

Finding Self: Of Gods, Contestation and Containment in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

Elizabeth Onyewuchi Ben-Iheanacho

National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja – Nigeria.

Abstract

Studies in the feminist movement have identified splits leading to gay and lesbian studies as protest against mainstream feminism now perceived as recreating social inequalities by its continuing privileging of heterosexual orientation as an existentialist framework defining female self and constraining social engagements for the 'other' minded. Queer literary analysis seeks to centralize and interrogate sexual orientation/alternative lifestyle to not only garner sympathy and end discrimination against those whose defining choices are deemed deviant but primarily, to examine the issue of identity and perceived realities. This discourse examines Emezi's presentation of individual identity as an empowerment tool for social negotiation using the world of the Ogbanje. It highlights factors that disempower identity through contestation and containment. Further, the analysis recognizes *Freshwater* as a literary exercise that disrupts and destabilizes binary prism as received perception protocol on gender, sexuality, gods, and society in the quest for finding self.

Keywords: *Containment, Contestation, Identity, Ogbanje, Queer theory*

Introduction

As a political and social movement, feminism has its origin in the struggle for women's rights and probably dates back to the 18th century with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. The suffrage movement of the 20th century was an actualization of voting rights which served to revive the campaign for the visibility of women in all spheres of life. As an ideology, feminism in its historical evolution has spawned many shifts and birthed many phases leading to such categorizations as First and Second wave Feminism. These in turn roughly translate into the Feminine Phase (1840 - 1880), the Feminist Phase (1880 -1920), and the Female Phase (1920 – present); in

Showalter's classification. Feminist scholars also identify the many strands of the ideology to include Afrocentric experience centered theories such as Womanism, Motherism and Stiwanism. Western feminist concepts such as Marxist/Socialist feminism, Humanist feminism, Liberal feminism and Radical feminism are additional frameworks for feminist discourse. The binding consciousness to these theories is the recognition that inequality of the sexes often rendered as perpetuated by patriarchal disposition to subjugate women, is neither a biological nor divine mandate. Rather, it is a social construct. Hence, feminist studies seek to centralize women experiences by mainstreaming them into dominant fields.

The many variants of feminism indicate different responses and perspectives from women of diverse backgrounds and orientations. For instance, African-American women distanced themselves from the generic term, “feminism”; preferring “Womanism” as best suited to capture their cultural nuances, values and orientations which the West may not necessarily align with nor consider significant. In a similar vein, gender resistant feminism such as enunciated by radical feminists, called for the dismantling of the formal structures and institutions that subjugate women especially the family, marriage and motherhood. Its more extreme adherents, the gay/lesbian feminists, oppose everything male; encouraging instead, social relationships, particularly sexual, with women only thus bringing sexual preferences to the fore of gender scholarship.

Queer theory is the resultant gender sensitive discourse that centralizes sexual orientation of wide-ranging ‘deviant’ sexual identities including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender into criticism. Queer theorists interrogate how sexuality is contrived and construed by society: Is sexuality socially constructed or natural? Can it be changed or altered? Whilst feminism had postulated that gender is a social construct though sex is an existentialist fixed item, queer theorists extend

the logic by positing that the traditional binary of masculine/feminine denies individuals the right to choose their authentic identities since what it means to be a man or a woman is constantly changing as determined by the defining culture (Butler). Hence, queer theorists promote fluidity of identity; recognizing that identity results from a complexity of choices, experiences and other significant impacts.

Queer literature aims to deconstruct fluidity of gender identity in order to subvert binary oppositions and demystify heterosexuality as an absolute. Rather, such literary endeavors present individuals as a collection of many possible sexualities especially based on the argument that sexuality can change; not being biologically and divinely assigned (Dobie).

Emezi’s debut novel, *Freshwater*, tells the story of Akwaeke (more often called the Ada), a child prayed into existence by her father, Saul, but who grows into an unusual, volatile, unassuageable Ogbanje, laden with spirits and entities whose coming and going disrupt the seemingly coming-of-age narrative. The Ada daily interfaces and is at home more with the otherworld and metaphysical beings and less with human realities. When she travels to America to study, these entities that inhabit the marble chamber of her mind mature, becoming

more powerful and so overwhelming that they take over her personhood and identity.

Reviews of *Freshwater* focused on the novel as a narrative about dissociative identity disorder, personality disorders, mental illness and madness thus locating it within the therapeutic literary exercise category. In one such review, the reader is urged to consider *Freshwater* as an inquiry and curiosity that “explores the separation and convergence of human madness and otherworldly divinity” Hence, the focal question the novel seeks to find answer to is: “Are the gods a manifestation of Ada’s madness or is Ada being driven mad by the gods?” (Wallberg)

From this perspective, *Freshwater* is presented as an exploration of the surreal experiences of a young woman as she descends into madness; her mental breakdown manifesting in uncontrollable rages, mood swings, a burgeoning appetite for blood and self-mutilation. As the Ada grapples with the realities in her head by developing several separate alternate selves, each volatile, powerful in turn or protective and hedonistic at a twist, her personality recedes into the backroom of her mind/consciousness. The realization that only a return to the mythical Patron Mother of all Ogbanje, the source of all freshwater, would mend her by gathering her fractured self into a healthy whole is the

resolution of the conflicts and convolutions arising from the converging of the otherworld in a human vessel.

In this discourse, Emezi’s *Freshwater* will be analyzed using the literary methodology of queer criticism. The intervention will interrogate how the author presents, interprets and interrupts traditional views of sexuality to destabilize normalized gender narratives within the sociological framework of the Ogbanje phenomenon..

Self: A Question of Identity and Power

Identity can be defined as the qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearances and/or expressions that characterize a person or a group. Identity is, therefore, that prized, intangible element that gives a sense of self, wholeness, distinctiveness, peculiarity, oneness, singleness, separateness, and uniqueness (Olsen). While diverse cultural items such as clothing, artistic expression and social performances can be used in expressing identity, the most individuating form of identity and prized asset, is a person’s name.

Identity as an empowerment quotient is important to the Self because it helps define frameworks and set boundaries while imbuing a sense of worth and confidence to help face challenges and identify with others of similar traits. The question of identity is central to the

many frames of contestation in Emezi's *Freshwater*.

The first time our mother came for us,
we screamed.

We were three and she was a snake...
But we had spent
the last few years... thinking that our
mother was someone
different, a thin human with rouged
cheek-bones... (who)

sang Catholic hymns... (2-3).

In the novel, contestation over identity began with the name the new born baby girl is to be called as gods, goddesses and ancient spirits wrestle not only for the soul of the Ada but for her body. On the day of her Christian baptism, though her second name (which was never revealed to the reader) satisfies church protocol, it is "... (Akwaeke) her first name (that) held more god than they could imagine." (9). It is this name that resonates, evokes, and invokes the stamp of gods and their ancient saints on the child as theirs. Her life, consequently, is marked for a continuing dialogue and invocation of the here and the hereafter thus making her an 'in betweener', a straddler of the gates between the living and those gone before, with one foot on each side of the eternal divide; neither flesh nor divinity yet fully both, all at once. Her name as identity became the frame for power contestation by forces human and supernatural as she struggles to come to terms and own the many

personalities within her on her journey to finding self.

Further, identity is a social construct that an individual is not born with but builds over time using cultural tools such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, and subcultures like profession and sexual preferences (Olsen). Identity can be contested when factors that disempower an individual's sense of being are imposed externally to constrain self-identity expressions and ensure conformity to the delimiting norm. Contesting identity, therefore, is the process of challenging negative aspects of identifiers that are projected onto people by the society in which they live and the norms and values that have been mainstreamed as acceptable. Creative narratives that deconstruct, satirize and subvert these received notions and cultural stereotypes and perspectives are to be seen as endeavors in identity contestation.

From this perspective, therefore, Emezi's debut novel, *Freshwater*, is a macabre, harsh and uncomfortable tale of contestation and containment grounded within Igbo cosmology and told mainly in the narrative voice of gods and spirit beings that inhabit an Ogbanje child and daughter of Ala, the Earth goddess in the Igbo pantheon. It is a dark tale of recognizing, coming to terms and accepting the many fragments of our being: the multiple

personalities and their disruptive tendencies, as well as the diverse disembodied spirits that inhabit the mind and cause individuals so inhabited to act in unconventional manners that invariably lead to discovering the self, the being/name/label an individual is called to be and answer.

On the one hand, *Freshwater* is not the story of the Ada in so far as the narrative voices are those of the spirit beings that reside in the human form of Ada the Ogbanje child born to die and return to continue the cyclic coming and going except her *Iyi-Uwa* (the covenant stone that binds her to her *Ndi Otu*, her "brothersisters" in the spirit realm) is severed. Contrary to established Ogbanje protocol, the Ada thrives and the spirit beings clinging to her vagina, womb, shoulder and mind are trapped. They in turn grow in propensity for mischief while longing for home, volatile and conflicted because they are unable to return while their host, the Ada, lives. Their jeopardy is complicated by an unwillingness and inability to kill her to channel themselves home since death of the human carrier is their only gate to pass back to the spirit world; paradoxically because suicide is an abomination to her patron goddess, Ala. These vagrant, volatile and malevolent spirits, thrust into an uncharted task without operational manual, can only be

expected to be disruptive and subversive of established norms, ethics and boundaries.

Yet, it is the story of Ada, the carrier of Igbo gods, goddesses and ancient spirits and saints in a contemporary dispensation. Hers is a tale of "disruption of identity, self-damaging impulsivity, emotional instability and mood swings, self-mutilating behavior and recurrent suicidal behavior." (152); all these being modern psychological terms that seek to explain and contain Ada's torturous reality in a world that has little tolerance for those who do not conform and be pigeon holed into neat boxes.

This disturbing embodiment and blurred identity marks *Freshwater* as a novel characterized by dizzying identity fluidity that is within grasp yet slithering away, defying conventional labels as the spirits turn and twist, each seeking its place in the sun. Is the Ada the sum total of the beings that inhabit her body or separate from them? If the spirits indwell, possess, control, manipulate and overwhelm their host, whose story is it then? Would it be fair to judge the human host by the hunger and appetite of her inner beings? These questions are queer theorist impulses that the novel seeks to engage the reader with in order to evoke sympathy for those the society has labelled odd balls and consigned to the margins and fringes of alternative lifestyle. Thus, Emezi's narrative

in *Freshwater* exhibits current feminist concerns with gender and identity construction.

Contestation and Containment as Narrative and Thematic Disruptions in *Freshwater*

The narrative structure of *Freshwater* is woven around very intricate levels of contestation that can only be resolved by containment of the contending impulses and remorseless power dynamics. The Oxford Dictionary defines contestation as the act of disputing or arguing in strife. As a social practice, it entails objection to specific issues that matter to people. This could take the form of insistent disagreement where people protest against conformity to existing social norms. Containment, on the other hand, is defined as the action of checking the expansion of a hostile power as strategy to limit and mitigate its influence. It aims to keep something perceived as harmful, under control or within limits. It therefore implies control and safety since it results from contestation and serves as salve to restore disrupted social values. *Freshwater* and Igbo cosmology recognize the Ogbanje as free range spirits used to the freedom of coming and going as they please and with one foot in between the two worlds, as alien and hostile manifestations in contest with accepted social behavior and which must

be contained. Severing the *Iyi-Uwa* and corpse mutilation are some of the containment measures devised by the afflicted family and community to checkmate the malevolent visitations.

Studies in Igbo cosmology and creative renditions in Nigerian Literature have recorded sizeable scholarship in the Ogbanje phenomenon. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe Chinua (62) describes the oddity as “...one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mother’s wombs to be born again” much to the grief of the parents who often resort to bodily mutilation of the dead child, on the advice of a medicine man, to discourage the cyclic recurrence. Soyinka and Clark both immortalized the wanderer child ever seeking its kindred spirits in Yoruba mythology in their poems of similar title, *Abiku*.

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And repeated time. (Soyinka)

Coming and going these several
seasons,
Do stay out on the baobab tree,
Follow where you please your
kindred spirits
If indoors is not enough for you.
(Clark)

Sociological observations attest to the intractable malice of the Ogbanje whenever the phenomena is acknowledged. Achebe Chinwe defined the Ogbanje as “a ‘personality disorder’ that describes someone who isn’t true to their god-given nature and talents, in spite of an excess of good attributes. Ogbanje can be extraordinarily handsome or beautiful, achieve meteoric success but die prematurely without making any lasting mark. They are believed to be part human and part spirit, their fates entwined with one of two spirits who intercepted them at birth and renegotiated their fate to include serving them in the world. In exchange for fame, wealth, or beauty but always a short life. Mbaegbu (79) noted that the Ogbanje are “...creatures of God with powers over mortals...They are not subject to the laws of justice and have no moral scruples, causing harm without justification.” Soliman and سليمان opined that the concept of Ogbanje is a metaphor for the relationship between the physical and the spirit world, the idea of predestination and the concept of reincarnation (149-171).”

The rendering of the Ogbanje epistemology in Sierra Leone casts the Ogbanje in the avenger mold. They are presented as carriers of social judgment and understood to be enforcers of punishment against wayward women whose deeds meet the collective disapproval of the

society. Such women include the adulterous as well as women who have terminated a pregnancy for whatever reason. The concept of Ogbanje in Sierra Leone therefore, embody the rules and values of society and punish women’s deviations against them hence the Ogbanje visitation and malevolence aim to serve as deterrence to other women. Hence the Ogbanje represents a breakdown of accepted social concepts that highlight tension between private virtue and public morality where the public appropriate behavior is hegemonic discourse. (Schneider)

The Nigerian epistemology of the Ogbanje contestation is framed within power dispute between remorseless gods and hapless humans who are arbitrarily violated by the spirit beings for inexplicable reasons. The common thread in the various Nigerian discourse on Ogbanje, therefore, is the presentation from the perspectives of the beleaguered families and communities.

Emezi’s narratology subverts this received structural protocol by first, creating scorned, hungry, ignored, bitter and playful gods that are fallible and whose carelessness left the gates open through which bored and spiteful spirits come in to harass humans. Secondly, by giving voice to the moody turbulence of the gods and ancient saints to tell their tale from mythical, insider vistas, Emezi introduces a

twist to the phrase “omniscient narrator”. The gods, being omniscient, become the bearers and explicators of their own tale and conveyors of the other world and otherness. Of the twenty two chapter book, the narrative voices of the spirit beings speak as We (Smoke and Shadow) in ten chapters and as Asughara in eight chapters while only four chapters are given to the human host, Ada. This departure from epistemological norm is the first level of non-conformity in Emezi’s narrative structure.

The second level of non-conformity in *Freshwater* is the thematic treatment of the Ogbanje phenomenon. The Ogbanje child who defies traditional expectation of infant mortality and lives, stays, thrives and crosses seas and oceans to reside in a foreign land without submitting to the containment protocol of disengagement from her *Iyi-Uwa* is an aberration. Used to unfettered coming and going and unbridled mischief that is the privilege of their spirit realm, to be born human with expectations to conform to bodily modulations is to be constrained and contained; an unacceptable act of distancing from the brothersisters. “To be singled out and locked into the blurred consciousness of a little mind? We refused. It would be madness.” (4). Being contained and constrained in human flesh becomes basis for contestation. With unhindered going and coming between worlds

spiritual and temporal with blurry demarcations, these embodied beings rage against being human with fleshy desires. They rage against their territorial displacement in a new country, away from ancient, familiar grooves and conventions. Their rage manifests in disruptive forms such as body molding, deconstructed bodies, shifting sexual preferences and identities, spirit possession, embodied powers and indeterminate identities/multiple personalities. These unusual contestations are macabre subjects for queer theorist inquiry in *Freshwater*.

Gods Ancient and Modern; and Healing/Returning

The use of the narrative voice of the gods helps to normalize articulated criticism of society, parents, elders and even venerated religious figures such as the Christ of contemporary Christianity. From the prism of gods who are often rendered as beings of higher status and above mere mortals, the narrative voice of the Ogbanje is accepted as that of the beings within. Achebe Chinua (61) hinted at this subversion of the interpersonal power nexus between an elder and a child as existed between Ekwefi and her Ogbanje child, Ezinma. “Ezinma did not call her mother *Nne* like all children. She called her by her name, Ekwefi, as her father and other grown-up people did. The relationship between them was

not only that of mother and child. There was something in it like the companionship of equals,...” Schneider notes:

By not only freely and publicly
stating their opinions
about their kin, but also judging
their actions, ogbanjes
break with the rules of conduct
normally expected of sons
and daughters. They embody the
direct opposite of the obedient
and silently revolting youth as they
openly point fingers and criticize
the actions of their kin that they
consider inappropriate.

Thus, the speaking voices of the nebulous Smoke and Shadow (We) and the vindictive and brash Asughara freely express their condemnation of the parenting skills and cultural blindness of Saul and Saachi, the human parents of the Ada. This serves to isolate her from her human family while making her totally dependent on her inner beings. It also introduces the platform for the disparaging and haranguing disrespect that Asughara shows to Yshwa, the Christ even if she grudgingly concedes him the right of a senior brothersister in the fellowship of Ogbanjes and born to die changelings.

Further, the narratology helps to highlight an interplay of different beliefs: Christianity, the

occult, as well as the spread of traditional worship of ancient gods of Africa over the oceans and seas while the concept of Ogbanje hints at memory, oral cultures and continuing conversations between West Africa and the Americas (Ogunyemi, 663). Hence the novel, *Freshwater* pulsates with contestations between spirit beings such as Yshwa, Ala, Asughara, Smoke, Shadow, Malena, Sango/Chango; all of whom are gods and goddesses in the African pantheon, ancient and modern. Each of these had in their various evolutions, also been in human form and therefore, like the Ogbanje, partly human, partly divinity and as such, fickle, limited, contrarian. Each has a different idea of appropriate treatment as containment needed for the treatment of the Ogbanje psychosis.

Healing is a form of restoration to accepted social, mental and physical normalcy within established framework. For the Ogbanje, healing from the never-ending torment and tug of war between two realms can only be in one of two ways: a severance of the covenant stone that binds the two worlds thus closing the gates to the brothersisters by stepping two feet into the human realm; or returning through physical death in the human field; *Iyi-Uwa* intact, becoming one with those gone before.

In the pull and push of contestation among gods and their human hosts, within the ancient spirits and against themselves, in the wrangling of private virtue against public morality, the journey to personhood against social expectations, and the dilemma over to stay or to return, several mechanisms are developed and adapted by the host towards treatment (temporary measure) and containment (permanent solution). These range from prayers offered by Saul, the Ada's father, to one ancient saint but answered by another, to suicide attempt initiated by a frustrated Asughara in a bid to answer the home going call of the brothersisters. They embrace the Ada's self-inflicted body mutilations to appease the bloodlust of the gods within. Furthermore, they include psychiatric therapy initiated by the Ada to better understand her illness and device coping mechanisms, gender reassignment undertaken to look androgynous to better accommodate the sexual appetites of her many personalities and surgical body modification to look more reptilian and physically resemble the totem python of her patron goddess, Ala as a form of embracing her name, Akwaeke. None of these processes is without its limitation; each a necessary step towards the ultimate decision by the Ogbanje to either stay or return; to define and embrace

her true identity as she comes to terms with her personhood.

By deploying her agency to solve an ancient problem in a contemporary dispensation, the process to healing/containment can be likened to the traditional severance of the *Iyi-Uwa* with the twist of self-determination. Usually buried beneath a tree in Igbo folklore, the Ada's is intricately woven into her vagina, womb, shoulder blades and mind. From these bodily entrapments, her covenant stone can only be extricated by surgical interventions, intellectual discourses and psychiatric sessions that reshape and broaden her cultural orientation while exorcising the hold of her brothersisters. It is also significant that, contrary to traditional practice where the severance rite is initiated by the elders in afflicted family, it is the Ada that activates the unorthodox steps to her healing. She is no longer a passive host upon which the gods attach themselves, indwell and possess her to degenerate acts of debauchery. Rather she has come into her own, an acolyte and returnee to the grooves that is her originating source:

But I had surrendered and the reward was
that I know myself.
I did not come from a human lineage and
I will not leave one behind.

I have no ancestors. There will be no mediators...Ogbanje are as liminal as possible – spirit and human, both and neither. I am here, real and not real,... I am the brothersister who remained. (248 -249).

Conclusion

As queer narrative, Emezi's *Freshwater* explodes heterosexual mystique of existentialist binary opposition of male and female in feminist sexual utopia. Domiciled in the mythical world of Ogbanje, our discourse has shown the novel is replete with contestations and power tussle that ultimately determine their host's gender profiling and sexual preferences. This creates a dizzying identity fluidity. Hence the loud, lewd, brash and abrasive female Asughara, the reticent male Saint Vincent whose preference for girls pushes his female host to an initial breast reduction with mastectomy in view thus transitioning as transgender, the slithering Shadow and Smoke of indeterminate gender and the Christ whom the Ada loves, worships and elevates to her moral compass but who never really comes through for her. *Freshwater* explores the power and the limits thereof of

these gods, goddesses and the inhabitants of the spirit realm, the conflicts and contradictions that come to play as the human host negotiates the turbulence within to embrace self: damaged, fragmented but accepted only by a homecoming to the peaceful waters from which she was spawn.

Finally, *Freshwater* is about containment, metaphorically deployed as gates. Gates ordinarily indicate that certain protocol and conventions have been met or are willing to be met to gain entrance. Usually, gate keepers shut the gate against the uninvited, rude gate crashers thereby signaling containment of valued guests who have been screened and have indicated their willingness to play safe and within the rules. The conflict that arises when a gate keeper mindlessly leaves a gate open to vagrants is the kernel that the Ada grapples with as she struggles to come to terms with those within who rage against conformity and strain against containment as they dart through the cyclic gate of coming and going. Thus, in *Freshwater*, Emezi uses gates to illustrate the uncharted, unconventional and non-conforming moments in queer literary narrative.

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- **Elizabeth Onyewuchi Ben-Iheanacho** is with the Research and Documentation Department, National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja – Nigeria and can be reached at: elizabeth.beniheanacho@gmail.com.