Vivek's lifeless body in front of her house, she realises that the pendant is missing. Finding it becomes her obsession after Vivek's funeral and her quest represents her need for answers. Ọdịnani and Hinduism thus participate significantly in the development of the narrative and this is also the case with Christianity. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Christianity is a source of alienation and suffering, especially for Vivek. As Vivek is perceived as homosexual in Nigeria in the 1990s, his family prefer to consider him mentally ill rather than acknowledging his sexuality and his gender identity, which would mean acknowledging the dangers that go with it. Mary (who is Vivek's aunt, Osita's mother, and a fervent believer) promises Kavita that her parish can help Vivek. However, Vivek is beaten by the congregation and believed to be possessed by a demon. This further stigmatises Nnemdi's existence and undermines her. However, Christianity is also used as a tool to understand the circularity of life as well as the holistic presence of life and death in the novel. Each religious system thus plays a role in the representation of non-binary existences in *The Death of Vivek Oji*.

The spiritual system that is most influential in the novel is Ọdịnani, the Igbo religion. This feature of Nnemdi's existence is presented in the novel in different ways. The first is related to Vivek's birth, as the day when Kavita goes into labour and gives birth to Vivek is the same day that Ahunna dies of a heart attack:

It wasn't until the next day that a messenger boy from the village came to Ngwa to tell Chika that Ahunna had died the day before, her heart seizing at the threshold of her house, her body slumping into her compound, the earth receiving her slack face. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 13)

It is made clear in this passage that Ahunna dies of a heart attack on the day that Vivek is born. However, Chika and Kavita were made aware of the unfortunate event the next day. Significantly, Ahunna “dies at the threshold of her house,” which is similar to where Vivek’s lifeless body is found by Kavita. The similarity further strengthens when Vivek is born with a scar on his foot that is identical to Ahunna’s. Long before Vivek’s birth, Ahunna stepped on a stick that wounded the instep of her foot while taking care of her farm. As the wound healed, it left a scar in the shape of a starfish on Ahunna’s foot (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 5). The distinctive scar can also be found on Vivek’s foot from the day he was born: “On the day Vivek was born, Chika had held the baby in his arms and stared at that scar. He’d seen it before—Kavita always commented on its shape whenever she rubbed Ahunna’s feet” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 13). Ahunna and Vivek thus share a unique physical feature that creates a bond between them, even though they never meet and are never alive at the same time. This similarity sparks a question in Chika’s mind:

How else could that scar have entered the world on flesh if it had not left in the first place? A thing cannot be in two places at once. But still, he denied this for many years, for as long as he could. Superstition, he said. It was a coincidence, the marks on their feet—and besides, Vivek was a boy and not a girl, so how can? (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 13)

This passage introduces the idea that reincarnation is within the realm of possibility, even though it is dismissed as being “just stories” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 13) by Chika. Indeed, Chika is a focaliser in this excerpt and the narrative transmits his thoughts and questions as his mind is the territory of a battle between rationality and spirituality. In other words, Vivek’s father notices inexplicable similarities between Ahunna and his son but chooses to consider them a coincidence. Furthermore, his statement about Vivek being a boy and not a girl implies that he believes certain phenomena, such as reincarnation, may be more plausible or expected depending on whether the person is a man or a woman. This highlights a distance between

Chika and Igbo spirituality similar to Saul's, the father of Ada. The idea that Vivek is a reincarnation of Ahunna is further reinforced by a dream Vivek has as a teenager, which he tells Osita about:

“I dreamt that I was our grandmother,” I [Vivek] tell him. “I looked in a mirror and she was there, just like the pictures, and she spoke to me in Igbo.”

“What did she say?”

“Hold my life for me.” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 160)

In this passage, Vivek as a narrator talks to Osita about a dream he had where his reflection was Ahunna. Vivek never meets Ahunna but rather only her looks from the family photos, however, he sees her in his dream and recognises her. The fact that Vivek mentions that Ahunna talked to him in Igbo is significant as it tightens the link between the dream and Vivek's own identity and Igbo spirituality. In the dream, Ahunna tells Vivek to “hold [her] life for [her],” which then makes Vivek wonder if reincarnation is real and if he can be a reincarnation of Ahunna. This quotation strengthens the idea that Vivek is a reincarnation of Ahunna, but also gives a voice to her beyond death, as is the case with Vivek who still narrates chapters of the novel after he dies. The theory that Vivek could be Ahunna reincarnate ultimately solidifies when Kavita learns of the female name that Vivek wanted his friend to call him: Nnemdi. Kavita does not know why, but the name sounds familiar to her. After days of thinking about it, she phones her brother-in-law, Ekene, to ask him about the name:

“Do you remember when Vivek was born?” she said [...].

Ekene paused for a moment. “Yes, of course.”

“And you said we should have given him an Igbo name, at least as a middle name?”

[...]

He sighed through the line. “Nnemdi. It's not a common name, but it was for Mama. Because they had that same scar on their feet.” [...] But Chika didn't agree. If Vivek had been a girl, maybe he would have agreed. I don't know. He was very somehow about the whole thing, so I just left it alone. [...] (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 221-22)

After talking to the children of the Nigerwives, Kavita calls Ekene as the name “Nnemdi” sounds familiar to her. Ekene tells Kavita that, before the naming ceremony, he had suggested to Chika naming Vivek Nnemdi as he shared the scar Ahunna had on her foot before her death. However, Chika refused because of the gender that Vivek was assigned at birth. This revelation leaves Kavita in shock as Nnemdi is the female Igbo name that her child chose for herself without knowing that Ekene had suggested it to her father (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 222). The name Nnemdi ultimately answers the question of whether or not Nnemdi is a reincarnation of her grandmother, but it also compels Kavita to accept her child’s queerness, as will be argued in the following chapter. It also represents a side of Nnemdi that is spiritual as she did not know that Ekene suggested this as a middle name for her yet chose it herself. This highlights a spiritual aspect of Nnemdi’s gender identity as she is connected to Ahunna through her queerness. The quote also draws attention to Chika refusing to give the second name Nnemdi to Vivek as he was assigned male at birth. This expresses the unwillingness of Vivek’s parents, in this case Chika, to acknowledge his existence as a genderqueer person.

Reincarnation thus plays a central part in the novel. It represents life always coming back in a circular way. Circularity is central to *Ọdịnani* and to *The Death of Vivek Oji* by extension. It breaks away from the binary opposition between life and death as it places life and death as different stages of the same cycle rather than oppose them as states that are impossible to combine; it also offers individuals the opportunity to experience consciously the different stages of existence. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Nnemdi’s life and death are represented as circular in different ways. Early in the novel, a third-person narrator describes with pictures how her family was when Nnemdi was born and when she died:

Picture: a house thrown into wailing the day he left it, restored to the way it was when he entered.

Picture: his body wrapped.

Picture: his father shattered, his mother gone mad. A dead foot with a deflated starfish spilled over its curve, the beginning and end of everything. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 14)

The first part of this quotation insists on the circular aspect of Vivek’s life, as he was born in a grieving household and left a grieving household when he died. The second pictorial description talks about Vivek’s wrapped body; however, it is unclear whether it is describing his body wrapped when he was a baby or the way his mother found his body after he died: wrapped in colourful fabric. Finally, the third depiction showcases Chika and Kavita’s grief and mentions

a “dead foot with a deflated starfish spilled over its curve” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 14) as “the beginning and end of everything.” Vivek’s deflated foot represents the death of Vivek, through which Ahunna dies once more. Furthermore, Nnemdi mentions that life is circular in the ultimate chapter in the novel. She narrates the chapter from beyond death and explains that “[she] was born and [she] died. [She] will come back” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 245) and that “somewhere [...] in the river of time, [she] [is] already alive” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 245). The passage raises questions about the nature of life and death, exploring themes of continuity, rebirth, and the fluidity of time. It introduces the idea that despite the physical death of an individual, there is an inherent connection and ongoing existence that transcends the boundaries of time and space. This means again that the boundary between life and death is not impermeable but rather porous. This quotation also strays away from the binary opposition between life and death as it considers that someone, in this case, Nnemdi, can be simultaneously dead and alive “somewhere [...] in the river of time” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji*, 245). Nnemdi is also present, as just explained, as a ghostly figure throughout the novel. Indeed, she comments on events that happen after her death, which places her in a state of in-betweenness, as will be further discussed in the chapter on liminality. The principle of circularity of life is also depicted in this passage representing Osita’s perception of Nnemdi’s death:

I wasn’t sure why Aunty Kavita had picked a fruit tree that would feed on Vivek’s body. Uncle Chika probably would have selected something else, like a palm tree. Did she look forward to the day when it would actually have star fruits hanging from its branches? Would she pick them and eat them as if she was absorbing him, bringing him back inside where he’d come from? It would be something like Holy Communion, I imagined, body and blood turned into yellow flesh and pale green skin, bursting with juice. Or maybe she would never touch the fruit— maybe no one would—and they would fall back to the ground to rot, to sink back into the soil, until the roots of the tree took them back and it would just continue like that, around and around. Or birds would show up and eat the fruit, then carry Vivek around, giving life to things even after he’d run out of it himself. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 230)

Osita visits Vivek’s grave for the latter’s birthday and questions the choice of tree Kavita planted on Vivek’s grave. It is usual in Nigeria to plant a tree on someone’s grave; however, as mentioned in the passage, a fruit tree is not a usual choice. Osita thus reflects on the tree, on its fruit and on how it could bring Vivek back into the world by “feed[ing] on [his] body” (Emezi,

*Vivek Oji* 230). This idea highlights once more how life is circular, however in a different way than with reincarnation. Here, according to Osita, Vivek still lives in a way because a fruit tree is growing on his grave and because this tree will provide star fruits that will be eaten by humans or by birds that will spread the seeds of the fruit, therefore planting new trees that will indirectly be a result of Vivek's passing and burial. Osita also wonders if Kavita will eat the fruit and thus bring Vivek back to where he came from, that is from Kavita's body. His mental description of the star fruits falling on the floor and rotting until they go back into the soil and feed the roots of the tree is clearly representative of circularity as well, as it shows that the tree feeds itself and that thus Vivek feeds himself. Furthermore, Christianity is a lens through which Osita to understand Vivek's transformation. The young man does so by approximating it to transubstantiation, the fact of seeing the body of Christ in bread and his blood in wine during the Eucharist. In this case, Vivek's body would be found in "yellow flesh and pale green skin" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 230) and his blood would be present in the juice of the green fruit (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 230). This suggests a shared identity parts between Vivek and Christ, which is further depicted through the events that happen in the aftermath of Vivek's death. Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are central events in Christian theology, representing sacrifice, redemption, and the triumph over death. In a similar manner, Vivek's death instils a search for truth and a reckoning which forces characters to confront their own bias and fears. Moreover, Nnemdi can be said to resuscitate through her narrative ability in the novel and the fact that she implies that she is alive somewhere in the river of life (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 245). Lastly, a sacrificial character can be associated with Nnemdi's life and death. As she explores her identity, she pushes Osita to navigate his sexuality and confront his fears, as will be analysed in the following chapter. In other words, Vivek acts as a catalyst for self-reflection, growth, and understanding among his friends and family, including Osita and Kavita, who grows into understand and accepting her child for who he is.

Christianity thus also forms a part of the novel, in this case as a lens through which Osita can understand Vivek's transformation. Moreover, as mentioned in the introduction, Christianity is also depicted in the novel as having a negative impact on Vivek's life. In addition to serve as a support to Osita's understanding of Vivek's existence after his death, Christianity is a source of misunderstanding and suffering. Indeed, as Nnemdi starts wearing her hair long and is considered effeminate by the people surrounding her, Kavita worries that she is mentally ill. After trying multiple times to help her and connect with her, but failing at doing so, she agrees for Mary to take Vivek to her church were, Mary affirms, the congregation and the pastor will be able to help him. However, when Vivek comes home from Owerri, where Mary, Ekene,

and Osita live, he appears to be furious at Kavita, who is confused as she believes that if anything wrong had happened at the church, Mary would have phoned her. However, Vivek lifts his shirt to show contusions on his torso:

“You think it’s all right to treat someone as if they’re an animal? In the name of their useless deliverance? Mba, wait. They called it an exorcism. Because, apparently, I have a demon in me, did you know? They had to beat it out.” He lifted up his shirt, revealing a swath of dark red welts on his side. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 75)

In this passage, Vivek feels he has been treated in an inhumane way by the congregation as they believed that his appearance was the result of demonic possession. He blames his mother who allowed Mary to take him to her church without further investigating what was going to happen. In this passage, Christianity is represented as archaic and violent, unable or unwilling to understand existences outside the norm as they consider Vivek to be possessed by a demon. This implies that the congregation ignores, willingly or not, existences outside the gender and sexual binary and consider them to be evil. The last sentence of the excerpt describes Vivek showing bruises on his body as he was the victim of physical violence as a result of homophobia and transphobia.

Finally, the third spiritual tradition represented in the novel is Hinduism. Kavita being Tamil, this makes Nnemdi biracial but also at the intersection of two spiritual traditions as her mother was Hindi but converted to Catholicism. The Ganesh pendant Nnemdi wears which disappears after her death was given to her as a child by Kavita. Interestingly, her obsession grows after Nnemdi’s burial: if Kavita finds the chain before the funeral, Nnemdi would be buried with it and Kavita wants to keep it to remember her child. Kavita’s search for the chain parallels her quest for the truth surrounding her child’s death. Ultimately, she never finds the pendant in the same way that she never finds what really happened to her child on the day she died. Both the pendant and the truth are in Osita’s possession, as is mentioned at the end of the novel. Osita knows what happened to Nnemdi because he was an actor in her death, and this is also the reason why he is in possession of the chain. The pendant represents Ganesh, the Hindu god of new beginnings who helps overcome obstacles. In this context, this is significant that it is Osita who ends up having the pendant in his possession. Osita since he has to come to terms with the role he played in it. Indeed, as a reminder, Osita accidentally kills Nnemdi while trying to keep her inside the house and away from the riot. During her lifetime, Nnemdi overcomes

many obstacles to become herself; she even dies while trying to exist publicly as a transgender person.

To conclude, spirituality in *The Death of Vivek Oji* plays different roles, but also comes from different traditions. Nnemdi's spiritual existence is at the intersection of different belief systems: Odinala, Christianity, and Hinduism. From Odinala comes the fact that, like Ada who is an oḡbanje and a daughter of Ala, Nnemdi represents more than meets the eye. She is a genderfluid person who is her grandmother reincarnate, as shown by the starfish scar on the instep of her foot. This puts Nnemdi's existence beyond the binary between life and death. Indeed, Emezi portrays Nnemdi as a reincarnation of Ahunna, although Vivek was assigned male at birth, which means that Ahunna still lives through him. Vivek is also impacted by Christianity during his life as he is misunderstood and mistreated by Mary's church. This shows that the Church does not want to understand and accept his existence as a visibly queer person and would rather consider him to be possessed by a demon. On the other hand, Osita's use of Holy Communion to word his perception of the fruit tree growing on Vivek's grave as participating in the circularity of life, shows that Christianity can be used as a lens to understand existence outside the binary, in this case beyond the life-death dichotomy. Finally, Hinduism also plays a part in the novel through the singular motif that is the Ganesha pendant that Vivek wears most of his life. The pendant becomes, as previously mentioned, a catalyst for the story as Kavita searches for it after it disappeared from Vivek's lifeless body. It is also an important symbol for Osita, who has the pendant in his possession and who is the only person alive knowing the truth about Nnemdi's death. Representing Ganesha, the Hindu god of overcoming obstacles, the pendant guided Nnemdi through her life and accompanied her as she was exploring her gender identity and her sexuality and then, after her death, it is in possession of Osita, who has to accept the part he played in Vivek's death as well as his sexuality, as will be argued in the following chapter, and the loss of his loved one. Succinctly, spirituality in *The Death of Vivek Oji* is multifaceted, incorporating elements from Odinala, Christianity, and Hinduism. Nnemdi's existence challenges binaries, while the Ganesha pendant serves as a guiding symbol and catalyst for the narrative.

#### **2.4. Fluidity and Liberation: Conclusion of Spirituality**

This chapter argued that in both *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, spirituality is used as a channel to represent non-binary identities. Religion in *Freshwater* allows the introduction of Ada's multiple identities, as an oḡbanje, a child of Ala, and as a holy figure containing multiple

entities. On the other hand, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's spiritual experience also offers a context in which self-exploration leads to self-liberation. Vivek is a reincarnation of Ahunna, his own grandmother and his exploration of this spiritual aspect of his identity helps him ground himself in his gender identity, as will be explored later, but also offers him a situation that is not limited by the dichotomy between life and death. The border between these two states is depicted as porous and permeable instead of unbridgeable. Ada exists as a bridge between the world of the humans and that of the spirits, and Vivek between the world of the living and that of the dead. This is especially striking when it comes to the narration of events that happened after Nnemdi's death. Nnemdi indeed appears as a narrative voice after her passing and is even able to comment on events that happened as her family, friends, and lovers grieve her death. The book ends with Nnemdi explaining herself that death is not a final state, and that time is a river in which someone can be simultaneously alive and dead, thus evoking her own existence as Ahunna reincarnate. Ultimately, the depiction of spirituality in both *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* creates space for the representation of gender identities and sexualities that exist beyond the binary, as will be argued in the following chapter.

### **3. Transcending Norms: Gender and Sexuality in *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji***

#### **3.1. Theoretical Framework: Queerness as Resistance, Disruption, and Non-Conformity**

This theoretical framework will focus on the notion of queerness, from where it stems, and its political aspect. Queerness is not easily defined as it “rejects stable categorization of identity categories” (Weise 484). The term “queer” used in the LGBTQIA+ context is the result of the reappropriation of a slur. It was once used as a derogatory way of addressing LGBTQIA+ people and subsequently gained acceptance in the late 1980s to 1990s following gay and lesbian activism (Weise 484). Queerness, as Judith Butler describes it in “Critically Queer” is “never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage” (19). More concretely, queerness is the rejection of “stable categorization of identity categories, typically along sexual and gender identities” (Weise 484). Although it rejects the categorisation of ways of identifying oneself, it is still considered an identity, or rather a position, that “encompasses gender and sexual identities that do not align with dominant gender and sexual cultural expectations” (Weise 485). Dominant gender and sexual expectations can be summarised as “maleness = masculinity = attraction to women, or femaleness = femininity = attraction to men” (Shlasko 124) and any behaviour that disrupts this paradigm of expected behaviours can be considered queer. The fact that cisheteronormativity is a paradigm means that it can be questioned and shifted through the presence of queer identities and behaviours. Queer identities and behaviours encompass people who hold “gender and/or sexual identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming” (Weise 485). Furthermore, sexual activities like BDSM, sex work, non-monogamy, and fetishes (Weise 485) also occupy room in the queer space as these types of sexual expressions defy the limitations imposed by the cisheteronormative framework. To recapitulate, queerness can be applied to identities or behaviours that challenge the cisheteronormative norm, which expects men to present in a masculine manner and to engage in romantic and sexual relationships with women and women to present in a feminine manner and engage in romantic and sexual relationships with men. It resists questions of categorisation and gender conventions. The purpose of this section is to further investigate queerness and its political aspect, as well as to explore the notions of gender identity and gender expression, the theory of gender as performance elaborated by Judith Butler as well as compulsory cisheterosexuality.

Queerness being a response to cisheteronormative norms, its existence relies on the idea that gender is separate from sex. Indeed, as Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, although sex can be considered to be biological, gender is not. It rather is a performance, that is a pattern of behaviours and preferences that are usually associated with one gender, the other, or both:

Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. (Butler, *GT* 8)

Here, Butler suggests that although sex is considered a trait that cannot be controlled, gender, on the other hand, is. The phrase "biology-is-destiny formulation" refers to the idea that an individual's biological sex (male or female) determines their social roles, behaviours, and identity. It suggests that because of biological differences, men and women naturally embody specific characteristics and fulfil predetermined roles in society. However, Butler argues that gender is a social construct, which means that it is not inherent to human existence and that the way gender is understood and performed is influenced by social, historical, and cultural factors, such as norms, expectations, and power relations rather than an innate set of traits and behaviours. Butler argues that the stability of either gender, whether it be man or woman, relies on the existence of stable and oppositional heterosexuality.

In other words, the traditional understanding of gender as a binary system consisting of masculine and feminine roles is reinforced and maintained through the framework of heterosexuality:

The internal coherence of unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. (Butler, *GT* 31)

According to Butler, the oppositional nature of gender, that is the fact that the masculine is considered opposed to the feminine, is reinforced by the institution of heterosexuality and also feeds it. This means that heterosexuality plays a significant role in defining and limiting the range of gendered possibilities within the binary gender system. By upholding the norms

dictated by heterosexuality, society reinforces the idea that there are fixed and distinct categories, that of man and woman. Here, Butler hints at the existence of compulsory heterosexuality as a way of upholding the binary gender system.

In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Monique Wittig puts compulsory heterosexuality and cisnormativity on trial. Compulsory heterosexuality is defined as the normalisation of heterosexuality, that is the belief that it is the only natural sexuality (Brittner 115) and cisnormativity is the assumption that being cisgender, that is identifying with the sex assigned at birth, is normal (Worthen 31). Wittig considers that heterosexuality is not natural but rather “a political regime which rests on the submission and the appropriation of women” (Wittig xiii):

The sexes, in spite of their constitutive difference, must inevitably develop relationships from category to category. Belonging to the natural order, these relationships cannot be spoken of as social relationships. This thought which impregnates all discourses, including common-sense ones (Adam's rib or Adam is, Eve is Adam's rib), is the thought of domination. Its body of discourses is constantly reinforced on all levels of social reality and conceals the political fact of the subjugation of one sex by the other, the compulsory character of the category itself (which constitutes the first definition of the social being in civil status). The category of sex does not exist a priori, before all society. (Wittig 5)

In this passage, Monique Wittig discusses the idea that gender categories, referred to as “the sexes”, leads to the development of relationships between the gender categories. These relationships are often seen as natural and not recognised as social relationships. Wittig argues that this perspective is rooted in the notion of domination, which permeates various discourses, including common-sense ideas like the biblical story of Adam's rib. The "thought of domination" (Wittig 5) refers to the belief that one gender holds power and control over the other. This domination is reinforced through social structures and norms, which conceal the political reality of the oppression of one gender by the other. The category of gender itself is seen as compulsory and is defined in civil status, implying that it is an essential aspect of an individual's social identity. Wittig's critique centres around the idea that gender and the relationships between the sexes are not fixed or natural, but rather constructed and imposed through social and political mechanisms. By exposing the power dynamics and the compulsory nature of gender categories, Wittig challenges the notion of gender as a characteristic inherent

to humans, as well as highlights its political and social implications. An aspect of the oppression of women by men, according to Wittig, is that women are subjugated to “the rigid obligation of the reproduction of the "species," that is, the reproduction of heterosexual society” (Wittig 6). For the reproduction of the species, and thus of heterosexual society, to be fruitful, heterosexuality is considered compulsory.

The binary gender system, and thus compulsory heterosexuality, relies on the division of the population into two distinct categories: women and men. This division is made at birth as the doctor who delivers the baby assigns a sex depending on the baby’s genitals (Kedley 646). Sex assigned at birth refers to this act, that is the imposition of a sex based on the genitals of an individual at the time of their birth. If the baby has a penis, he is assigned male and if the baby has a vagina, she is a female (Kedley 646). Children who are born with genitals that are “not considered fitting squarely in the categories viewed as male or female are considered intersex and are sometimes altered medically in order to be assigned either male or female at birth” (Fausto-Sterling qtd. by Kedley 646). Just like gender, the sex that is assigned at birth is a social construction:

Sex assigned at birth is a social construction. This is not because genitals (a penis or a vagina) are not materially real; they, of course, are a part of many (but not all) bodies. The social construction is that genitals have been chosen (as opposed to a plethora of other options such as chromosomes, hormones, or a combination of varying factors) in order to classify humans into two distinct categories, male and female, and that category is assigned at birth. (Kedley 646)

Kate Kedley acknowledges the material reality of genitals, affirming that they exist in many bodies, although they do not exist in all bodies. However, she argues that sex assigned at birth is a social construction in the sense that genitals have been chosen as the primary determinant for classifying humans into the two distinct, and opposing, categories of male and female. The choice of focusing on genitals ignores other potential markers, which reduces the complexity of sex to a binary framework.

People who identify with the sex that was assigned to them at birth are cisgender (“LGBTQ+ Inclusion”). The prefix “cis-” comes from Latin and means “on the same side of” (“LGBTQ+ Inclusion”). On the other hand, people who do not identify with the sex that was assigned to them at birth are transgender (“LGBTQ+ Inclusion”). Transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses people whose “gender identity and sex assigned at birth do not

correspond based on traditional expectations; for example, a person assigned female sex at birth who identifies as a man; or a person assigned male sex at birth who identifies as a woman” (“LGBTQ+ Inclusion”) and people whose gender identity does not fit the man-woman dichotomy. This is the case of people who are non-binary (“LGBTQ+ Inclusion”). Usually, transgender people whose gender identity situates itself outside the binary are qualified as genderqueer (“LGBTQ+ Inclusion”), which is itself an umbrella term (Stachowiak 218). Genderqueer people can be people who are both man and woman, neither man nor woman, gender fluid, third gender, or other-gendered (Stachowiak 221). The term genderqueer is intended to highlight a form of non-conformity: “To be or do genderqueer is to intentionally, or unintentionally, disrupt gender oppression and power structures by pushing back against traditional expectations of doing and being a normative gender” (Stachowiak 220). In other words, disruption and transgression of societal norms are central to genderqueerness.

As just argued, queerness can be applied to gender identity, but it can also be applied to sexuality. The term queer, when it comes to sexual orientation can refer to the rejection of “specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity” (“List of LGBTQ+ Terms”) but it can also be considered an umbrella term to describe people who “think of their sexual orientation or gender identity as outside of societal norms” (“LGBTQ+ Inclusion”). In other words, queerness rejects labels but also provides a label for people who exist outside of social conventions in terms of sexuality and gender.

To conclude, this section has highlighted the different ways in which a person can challenge societal norms in terms of sexuality and gender by delving into the intricate concept of queerness and focusing on its resistance to fixed categorisations and societal norms. It explores the ways in which queerness challenges the binary gender system and compulsory heterosexuality by encompassing identities and behaviours that defy traditional expectations. By rejecting stable categorisation of gender and sexual identities, queerness highlights the fluidity and diversity of human experiences. This subchapter critically examines the socially constructed nature of gender and the assignment of sex at birth, revealing the underlying power dynamics within these systems as they reinforce cisheteropatriarchy. Additionally, queerness extends beyond gender identity, encompassing various expressions of sexuality and defying labels to embrace a refusal to conform to societal norms. It is a way of identifying that is a political stance that aims to disrupt and challenge dominant power structures.

### 3.2. “Bigger than whatever the namings had made”: Gender and Sexuality in *Freshwater*

The narrative in *Freshwater* deconstructs the gender binary through the representation of non-Western perspectives and the incorporation of elements of Igbo spiritual existence. Ada's status as an *ogbanje* shapes her experience of gender and sexuality as she shares her body with Asughara and Saint Vincent, who each have different desires and needs. Asughara, a hypersexual feminine entity born from trauma, objectifies men, valuing them solely for their availability and physical attractiveness. On the other hand, Saint Vincent challenges Ada's perception of her own body. Indeed, as Saint Vincent becomes more prominent, Ada begins to feel dissatisfaction with her feminine and reproductive body, desiring a form that aligns with her fluctuating self. The narrative examines Ada's exploration of her body and self-actualisation, as well as highlights the rejection of binary oppositions and the notion of a fixed, immutable body and identity. Moreover, the idea that the spiritual nature of the *ogbanje* clashes with the human body, as the body is perceived as a restricting vessel is also explored in the novel.

Akwaeke Emezi decentres the gender binary through the representation of non-Western realities, as is the case with Ada being an *ogbanje* (Magaqa & Makombe 28). As explained, Ada is a compound of different spirits who each have different personalities, desires, and needs. At the beginning of the novel, within Ada only exist herself and the brothersisters, that is the narrative ‘we’. This ‘we’ is described as a shifting cloud of spirits. They are the spirits that entered the baby’s body during pregnancy, the *ogbanje*, whose purpose is to have the child die. Two individual spirits then appear successively in the novel: Asughara and Saint Vincent. Asughara appears out of the ‘we’ after Ada gets raped by her then-boyfriend, Soren. When Ada realises that Soren has been sexually assaulting her, the traumatic discovery instigates Asughara’s birth, as was previously argued. Asughara is a hypersexual feminine entity who defines her birth as a traumatic response to Ada’s repetitive sexual assaults: “I came into the world the way I did because of Soren, and whatever chance I had of being anything else was lost in that. I was a child of trauma; my birth was on top of a scream and I was baptized in blood” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 73). Here, Asughara narrates her own birth by explaining that her coming into Ada’s world is due to Soren sexually assaulting her. She characterises herself as a “child of trauma” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 73) whose birth was “on top of a scream” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 73). The lexical choice expresses the violence of her birth which serves as a

justification of her traits and her actions when she takes control of Ada's body. Asughara likes to engage in unprotected sexual intercourse with men, as well as hurt them, as is the case with Itohan's brother. Itohan is an older Nigerian girl and a friend of Ada's. During her time at university, Ada spends her summers with Itohan's family in Georgia as they stand as a second family for Ada while she is in the United States. Itohan has a younger brother and an older brother, both of whom become victims of Asughara's hunger: "I started with Itohan's younger brother. He was tall and beautiful, with smooth dark skin wrapped over muscle, but more importantly, he was there and it was easy" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 73). Here, Asughara's description of the beginning of her relationship with Itohan's younger brother, who remains unnamed, shows that she values him only for his availability. Indeed, her saying "I started with Itohan's younger brother" implies an emotional detachment in her sexual relationship with him, this detachment is reinforced by the fact that Itohan's brother remains unnamed in the novel. Asughara then further objectifies him by describing only the features of his physical appearance that she finds attractive, reducing him to an object of desire. His worth is limited to his physical attractiveness and to his availability. The most important feature of his person to her is the fact "it [is] easy" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 73), which hints at a consumerist view of manhood, perceiving men primarily through the lens of desirable qualities and materialistic attributes. Asughara's relationship with Itohan's younger brother starts as a secret, however, when Itohan's mother sees them sleeping in bed together, they begin a public relationship which ends when Ada goes back to Virginia. When the next summer Ada returns to Itohan's family home in Georgia, Asughara sets her sights on Itohan's older brother. She then uses Ada's body to get closer to him, at first coyly and gently, and then overtly sexually:

I played soft and sweet, I pretended to be Ada since she was the one he loved. I brushed her fingertips over the back of his hand as he drove and gave him shy smiles till we were alone, and then I slid my palms over his jeans, but he stopped me.  
(Emezi, *Freshwater* 119)

Asughara's choice to "play soft and sweet" suggests a deliberate act of manipulation designed to align with Itohan's older brother's expectations of Ada's behaviour and personality. She initiates physical touch, an intimate gesture that creates a sense of closeness and genuine respectful connection. Furthermore, Asughara smiles shyly at Itohan's brother, which reinforces the illusion of her being Ada with the purpose of eliciting a positive response. The sentence "then I slid my palms over his jeans, but he stopped me" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 119) reveals a

shift in the interaction, a return to Asughara's habits as she becomes more sexually assertive in her way of touching Itohan's older brother. However, her advances are refused by the man who genuinely likes Ada. As a consequence of his refusal, Asughara decides to emotionally destroy him by returning to the younger brother with the idea of having sexual intercourse with him and then breaking up with the older brother saying that Ada never loved him (Emezi, *Freshwater* 120). To summarise, Asughara's behaviour reflects the violence of her birth and also demonstrate how Ada is a multifaceted being shaped by the entities that form part of who she is and by the experiences she goes through. This interaction between Asughara and Itohan's family portrays the influence the spiritual entities living within the body have an influence on Ada's sexual desire.

Furthermore, for Asughara, Ada's body, considered feminine, is not an issue, she appreciates the way it looks and the way it interacts with the bodies of the men with whom she engages in physical contact. However, Ada begins having a problem with her body shape as Saint Vincent starts taking up more space inside her. The following quotation shows the impact that Saint Vincent has on Ada's perception of her own body:

And with Saint Vincent, our little grace, taking the front more than he used to, the body, as it was, was becoming unsatisfactory, too feminine, too reproductive. That form had worked for Asughara—those breasts with the large, dark areolae and nipples she could lift to her mouth—but we were more than her and we were more than the saint. We were a fine balance, bigger than whatever the namings had made, and we wanted to reflect that, to change the Ada into us. Removing her breasts was only the first step. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187)

This passage provides the reader with a glimpse into Ada's journey of self-discovery. As Saint Vincent becomes more present and active within Ada's mind, the perception she has of her own body changes: it becomes "unsatisfactory, too feminine, too reproductive" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187). Here, different characteristics of the body are qualified as dissatisfactory, that is its femininity and its ability to reproduce. These traits imply that Ada's current physical form does not align with her desired sense of self at that moment in her life. The idea of development is also present in the sentence: "That form had worked for Asughara—those breasts with the large, dark areolae and nipples she could lift to her mouth—but we were more than her and we were more than the saint" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187). The mention of the breasts, their physical appearance, and the act of lifting them to the mouth suggest a connection to femininity and the

body's reproductive capabilities that is appreciated by Asughara. However, the narrator emphasises that Ada is complex and multifaceted, which implies a yearning for a fuller expression of identity that transcends traditional categorisations as Ada herself transcends categorisation. In this quotation, Emezi challenges gender categories by defining Ada as an ever-changing entity whose identity is “bigger than whatever the namings had made” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187). The author thus opposes Ada’s identity to “the namings” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187), that is human-made gender categories. As said, Saint Vincent considers the body to be “too reproductive” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187) because reproductive ability is “a cruel reminder that [the spirits] were now flesh, that [they] could not control [their] form, that [they] were in a cage that obeyed other laws, human laws” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 123). This quote suggests that the human form, that is the flesh body, is a restrictive form for entities like Saint Vincent and Asughara who are used to being able to control their shape depending on how they feel at the time. Furthermore, since he spent a lot of time only existing in the marble and in Ada’s dreams, Saint Vincent is not accustomed to flesh. This specifically is what makes Saint Vincent a saint: that he is “removed from flesh and therefore purer” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 122). In addition to its being too reproductive, the body is also seen as “too feminine” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187) by Saint Vincent who consequently likes to wear a binder to hide its curves: “The first time the Ada wore the binder, she turned sideways in a mirror and Saint Vincent laughed out loud in relief, in joy, in the rightness of the absence” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 188). The act of wearing a binder is depicted as a way Ada can, although temporarily, adapt her physical appearance to the complexity of her selves. As she watches herself in the mirror, Saint Vincent experiences euphoria as the body reflects his sense of self. As a way for the spirits to further “control [their form]” (Emezi 123), they have Ada get gender-affirming surgery: she gets a breast reduction. Significantly, Ada does not opt for a mastectomy, but rather a breast reduction, in the sense that again, the narrative steers away from binary opposition: Ada’s issue is not with having breasts, but with having too much of them. This goes against the dominant narrative of the “wrong body”, that is the idea that there is one valid body type for each gender (López 83).

We considered removing the breasts utterly and tattooing the flat of her chestbone, but that decisiveness still felt wrong, one end of the spectrum rocketing unsteadily to the other end—it wasn’t us, not yet. So we chose a reduction instead of a removal. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 189)

In this excerpt, the idea of adapting the body to Ada's identities is central. The narrative 'we' explains the thinking process behind the decision to have a breast reduction. The narrator suggests that a mastectomy was considered, but that it was too decisive: "one end of the spectrum rocketing unsteadily to the other end" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 189). One end of the spectrum is Ada's present body, the one that presents femininely and is associated with womanhood, while the other end of the spectrum represents masculinity. The narrator invokes the idea of unstable equilibrium to explain why neither end of the spectrum works for Ada. This suggests that Ada exists between the two ends of the spectrum, in an indecisiveness that implies a liminal state reinforced by the phrase "it wasn't us, not yet" (Emezi 189). This phrase feeds the idea that gender is not something fixed and permanent. In other words, each independent spirit that forms the compound that is Ada has different needs as well as a different relation to sexuality and to their body. While the body, considered feminine, proves to be a problem for Saint Vincent, this is not the case for Asughara. Thus, being an *ogbanje*, an individual who contains multiple entities, puts Ada's existence beyond the gender and sexual binaries.

As was mentioned, in addition to being considered "too feminine" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187) by Saint Vincent, the body is considered "too reproductive" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187): its reproductive capacity is highlighted as a problem, as something that should not be. Being an *ogbanje* and having reproductive abilities is an issue for Ada: as Igbo people believe in reincarnation and thus in the importance of lineage, an *ogbanje*, as a negative interference in the lineage, cannot reproduce. As explained in the novel, an *ogbanje* does not have ancestors and thus cannot become an ancestor. This partly explains the issue that Ada has with her own body, that is that her reproductive organs are considered a problem that must be solved: "The ways of our brothersisters, of *ogbanje*, were clear. Do not leave a human lineage, for you did not come from a human lineage. If you have no ancestors, you cannot become an ancestor" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187). It is not just discomfort that pushes Ada to not have children: her aversion to the idea of bearing children stems from an incompatibility between her existence as an *ogbanje* and parenthood. The other aspect of Ada's body-related issue stems from the fact that the *ogbanje* is a spiritual being trapped in a human body as is expressed by the narrative 'we' in this quotation: "You must understand, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us. It would be unthinkable, unbelievably cruel for us to ever swell so unnaturally, to lactate, to mutate our vessel. Could there be anything more human?" (Emezi 187). Again, the human body is presented as being unfit to house spiritual entities. And as Maria Sofía López explains in her article "Border Gnoseology: Akwaeke Emezi and the Decolonial Other-than-Human", surgery can be seen as "a trajectory towards the visibility and realization of their spiritual being" (84). This

highlights the close bond between body and identity in a way that situates itself outside the limits of gender. Indeed, as Tina Magaqa and Rodwell Makombe suggest in “Decolonising Queer Sexualities: A Critical Reading of the *Ogbanje* Concept in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater*”, “the ogbanje problematizes gender by harmonizing the spiritual (genderless) and the embodied (gendered) spheres of being human” (25). In other words, gender is a purely human construct and Ada being a spiritual entity and not a human, exists outside its scope. Ada is not only more than just a man and a woman, but she also is not human and thus, these concepts cannot encompass her whole identity. Through the gender aspect, the novel questions the liminal existence of Ada as a spiritual being living in a human body.

To conclude, the novel challenges and transcends traditional notions of gender and body through the character of Ada, a compound of spirits who disrupts the gender binary, as she embodies a complex and ever-changing identity. The narrative emphasizes the impact of these spirits on Ada's sexuality and gender expression by centring the presence of Asughara and Saint Vincent within her. Asughara, a hypersexual feminine entity, manifests in response to Ada's traumatic experiences of sexual assault. She engages in intimate relationships with men, objectifying them and using Ada's body for her own desires. On the other hand, Saint Vincent challenges the femininity and reproductive aspects of Ada's body. As he takes up more space within her, Ada begins to perceive her body as unsatisfactory, too feminine, and too reproductive. This discomfort reflects the spirits' struggle with being confined to a human form and their desire to transcend human laws and limitations. Additionally, Ada's reproductive abilities pose a conflict for her as an ogbanje. In Igbo culture, where reincarnation and lineage are significant, an ogbanje is seen as a negative interference in the lineage. Ada's aversion to bearing children stems from the incompatibility between her existence as an ogbanje and the role of parenthood. In short, *Freshwater* challenges gender norms and questions the compatibility of spiritual beings with human existence. Through Ada's complex and multifaceted character, the novel explores the intersections of identity, sexuality, and the body, ultimately transcending the boundaries of gender and presenting a narrative that exists beyond categorisations.

### **3.3. Bonded Identities: Gender and Sexuality in *The Death of Vivek Oji***

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Akwaeke Emezi explores alternative modes of existence that challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality. The novel depicts a rich tapestry of sexual attraction, gender identity, and gender expressions, emphasising fluidity and non-

conformity. This is the case for Vivek whose journey of self-discovery is the focal point of the novel. As a genderqueer individual, Vivek defies the rigidity of the man-woman dichotomy, transcending traditional categorisations by embracing both masculine and feminine facets of his identity and comfortably employing corresponding pronouns. Vivek's sexual attraction also manifests as fluid, characterised by romantic and sexual experiences with both men and women throughout his life. The novel also follows the struggles of Osita as he grapples with his sexuality, particularly his attraction to Vivek, and is challenged by his desires. Osita's journey is filled with societal expectations pushing him to feel ashamed of his sexuality, which leads him to project his shame onto Vivek. However, Osita's understanding of his sexuality remains fluid, as demonstrated by his intimate encounter with Juju after Vivek's passing. Furthermore, in addition to representing identities that challenge the binary perception of gender and sexuality, the narrative also validates these identities through the introduction of different characters and perspectives. For instance, the character of Ebenezer participates in the challenging of gender roles and expectations but also offers an external viewpoint to Vivek's character and development. Emezi's novel thus offers a critical exploration of gender and sexuality beyond traditional boundaries.

Sexual attraction, gender identity, and gender expressions are predominantly depicted as fluid in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, which creates a rupture with their usual perception as fixed and immutable. Vivek's gender transcends the gender binary in the sense that he is genderqueer. Although Vivek's gender identity remains unlabeled in the novel when his friend group explains who he was to Kavita after his death, they mention that he wanted them to use the pronouns "he" as well as "she" and to call him Nnemdi as well as Vivek: "Sometimes he asked us to call him by another name; he said we could refer to him as either she or he, that he was both" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 217). This quotation highlights the fluctuating aspect of Vivek's identity through the use of key words such as "sometimes" or "either". Indeed, in this context, these adverbs reinforce the idea that Vivek's way of identifying himself varies. As Juju explains to Kavita in the previous excerpt, Vivek was both a man and a woman and thus could not fit in the man-woman dichotomy, yet at the same time, Vivek was neither a man nor a woman. Vivek narrates a chapter from beyond death in which he explains that his sexuality is perceived as unnatural:

I know what they say about men who allow other men to penetrate them. Ugly things; ugly words. Calling them women, as if that's supposed to be ugly, too.

I'd heard it since secondary school, and I knew what that night was supposed to make me. Less than a man—something disgusting, something weak and shameful. But if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. They could have it. I'd take the blinding light of his touch, the blessed peace of having him so close, and I would stop being a man.

I was never one to begin with, anyway. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 131)

In this excerpt, Vivek resituates his gender identity and his sexual orientation in the socio-cultural context in which he lived. He confronts the derogatory labels and judgments associated with men who engage in receptive sexual acts with other men. Vivek also challenges the notion that being labelled as a woman or feminine is inherently negative and rejects the idea that such experiences diminish one's masculinity. Furthermore, he acknowledges being aware of these prejudices since his secondary school days, indicating a long history of exposure to societal biases. However, he refuses to be defined by the societal construct of manhood that condemns same-sex relationships and rather perceives the pleasure and intimacy he experiences with Osita as a transformative force. Ultimately, by stating that he was never truly a man to begin with, Vivek suggests a personal understanding of his own identity that transcends conventional gender norms. This reveals a sense of self-acceptance and a rejection of societal pressure to conform to rigid gender roles and expectations. The excerpt captures Vivek's defiance against societal prejudices and his affirmation of personal autonomy. His identity, like that of Ada's, is fluid. This can be perceived in the way Vivek present himself when he is at Juju's house:

I stared at his wrists, his slender ankles, the white caftan he was wearing. Vivek turned his head as he heard me enter, and I saw both the bruised shadows under his eyes and the soft red of a lip tint staining his mouth. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 120)

In this excerpt, Osita visits Vivek at Juju's house for the first time after they had a fight because Osita reacted violently to Vivek implying that the former might be gay. When Osita enters the room, he sees Vivek wearing a white caftan and red lip tint, which renders his presentation more feminine. As time goes by, Nnemdi increasingly challenges social conventions and asserts her queer identity as she presents more femininely. For instance, she starts wearing dresses, makeup, and nail polish in public spaces as it is the case when Ebenezer sees Nnemdi walking down the street (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 118). Furthermore, Vivek's gender fluidity is fed by his spiritual identity. As explained in the previous chapter, Vivek is Ahunna reincarnate and as

Ahunna lives again through him, her identity is a part of him. This is reflected in the feminine name Vivek asks his friends to call him, Nnemdi. As explained, Nnemdi is the name that Vivek would have been given if he had been assigned female at birth as, in Igbo, Nnemdi means “my mother lives” (“Nnemdi”). As argued, Nnemdi and Ahunna share the same starfish shaped scar on the foot and Nnemdi was born on the day Ahunna died. Being the reincarnation of her grandmother interferes with Nnemdi’s identity and shows that strict gender categories cannot encompass her spiritual existence, as is the case with Ada as well.

The sexual orientation of characters represented in the novel also remains predominantly unlabelled. Throughout the novel, Osita struggles with his sexuality: his biggest challenge appears to come to terms with his attraction toward Vivek. This is first exemplified when Osita and Vivek are still boys and Vivek puts on the jewellery that forms part of Kavita’s dowry:

Vivek smiles at his cousin with gold droplets falling into his eyebrows. “Bhai,” he says, with a voice like a bell. “How do I look?”

Osita wished, much later, that he’d told Vivek the truth then, that he was so beautiful he made the air around him dull, made Osita hard with desire. “Take it off,” he snapped instead, his throat rough. “Put it back before they catch us.” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 11)

Here, Osita’s internal and external reactions clash as, internally, he feels enthralled by Vivek’s appearance, but his external reaction shows anger: he snaps at Vivek, ordering him to take off the jewellery. His first reaction is to feel admiration and desire toward Vivek, but then anger takes over. Durán-Almarza associates Osita’s reaction with a fear of the strange, embodied by Vivek: “Osita’s ambivalent reaction for the first time marks Vivek as a stranger, who is perceived as “both *frightening* and *enticing*” (79, italics in original) as he represents a threat in “in the homo- and transphobic environments in which they live” (Durán-Almarza 79). The quotation also shows, through the clause “Osita wished, much later, that he’d told Vivek the truth then” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 11), a feeling of regret that Osita was not able to be honest with Vivek because he was not honest with his own self. Later on, like Vivek with Juju, Osita is in love with Elizabeth, Ruby’s daughter. Elizabeth is described as the “most beautiful girl” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 19) that Osita has ever seen. Even though during their childhood Osita believes that his interest in Elizabeth is not reciprocated, the pair begins dating in high school after Osita courts her with letters and song lyrics. They both explore their sexuality together as they have sexual intercourse in the boys’ quarter of his uncle and aunt’s house. However, their relationship

brutally comes to an end after an incident involving Vivek watching them having sexual relations. After Osita and Elizabeth's first time having sexual intercourse in Vivek's house, Osita tells Vivek the details of the encounter and Vivek asks Osita to let him watch the next time Elizabeth comes to see him. Osita hesitates yet ends up accepting as he considers the scheme to be a way to bond as men with his cousin: "We were men together and we liked to show off, so I agreed" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 33). This quotation depicts what bell hooks calls misogynistic homosocial bonding, which characterises bonding between Black men that relies on degrading Black women (hooks 104). Elizabeth therefore comes to see Osita and the pair starts having sexual intercourse, however, the intercourse brutally stops when Elizabeth sees Vivek standing at the entrance of the room. Osita gets angry at Vivek and starts shoving him, but Vivek stays completely still. Vivek's absence of reaction is the result of "an episode"<sup>1</sup> (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 36) according to Osita, who still feels extremely upset by the course of events: "I knew he was having an episode, I knew he was sick, but I didn't care. I was tired of covering up for him, tired of him being sick or strange or whatever was wrong with him" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 36). Here, Osita narrates the events from his point of view and confesses that although he knows that Vivek cannot control his blackouts, he feels irate and exasperated by his presence. Furthermore, the sentence "I was tired of covering up for him, tired of him being sick or strange or whatever was wrong with him" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 36) shows that what brings Osita to feel such extreme emotions is not the event in itself, but the fact that he considers Vivek "sick or strange" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 36) without being able to understand what makes him this way. Durán-Almarza argues that it is Osita's feeling of discomfort towards Vivek's queerness which stops him from understanding him: "Osita's attitude towards his cousin is always mediated by a discomforting feeling of strange(r)ness that prevents him from getting close enough to understanding what Vivek is going through as a gender non-conforming teenager" (79) After his and Elizabeth's relationship ends, Osita graduates from high school and goes to university in Nsukka. During one of his trip home, he tells Vivek about a girl he is dating, however Vivek does not believe him and implies that Osita might be gay, which creates a reaction similar in intensity to the one he had after feeling desire towards Vivek as children:

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<sup>1</sup> Vivek's episodes have been analysed through the lens of queerness by researchers, one of them being Emilia María Durán-Almarza in "Uncomfortable Truths: Queer Strangers and Gendered Necropolitics in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*". In her article, Durán-Almarza regards Vivek's episodes as distress in the face of the violence he suffers from the cisheteropatriarchal system.

I pulled away and jumped off the bed. “Don’t touch me. You think I’m like your friends? Or like you? Is that why you decided to start looking like a woman, eh? Because you’ve been knocking men? Biko, I’m not like you—forget that one, now-now!” I slapped the palms of my hands against each other, as if dusting off the contagion of his thoughts. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 67)

Osita reacts violently to Vivek hinting that he might be homosexual. His first reaction is to physically distance himself from his cousin and setting a boundary by telling Vivek to not touch him. Osita then intends to reverse the situation by saying that Vivek is the one who is gay and who looks like a woman because he has long hair. Thirdly, Osita sets a mental distance by saying that he is different from Vivek. His reaction is infused with the idea that Vivek is homosexual and that it is unnatural but also contagious as he refuses to be touched by him and slaps his hands “as if dusting off the contagion of his thoughts” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 67). Osita’s emphatic reaction appears as a way for him to assert a masculinity and heterosexuality that are challenged by Vivek. His behaviour images bell hooks’ theory: “Much black male homophobia is rooted in the desire to eschew connection with all things deemed “feminine” and that would, of course, include black gay men” (hooks 147). In other words, as a way to reaffirm his masculinity, Osita fiercely rejects Vivek, who represents a rupture with traditional masculinity that threatens Osita. Furthermore, Vivek becomes a source of fear for Osita, which reverses the power balance between the two, as explained by Ashmita Biswas in “Queering the Racial Other: Towards a Queer Africa” (119), as Osita is the one afraid —of being perceived as a homosexual— and Vivek’s assurance strengthens Osita’s fear. However, a breach appears in Osita’s heterosexuality the same night as he craves his cousin’s touch:

At some point in the night, NEPA came back and the ceiling fan whirred on. I stirred and woke up. I was lying on my back with an arm thrown out; Vivek was scattered beside me, his leg touching mine and his hair drowning my arm, the silver chain and pendant gleaming against his collarbone. I could almost see the lines that marked Ganesh. Vivek sighed and his eyes opened into slits.

“Sorry, bhai,” he whispered, and drifted back to sleep. There was a tendril of hair lying on his cheek that I wanted to move aside, but I was too afraid to touch him. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 69)

After their fight, the pair falls asleep in the same bed. Later during the night, as the power cut ends, Osita wakes up and starts observing his cousin with a loving gaze. Osita's gaze focuses on Vivek's leg and hair touching him. The physical attraction and tenderness Osita feels towards his cousin culminate as he wants to remove a lock of hair resting on Vivek's cheek. From this moment of the novel on, Osita's interest in Vivek grows, and this although he still struggles with internalised homophobia. Indeed, later on, after returning again from university in Nsukka, Osita visits Vivek at Juju's house, where the latter stays most of the time after his return from boarding school. After Vivek asks him several times why Osita is visiting him after the last talk they had where Osita insulted Vivek, the former tells Vivek about what happened during a night out:

So I told him, my voice unstable and small: About the small, dark club I'd been in the previous weekend, the young university student who leaned in to kiss me in a smoky corner, and the way I allowed it, allowed him even though anyone could look and see us; allowed his tongue to push into my mouth, even kissing him back before I came to my senses and pushed him away and left. About how he tried to talk to me about it the next day, bright-faced and eager, how panicked I felt because I didn't know what he thought I could give him, what world he thought we lived in where it was safe to do something like that. About how I lied when he brought it up, claiming I couldn't remember what happened, blaming it on whatever we'd been drinking. About the way his face collapsed in hurt and a fresh aloneness. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 123)

Osita narrates this passage which he starts by expressing awkwardness and confusion by qualifying his voice as "unstable and small" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 123). He describes a night out in a club during which a male university student kisses him. Osita's first reaction is to let the student kiss him and even reciprocate the gesture. However, at some point, he abruptly leaves as he "[comes] to [his] senses" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 123), meaning that Osita considers this episode to be a momentary lapse in judgment. This feeling perdures the day after as the student comes to talk to Osita who rejects him by saying that he has no recollection of the night before. Osita is aware of the pain he is causing the young man in front of him as he rejects him, however, at this point, he does not deny his attraction to the young man but rather questions the possibility of a homosexual relationship in their context as he feels the student does not know "what world he thought [they] lived in where it was safe to do something like that" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 123).

His mention of a safe world alludes to the societal restrictions and dangers faced by individuals who deviate from traditional norms. After hearing Osita's account of the night, Vivek gets angry at Osita, believing the latter came to tell the story to him so that Vivek could make Osita feel better even though he was homophobic towards Vivek the last time they saw each other:

“You have no shame,” Vivek spat. “What do you want from me?”

I used to know the answer to that. I had just wanted to talk to someone who would understand, but now, faced with him and the fatigue bracketing his mouth, I shocked myself. I watched my hand wrap around his wrist, my fingerprints marking his skin as I surged forward and kissed him so hard that my teeth knocked against his, the way I'd wanted to ever since I'd seen him sitting on my bed at my parents' house, since I'd woken up that night with his hair on my arm and his body so close to mine. Vivek's pupils flared as my other hand knotted behind his head. He hit my chest with his free hand, trying to get away, but I couldn't let him go. Our eyes were locked, two swirling panics, and he wrenched his face away. I was still holding the back of his head and his wrist. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 125)

By telling Osita that he has no shame and asking him what he wants from him, Vivek sets a confrontational tone, leaving Osita speechless. The latter does not have clear answers to give to Vivek, who upsets Osita's certainties. Osita reflects on his initial intentions, recalling a desire for understanding and connection. However, faced with Vivek's fatigued appearance and the gravity of the moment, he experiences a shocking transformation within himself. He grabs Vivek's wrists and forcibly kisses him. However, Osita, who narrates this passage, describes the moment as if he was lacking control over his own actions: “I watched my hand wrap around his wrist” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 125). This clause makes it seem as if Osita was controlled by a force over which he has no influence. The rest of the quotations makes it clear that it is his desire for Vivek which drives him. The physicality of the scene intensifies as the narrator's hand wraps around Vivek's wrist, leaving visible marks on his skin. Osita then describes the forceful and passionate nature of the kiss, expressing a long-held longing that had been present since he last saw Vivek. The mention of teeth knocking against each other adds a raw and almost violent quality to the kiss, reflecting Osita's intensity of emotion. In this passage, Osita comes to terms with his desire and imposes it on Vivek as he forces his cousin to kiss him by restraining him by the wrists, even as Vivek hits Osita's chest with his free hand. This passage shows that Osita struggles with his sexuality and uses Vivek as an outlet, whether it is for his anger and shame

or for his passion as the boundaries between these seemingly opposite feelings are blurred. Osita and Vivek develop a deeply loving relationship that lasts until Vivek's death, at which point Osita still grapples with outside perception and the fear of reprimands as a consequence of a break with heteronormative social codes. As a matter of fact, fear of cisheterosexual retaliation is what motivates Osita to physically grab Vivek with the intention of bringing him inside on the day the market burns, back into his liminal space, as will be argued in the chapter on liminality. Osita's desire to protect Vivek and to force him not to break the cisheteropatriarchal mould is what ultimately ends up killing Vivek. Once again, Osita projects his fears and shame onto Vivek, causing Vivek to bear the consequences of Osita's internal battle. However, even though it is difficult for Osita to understand and accept his sexuality, it remains nevertheless fluid as is illustrated by the night he shares with Juju after Vivek's death:

Juju climbed on the bed and straddled me. The pain in my chest was near overwhelming, but she took my face in her hands and her eyes fed on the hurt seeping out of my skin. "It's okay," she whispered. I closed my eyes because I didn't want to cry again. "It's okay." I felt her kiss me and she tasted like she was already crying. I slid my hands to her back and dug my fingers into her spine, kissing her back. I could almost feel the brush of his hair dragging over my shoulders, his strong palm on the back of my neck. Before I knew it, my tears were pooling at the corners of my mouth, she was eating them along with hers, we were filling our mouths with salt and tongues and wet grief. I pulled off my singlet and Juju raised herself enough for me to take the boxers off as well, then raised her arms to let me pull off her nightgown. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 192)

In this quotation, Osita narrates a night he and Juju spend together after Vivek's death. As Osita was Vivek's lover and Juju grew closer to Vivek during his last months of life they both go through a period of intense grief after his death. One way they express their grief is through sexual relations as is shown in this passage. Osita describes Juju climbing onto the bed and straddling them, a physical and symbolic position that signifies the intimate connection the two characters establish through their love for Vivek. The pain in Osita's chest reflects the overwhelming grief he is experiencing after Vivek's death. However, at this moment, Juju's actions and touch offer a sense of comfort and support to him. Moreover, Osita senses that Juju is drawing strength from the pain that permeates Osita's being, as their shared grief appears to be a source of connection between them. More than a way to connect with each other, their

moment together allows Osita to connect with Vivek, whose presence as a third actor of the sexual intercourse is felt by the narrator who says: “I could almost feel the brush of his hair dragging over my shoulders, his strong palm on the back of my neck” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 192). Vivek's real presence, beyond death, is confirmed in the following chapter, narrated by Vivek himself:

He was right. Of course I watched them—they were so beautiful together. I put my hands on the small of her back and on the solid stretch of his chest. I kissed the sweat of her neck and his stomach.

They were keeping me alive in the sweetest way they knew how, you see. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 195)

Vivek observes Osita and Juju as they find solace and connection in their shared grief. The passage explores Vivek's longing, his presence in their intimate moments, and the transformative power of their love since through their expression of love, they are “keeping [Vivek] alive” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 195). After feeling attracted to Elizabeth and briefly dating her during their teenage years, Osita starts exploring his sexuality and enters a relationship with Vivek during which he still struggles with outside perception and social conventions. After Vivek's death, his sexuality still fluctuates as he has intercourse with Juju. Later, Osita goes to Port Harcourt in hopes to run away from his grief (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 39). During his time in the coastal city, he drinks and has sexual encounters with women as he feels that after Vivek, he could not intimately socialise with other men:

The whole time in Port Harcourt, Osita had fucked only women—it had been like that since Vivek died. It felt safer, as if he wasn't giving any important parts of himself away: not his soul or heart, just his body, which didn't matter anyway. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 44-45)

This passage highlights Osita's perception of his sexuality in the aftermath of Vivek's passing. The narrator explains that during Osita's time in Port Harcourt, he only “fuck[s] women” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 45) and not men as sexual intercourse with women does not require an emotional involvement from him. This idea is reinforced by the narrator's use of the phrase “Osita had fucked only women” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 45) which implies an emotional distance implied by the use of the word “fucked”. Furthermore, the absence of the preposition “with”

hints at a one-way relationship where the woman is used by Osita. This passage thus suggests that Osita returns to heterosexual sexual relations in order to avoid any emotional bond. However, emotions and feelings were central to his night with Juju. This demonstrates that through Osita's sexual development, the novel depicts sexuality as non-fixed and fluctuating.

Vivek's sexuality is also an example of fluid sexual orientation. Indeed, during his childhood, Vivek is in love with Jukwase, nicknamed Juju. Juju is Maja's daughter, a nurse from the Philippines and a member of the Nigerwives community. She is thin and tall, with long curly hair, and does not enjoy coming to Nigerwives events, which creates resentment in Somto and Olunne, the daughters of another Nigerwife, Ratha. As children do, Osita gently mocks Vivek for his feelings towards Juju, while still acknowledging from his adult narrator perspective that Vivek "liked that girl too much" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 21). Vivek's interest in Juju is represented as real and valid by Osita who narrates the chapter. However, as he grows up and starts growing his hair, Vivek's family fear he might be homosexual, or at least that he might appear to be:

The boy is slim, he has long hair—all it takes is one idiot thinking he's a woman from behind or something, then getting angry when he finds out that he's not. Because, if he's a boy, then what does it mean that the idiot was attracted to him? And those kinds of questions usually end up with someone getting hurt. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 71)

In this passage, Kavita is on the phone with her sister-in-law, Mary, who attempts to convince Kavita to have Vivek go to her church to help him overcome his issue, which is the feminisation of his gender expression. The argument that Mary uses to change Kavita's mind is the danger in which Vivek's appearance put him. She implies that homophobia and transphobia would cause Vivek to be on the receiving end of abuse by men whose masculinity is endangered by Vivek's femininity (Durán-Almarza 81). Simultaneously, Vivek is exploring his sexuality, for instance with his neighbour Tobechukwu. Vivek and Tobechukwu have known each other since childhood, a time during which they used to fight. After Vivek comes back from university, his long hair makes him the target of harassment and violence on the street from men, however, Tobechukwu reacts differently to Vivek's appearance. The reason why his neighbour acts differently towards Vivek stays unclear until one night, as Vivek is smoking a joint on the landing of the boys' quarter, Tobechukwu joins him and the two have sexual relations. As he

recounts this moment with Tobechukwu, Vivek mentions other homosexual relationships he had during his time in boarding school:

[Tobechukwu] reminded me of the senior boys from when I was in boarding school, their complete assurance that it was well and right for me to provide them with pleasure, an assurance so solid that nothing they did shook up who they believed themselves to be: boys who could not be broken, boys who broke other boys and were no less for it. The difference was that Tobechukwu seemed indifferent, not threatening. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 115)

This quotation makes it clear that during his time in boarding school, Vivek was the victim of homophobic sexual violence. He recounts that older boys at his school requested sexual favours from him. In addition to exposing the older boys' indifference in regard to the abuse of younger boys, the phrase "their complete assurance that it was well and right for me to provide them with pleasure" hints at the fact that a man or a boy who is on the receiving end of homosexual acts does not question his heterosexuality. The end of the sentence "boys who broke other boys and were no less for it" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 115) describes the older boys who displayed a disturbing and unwavering sense of entitlement as they abused younger students. Vivek compares Tobechukwu to these sexually violent boys as he says that he is reminded of them by his presence. However, Tobechukwu stands apart by exuding an air of indifference rather than a threatening presence. Subsequently, Vivek and Tobechukwu engage in consensual sexual activity, and more precisely Vivek performs oral sex on Tobechukwu, but this time, he does it willingly. Vivek and Tobechukwu only meet once and after, Vivek starts seeing Osita. Both start a romantic and sexual relationship while Osita is still struggling with his sexuality and Vivek still exploring his gender identity. After their first kiss, Vivek and Osita spend the night together and have sexual relations with each other for the first time. The morning after, Vivek wakes up and goes to see Juju who kisses him:

When her door creaked open, she already knew it was Vivek. He'd come up to her window seat, dropping a kiss on the top of her head before he sat next to her, tangling his legs with hers. He was shirtless and he smelled like sex. Juju leaned forward and kissed him for the first time[...]. She wasn't sure if it surprised him, but Vivek had kissed her back, his morning breath sour on their tongues before he broke it off and nipped his teeth against her nose lightly. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 141)

The scene depicts a moment of unexpected intimacy between Juju and Vivek, layered with familiarity, desire, and uncertainty. Juju is alone in her bedroom when Vivek enters and sits next to her. At first, he kisses her on the head, thus establishing a sense of affectionate connection. They settle down together on the window seat, their legs intertwining, creating a physical closeness that reflects their emotional bond. This position shows that both Vivek and Juju are physically comfortable with each other and are used to each other's physical touch. However, Juju suddenly acts in an unusual way as she kisses Vivek on the mouth for the first time. Whether or not Vivek is surprised remains uncertain, however, it is clear that he reciprocates the gesture. Vivek then playfully nips his teeth against Juju's nose, adding a touch of lightness to the moment. This passage exemplifies the complexity and fluidity of relationships, where unexpected connections can emerge and unfold. It also depicts a way of loving that is not exclusive, but rather encompasses many people and different types of love. It is thus clear that the novel represents through Vivek a fluctuating sexuality and romantic attraction which develop through time without staying fixed or static.

Additionally, the narrative validates identities that exist outside the binary through the presence of different focalisers. One of the novel's focalisers is Ebenezer, whom the reader is acquainted with through Kavita's point of view. Ebenezer is a vulcaniser described as a "short man with a scar breaking his right cheek" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 11). A few chapters in the novel focus on his life and his relationship with his wife. Ebenezer married Chisom, a trader at the market who sells fabric and sewing items (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 145). Chisom is a hard worker, which is not seen in a positive light by Ebenezer's brothers who consider that women like Chisom "start feeling like they're men" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 145) and want to run the household and emasculate their husband (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 145). However, Ebenezer appreciates this trait in his wife. The pair have been married for six years but they have not had any children yet, which creates friction in their marriage as Ebenezer and his family blame Chisom's reproductive system for that. As frustration builds up between Ebenezer and Chisom, he starts cheating on her with different women working near his shop. One of them is Mama Ben, a food shop owner who has "four or five" children (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 147), highlighting her reproductive abilities. Ebenezer is attracted to her character and her appearance and likes to imagine what life with her would be like: "Ebenezer wondered what it would be like if he was her husband, with all these children and his wife with a business of her own, just like he always wanted" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 147). Ebenezer fantasises over an imaginary and idealised life with Mama Ben. However, his interest quickly jumps from her to another woman:

He wasn't even thinking about Mama Ben. No, the woman on his mind now was this orange-seller he'd seen last week, with a sweet voice and a nyash that rolled seductively under her wrapper. She had shown up in his dreams, and he considered this to be a sign. Her hips looked like those of someone who could have children easily. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 148)

Again, as shown in this passage, Ebenezer is attracted to a woman who owns a business and seems able to carry children, as he believes that Chisom is the one unable to have children. Indeed, the excerpt explains that Ebenezer has moved on from Mama Ben to another woman, an orange seller. Ebenezer appears to objectify her as she is described from his point of view as having a "sweet voice" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 148) and a "nyash that rolled seductively under her wrapper" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 148), which means that Ebenezer watches the orange-seller's buttocks and associates her curves with fertility. Ultimately, on the day the market burns, Ebenezer knowing that his wife worked there ran to help her instead of staying with Mama Ben who asked him to do so. The fire and Chisom's reaction to it, that is staying in her shop and packing her fabric in order to not lose everything even though she was in danger of being hurt or dying, lead Ebenezer to a deep reflection about his actions and the role he plays in his couple:

Ebenezer felt ashamed at how hard he'd been fighting her about seeing a doctor. She had packed up the things, not knowing how she could carry all of it, simply because she was ready to handle that part when the time came. Now the time had come and he was there, as he should have been, as he always should have been. Why should she be carrying anything by herself when he was her husband? (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 158)

Fertility is a central theme throughout Ebenezer's storyline, and it is present in this excerpt as well. Ebenezer feels ashamed of his behaviour towards Chisom as he pushed her to go see a doctor to explain the couple's childlessness. After cheating on her and blaming her for their childless life, Ebenezer realises when the market is on fire that he has been a bad husband to Chisom. The first sentence of the quotation implies an acknowledgment by Ebenezer that Chisom is not the only one responsible for the couple's childlessness, although the burden of fertility has been put on her as a woman. This way, Ebenezer's storyline challenges gender roles by exposing gender inequalities within the romantic relationship and then by having Ebenezer

realise how unfair he and his family are to Chisom. Furthermore, Ebenezer's storyline appears at first to be unrelated to Vivek's. However, it then becomes clear that Ebenezer offers an external point of view to Vivek's queerness. Ebenezer knows Vivek as a child as Kavita goes to the vulcaniser's shop to fix her car and the two interact:

As a child, Vivek would place a small palm against the hot metal of the car, balancing from foot to foot as he watched Ebenezer work. The scar was thick against Ebenezer's skin, a shiny clotted red pushing out from the brown of his face. When he smiled at Vivek, the scar fought the folding of skin and his mouth rose properly on only one side. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 12)

This passage narrates a moment during Vivek's childhood when he and Kavita were at the vulcaniser's shop and Ebenezer looks at Vivek and smiles. Vivek is described as touching the "hot metal" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 12) of his mother's car while Ebenezer is working on it. The scar's presence is evident when Ebenezer smiles, as it resists the natural folding of the skin, causing his mouth to rise on only one side. This passage establishes a relationship between Vivek and Ebenezer: they know each other personally, and this ever since Vivek was a small child. Years later, as Ebenezer is in his shop with a couple of customers, a male banker who is waiting for their car to be fixed and the female colleague to whom he is giving a lift, the three of them see a tall woman walking down the street in front of Mama Ben's shop:

The woman shot him a nasty look but the man completely missed it, his attention diverted by yet another woman, this one walking past Mama Ben's canteen across the street. She was tall with long mammy-water hair in two plaits down her back, wearing a flowered dress that cut off at her calves. Her sandals were plain and brown but her toes had been painted a bright red. She walked like a model and looked like one, thin arms and sharp cheekbones. The banker ogled her, then made kissing noises at her, puckering his lips. When she didn't turn her head, he shouted, "Tall babe! Come make I climb you small!" then burst into uproarious laughter, as if he'd said the wittiest thing. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 149)

As they wait for the banker's car to be repaired, the banker provides his female colleague with unwelcome advice, but as she shows her irritation by "[shooting] him a nasty look" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 149), the man does not notice because his attention turns to another woman walking

on the street. The other woman is described with precision; she is tall, with “long mammy-water hair” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 149), meaning that she “possesses long, flowing hair” (Caputo, 2009), tied in two plaits, and wearing a flowered dress and sandals with painted toenails. The woman is then compared with a model in terms of her movements and her looks, especially her thin arms and cheekbones. All of these descriptive elements imply that the tall woman is observed in her entirety by Ebenezer and the two colleagues and that she is considered attractive by the male banker who catcalls her and sexually harasses her by telling her lewdly that he “will climb [her] small” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 149). After this, the banker and his colleague argue about whether the woman’s hair is real or if it is a weave-on, further highlighting the fact that the tall woman has been thoroughly examined by the pair. In the weeks that follow, Ebenezer keeps seeing the beautiful tall woman walking down the street running errands or going shopping. The tall woman becomes a recurrent yet distant presence in Ebenezer’s life as he observes her and wonders about who she is:

In the weeks that followed, he saw the tall girl a few times. Once she was returning from the market with polythene bags filled with vegetables; another time she was going to the Mr. Biggs at the junction. Once she just seemed to be going for a walk, listening to a Discman in her handbag. Ebenezer decided she must live in the area because she was always walking, never on an okada or in a taxi. She looked like the kind of girl who just liked to walk everywhere. That’s probably why she’s so slim, he thought. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 151)

This passage establishes a recurrence as it describes moments Ebenezer sees the tall woman in the span of weeks. He sees her coming back from the market, going shopping, going on a walk, etc. All these instances lead Ebenezer to deduce that the woman lives in the area as she is seen walking rather than riding a taxi or an okada. The previous excerpt also shows that Ebenezer carefully observes the woman and thinks about her a lot, even though he does not seem to sexualise her as he does with Mama Ben and the orange seller. The final time Ebenezer sees the tall woman is on the day the market burns, as he is running towards the market to help Chisom:

As he was running, he passed a couple arguing on the side of the road. It was the tall girl with long hair. The man with her was holding her arm, shaking her till her hair fell in her eyes.

“We have to go now!” he was shouting. “Do you know what they’ll do to you?”

She pulled away from him so hard that she stumbled backward. Ebenezer saw her skirt flutter in the air, covered in small red flowers [...]. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 156)

Ebenezer is on his way to the market to help Chisom escape the place and save her goods. While running, he sees the tall woman, who remains nameless throughout the chapters focusing on Ebenezer's story, arguing with a man who is telling her they need to go. The man forcefully grabs her arm and shakes her, causing her hair to fall into her eyes. He urgently shouts about the need to leave, out of concern for her safety. In a display of resistance, the woman pulls away from him with such force that she stumbles backward. Ebenezer observes her skirt, adorned with small red flowers, fluttering in the air as a result of her sudden movement. This excerpt emphasises the intense conflict within the couple's interaction. The man's physical aggression and urgent warnings suggest a sense of impending harm. The woman's act of pulling away demonstrates her strength and determination to break free from the man's control. The last thing Ebenezer sees before losing sight of the pair is the tall woman stumbling backwards and falling. Later on, when the events surrounding Nnemdi's death are narrated from Osita's point of view, it becomes clear that the tall woman Ebenezer keeps seeing from his shop is Nnemdi herself and that the man with whom she is arguing is Osita:

I groaned and clutched at my head. We didn't have time for this. What would happen if someone looked too closely at her, someone holding a machete and buffeted by a mob? How quickly they could hurt her, kill her. I grabbed her arm and started to drag her away. "We don't have time to be quarreling on the road!"

She tried to pull away and started hitting me. "Let me go! Hapu m aka!"

I lost it. "We have to go now! Do you know what they'll do to you?"

Nnemdi gasped and wrenched away from me with all her strength, breaking my hold. I was startled by the pain in her eyes, surprised that the truth could hurt her so much. She pulled herself away with such force that she stumbled, and her heel caught on a stone, and she fell. It happened so fast. I saw her head strike the raised cement edge of the gutter at the side of the road. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 235)

This excerpt recounts the moments that precede Nnemdi's death and completes the events previously narrated from Ebenezer's point of view by introducing a perspective internal to the events. Osita is looking after Nnemdi because their friends told him that she went out alone and presenting femininely, which makes him worry for her safety. After he finds Nnemdi, he tries

to convince her to go back home with him as he considers it will prevent her from being harassed by the mobs that are filling the streets as the fire at the market is spreading. However, Nnemdi resists Osita's pleadings and pulls herself away from his grip, causing her to fall to the ground and hit her skull on the curb. The reveal happens in the penultimate chapter of the novel, that is the twenty-third chapter, however, the events narrated from Ebenezer's point of view appear in the seventeenth chapter. The narrative therefore glosses over the events before they can be understood by the reader, which participates in validating Nnemdi's identity. Indeed, what frightens Osita is that Nnemdi would be perceived as transgender or queer by mobs, as this could lead to her being attacked and even killed. However, the narrative, through Ebenezer's storyline, offers an external point of view, which shows that when presenting femininely, Nnemdi is considered a woman. This way, the narrative validates Nnemdi's non-binary identity by introducing an external point of view that sees her as she is, both feminine and masculine presenting.

To conclude, as is the case in *Freshwater*, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, spirituality and gender identities as well as sexuality are inherently linked. This is represented principally through Vivek who is a reincarnation of Ahunna and who has his identity impacted as a result. Indeed, Vivek experiences moments of spiritual recognition which connect him to the facet of his identity that directly stems from Ahunna. One of these moments is the dream he has where he looks in the mirror and sees Ahunna in the reflection who asks him to hold her life for her. This instance highlights a bond between the two beings that was first revealed on Vivek's day of birth, which was the day Ahunna died, as he was born with a mark on his foot that is identical to a scar on Ahunna's. At this point, the shared identity between the two characters is already evident but becomes further explored as the story advances and it becomes clear that the part of Ahunna that lives through Vivek also influences his gender identity. This is shown through the female name Vivek chooses for himself, which illustrates that Ahunna still lives because he lives. Vivek's gender is not immutable, it oscillates between the feminine and the masculine, between Nnemdi and Vivek. This is validated and reinforced by the narrative as the character of Ebenezer is a focaliser whose storyline allows for the external perception and thus validation of Nnemdi's femininity. Ebenezer does not only play the role of an instrument in Vivek's representation but also participates in the challenging of gender roles through his relationship with his wife, Chisom. Furthermore, sexuality is also represented as fluid as Osita and Vivek both explore their sexuality with men and women. Moreover, their sexual orientation remains unlabelled throughout the novel. Even though Osita suggests that he does not feel emotionally involved with women, he has a deeply emotional sexual moment with Juju in the aftermath of

Vivek's death. Overall, this chapter has explored how *The Death of Vivek Oji* intricately weaves together spirituality, gender identities, and sexuality, revealing their inherent interconnectedness.

### **3.4. Challenging Conventions: Conclusion of Gender and Sexuality**

Both novels intertwine humanity and spirituality to depict hybrid realities that transcend “the namings” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187), that is human-made categories of gender and sexuality. Both *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* explore the relationship between spirituality, gender identities, and sexuality, and therefore push the boundaries of conventional understanding. While *The Death of Vivek Oji* explores the intertwining of spirituality and gender identities through Vivek's connection to Ahunna and the fluidity of his gender expression and identity, *Freshwater* challenges traditional notions of gender and body by representing Ada's embodiment of multiple spirits. The novels highlight the impact of spiritual entities on the characters' identities, whether it is Vivek's exploration of gender fluidity or Ada's disruption of the gender binary.

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's journey exemplifies the interconnectedness of spirituality and gender. Vivek's reincarnation of Ahunna not only establishes a profound bond between the two, but also influences his gender identity, as seen through his choice of the female name Nnemdi. The character of Ebenezer and the storyline centring his marriage to Chisom further validates Nnemdi's identity by providing an external point of view and also challenges gender roles. In *Freshwater*, Ada's complex existence as a compound of spirits transcends traditional gender norms. The presence of Asughara and Saint Vincent within her showcases the intersection of spirituality, sexuality, and the body. Asughara's hypersexual femininity and Saint Vincent's defiance of reproductive abilities challenge Ada's perception of her own body, thus reflecting her desire to transcend human limitations.

Overall, both novels question the compatibility of spiritual beings with human existence, and more precisely with human-made categories. Vivek's spiritual recognition and Ada's existence as an *ogbanje* highlight the conflicts and complexities that arise from the coexistence of spiritual and human realms. Their representation transcends categorisations and challenge gender norms as they stand for individuals whose internal life cannot be fully encompassed by traditional norms.

## 4. Liminality and Existences in the In-between in *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*

### 4.1. Exploring Liminality: From Anthropological Studies to the Queering of Boundaries

The noun *liminality* comes from the adjective *liminal*, which is itself derived from the Latin noun *limen*, ‘threshold’ (“Liminal”). Liminality, in this sense, refers to the space between the inside and the outside of a house, the “piece of wood, stone, or other material forming the bottom of a doorway, which is crossed in entering a house, building, or room” (“Threshold”). In this context, this place is not one in which one stays for long durations of time; it is a place of passage. This notion has been used and expanded by different scholars through time, some of the most notable being Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gloria Anzaldúa. This section of the dissertation will focus on retracing the development of the term from its introduction to anthropological studies by Arnold Van Gennep to its queering by Gloria Anzaldúa.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Arnold Van Gennep introduced the term liminality to anthropological studies in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). It was previously used in psychological sciences in relation to “the point beyond which a sensation becomes too faint to be experienced” (“Liminal”). Van Gennep considered that people’s lives consisted of a series of passages from “one age to another and from one occupation to another” (Van Gennep 2-3). In *Les Rites de Passage*, Van Gennep develops the eponymous phrase and describes it as having a three-part structure, rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation” (Van Gennep 11). The general idea behind the rite of passage is that it represents the liminal period between, on the one hand, the social status of the person before the rite started and, on the other, their new status and reincorporation into society after the rite ends (Chakraborty 147). According to Van Gennep, one of the most typical rites is that of initiation, which marks the passage from childhood to social puberty (Van Gennep 69). In the rite of initiation, the moment of transition “consist[s] of a moment or period of uncertainty, a liminal period” (Chakraborty 147). Liminality, in this case, is a temporary transitory state between two social statuses.

Arnold Van Gennep’s theories were then further elaborated by Victor Turner, a Scottish anthropologist who focused on ritual in ‘tribal’ communities, but also in the contemporary West (Bigger 209). Turner therefore expanded Van Gennep’s conception of liminality and applied it to “embrace all transitions and all rituals everywhere” (Bigger 209) as he refers to “any type of

stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized” (Turner 94). He particularly studied “the function of [the] ritual transitional phase and its similarity to other cultural dramas of change in individual and social life” (Chakraborty 147), as well as how these transitions are experienced by the people who undergo them (Turner 94). Turner opposed social structure, that is status and power, to anti-structure, that is powerlessness (Bigger 209). The anti-structure is the liminal space (Bigger 209). He also suggested that social life is characterised by the alternation between structured social roles and “the blurring of social roles which occurs in the ritual context” (Chakraborty 147), that is situations of social powerlessness since liminal beings have no status or property (Turner 95). To Turner, liminality is associated with ambiguity:

The attributes of [...] “threshold people” [...] are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in culture space. (Turner 95)

Victor Turner thus added the notion of ambiguity to his definition of liminality and related the liminal state to powerlessness caused by a temporary situation that is outside societal norms.

Postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha, in turn, further developed the idea of liminality and adapted it to postcolonial studies. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha delves into the various ways in which colonialism has influenced the lives of colonised individuals. He describes liminality as a site “betwixt and between times and places” (Bhabha 158) which is “characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change” (Chakraborty 146). Bhabha introduces two key concepts: hybridity and the ‘third space’. As he explains, hybridity is the “interweaving” (Bhabha 5) of elements of the coloniser and the colonised (Chakraborty 149). In other words, hybridity results from the contact between cultures, as it stems from colonised people’s “borderline [condition]” (Bhabha 6). The concept is thus based on the idea that “no culture is really pure as it is always in contact with the other” (Chakraborty 149). On the other hand, the third space is the result of “a tension between two cultures” (Chakraborty 149) in a colonial situation. It is considered a space between cultures, at once similar to and different from the cultures that surround it as neither the coloniser's cultural framework nor the colonised's cultural framework can fully determine the outcomes or resolve the complexities of this space. The third space is thus more than hybrid, it has distinct features and “marks a new beginning of possibility in terms of meaningful identification” (Chakraborty 149):

The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the inbetween space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (Bhabha 39)

Bhabha suggests that acknowledging this split-space of enunciation can pave the way for conceptualising an international culture. Rather than focusing on the superficial aspects of multiculturalism or the mere coexistence of diverse cultures, Bhabha proposes a deeper understanding that recognises the hybridity of cultures. The third space transcends “established notions of culture and identity” (Chakraborty 149) and therefore is “a place of opportunity for the growth of fresh ideas [which] [reject] anything fixed, [and so] [open] up newer scope for fresh thoughts allowing [people] to go beyond the rigidity and limited focus of colonial binary thinking” (Chakraborty 149). According to its description, Bhabha’s ‘third space’ is liminal by definition as it exists in the interstices between cultures. Bhabha’s liminal space is consequently not a space between different stages of life, as was the case for Van Gennep and Turner, but a space between cultures.

Feminist and queer theory scholar Gloria Anzaldúa includes the notion of queerness in her definition of liminality in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Anzaldúa indeed links liminality to the borderlands, which are “spaces located between socially instituted borders, including geographic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racialised borders” (Melchior 384). These borders are, according to her, “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe” (Anzaldúa 25) and to “distinguish us from them” (Anzaldúa 25). In other words, just as Bhabha includes geographical borders in his definition of liminality by taking into account the experience of people from colonised countries, Anzaldúa includes the spaces ‘betwixt and between,’ using Turner’s words: what she calls the borderland, “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 25). Liminality is the in-between, something that, in her conception of the term, can be chosen or enforced. This perception of liminality can be applied to the situation of queer people:

In trying to simultaneously navigate enforced gender and sexuality norms and authentic self-expression and identity, queer people find themselves between

competing thresholds, such as societal norms and authentic self, without the ability to move fully into either space. (Melchior 385)

Queer people that explore their identity tend to stray away from societal norms, as explained in this passage, and thus find themselves in a liminal space, between “societal norms and [their] authentic self” (Melchior 385). This situation, which, as previously mentioned, may be chosen or enforced, can still be an opportunity for an individual to “move on beyond the labels that bind them, as societal norms and oppressions seek to define” (Melchior 386). The liminal space is thus ambiguous as it can be occupied “sometimes by choice, sometimes by force, and sometimes both” (Melchior 386). According to Anzaldúa, the liminal space can also be inhabited temporarily or permanently: “There are individuals who, due to oppressive systems such as cisheteronormativity and racism, permanently occupy liminal places” (Melchior 386). This ambiguity allows for the creation of spaces “that do not rely on longstanding societal norms and instead offer the potential for hybridized people and spaces” (Melchior 386) as the people who inhabit the borderlands are queer:

The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los *atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (Anzaldúa 40, italics in original)

Anzaldúa’s liminal space is thus ambiguous, permanent or temporary, voluntary or enforced, and predominantly occupied by people marginalised by a cisheteronormative and racist society.

The definition of liminality has thus been developed throughout the twentieth century and has continued to be expanded and adapted to multiple realities at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It was first defined as a temporary social situation by Van Gennep. Then, Turner added the notion of ambiguity and applied the concept to Western cultures, theorising that liminality is an ambiguous space in which people exist in-between stages of their lives. Bhabha later applied the definition to people from colonised and previously colonised countries who created spaces between their culture and the colonisers’, thus generating new ways of identifying oneself. Gloria Anzaldúa linked liminality to queerness by theorising that queer people tend to exist, by choice or not, in liminal spaces and situate themselves between who they are and who they were brought up to be. Liminality in Anzaldúa’s perception thus refers

to the tension between the self and societal expectations. To conclude, as explained by literary scholars Isabelle Gadoin and Annie Ramel in their discussion of liminality,

Modern language has retained the sense of indeterminacy and in-betweenness rather than the clear-cut notion of separation or demarcation. The liminal is basically unascrivable, undescrivable, neither here nor there. (Gadoin and Ramel 5)

This “sense of indeterminacy and in-betweenness” (Gadoin and Ramel 5) is represented in *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek* through the creation of literal and metaphorical liminal spaces inhabited by the novels’ respective protagonists, Ada and Vivek.

#### **4.2. “The gates were open and she was the bridge”: Liminality in *Freshwater***

In *Freshwater*, Ada’s existence is complex and ever-changing, as has been explained in previous chapters. Ada is a spiritual being, the child of a goddess and at the same time an *ogbanje*, which means that her existence is inherently liminal, as I will argue in this chapter. Indeed, Ada, as an *ogbanje*, is an interference in her family’s lineage. She does not have ancestors and cannot become an ancestor (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187). Ancestors in Igbo spirituality play an important role in the lives of their descendants and their existence persists through it; this role is out of reach for Ada. Furthermore, her existence as an *ogbanje* puts Ada between different realms of existence: she exists between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, as she inhabits a human body but is not human, and she exists between life and death, as *ogbanjes* are supposed to die during childhood but Ada manages to live through self-sacrifice. As a matter of fact, as a child, Ada starts self-harming regularly as she discovers that it is a way to make the spirits that inhabit her settle down momentarily, as will be examined later. Moreover, her multiple identity makes her experience different relationships with gender and sexuality throughout her life as, as a multifaceted being, she experiences the identities and attractions of the entities that compose her. She is therefore represented as a being whose existence cannot fit rigid categories and whose identity is not permanent nor fixed but rather ever developing and changing.

As explained earlier, *ogbanjes* are interferences in the lineage. In Igbo spirituality, the role of ancestors is considered crucial as they “are believed to participate in all important family affairs” (Okafor 148) and for this reason, many people want to lead a “good life” (Okafor 148) because “it is only those who live a good life that go to the world of the ancestors (the spirit land) where they continue to have influence on earthly life and family matters” (Okafor 148).

This way, ancestors' lives are perpetuated in death through their role in their descendants' lives. In other words, death is an essential state that is not opposed to life in Igbo culture. However, Ada's existence as an *ogbanje* makes it impossible for her to be an ancestor or to have any as "the *ogbanje* [is] an unwelcome deviation that lives in between two different worlds" (Magaqa and Makombe 25). This means that Ada's existence situates itself outside of the family genealogy and is thus, in a way, temporary as the role of ancestor is outside her reach.

Another liminal aspect of Ada's existence as an *ogbanje* lies in the fact that *ogbanjes* are "embodied spirits [who] never cut ties with the spiritual world" (Magaqa and Makombe 25), which means that Ada always has "one foot on the other side" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 27). In other words, while Ada is not human, she is not a spirit either; rather, she is a spiritual entity composed of different beings that exist in a human body. She exists between two realms and thus can experience both of them. Indeed, while Ada in her bodily existence lives a life surrounded by other human beings, first her family and then her university friends in Virginia, another world exists in her mind. In the novel, her mind is represented as a "marble room" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 41) which is filled with the different entities that exist within Ada: Ada herself, Asughara, Saint Vincent, and the brothersisters. The fact that her mind is depicted as a marble room is interesting as it creates a dual representation of Ada: the Ada who moves among humans and the one who exists within the marble room with Asughara and Saint Vincent. The portrayal of Ada's psyche through the image of the marble room allows for the concrete representation of Ada's deepest struggles and traumatizations. Moreover, her mind is not an isolated enclosed space, as other spirits can visit it like the brothersisters. This is the case with Yshwa, who takes shape in Ada's mind after she realises that she has been sexually assaulted by Soren:

He started to materialize inside her mind, as if he was one of us, as if he belonged there. He was trying to reach her but I never liked him, so I blocked him at every chance. He had too much light inside him, it was always reflecting off the marble and glaring into my eyes. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 84)

Asughara, who narrates this passage, disapproves of Christ's visit in Ada's mind. Yshwa intends to materialise, years after Ada prayed for him to do it, but Asughara rejects him. Asughara considers that Ada is hers to save (Emezi, *Freshwater* 61) which can explain her desire to expulse Yshwa from Ada's mind. Moreover, Yshwa is said to have "too much light inside him" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 84) from Asughara's point of view which highlights the fact that both represent opposite values. Asughara others Yshwa by saying "as if he was one of us, as if he

belonged here” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 84). This excerpt shows that Ada’s inner life is ever-changing as Ada can take control of her own body, or another entity can. For instance, Asughara takes control of the body during sexual intercourse with men to allegedly protect Ada from traumatic events, since traumatic sexual intercourse was the reason for her emergence. Indeed, Asughara narrates that, after the realisation that Soren had been raping Ada, the intimate relationship between the two continues:

The boy fucked her body again, that day and every day afterward, over and over. [...] Except Ada wasn’t there anymore. At all, at all. She wasn’t even a small thing curled up in the corner of her marble. There was only me. [...] I was powerful and I was mad. [...] Ada was never there when there was a bed. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 63-64)

Asughara protects Ada from the traumatising experience of having sexual intercourse with Soren by “filling [...] up” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 64) the marble, therefore stopping her from witnessing the event. The sentence "The boy fucked her body again, that day and every day afterward, over and over" expresses the repetitive nature of the abuse. Moreover, “I was powerful and I was mad.” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 63-64) suggests that protecting Ada is not Asughara’s only desire. The combination of power and madness shows a strong reaction to the sexual abuse and showcases a newfound sense of power and an intense emotional response by Asughara in the face of the trauma experienced by Ada. In other words, the abuse that Ada goes through makes Asughara stronger because it makes her angrier. Asughara can take control of the body whenever she deems it necessary of benefitting Ada or herself, which means that, Ada exists between states, depending on whether she is present herself in her body, or if another part of her being is. Furthermore, since Ada serves as a bridge between two realms of existence, she can be visited by spirits that come from the other side, that is the world of the spirits, as is the case with Yshwa, and at some other point with the brothersisters.

Indeed, at some point in Ada’s life, the brothersisters come from the other side of the gate to remind Asughara of the role of the oġbanje:

*Come back, they said. Listen to us this time.* They pressed on either side of me and pulled me over, back to their memories of the other side beyond the gates, of what used to be mine too, the solid comfort, the thousand-souled other brothersisters all folded against each other, never alone, as alone as you could want to be —anything,

everything we ever wanted, even nothingness, if we chose that, even ends. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 134, italics in original)

The brothersisters visit Asughara to remind her of her duty as an *ogbanje*: dying. This passage narrated by Asughara shows the brothersisters visiting the marble to remind her what existence in the world of spirits is like, intending to convince her to come back by having Ada die. Asughara describes the brothersisters as “thousand-souled” and “never alone” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 134) referring to when Asughara was part of the shifting cloud, before being involved with humans. Furthermore, the mention of being “never alone” can be linked to the Igbo proverb saying that when one thing stands, another thing must stand beside it. This would imply that the brothersisters offset each other and thus create an entity that is balanced as a whole. This explains the brothersisters’ commitment to bringing Asughara back to the spiritual world and thus to them by having her push Ada to suicide. As previously explained, Ada has managed to survive through childhood and her teen years by self-harming, a sacrificial ritual that kept the brothersisters calm:

We were loud and kicking against this meatbody we’d been shoved into; we wanted to be let out, this was an abomination. But the Ada had learned her trick of quick sacrifices just that year, so when [Ada and her cousin] got back to the house, she cut into the back of her hand and bled us into a restless silence. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 124)

Although Ada has managed to live through her childhood and teenage years by self-sacrificing, she is still supposed to die as *ogbanjes* do. This quotation shows the perspective of the brothersisters stuck inside a “meatbody” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 124) which is unfit for them. They disrupt Ada’s internal life and comfort within her body to demand a sacrifice from her. Only when Ada has made herself bleed, they turn quiet. This shows that the brothersisters need Ada, but also torment her as their presence is synonymous with turmoil and self-inflicted violence. After the brothersisters’ reminder, Asughara makes it her mission to have Ada commit suicide, although this takes time: “It’s not easy to persuade a human to end their life— they’re very attached to it, even when it makes them miserable, and Ada was no different” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 150). In the meantime, this creates within Ada, whose existence already situates itself between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, a tension between life and death as she is attached to her life, and yet has a part of herself, that is Asughara, that wants to

end it. Ultimately, Asughara convinces Ada to attempt suicide after a fight with her boyfriend, Hassan. The spirit does so by projecting the spectre of Ada's cousin, Uche, who died shortly before of a pulmonary embolism:

Uche's corpse sat across from her, his lung clot turning him grey as he watched her with gutted eyelids and still blood. Ada stirred miso paste and dehydrated seaweed into a bowl of hot water, talking softly to him as if he was alive. I stood behind her with my palm on her shoulder. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 176)

Ada physically finds herself between Uche's spectre and Asughara: "I was keeping a fine balance by bringing Uche's shade here, maintaining a delicate tension between Ada's world and that of the brothersisters" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 176). Asughara positions Uche, his skin grey from the blood clot, in front of Ada and positions herself behind Ada, with her hand on her shoulder, thus surrounding Ada's body with entities originating from the spiritual world. It is this "tension between Ada's world and that of the brothersisters" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 176) that pushes Ada to take painkillers to end her own life. This overwhelming presence of spirits breaks the equilibrium within Ada between the two worlds that compose her and in which she lives, thus making her vulnerable to Asughara's desire. Ada's instability is represented by the manner in which she talks to Uche as if his presence was natural. However, it is a pull from the world of the living, that is Hassan calling Ada on the phone, that manages to break Asughara's hold on Ada. When Ada answers the phone, she explains to Hassan that she has taken painkillers and then she calls another friend to describe the situation to her as well. The friend thus decides to call an ambulance, although Ada does not want to, which ends up saving her life. This event represents the strong tension between the two realms that exist within Ada and how her life is balanced between these different states. It also illustrates how both life and death, and both the spirits and the humans are necessary to Ada's existence as she is a compound of all of these elements.

Ada contains different entities with different relations to sexuality and gender and her sexual orientation and her gender identity and expression reflect that. Magaqa and Makombe argue that, as an *ogbanje*, Ada embodies a third space because she "transgresses "natural" emotions to embrace emotions often associated with different genders" (32). Indeed, as the novel advances, it becomes increasingly clear that Ada is transgender, and more precisely a non-binary transgender person. This is significant because her gender identity, closely related to her identity as an *ogbanje*, cannot fit within the man-woman dichotomy. This aspect of Ada's

queerness reinforces the liminality of her existence as she exists in-between genders and sexualities. For instance, Saint Vincent is a more masculine spirit who creates a “dreambody” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 122), that is a body with a penis, that he uses in Ada’s dream:

Saint Vincent preferred to move inside the Ada’s dreams, when she was floating in our realm, untethered and malleable. He molded her into a new body there, a dreambody with reorganized flesh and a penis complete with functioning nerves and expanding blood vessels. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 122)

This excerpt depicts how Saint Vincent interacts with Ada’s mind and body. While Asughara dominates the body, Saint Vincent prefers to exist within the mental realm where he stays “malleable” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 122). This suggests that Saint Vincent necessitates a fluidity in terms of bodily possibilities, as depicted in the phrase “reorganized flesh” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 122), which implies a restructuring or rearrangement of the physical body in the dream state. This passage represents the intersection of the physical and the dream world, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. It also explores the transformative power of dreams and Saint Vincent’s ability to shape Ada’s dreambody. It is also mentioned that Saint Vincent is attracted to women (Emezi, *Freshwater* 125), and consequently, when he is more present at the forefront of Ada’s mind, Ada more visibly expresses attraction to women. With Saint Vincent’s presence, Ada also starts wearing “men’s clothes” and appreciating aspects of her body that are considered masculine as well:

Even the things that the Ada used to dislike about her body had mellowed out once we let Saint Vincent run. Then, the broad shoulders and the way they tapered down to narrow hips and small buttocks finally fit. Men’s clothes draped properly on this body—we were handsome. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 187)

Interestingly, Ada is described as handsome in this passage, a gendered adjective more often than not used to describe attractive men (“Handsome”). On the other hand, as previously described, Asughara is a feminine hypersexual spirit who has sexual intercourse with men when she takes control of the body. This means that Ada’s attraction to either women or men varies depending on the entity taking the forefront of her mind and inhabiting her body; it exists outside of the heterosexual norm. Moreover, the way she perceives and appreciates her body also varies depending on the entity taking control of the body. With Saint Vincent existing more

often at the forefront of the mind, Ada's perception of her body features develops. Characteristics usually associated with masculinity, as is the case with her broad shoulders, narrow hips, and small buttocks, which she usually dislikes become a source of personal validation for her as it allows her to be less perceived as feminine and to counterbalance for her breasts (Emezi, *Freshwater* 124).

As is mentioned, Ada's relationship with her own body evolves through time and her identity is not fixed in the novel. For instance, when Ada gets a breast reduction as gender-affirming surgery, the narrative 'we' explains: "We considered removing the breasts utterly and tattooing the flat of her chestbone, but that decisiveness still felt wrong, one end of the spectrum rocketing unsteadily to the other end—it wasn't us, not yet" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 189). In other words, the choice of undergoing breast reduction surgery instead of a mastectomy resides in the fact that the latter is not representative of Ada's internal reality at this point in her life. The mention that "it wasn't us, not yet" suggests a notion of liminality and of fluctuation of identity, which reinforces the idea that Ada's gender identity is not something fixed and permanent. From this perspective, Ada's gender identity is bound to evolve and change throughout her life. The representation of her transition as a never-ending process participates in the representation of her existence as a liminal one. She does not transition from one status to another, as was theorised by Van Gennep and Turner, nor does she transition from her sex assigned at birth to male. It can be argued that her transitional state is a 'status' in itself, more precisely an acknowledgment of her fluctuating non-binary gender identity. As explained by Tina Magaqa and Rodwell Makombe in "Decolonising Queer Sexualities: A Critical Reading of the *Ogbanje* Concept in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*," the representation of identity as "never settled but always in a state of flux" (Magaqa and Makombe 26) "accommodates 'other' identities and ways of being often perceived as abnormal in some cultural contexts" (Magaqa and Makombe 26). In other words, representing identities as ever fluctuating and not settled creates space to depict Ada's non-Western realities. Ada's identity cannot fit into rigid categories because she is a compound of entities, a spiritual being who encompasses multiple realities, genders, and sexualities.

To conclude, Ada's existence is liminal in many ways: she is represented as a bridge between different worlds that are usually considered incompatible, that is the world of the living and the world of the spirits. It can thus be said that she "[divides] distinct spheres [and] identities" (Chakraborty 146) as she participates in the novel's deconstruction of strict binaries and rigid categories. Emezi uses precolonial Igbo concepts, that is Ada's liminal existence as an *ogbanje*, to do so. The novel's representation of Ada's existence, therefore, fits Bhabha's

definition of liminality as an “in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change” (Chakraborty 146). Ada inhabits a metaphorical third space which situates itself between two realms, but which has its own characteristics and rules. More than the space she inhabits, it can be said that her existence in itself is inherently liminal: as an *ogbanje*, she was born to die and thus has to find strategies to stay alive. However, this only works temporarily as, at some point, Asughara decides to have Ada die. From this moment on, the equilibrium between the two opposite realms that compose Ada’s reality is unbalanced, especially seeing that Asughara summons Uche’s shadow to take Ada away from the human world. Additionally, Ada is multifaceted and therefore cannot fit into a single gender or sexual category. Indeed, different entities with different relationships with gender and sexuality live in her body, and therefore, Ada’s identity in terms of gender and sexuality changes depending on who exists at the forefront of her mind. This representation of existence does not work with a gender and sexuality system that has rigid, unbridgeable categories.

#### **4.3. Blurring Boundaries: Liminality in The Death of Vivek Oji**

The liminal aspect is also central to *The Death of Vivek Oji* whose narrative centres a young queer person and the story of their death. In the novel, the notions of life and death blend and interact with each other, thus breaking the rigid boundaries between these two states. Furthermore, the novel also presents Vivek as a hinge between these two aspects of life, as well as between the past and the present as Kavita’s investigating his death is the focal point of the story. The liminality of queerness is also important in the novel as, as it unfolds, Vivek’s queer identity becomes evident. Vivek, like Ada, does not have a binary queer identity. Rather both transcend the binary as Ada’s gender and sexual identities are as multiple as her beings and Vivek is a genderqueer person who accepts he and she pronouns as well as two names: Vivek and Nnemdi. One is considered a masculine name of Indian origins; the other name is a feminine Igbo one. Vivek/Nnemdi’s identity is thus fluctuating as they can go from feminine to masculine and thus rise above gender categories. Moreover, the novel depicts cultural liminal spaces, as it is the case with the *Nigerwives*. They are a multicultural community of foreign women living in Nigeria who help each other to learn Nigerian culture. In this way, liminality is used in the novel to represent non-normative realities that go beyond unbending categories in terms of life and death, gender, and culture.

The Nigerwives is a group of immigrant women who moved to Nigeria because they married Nigerian men. They are described in the novel as a community that helps women to “assimilate into these new lives so far away from the countries they’d come from” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 17). In other words, the Nigerwives create a liminal space, in-between cultures as they each bring elements of their own culture into the society they build together. On a microcosmic level, the Nigerwives represent a culture made of different cultures: their native culture and their adoptive Nigerian culture. The group thus can be considered a third space according to Bhabha’s definition. However, the power dynamics can be said to be reversed in the case of the Nigerwives as it is not the colonial authority who holds more power, but the Nigerian husbands as is depicted in Maja’s situation. Maja is described in the novel as a “nurse from the Philippines who was married to a much older businessman” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 20). She is also Juju’s mother. At some point, Maja’s husband has an affair with another woman who gets pregnant. The illegitimate couple has a boy together, something that was important to Maja’s husband, as Maja only has a daughter. As a consequence, the husband decides to have his second family move into his and Maja’s home. He, moreover, forbids Maja to leave him or the country, ensuring it by taking her and Juju’s passports. There is therefore an enforced aspect to the presence of Maja in the liminal group as the decision to stay or leave is beyond her control. This idea of liminality is reinforced by a comment made by Vivek during a birthday party when they are children. Eloise, a British mother whose children all left to study in England, is on the phone with her son and Vivek wonders why she does not leave Nigeria to go to England with her children. He then remarks that most of the women there would have left the country if it were not for their children: “most of them are only here because of their children. If not, they would have left from since.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 18). The presence of these women is thus represented as temporary or enforced in the novel, thus reinforcing the liminal aspect of their community. The group also engenders a liminal subgroup: the children of the Nigerwives who represent a metaphorical safe space for Vivek to explore his queer identity. All these children are biracial, for instance Vivek is half Indian and half Igbo which makes his identity culturally liminal as well as liminal in terms of gender and in terms of his presence between life and death.

As the title says, the novel tells the events surrounding Vivek’s death. The story starts with Vivek having died and having been found naked, wrapped in colourful fabric in front of the family house by their mother, Kavita. Then, throughout the novel, the narration goes back and forth between moments that lead up to Vivek’s death and moments that follow it, with as a focal point the research of the truth behind the events that happened the day the market burned.

In other words, and as Emilia María Durán-Almarza defines it in her article “Uncomfortable Truths: Queer Strangers and Gendered Necropolitics in Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji*,” the novel can be seen as a “feminist actualization of [the] African noir” (Durán-Almarza 70) in which the reader accompanies Kavita in her “quest to discover the circumstances surrounding her [child’s] killing” (Durán-Almarza 70). As she searches for the reason behind her child’s death, a second —metaphorical— death happens: Kavita discovers through Osita and the Nigerwives’ children that Vivek was genderqueer, that he accepted different pronouns and wanted to be also named Nnemdi. At first, Kavita’s emotional reaction is to show outrage and disbelief as she says “‘It’s enough. You people will not sit here and tell me my son wanted you to call him she. It’s... it’s unnatural’” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 217). This reaction presents Vivek’s identity as abnormal and monstrous (Courtois 178). However, learning about Vivek’s identity partially answers Kavita’s questions, as she still does not know the real circumstances of Vivek’s death, but she then knows that she did not know who her child really was. She shows the photos of Vivek wearing dresses and makeup to Chika who also falls apart as a result. The novel depicts Kavita’s process of acceptance of her child’s true identity, which culminates with her destroying Vivek’s tombstone with a hoe:

She was aiming at the inscription now, and he cringed as he realized it.

“We—can—at—least—get—one—thing—*correct!*” she snarled between swings.

(Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 226; italics in original)

Kavita destroys the tombstone in a fit of anger and sadness with the idea that Chika will replace it with Vivek’s true identity engraved on it. By saying that she and Chika can at least get one thing correct, she acknowledges the errors they made as parents during Vivek’s life. This can refer to their unwillingness to accept their child’s sexuality and gender. For Kavita, removing the engraving on the tombstone to replace it with one acknowledging all aspects of Vivek’s identity would bring her solace.

The novel thus features chapters that are set in the past, that is the telling of Vivek’s birth, childhood, and teenagerhood, Ahunna’s death, Kavita and Chika’s courtship, and others that are set in the present, which depict Vivek’s family and friends mourning, Vivek’s funeral, and Kavita’s investigation. The past being life before Vivek’s death and the present being life after Vivek’s death means that Vivek acts as a hinge between these two temporalities in the novel. The role of Vivek as a hinge between past and present is further reinforced by the fact that Vivek is one of the three narrators of the novel, with Osita and an omniscient narrator. This

means that beyond death, Vivek still has a voice and is able to witness and comment on events that happen after his accidental death in short enigmatic chapters. Moreover, the novel also blurs the line between life and death by having Vivek being described as alive in his death. For instance, at some point after Nnemdi's death, Juju, who became Nnemdi's closest friend in the weeks before her death, and Osita, who was Vivek's cousin and lover, engage in sexual intercourse as a way to process their grief. During the intercourse, Osita imagines that Vivek is present and watches them:

I imagined Vivek behind her, his legs mixed up with mine, his mouth against her back; imagined I could reach beyond her and meet his forearms, pull him closer until we were all pressed against each other.

But when my hands reached out, there was only air, unmoving and hot. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 193)

Here, Osita narrates the intimate moment between him and Juju and explains that he imagines that Vivek also participates. This shows that having sexual intercourse is a way for them to grieve Nnemdi, as mentioned earlier. However, the last sentence marks a difficult return to reality as Osita wants to touch Vivek's arms, he realises that no one is behind Juju. This portrays a moment of recognition for Osita who realises that Vivek is not part of his physical life anymore. The following chapter is narrated by Vivek himself, who says that he is actually watching them (Emezi, *Vivek Oji*, 195). He adds: "They were keeping me alive in the sweetest way they knew how, you see" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji*, 195). This passage shows that Vivek, after his death, exists in a liminal space and that, as is the case in *Freshwater*, the boundaries between life and death, and in this case between past and present, are porous and crossable. Vivek might not be physically present with Osita and Juju, yet he spiritually accompanies them. The idea that the boundary between life and death is permeable is also present in the last chapter of the novel, narrated by Nnemdi who says: "Somewhere, you see, in the river of life, I am already alive" (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 245). This means that after her death, Nnemdi will be born again. Life and death are not presented as opposite and unreconcilable states, they are rather shown to be part of a never-ending cycle. Vivek/Nnemdi's existence in the novel is thus liminal, in the sense that they exist in-between states and times. Like Ada who is a bridge between the world of the spirits and the world of the living, they are a bridge between life and death, as well as between the past and the present.

Furthermore, as a queer person, Vivek finds themselves in a liminal space as described by Gloria Anzaldúa, that is a queer liminal space that offers the possibility to queer people to explore the intricacies of their identity. Vivek's liminal space is both literal and metaphorical as it is represented in the novel through Juju's bedroom and the Nigerwives' daughters, that is Juju, Elisabeth, Somto, and Olunne. The group, as well as Juju's bedroom in which they socialise, can be described as Vivek's safe places. Vivek wears makeup and dresses for the first time surrounded by them. Moreover, the group also seems to be a safe space for the other teenagers to explore their own sexuality as Juju and Elisabeth are in a queer relationship together, as well as Vivek and Osita. However, at some point, Vivek begins striving to escape the liminal space in which he is by going out as their true self and by letting Nnemdi take space in his life. Nnemdi's presence appears late in the novel; however, it is made clear that her taking up space is important to herself, yet she is forced to stay in the liminal space as Anzaldúa defines it:

In trying to simultaneously navigate enforced gender and sexuality norms and authentic self-expression and identity, queer people find themselves between competing thresholds, such as societal norms and authentic self, without the ability to move fully into either space. (Melchior 385)

Nnemdi does not have to "ability to move fully into either space" (Melchior 385) because she cannot exist solely in her safe spaces, and she cannot fully be herself in society. Indeed, Vivek/Nnemdi intends to live as their true selves but, out of love, their friends and family, mostly Osita, force them to remain "between competing thresholds" (Melchior 385) for their own sake, although it ends up killing them. This element is central to the novel, as it recounts the death of Vivek and elucidates the mystery around it. At different moments in the novel, it is mentioned that several characters believe that Vivek was killed by rioters during the fire at the market, although it does not explain why his body was found naked and in front of his parents' house. The idea is that Vivek was murdered as a result of their queerness: a queer person, a "man" —according to their parents— with long hair. The true cause of Vivek's death comes at the very end of the novel when Osita reflects on it: Nnemdi went out in a dress during the riot at the market. As Osita was worried for her, he tried to find her and bring her home, although she did not want to. While trying to get out of Osita's grip, Nnemdi fell to the ground and broke her skull.

I lost it. “We have to go now! Do you know what they’ll do to you?”

Nnemdi gasped and wrenched away from me with all her strength, breaking my hold. I was startled by the pain in her eyes, surprised that the truth could hurt her so much. She pulled herself away with such force that she stumbled, and her heel caught on a stone, and she fell. It happened so fast. I saw her head strike the raised cement edge of the gutter at the side of the road. I saw her body slump, eyes closed, blood pooling into the sand within seconds. (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 235)

In this excerpt, Osita tells the events surrounding Vivek’s death. It becomes clear that Nnemdi was not attacked by rioters, but rather that she died intending to escape her liminal space. Osita expresses that he fears other people’s reactions, which brings to the surface his own shame of being perceived as homosexual. This explanation comes as a narrative twist as it turns out that it is not hatred and violence that caused Nnemdi’s death, but rather a protective impulse, an attempt to keep her in a liminal safe space. Altogether, the queer liminal space in *The Death of Vivek Oji* is ambivalent as it is a place that permits Vivek to explore his identity and “move beyond the labels that bind [him]” (Melchior 386), but it is also a place of unintended violence. As explained, it is Osita’s determination to keep Vivek in the liminal space that led to his death.

To conclude, the representations of liminal existences are diverse in *The Death of Vivek Oji*. The novel covers the events surrounding Vivek’s death, going back and forth between moments where the protagonist was alive and moments where he are dead. Vivek/Nnemdi is a complex character who, like Ada, exists in-between states and gender categories. They are a hinge between past and present, as well as life and death in the novel. Furthermore, death itself is represented as a part of life and as a state that is not permanent. In his death, Vivek is presented as alive “somewhere [...] in the river of time” (Emezi, *Vivek Oji* 245) and as being able of witnessing events that happen to live characters and even make his presence felt by these characters. Death is thus not represented as the binary opposite of life in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, but rather as coexisting with it and even being able to interact with it. In terms of culture, the novel depicts a culturally liminal microcosm, that is the community of the Nigerwives, who create a culture of their own which contains elements of the Nigerian culture as well as elements of their own, diverse, native cultures. This group creates a space in which another group composed of the Nigerwives’ children, can represent a liminal safe space for Vivek/Nnemdi, as well as the other young people of the group, to explore their queerness. The liminal aspect of the novel thus feeds the queerness of the identities represented as much as it allows for a faithful depiction of their reality.

#### 4.4. Embracing Transitions: Conclusion of Liminality

Both *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* are coming-of-age narratives that depict realities that are liminal and outside the norm. Indeed, Ada and Vivek are both queers and both novels explore their protagonists' journey of self-discovery and self-understanding. Their identities are fluctuating and not permanent as Ada considers that she will change through time and Vivek is genderqueer, thus existing between different gender identities and expressions. Additionally, *The Death of Vivek Oji* also covers the journey of discovery of Kavita, Vivek's mother, as she explores the conditions of her child's untimely death. Ada is an oġbanje and Vivek dies, as a result, both of them act as bridges between life and what exists beyond it. Moreover, both exist in liminal spaces that act as safe spaces: Ada's mind allows her to exist outside the human world and inside the spiritual world and Vivek creates a queer liminal space with the children of the Nigerwives in which he can explore his identity and express his femininity.

As previously explained, throughout *Freshwater*, Ada understands that her existence as an oġbanje is multiple and fluctuating, which influences her gender identity and sexuality. Depending on which part of her exists at the forefront of her mind, her gender expression, identity, and her sexuality vary. On the other hand, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek explores his gender identity and sexuality and discovers that he is genderqueer. His gender identity is thus, as is the case for Ada, fluctuating and not fixed. None of them have an identity in terms of gender and sexuality that can fit in a dichotomous system, they both have non-binary identities, Ada's identity being too complex to fit within the man-woman dichotomy and Vivek finding comfort in both masculinity and femininity.

Another fluid aspect of Ada and Nnemdi's lives is the fact that they both cross different states of existence and bridge them. Ada acts as a bridge between the world of the living and the world of the spirits. She lives in a human body but is a compound of non-human entities that interact with each other and with other spirits that can visit her mind, the marble. Ada also experiences a tension between life and death as Asuġhara strives to have her commit suicide since oġbanjes are supposed to die. She exists between these two states as Vivek exists as a hinge between life and death. Vivek dies literally in the novel as he falls while trying to get away from Osita; he is still present in the narrative in chapters that depict moments before his death and is present as a voice and spiritual entity in the chapters that recount events that happen after his death. Furthermore, in addition to the literal death, there also is a metaphorical death: the death of whom Vivek's parents thought he was. As Kavita investigates her child's passing, she learns that Vivek's true identity is not what she expected and that he actually was

genderqueer. She processes her discovery in a way that ends with her destroying her child's tombstone to replace it with one whose engraving is faithful to her child's identity.

Moreover, both novels represent liminal spaces that act as safe spaces for the characters. In *Freshwater*, Ada's mind, called the marble, is a place in which she can retire when her body goes through traumatic events or when it is controlled by another entity, that is Asughara or Saint Vincent. The marble is thus a safe space for Ada, but also a space bridging the two parts of her identity: her human experience and her spiritual one as spiritual entities can visit it, as is the case with Yshwa and the brothersisters. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, liminal spaces are present through the representation of the Nigerwives' community, a group of immigrant women who moved to Nigeria to live with their Nigerian husbands. The Nigerwives create a culture that blends elements of their native cultures and the Nigerian culture. They also create a space which allows a subgroup including their children as well as Osita to emerge. This subgroup is itself a safe space for the young people who are exploring their sexualities and it is a liminal space that allows Vivek to express his queerness. This is central to Vivek's development as his family are not welcoming of his gender nonconformity and blame his feminine side on mental health issues. The queer safe space in which Nnemdi temporarily exists is thus essential to her. However, as she tries to evade it but is forced to stay in it by her friends and Osita who want to protect her from the violence queer people face in the outside world, it becomes an enforced safe space. This forceful protection even leads to her accidental death.

To conclude, Emezi represents non-binary trans identities that permanently fluctuate and develop but do not appear to be incomplete as the characters are not fully aware of who they are yet. Vivek and Ada are liminal beings because they are bound to exist in the explorative phase of their lives. From this point of view, the identity they represent in *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* are inherently liminal, that is, in a state of transition. Transition, whether it is in terms of gender, sexuality, or states of existence, is central to their identity. Both characters transition in various ways throughout the novel: they both transition from child to young adult and, furthermore, they transition in terms of gender as Ada gets gender-affirming surgery and Nnemdi starts presenting in a feminine way. The representation of liminal existences in both novels shows that the concept can take various meanings depending on the context in which it is used: *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* both depict existences, experiences, and spaces that are liminal in the sense that they blend cultures, genders, sexualities, as well as different realms of existence.

## 5. Queering holiness: General conclusion

This dissertation has explored how notions of spirituality, gender, and sexuality shape the representation of existences defying the binary and rigid categories in *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Both Ada and Vivek are characters existing in liminal spaces who strive to delve into the complexity of their identity as a way to understand who they are. This paper has also investigated the use of literary genres and devices to transgress norms and thus challenge preconceived notions.

On the level of spirituality, the novels represent different belief systems and use them to represent complex existences. In *Freshwater*, Ada is an *ogbanje*, a being complex by nature whose purpose on Earth is to cause grief to a single family repeatedly by having their children die. Furthermore, Ada is a child of Ala, the Igbo goddess of Earth, which makes her existence all the more complex. She struggles to grapple with her spiritual identity and how it impacts her social life as well as her gender identity and expression, and her sexuality throughout her life. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek is a reincarnation of his grandmother Ahunna which impacts his identity on different levels. Vivek's spiritual journey allows him to navigate his gender identity and offers him different perspectives on the world: as an actor of his own life, but also as a metaphysical presence in the life of his family and friends after his death. The spiritual widely influences the sexual and gender-related spheres in both novels. Ada is a compound of different entities with different energies, sexual attractions, and gender expressions. There is Asughara, who is a hyperfeminine angry entity who is attracted by available men to hurt them. On the other hand, Saint Vincent is masculine and soft and favours the realm of the imaginary. Ada, as a holy figure inhabiting a human body, has to come to terms with the limitations of her flesh and learns throughout the novel to have her human side and her spiritual side coexist and flourish. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, being a reincarnation of Ahunna confronts Vivek with the fact that he also has an identity influenced by spiritual figures. The gender aspect of his identity is influenced by this as the female name he chooses for himself is Nnemdi. In the two novels, spirituality and gender and sexuality are interconnected. Moreover, Vivek also represents a sexual orientation that is fluid as he has romantic connections with Osita and Juju. Osita similarly is depicted as fluid in terms of his sexuality as he has sexual intercourse with Elizabeth, Vivek, and Juju and connects on an emotional level with the three of them. In the novels, a multitude of spiritual figures from different belief systems are depicted. Interestingly, none of them are represented as ideal in opposition to an undesirable one. Each entity has a purpose accompanied by a set of values and beliefs through which they act. The

narrative “we”, for instance, acts in concordance with its purpose on earth: killing the child whose body it inhabits. This action is not the subject of a value judgment as it is rather considered to be an objective inherent to the *ogbanje*’s existence. Furthermore, Asughara’s figure is represented as both aggressive and brutal, willing to hurt humans to get what she desires, and at the same time fiercely protective of Ada.

Their spirituality, gender, and sexuality put Ada and Vivek in liminal spaces. Ada exists between the human and the spiritual realm as she is an *ogbanje*, a being who is composed of a variety of spiritual entities stuck in a human body. Moreover, the purpose of an *ogbanje* is to die and, although Ada manages to live by self-harming, her existence is characterised by a constant tension between life and death. Life and death are also represented on a spectrum in *The Death of Vivek Oji* as Nnemdi acts as a hinge between the two states in the novel. She narrates chapters beyond death and makes her presence felt by Osita and Juju when they grieve her together. Furthermore, as a genderqueer person assigned male at birth and presenting femininely at times, Nnemdi exists in a liminal space: Juju and the other children of the Nigerwives, who created themselves a liminal space between their culture and the Nigerian culture, represent a metaphorical safe space for Vivek who explores his sexuality and gender identity. On a literal level, Juju’s bedroom is a place in which he can experiment with his gender expression. When Vivek decides to step out of those safe spaces, Osita tries to force him to return inside them, causing Vivek’s accidental death.

Furthermore, the novels play with literary genres. *The Death of Vivek Oji* can be seen, as expressed in the chapter on liminality, as a feminist actualisation of the African noir, but also as queering the Bildungsroman. *Freshwater* can also be associated with the Bildungsroman as it is a coming-of-age novel; furthermore, the novel also plays with fiction and autobiography as it can be defined as autofiction according to Serge Doubrovsky’s characteristics of the genre. This shows that on a narrative level, the novels transcend literary genre as well as question it.

Overall, *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* challenge fixed categories and norms in terms of spirituality, gender, and sexuality. As such, Emezi queers spirituality through the representation of holiness as fluid and through the depiction of divinity and sexuality as interconnected. Several avenues for future investigation remain open. First, the representation of Ada and Vivek as Christ figures could be further explored as it participates in the depiction of Christianity which decentres the white male figure that is Jesus. Furthermore, Vivek’s fugues in *The Death of Vivek Oji* are also an interesting recurrence which has been explored by María Durán-Almarza and which could benefit from a more in-depth study.

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