

Fragmentation & Igbo Cosmology

in Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater*

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Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* chronicles the crises of identity faced by Ada, as she is possessed by Igbo spirits, the *ogbanje*. After growing up in Nigeria, she leaves for America for university, wherein she further feels the rifts between Igbo and Western epistemologies. Emezi renders the manner in which the *ogbanje* possess her as biological, her very existence is an iteration of Igbo cosmologies and its deities. Though Ada initially equates the fragmented identities that reside within her as 'broken', as perpetuated by colonial frameworks, it is upon her return to Nigeria she discovers her own 'place in this world' (Emezi 219). Through an analysis of liminality, imagery, and narrative technique, I argue that embracing the fragmentation of the self offers a more complex, nuanced conception of wholeness, grounded in the 'twoness' and fluidity of Igbo ontological structures.

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Introduction

Akwaeke Emezi's 2018 novel *Freshwater* explores the multitudinous struggles of Ada, as she is possessed by the *ogbanje*, Igbo spirits that are said to 'repeatedly die and be repeatedly born by the same mother', birthed at the 'gates' (Ilechukwu 240). Drawing on the kinesis and fluidity of Igbo cosmology, the fragments of Ada's identity exist as distinct, but *interrelated* layers of wholeness. This cosmology is what Emeka George Ekwuru terms a "mythical rationality", a way of life based on man's spiritual needs', creating what Achebe documents as an 'arena for [the] interplay of forces', its art possessing a 'social and kinetic quality' in its reflection of human experience (34–5; Achebe qtd. in Eze 435). Ekwuru's 'twoness model of reality' emphasizes this impulse for kinesis: viewing the universe as 'twofold—each distinct but similar and *interdependent*: "visible" and "invisible"' (Ekwuru 43, italics original). The two-tier structure extends geographically into the Sky and the Earth; the Earth divided into the visible and the invisible, or more simply: the human and the spirit world. Victor Chikezie Uchendu similarly theorises existence for the Igbo as a 'dual but interrelated phenomenon involving the interaction between the material and the spiritual'; it is within this material reality Emezi postulates the presence of 'the gates' (11–12). The gates function as a site of 'liminality', a term Victor Turner explicates as the second, transitional stage within a *rites de passage*, 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age' (Turner 94). While Turner's model predicts a return to a 'relatively stable state', the *ogbanje*, in their cyclical lives, exist permanently 'betwixt and between' the human and spirit world, an inherently 'liminal' entity represented as 'unstable', their behaviour idiosyncratic and precarious (Turner 99).

Having the *ogbanje*'s *iyi-uwa*, a compound object binding them to the physical world, interweaved within the confines of Ada's body, the *ogbanje* describe the spiritual threshold through which they entered her world as 'the gates'. These gates are not only symbolic, but an intrinsic element of birth, their knowledge 'can all be traced back to the gates' (Emezi 33). Thus,

Ada's identity is constructed on the spiritual but decidedly tangible pillars of Igbo ontologies, in turn legitimizing the twoness model of reality as encapsulating the 'totality of "being"' (Mbiti qtd. in Ekwuru 50). This ontology must contend with the fact that modernity, and colonialism have manufactured a 'conventional "philosophy of history"...[that] is still normatively Eurocentric', wherein African history is 'subsumed to the ideological parameters and periodization of the general [colonialist] framework' (Bhambra qtd. in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 1). As the Global South faces the consequences of epistemicide and cultural imperialism, epistemic justice entails the 'liberation of reason from coloniality', to recognize African indigenous knowledge as a valid and legitimate way of being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 3). Ada's traumatic life experiences, recounted in Nigeria and America, prompt a mind-numbing crisis of identity. Emezi's distinctive voice urges readers to critically perceive dominant, Western ideologies by displacing these epistemes in favour of Igbo ontologies through Ada's fragmented lens. Emezi's use of diction patterns, constantly evolving imagery and narrative technique cumulatively reconceptualises fragmentation from rupture into a multitudinous, layered selfhood grounded in Igbo cosmology, despite the efforts of colonial modernity to rewrite non-Western epistemologies.

Liminality and the Gates

From the conception of the *ogbanje*, Emezi immerses the reader into an Igbo cosmology accentuated through Ada's consciousness, using continuously evolving imagery to expand the boundaries of body, spirit and identity. As 'the invisible world presses hard upon the visible', the Igbo 'see that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world' (Mbiti qtd. in Ekwuru 50). This interrelation is grounded in the material: chalk, kola and clay are used for making art that channelled 'a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form' (Achebe qtd. in Eze 436). Igbo art in its contemporary usage seeks to elucidate that 'no condition is permanent', these materials effectively capture the liminality of Igbo ancestral markers (Achebe qtd. in


Eze 436; Frederick).

The gates are a site of birth and liminality, acting as a transitional space between the earthly and the spiritual. Emezi personifies these gates as ‘carved monstrosities’, composed of clay and chalk to echo Igbo ancestral markers—signalling their role as portals between the ‘familiar and unfamiliar, sanctuary and outer world’ (Neaheer 49). Throughout the novel, Ada associates the sensory imagery of chalk and kola with her perception of the *ogbanje*. The gates through which they entered her body stank of ‘sour chalk’ — the combination of the tactile with the olfactory is telling: chalk, as the material of the gates at the point of transition between the human and spirit worlds, inherently links tactile imagery with liminality. Still, their ‘sour’ stink carries, or rather imposes, the *ogbanje* into her selfhood, incorporating these liminal entities into her being, an inherent fragmentation (Emezi 19, 43). To Ada, the *ogbanje* initially felt ‘bitter like kola’, their imposition marked by Emezi’s synaesthesia to distance Ada’s identity from the ‘Igbo-ness’ of kola, but when struck with grief, that distance is collapsed and Ada grieves as *one* with the *ogbanje*, turning ‘cold as chalk’, embracing the ancestral markers she initially rejected (Emezi 36). Teresa de Lauretis conceives the *ogbanje*’s narration to construct a self that is ‘not only multiple, but also “shifting, and often self-contradictory”’; while they were a ‘distinct we instead of being fully and just her’, it is in this distinctive embodiment through ancestral markers the conception of selfhood expands to incorporate the fragments of a cosmological, idiosyncratic spirit (qtd. in Sharma 266; Emezi 5). While Sharma argues that fragmentation implies a ‘perspective of lack’, the *ogbanje* are separated from their brothersisters in the spirit world, Ada is separated from her human mother, they *are* alienated in America, while facing epistemicide and cultural dissonance—there is a lack, there is a fragmentation (274). And it is these fragments that constitute the ‘wholeness’ of her identity, the boundaries of which are expanded by ancestral materials of liminality.

In Emezi’s resistance to aestheticise the *ogbanje*,

they capture ‘the Igbo world in all its aspects—material, spiritual, and sociocultural’ through a depiction of the visceral and biological as messengers of the abstract or spiritual (Uchendu 11). Emezi anchors spiritual fluidity in the biology of the human body. In conceiving the layers of the *ogbanje* via tangible, bodily and earthly imagery, Emezi delineates Ala, the Earth goddess, ‘a physical entity and a deity’; Ala is the scene where humans and gods interact (Ekwuru 65). The *ogbanje* trace their ‘madnesses’ back to the gates. The simile of ‘a slack mouth’ mirrors how they were ‘yawned’ into existence, establishing a link between biological processes and the gates (Emezi 33). The tricolon intensifies the effect of the diction pattern, now evolving, as ‘a pushing out, an expansion, an inhalation’, the body’s reproductive and respiratory system insinuated (Emezi 33). The pathway of the gates, the channel, is soon imagined as an ejaculation ‘into an unexpected limbo’, furthering reproductive connotations (Emezi 34). Emezi envisions the gates as a universally ‘special point of transition’ (Neaheer 49). The gates are gaining layers of spiritual value, in tune with human physicality, while the carved doors and chalk act as vessels, mediating the two realms. The image of ‘freshwater’ evolves later in the novel, initially representing the ‘channel’, or ‘river’, a liminal bridge; the recurring motif is embedded in the idea of the gates (Emezi 33–35).

However, this embodied connection transitions from the vitality of birth, into an open wound. Emezi describes the gates as ‘open sores’; the tactile simile visualises skin breaking apart, overflowing with pus—an unwanted fluid—leading to blood clotting, a recurring motif of Ada’s pain. Still, their knowledge is seen as contaminating—it has an olfactory ‘stink’ when ‘leaked mindlessly’, aligning with the metaphor of the sores, an ‘infected widening’ of space, manifesting as ‘rooms where there should be none’ (Emezi 33, 35). This transition is significant, it marks the spiritual contagion of the *ogbanje*, as they grow possessive of her body. They claim cruelty as their ‘birthright’, when Ada needs them, they ‘spring into sentience’—the sibilance evoking the sound of a hissing snake—they ‘drag’ themselves



'upright'—connotatively conjuring an eerie sense of the undead, and their 'grips into the sides of her mind', underscoring a possessiveness through violent personification (Emezi 37). Because Igbo time is cyclical, as 'it relates to the content of experience rather than to an absolute duration': the fluidity of experience renders the *ogbanje* as constant participants of Ada's reality, rather than being a 'ghost' of the past (Nwoga qtd. in Ekwuru 51). As the *ogbanje*'s 'grips' grow strong, Emezi articulates Ada's loss of autonomy through free indirect discourse, a style wherein Ada's first-person voice emerges within the *ogbanje*'s third person narrative. When Ada's voice is focalised, her innocent, evocative tone seeks to stir friction between the two ontologies. The narrative style signals their possessiveness over Ada, her vulnerability reflected in the repetition of phrases as she calls to Yshwa, her human mother Saachi and a part of herself she has lost to 'come back, come back'. The *ogbanje* become an omnipresent, parasitic figure 'in the marble room of her mind' (Emezi 36, 41). Their knowledge is also a net—tangible but full of gaps, constantly shifting, and misleading Ada. Through the 'agentic power of self-naming', Emezi's discourse on fluidity, cyclic temporality, and the Igbo cosmology urge the readers to conceive the fragmented layers of Ada's narrative (Magaqa 24).

The Contact Zone

By overwriting the Western narrative, and engaging in the 'contact zone' where cultures 'grapple with each other', Emezi engages in transculturation—the process by which marginal groups 'select and invent from...a dominant culture' (Pratt 34–6). Christianity, as a tool for colonialism in Africa, resulted in the creation of 'cultural standards that sought to erase not only the religious and spiritual beliefs...but their cultures' (Masombuka 38–9). Ada's father, Saul, follows the doctrines of colonial consequence and rejects the validity of Igbo cosmology as 'mumbo jumbo' (Emezi 13). His murder of the snake—a physical embodiment of Ala, the Earth goddess—functions as an allegory for how 'Western modernity attempted to destroy African spirituality by diminishing it' (Nwachukwu 98).

While Saul seeks to exclude the validity of Igbo cosmology from his lived experiences, Ada seeks to include Christianity into Igbo cosmology, longing for the order and symbol of morality and redemption that Yshwa provides, 'in contrast to the chaos that the *ogbanje* cause' (Masombuka 39). The *ogbanje* are sceptical of this 'Father lord', but by renaming Christ as Yshwa and adopting him as another brothersister, Emezi creates a universal mesh of spiritual connections through transculturation; stripping his name of that colonial 'standard'. Yshwa exists as a spectator, occasionally providing her comfort, in the 'marble room of her mind' (Emezi 41). But because Yshwa recognises 'the curve of her faith', her body acts as a universal vessel of emotion (Emezi 37). Ada's curve echoes Emezi's words emphasising a cyclic Igbo temporality: 'Curve in on yourself. [...] You will form the inevitable circle, the beginning that is the end' (224). In Akan philosophy, *sankofa* is a 'holistic recovery of one's personal history', to reach back to remember what was once forgotten and Ada's *sankofa* is in this curve, in reflection of individual and colonial histories through religious transculturation (Nwachukwu 105). Thus, Emezi observes colonial epistemicide and reforms one of its mechanisms—religion—to create an identity that is uniquely, and in its totality Ada, composed of a colonial fragment that is remembered, instead of forgotten.

The consequences of coloniality are intentionally and inescapably present, shaping Ada and her surroundings, exemplified by narrative voice, focalisation and imagery. Emezi subverts the colonial impulse for epistemic uniformity by capturing the lived experience of Ada. Ada's internal turmoil distanced her from the world of Western scientific approaches, as they were 'solidifying into something lost and bereft' (Emezi 37). Kwasi Wiredu importantly warns against the comparison of traditional, or spiritistic thought with Western scientific thought, as one effectively compares contemporary individualistic philosophising with relatively static indigenous ancestral knowledge, and since 'folk conceptions tend not to develop with time', it implies Igbo cosmology and Western scientific thought are temporally

and metaphysically disparate (qtd. in Eze 197). Wiredu's observation that folk conceptions are relatively static, Emezi presents the *ogbanje* as reactive, and adaptive, entering a 'contact zone' within the therapy office. Therapy does not work for Ada, *for a reason*—each intentional interrogation toward Asughara led to Ada experiencing 'a thousand spikes of pain'—while the comparison is warned against, it remains to be Ada's lived experience (Emezi 148). Emezi suggests an acceptance and embracing of their plurality toward the end of the novel, 'it is a powerful thing to be seen' (213). Malena, her friend from school, *Lęshi*, a Nigerian priest, and an Igbo historian ultimately guide Ada to her 'place on this earth' by seeing and accepting her Igbo identity as 'a village of faces...spirit and human, both and neither' (Emezi 226). Hence, Emezi resists a binary, static perception of Igbo cosmology and interprets healing through a genuine acceptance of the inherent fragmentation and disruption of the *ogbanje* in constituting a plural selfhood.

The Totality of Being the Child of Ala

With Ada's identity in a state of flux, fragments forming and falling apart, her homecoming to Nigeria after studying in America marks her transformation as the child of Ala; the geographical border-crossing acts as a site of 'socio-cultural unlearning and resistance' and as a 'liminal space of deconstruction' (Di Pietro 108). Chinwe Achebe describes that 'man journeys from the spirit land to the land of the living' through a river, and this is the river through which the *ogbanje* 'leak mindlessly' into Ada's life (11; Emezi 33). Water is cosmologically charged for the Igbo, 'Rivers and streams are endued with spiritual potency, and the Igbo believe that "people live in the water"' (Kalu qtd. in Nwachukwu 189). After Ada crosses the geographical boundary and stays there 'too long', the brothersisters reprimand, 'you crossed an ocean and you went far away and you didn't listen to us' (Emezi 134). Being far away from the 'red mud we came from', constitutes the conventional migrant trope, but the explicit anger, and the interrogation from the brothersisters indicates a deeper, metaphysical rebellion, 'the gates were all wrong', 'somebody broke them', because they

could not return to the brothersisters, they could not die—the migration more significantly affected the spiritual world, rather than only being geographical (Emezi 46, 133). Since the gates that mediated that liminal space between the two realms were broken, Ada creates for herself a *new* 'liminal space of deconstruction', one wherein the *ogbanje* are materially integrated into her being: when once the world inside her mind 'has been far more real than the one outside', Ada finds herself turning to the tangible earth, the scene that is *Ala*. The interplay of water and earth imagery underlines this rebirth: freshwater and rivers link Ada to the spiritual realm, but as she looks to the barren future, 'the rest is a road that spreads into the unknown' (Emezi 35). *Ala*, both the goddess of the earth and the source of all freshwater, binds these forces, grounding Ada in the material world, and nourishing her with the fluid of life. This duality is reflected in Emezi's diction, where humans are 'turgid with potential', likened to cells absorbing the fresh force of life from the river (Emezi 34). The *ogbanje* that first 'floated smoothly' and then 'like a paste of palm oil, red and thick', slowing down the river, and staining its water with 'that bright mother colour', the water that carried them transforms into a viscous oil, their movement slowed, undergoing a transition only determined by Ada (Emezi 35). The simile to oil juxtaposes the more persistent water imagery throughout, accentuating their disruption, marking a shift in Ada's identity too. The voices that hold her back, like Saul's call to the gods in 'the grain of his baritone' expands the water imagery to insinuate sand in the water's way through his 'grain', anger the *ogbanje* and resist Ada's eventual reclamation of her plurality; but in this marginal space of friction and viscosity there is 'radical possibility' (hooks qtd. in Di Pietro 112). Ada's turn to earthly imagery maps this transition from Saachi to Ala, from her human birth to her spiritual birth—as she feels the 'flame of the forest blossoms' and sees 'a portal at the top of the plumeria tree' (Emezi 38). The gates, now a portal rooted in the earth, are no longer a spiritual possession as Ada steers away from retreating into 'all the madresses' to her final resolution (Emezi 33). Ada, the *ogbanje*, and Ala, draw closer to each other,



through her belief, fragments coexisting throughout, as she completely and totally accepts the Igbo cosmologies that define her existence, her identity as the creator of liminality, as the child of Ala who declares: 'all freshwater comes out of my mouth' (Emezi 226).'

Conclusion

'Where one thing stands, another stands by it' (Achebe 10). Achebe's Igbo proverb finds profound resonance in *Freshwater*, as Emezi's powerful use of fragmented diction patterns, evolving imagery and narrative technique challenges Western epistemologies, immersing readers in an Igbo cosmology, confronting dominant conceptions of identity, trauma, and spirituality. By navigating the impact of colonialism on Ada's consciousness and the interplay between the physical and spiritual realms, Emezi creates a world-making narrative that insists on fragments coexisting as layers of wholeness, 'actively deconstructing the systemic reality of contemporary society' (Di Pietro 111). The cumulative impact of its themes and the power of Emezi's voice create ripples of cultural resonance, inviting readers to question dominant narratives and explore their multifaceted channels of identity, to find their source of freshwater.

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