BETWEEN SPIRIT WORLDS AND PSYCHIATRY: ONTOLOGIES OF DISTRESS IN AKWAEKE EMEZI'S *FRESHWATER*

Oladipupo, Olakiitan Abolanle & Adam, Ezinwanyi E.
Department of English, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria
oladipupo0147@pg.babcock.edu.ng; adam@babcock.edu.ng

Abstract
Mental health has become increasingly visible in contemporary African writing, but critical debates still tend to split interpretive labour between biomedical and spiritual paradigms, as though narratives of distress must finally be settled within a single explanatory register. Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) refuses that settlement. The novel narrates Ada's life through a shifting chorus of human and spirit voices, tracing childhood in southeastern Nigeria, migration to the United States, gendered and queer embodiment, trauma, and encounters with both religious and psychiatric institutions. This article addresses a gap in existing scholarship by analysing how the novel represents mental distress as an outcome of negotiated identity meanings rather than as an experience that can be reduced to either diagnosis or possession. Using identity theory as the primary theoretical lens, supplemented by work on ogbanje/abiku cosmology and stigma, the study employs qualitative close reading of key episodes including early family and church contexts, diasporic transitions, intimate violence, moments of non-graphic self-injury, and clinical encounters (Burke; Stets and Burke; Goffman). The analysis demonstrates significant relationships between polyphonic narration and identity salience, between chronic failures of identity verification and escalating distress, and between spiritual multiplicity and ambivalent coping strategies that can be both protective and risky. The article argues that *Freshwater* reconceptualises mental health as emerging at the intersection of social, spiritual, gendered, and diasporic identities, thereby stretching identity theory beyond its secular assumptions (Magaqa and Makombe; Talabi). It contributes a culturally grounded model for reading African mental health narratives that neither romanticises spirituality nor reduces experience to diagnosis, aligning with medical humanities and African literary scholarship that seeks theoretically rigorous and ethically sensitive analyses of cultural representations of distress (Gureje and Lasebikan; Patel).

Keywords: mental health; identity theory; African literature; non-binary subjectivity; medical humanities

1. Introduction

African literatures have long staged the mind as a contested terrain. Earlier criticism often showed how psychological breakdown could function as an allegory for colonial injury or postcolonial disillusionment, so that "madness" became a way of speaking the unspeakable in political life (Gikandi; Esonwanne). Yet a growing body of contemporary writing refuses to keep distress at the level of metaphor. Instead, it presents depression, trauma, altered perception, and psychic fragmentation as lived realities shaped by everyday relations, institutional power, and the pressures of gender, migration, and social stigma (Brown and Garvey). This shift does not cancel the political dimensions of African writing. Rather, it relocates politics into the intimate and embodied: into the ways distress is named, explained, treated, or morally condemned, and into the ways subjects are recognised or misrecognised within their communities.

That challenge is intensified in many African contexts where distress is routinely interpreted through overlapping epistemologies. Biomedical psychiatry, Pentecostal demonology, indigenous cosmologies, and

vernacular moral languages can coexist within the same community, sometimes within the same household. The result is not merely "culture clash" but a plural field in which the meaning of symptoms, the legitimacy of spiritual explanation, and the acceptability of clinical care are negotiated in everyday life (Patel). In such contexts, the question of mental health becomes inseparable from the question of interpretive authority: who gets to name what is happening, which frameworks are treated as credible, and which are treated as superstition, pathology, or sin.

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* is crucial to these conversations because it refuses the premise that a mind must be singular in order to be legible. The novel follows Ada from childhood in southeastern Nigeria to student life in the United States, tracing experiences of intense affect, relational breakdown, and institutional contact. Yet its narrative centre is not a stable autobiographical "I." Instead, the story is told largely by a chorus of spirit entities who claim to inhabit the "marble" of Ada's mind. These voices frame Ada as an ogbanje being, located between human and spirit worlds, and they narrate the body as a "house" shared, defended, and contested. The novel's form thus makes multiplicity not an anomaly but a condition of being, and it forces readers to consider how mental distress looks when the self is not presumed to be unified.

This article argues that the novel's central intervention is best understood through the problem of recognition. Ada's distress is repeatedly shaped by misrecognition, stigma, and conflicting demands for identity coherence across family, church, intimate relationships, and clinical institutions. The article uses identity theory to trace how identities are invoked, challenged, and verified or disconfirmed across these contexts. Identity theory is particularly useful because it conceptualises identities as sets of self-meanings tied to roles and memberships, and it emphasises the process of identity verification through social interaction (Burke; Stets and Burke). By reading *Freshwater* through this lens, while also taking seriously the ogbanje cosmology and the dynamics of stigma, the article offers a framework for understanding how the novel holds together spiritual and clinical registers without collapsing into either.

2. Statement of the Problem

The complexity of *Freshwater* has generated divergent critical responses. Some readings foreground the novel's queering of gender and embodiment, situating it within African queer futurities and debates about decolonising sexuality (Talabi; Magaqa and Makombe). Others emphasise its grounding in Igbo cosmology and treat the ogbanje motif as an indigenous lens through which to understand experiences that could be medicalised as "mental illness" within Western psychiatry (Ilechukwu; Uche). Further work examines the novel's generic hybridity, especially its disruptions of realist conventions and its refusals of tidy categorisation (Fourqurean). These strands of scholarship establish *Freshwater* as a text that is at once literary, cosmological, and politically disruptive.

While these approaches have advanced scholarship, they can also reproduce an unhelpful binary: either Ada's experience is clinically legible, or it is spiritually authentic. Both tendencies risk simplifying the novel's sustained interest in overlap, contradiction, and negotiation. *Freshwater* does not merely juxtapose "African spirituality" and "Western psychiatry." It stages a dense ecology of meaning-making in which family respectability, church teachings, gender norms, diaspora pressures, racialisation, and clinical scripts collide and reshape one another. What remains under-theorised is how the novel represents identity itself

as the site of this collision: the place where multiple interpretive systems press on the self, and where distress emerges when no single system can secure coherent recognition.

A second gap concerns method and theory. Identity theory has rarely been applied to African literary texts that foreground more-than-human identities, and its core assumption of a relatively unified human subject can seem ill-suited to a novel that insists multiplicity is present from conception. Yet this awkwardness is also productive. Precisely because identity theory has been built around verification within human social interaction, *Freshwater* can be used to test what happens when identity standards include spiritual selves and when recognition must operate across ontological registers. The need, then, is not to abandon identity theory but to stretch it in conversation with African cosmology and queer embodiment, producing a framework adequate to the novel's formal and conceptual complexity.

3. Research Questions and Objectives

This paper is guided by three interrelated questions. First, how does *Freshwater* represent mental distress in ways that both draw on and resist available identity categories in Nigeria and the diaspora? Second, how does the novel's polyphonic narration render visible the negotiation of self-meanings across social roles, spiritual ontologies, gender expectations, and transnational movement? Third, how do stigma, misrecognition, and conflicting interpretive frameworks shape Ada's well-being and the responses of others to their experiences (Goffman)?

The main objective is to demonstrate that identity theory, when expanded to include spiritual and more-than-human identities, offers a productive lens for understanding the novel's critique of binary thinking about sanity, gender, and selfhood (Burke; Stets and Burke). More broadly, the study aims to show how *Freshwater* contributes to African literary engagements with mental health by modelling a narrative ethics that respects the opacity and complexity of lived experience rather than forcing it into pre-given categories. By bringing identity theory into conversation with ogbanje cosmology, queer African studies, and stigma research, the article contributes both to Emezi scholarship and to methodological debates on how to read narratives of distress in African and diasporic contexts (Patel; Gureje and Lasebikan).

4. Literature Review

Studies of psychological disturbance in African literature have long emphasised that "mad" characters are rarely reducible to biomedical figures. They often function as critical or prophetic voices, exposing social contradictions and hidden histories, while also carrying ontological weight rooted in African cosmologies (Gikandi; Esonwanne). Fasasi's discussion of "sanity in insanity," for example, stresses that characters labelled mad can articulate truths that dominant social orders cannot accommodate, thereby complicating the assumption that madness is simply a deficit (Fasasi). This tradition highlights a key insight for reading African mental health narratives: the meaning of distress is never purely internal, because it is always shaped by social interpretation and by the power to name. *Freshwater* inherits and intensifies these traditions but shifts the formal ground. Rather than narrating breakdown from an external perspective, the novel grants primary narrative authority to voices that claim spiritual agency. It thereby displaces the normative human centre that much realism presumes. This displacement does not deny the reality of suffering. Instead, it insists that the language used to name suffering is itself a site of power. The novel's insistence on multiple interpretive registers thus becomes a formal critique of interpretive monopolies, whether clinical or spiritual.

The ogbanje (and the Yoruba abiku) has received sustained attention as a spiritual framework for understanding liminality, repeated childhood death, and forms of difference that cannot be easily placed within ordinary categories. Ilechukwu's study of ogbanje/abiku and cultural conceptualisations of psychopathology demonstrates how cosmology shapes both community responses and adaptive practices, producing complex patterns of care, blame, indulgence, and hostility (Ilechukwu). Uche and Asakitikpi similarly show that ogbanje beliefs can structure perceptions of illness and health-seeking behaviour, revealing that cosmology does not merely "explain" distress but actively shapes how communities respond and how stigma is distributed (Uche; Asakitikpi). In literary criticism, ogbanje and abiku figures have frequently been used to trouble stable boundaries between life and death, human and spirit. Recent work on *Freshwater* emphasises that the novel does not treat ogbanje as mere folkloric ornament. Instead, it mobilises ogbanje ontology as an epistemic challenge to Western genre categories and to the assumption that "realism" must exclude spirit worlds (Fourqurean). This line of argument is useful for the present study because it reframes spiritual multiplicity as a claim about reality, not merely an aesthetic device, while still leaving open the question of how that claim is negotiated within social institutions and care systems.

Freshwater has also been positioned as a significant text in African queer studies. Magaqa and Makombe argue that the ogbanje concept, as deployed in the novel, complicates colonial and heteronormative binaries by holding together a genderless spiritual plane and a gendered embodied plane. In this reading, queer identity is not imported into Africa through Western templates but is articulated through indigenous cosmological resources (Magaqa and Makombe). Talabi similarly reads the novel's polyphonic voice-work as a formal enactment of queer futurity, emphasising that the novel imagines African queer being through multiplicity rather than through liberal narratives of individual self-clarity (Talabi). Yet queer studies also remind us that such pluralities are not experienced in a neutral world. Tamale's work on the politics of nonconforming sexualities in Africa documents how stigma, moral regulation, and institutional violence can intensify psychological distress for gender-nonconforming people (Tamale). *Freshwater* dramatises these pressures by showing how Ada's embodiment and desire are repeatedly read through religious and respectability frameworks that frame difference as sin, threat, or disorder. The novel therefore positions mental distress not as an outcome of queerness itself, but as an outcome of social environments that refuse recognition.

Identity theory, associated with Burke and colleagues, conceptualises identities as internalised sets of meanings tied to roles (such as student or daughter), group memberships (such as Nigerian or Christian), and personal attributes. These identities guide behaviour and generate expectations about how one should act. Psychological stability depends partly on identity verification: the process by which others' responses confirm one's identity meanings. Persistent non-verification can produce distress, anger, withdrawal, or attempts to change either the self or the social situation (Burke; Stets and Burke). While the theory has been widely used in social psychology and sociology, it has rarely been applied to African literary texts that foreground spiritual identities and non-binary subjectivities.

Although identity theory has informed empirical studies of role conflict and social stress, it has rarely been deployed to read African literary texts that foreground spiritual and non-binary identities. Conversely, public health research on mental health in Africa has documented significant treatment gaps and barriers to care, including stigma, limited services, and the mismatch between formal care systems and local

explanatory models (Gureje and Lasebikan; Patel). Recent efforts to integrate mental health into primary care, such as mhGAP initiatives, underline the contemporary relevance of narratives that explore how distress is interpreted and where people seek help (Patel). Goffman's concept of stigma and spoiled identity also provides a useful bridge here, clarifying how labels such as "mad," "possessed," or "sinful" do not merely describe, but actively discredit and constrain social life (Goffman). *Freshwater* is particularly suited to a framework that combines identity processes and stigma dynamics because it is a novel in which the central struggle is not only internal but also social and interpretive.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in close reading of *Freshwater* and engagement with relevant secondary scholarship. A qualitative interpretive approach is appropriate because the study examines narrative form, symbolic structures, and meaning-making processes rather than measurable behavioural outcomes. Close reading is used as a systematic method: the analysis attends to narrative voice, focalisation, metaphor, lexical choices for mental states, and patterns of interaction between Ada and significant others, including parents, pastors, lovers, friends, and clinicians. The goal is to trace how identity meanings are asserted, contested, and reconfigured across different contexts, and how those processes relate to distress, coping, and recognition. Episodes selected for analysis include Ada's early childhood and family environment in Nigeria; religious and familial interpretations of difference; the transition to American university life; the emergence of dominant spirit voices following traumatic experiences; encounters with psychiatric care; and moments of self-injury described only in broad, non-graphic terms. These scenes are read in relation to identity theory concepts of role identity, identity salience, identity verification, and identity conflict.

The framework is supplemented by stigma theory (Goffman) and by scholarship on ogbanje/abiku cosmology and African queer subjectivities (Ilechukwu; Magaqa and Makombe; Talabi). The reading strategy is iterative. Identity theory guides attention to patterns of verification and misrecognition, but the novel's formal choices are also used to test and stretch theoretical assumptions, especially the secular and singular subject that often underwrites identity theory (Stets and Burke). The analysis does not treat the novel as a clinical case study. Instead, it treats literary form as a theoretical resource: a way of thinking about how distress is lived and interpreted when identity is multiple and when explanatory frameworks compete.

6. Synopsis of *Freshwater*

Freshwater opens with a collective first-person plural voice, "we," belonging to a cluster of ogbanje spirits who narrate the circumstances of Ada's conception and childhood in Nigeria. The spirits frame themselves as divine presences inhabiting the "marble" of Ada's mind, and they claim that their entry is enabled by intense prayer and covenant. As Ada grows, the narrative portrays unusual sensitivity, intense mood shifts, and episodes of altered perception through the spirits' commentary on the body they share and the world that responds to it.

After Ada moves to the United States for university, pressures of independence, racialisation, cultural dislocation, and romantic vulnerability intensify the struggle among the selves. Traumatic experiences and emotionally destructive relationships precipitate the emergence of Asụghara, a fierce feminine-coded spirit, as a dominant identity. Asụghara drives the body toward behaviours framed as strategies of power and

survival, often interpreting intimacy through vocabularies of control and consumption. Another spirit, Saint Vincent, appears as a more orderly, masculine-coded presence. The narrative alternates among these voices, refusing a single stable vantage point and repeatedly exposing the limits of the categories that others use to make sense of Ada.

Ada's experiences are interpreted differently across contexts. Family members and pastors in Nigeria draw on Christian demonology and residual knowledge of indigenous cosmology. Clinicians and peers in the United States mobilise psychiatric categories and therapeutic scripts. The novel does not conclude with a cure or a total integration. Instead, it ends with a fragile negotiation among the selves, suggesting a partial acceptance of multiplicity as Ada's mode of being.

7. Theoretical Framework

Identity theory provides the primary analytical lens. Identities are understood as self-meanings associated with social roles, group memberships, and personal attributes, and as standards against which experiences and actions are evaluated. In identity theory, stability depends on identity verification: when others respond in ways that match one's identity standards, verification occurs and distress is reduced; when responses repeatedly disconfirm one's self-meanings, non-verification produces distress and attempts at restoration (Burke; Stets and Burke).

To use identity theory for *Freshwater*, two adjustments are necessary. First, identity must be broadened beyond social roles to include spiritual self-meanings that the text treats as ontologically significant. Ada's identities therefore include daughter, student, lover, and patient, but also ogbanje and child of Ala, alongside the identities claimed by the spirits themselves as gods, guardians, or predators. Second, verification must be treated as a struggle over the legitimacy of interpretive frameworks. In *Freshwater*, verification is not only interpersonal but also epistemic: it depends on which ontologies of mind and spirit are recognised as credible.

The framework is supplemented by Goffman's concept of stigma and spoiled identity, especially in relation to mental illness and gender nonconformity (Goffman). In many of Ada's social worlds, labels such as "mad," "possessed," "broken," or "sinful" threaten to spoil their identity as a respectable child, a serious student, or a legitimate subject of care. These labels intersect with scripts about queerness, spiritual warfare, and respectability politics, intensifying the pressure toward concealment and self-discipline. Bringing identity theory and stigma theory together helps explain why Ada's distress is not simply the outcome of traumatic events, but also the outcome of chronic misrecognition and interpretive reduction.

8. Analysis and Results

One of the most striking features of *Freshwater* is its polyphonic narration. Early chapters are narrated predominantly by the ogbanje chorus, establishing spiritual identity as a primary vantage point. This formal decision structurally makes spiritual selves salient. Ada does not "develop" multiplicity as an outcome of a later crisis; rather, the novel insists that the interior has always been crowded. Western clinical categories appear later as interpretive frames introduced through encounters with American institutions, not as the original truth of the self.

As the narrative progresses, shifts in voice signal shifts in identity salience. In scenes of routine social life, such as attending classes or navigating friendships, the human-coded voice becomes more audible, suggesting efforts to inhabit normative student and peer identities. Under conditions of threat, shame, or vulnerability, however, Asụghara's voice often dominates, reflecting moments when a protective, aggressive spiritual identity becomes central. This pattern resonates with identity theory's claim that salient identities are enacted more readily in situations where they appear most relevant (Burke). Under perceived danger, Ada's internal system foregrounds a self that prioritises power and survival, even at high cost. The polyphony also makes conflict within the self, audible. Voices disagree about what the body needs, what constitutes safety, and what counts as loyalty. The novel's narrative technique therefore becomes an aesthetic analogue of identity hierarchies and identity conflict. By letting different voices narrate different phases, the text shows how selves emerge, recede, and clash in response to changing circumstances, without presenting any single voice as the definitive truth.

Across Nigerian and American settings, Ada experiences persistent misrecognition. In Nigeria, family members oscillate between viewing Ada as sensitive or gifted and viewing them as under moral or spiritual threat. Christian frameworks of spiritual warfare can displace indigenous cosmology, producing a situation in which the ogbanje identity has no socially legitimate place. When unusual experiences or behaviours surface, they are read as sin, demonic influence, or moral weakness rather than as expressions of a complex identity. In identity-theory terms, Ada's internal identity standards cannot be verified because the available social categories cannot hold them.

In the United States, Ada attempts to occupy the role of "normal" international student and, later, partner and friend. Yet peers and partners respond to volatility, withdrawal, or unconventional behaviour with confusion, rejection, or pathologising concern. Clinical encounters may offer support while also translating spiritual language into symptom vocabulary, reducing multiplicity to disorder and cultural difference. These responses repeatedly fail to verify Ada's self-sense as spiritually plural and gender nonconforming. Identity theory predicts that chronic non-verification produces distress, and *Freshwater* portrays that distress as cumulative exhaustion, shame, and a felt impossibility of being fully recognised (Burke; Stets and Burke). Stigma sharpens this process. In Nigerian settings, labels of possession or madness can carry intense moral stigma, particularly within Pentecostal-influenced Christianity where distress may be framed as spiritual failure. In American settings, biomedical labels can discredit by turning the person into a diagnosis, especially where care systems reduce complex histories into administrative categories. Ada's identities as non-binary, spiritually connected, and traumatised are rarely acknowledged together. Instead, audiences recognise fragments, producing layered spoiled identities in Goffman's sense (Goffman). The novel suggests that distress is intensified not only by what happens to Ada, but by the repeated experience of being reduced.

The novel portrays spiritual multiplicity as a complex coping mechanism rather than as a simple symptom. In the aftermath of violence and betrayal, Asụghara becomes dominant and frames numbing, detachment, and high-risk intimacy as strategies of agency. The logic is recognisable: if vulnerability invites harm, then becoming hard, distant, or unfeeling may seem like survival. In identity-theory terms, this can be understood as the elevation of a protector identity whose role meanings involve minimising vulnerability and maximising control (Burke). At the same time, the text refuses romanticisation. Protective distance can become self-isolation; risk can compound danger; and strategies meant to preserve agency can intensify

shame and stigma. The narrative's ethical force lies in showing the intelligibility of these strategies within constrained conditions while also showing their costs. By granting Asụghara narrative authority, *Freshwater* resists the temptation to treat such behaviours as irrational. It invites readers to consider how coping strategies become legible when the self is multiply inhabited and when external recognition is repeatedly withheld.

Furthermore, mental distress in *Freshwater* is inseparable from gender and sexuality. The spirits do not conform to a binary gender system: Asụghara is intensely feminine-coded, Saint Vincent is masculine-coded, and the collective "we" voice exceeds gender altogether. Ada's embodied life in Nigeria and the United States, however, is structured by expectations that the body must be legible within recognisable categories such as daughter, girlfriend, or "woman patient." The mismatch between Ada's non-binary, spiritually plural self-sense and the gender scripts available in their environments contributes directly to strain. Magaqa and Makombe's account of ogbanje as a decolonial figure that destabilises binary embodiment clarifies how the novel's queer ontology is not simply a matter of desire but a reconfiguration of being (Magaqa and Makombe). Talabi's emphasis on polyphony and queer futurity similarly illuminates how the text refuses linear narratives of coherence (Talabi). Yet the novel also demonstrates how environments that insist on misgendering, condemnation, or erasure injure mental health. The text thereby highlights that the pathologisation of gender nonconformity is socially produced, entangled with religious and moral discourses, rather than inherent to queer existence (Tamale).

In addition, Ada's migration from Nigeria to the United States introduces another layer of identity conflict. The spirits travel with Ada, making the body a diasporic site where Nigerian spiritual epistemologies encounter American campus culture and clinical institutions. In Nigeria, ogbanje language may be culturally intelligible even when contested. In the United States, such language is more likely to be treated as metaphor, delusion, or exotic cultural difference. Conversely, diagnostic labels and therapeutic scripts that carry authority in American settings may not resonate with Ada's spiritual understanding of themselves. This dimension matters because migration changes not only roles and statuses but also interpretive resources. The same experiences can be read as spiritual calling, possession, trauma, or psychiatric disorder depending on context. Those interpretations shape which identities are available and what kinds of care are offered. In this sense, *Freshwater* is not only a story about an individual's struggle; it is also a meditation on how epistemic regimes shape personhood. The novel suggests that crossing borders entails crossing ontologies, and that distress intensifies when no interpretive system can recognise the whole self.

9. Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that *Freshwater* reimagines mental distress in African literature by centring identity dynamics and recognition rather than symptom lists or diagnostic labels. The novel's polyphonic structure functions as a formal analogue of identity salience and conflict. By allowing different voices to narrate different phases, Emezi shows how selves emerge, recede, and clash in response to changing circumstances. This extends identity theory by insisting that not all identities are socially visible or even fully human; some are rooted in cosmology and claim agency in the first person. The reading also suggests that chronic identity non-verification is represented as a central driver of distress. Ada's self-meanings as ogbanje, as non-binary being, and as traumatised youth receive little stable confirmation from family, peers, or institutions. Where public health research documents gaps between mental health need and service use, the novel dramatizes a parallel gap between lived identity and available categories of recognition (Gureje and Lasebikan; Patel).

Suffering emerges not only from traumatic events but from the ongoing erosion of the self by interpretive reduction.

Moreover, the novel offers a nuanced account of spiritual coping. Rather than endorsing or condemning spiritual framing, *Freshwater* shows how ogbanje identities provide both resources and risks. They offer explanatory power, protective distance from pain, and a sense of connection to non-human kin, but they can also generate behaviours that worsen stigma and danger. This ambivalence aligns with contemporary calls in global mental health to avoid simplistic dichotomies between "traditional" and "modern" approaches and to pursue culturally responsive care that can engage spiritual beliefs critically and respectfully (Patel). The novel thus becomes a conceptual resource for thinking about mental health in plural epistemic landscapes.

Finally, the novel's transnational dimension suggests that mental health and identity frameworks must be attentive to movements across interpretive regimes. *Freshwater* foregrounds how explanatory systems are historically and geopolitically situated, and how crossing borders entails crossing between different ontologies of mind, spirit, and illness. For literary scholarship, this implies that interpretive humility is an ethical necessity: to impose a single explanatory key is to miss the text's deliberate insistence on multiplicity and negotiation.

10. Conclusion

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* reconceptualises mental distress by presenting a protagonist whose subjectivity is irreducibly multiple and whose suffering cannot be separated from spiritual ontology, social recognition, gendered embodiment, and diasporic movement. Using an expanded identity-theory framework, this article has shown how shifting narrative voices enact identity salience; how chronic failures of verification and layered stigma intensify distress; and how spiritual multiplicity functions simultaneously as coping mechanism and source of risk (Burke; Goffman; Magaqa and Makombe).

At the same time, the novel reveals the limits of theories and care models that presume a singular subject or that enforce strict boundaries between spiritual experience and mental health. By granting narrative authority to voices that dominant systems might dismiss, *Freshwater* challenges readers to reconsider what counts as legitimate experience and what kinds of selfhood can be recognised within current systems of care. For scholarship at the intersection of African literature, medical humanities, and gender studies, the novel demonstrates that close reading can make theoretical contributions, especially when it refuses interpretive violence and makes room for plurality.

Works Cited

Akanni, Oluyemi O., and Lucky C. Edosien. "The New Nigerian Mental Health Act: A Huge Leap Before Looking Closely?" *Nigerian Medical Journal*, vol. 64, no. 6, 2023, pp. 838–845.

Asakitikpi, Aretha O. "Born to Die: The Ogbanje Phenomenon and Its Implication on Childhood Mortality in Southern Nigeria." *Anthropologist*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2008, pp. 59–63.

Brown, Caroline A., and Johanna X. K. Garvey, editors. *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions: Aesthetics of Resistance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Burke, Peter J. "Identity Processes and Social Stress." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 56, no. 6, 1991,

pp. 836–849.

Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. Grove Press, 2018.

Esonwanne, Uzo. "Psychoanalysis and African Literature." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2007, pp. 1–26.

Fasasi, Khabyr Alowonle. "Sanity in Insanity: Nature, Status and Functions of Mad Characters in African Literature." *International Journal of Linguistics and Language*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2012, pp. 17–23.

Fourqurean, Megan. "Literary Realism, Speculative Fiction, and Queer African Futures in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2025.

Gagiano, Annie. *Dealing with Evils: Essays on Writing from Africa*. Ibidem, 2010.

Gikandi, Simon. "African Literature and the Question of Psychology." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, pp. 19–34.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall, 1963. From the

Gureje, Oye, and Victor O. Lasebikan. "Use of Mental Health Services in a Developing Country: Results Nigerian Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2006, pp. 44–49.

Iheanacho, T., et al. "Attitudes and Beliefs about Mental Illness among Church-Based Lay Health Workers in Nigeria." *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–13.

Ilechukwu, Sunday T. C. "Ogbanje/Abiku and Cultural Conceptualizations of Psychopathology in Nigeria." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2007, pp. 239–255.

Magaqa, Thando, and Rodwell Makombe. "Decolonising Queer Sexualities: African Queer Perspectives." *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2021, pp. 24–39.

Patel, Vikram. "Mental Health in Low- and Middle-Income Countries." *British Medical Bulletin*, vol. 81–82, no. 1, 2007, pp. 81–96.

Saied, Ahmed R. A., et al. "Nigeria's National Mental Health Act 2021: Any Challenges and Implications for Mental Health Care?" *The Lancet*, 2023.

Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke. "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2000, pp. 224–237.

Talabi, Oluwadunni O. "Writing the Polyphonic African Queer Future: Reflections on Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*." *Journal of the African Literature Association*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2023, pp. 329–344.

Tamale, Sylvia. "Confronting the Politics of Nonconforming Sexualities in Africa." *African Studies Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2013, pp. 31–45.

Uche, O. O. C. "The Medical and Social Dynamics of Ogbanje." *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, vol. 1, no. 5, 2013, pp. 97–112.

World Health Organization. *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All*. 2022.

World Health Organization. "Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP)." World Health Organization, 2025.