

FRAGMENTED SELVES, SILENT RESISTANCE: A GYNOCRITICAL READING OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN AKWAEKE EMEZI'S FRESHWATER

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Abstract

This article presents a gynocritical reading of Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel Freshwater (2018), examining how the text constructs female subjectivity through fragmentation, silence, and spiritual embodiment. Drawing on Elaine Showalter's biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural models of gyno criticism, alongside Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theory of female doubling, the study analyses selected passages that depict Ada's plural identity, the collective "we" narrative voice of the ọgbanje spirits, and the dual function of silence as both oppression and resistance. Although Freshwater has attracted substantial critical attention within queer, postcolonial, trauma, and speculative-fiction scholarship, a sustained gynocritical engagement with the novel remains largely absent. Using a qualitative, interpretive method of close textual analysis, the article argues that Ada's fragmented selfhood should not be read through a Western psychological framework of disorder, but rather as a culturally and spiritually grounded articulation of Igbo cosmology. It further contends that silence in the novel operates simultaneously as an instrument of familial and patriarchal control and as a strategy of self-protection and refusal. The article concludes that Freshwater extends the boundaries of gyno criticism beyond its originally Anglo-American frame, demonstrating that indigenous African spiritual epistemologies can meaningfully expand feminist literary theory's understanding of embodiment, voice, and female subjectivity.

Keywords: Gyno criticism, Female Subjectivity, Silence, Fragmented Identity, Freshwater, Ọgbanje, African Feminist Literature

1. Introduction

There was an important development in the field of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s when Elaine Showalter introduced the concept of Gyno criticism. In her article "Toward a Feminist Poetics", Showalter shifted the focus of the critical discourse from women in male-authored texts to the women themselves as agents of literary creativity who ought to be analyzed for what they were (Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics" 25). Two years later, in her article "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Showalter suggested four models – biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical, and cultural – of interpretation of women's literature (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 184). It was around the same time that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where they discovered the "anxiety of authorship" of women deprived of literary models and explained how it resulted in the emergence of doubled, split, and rebellious feminine characters (Gilbert & Gubar 49, 78).

While these approaches have been quite fundamental, they were all developed within the Anglo-American literary tradition. However, African women writers' contemporary texts, which are characterized by their own cosmologies, orality, and decolonial issues, pose the question about the possibility to expand Gyno criticism into other cultural contexts. Akwaeke Emezi's first novel "Freshwater" represents an interesting case of this problem. The novel is devoted to the story of Ada, a Nigerian woman whose consciousness is occupied by ọgbanje spirits, i.e., spirits from the Igbo cosmology, who live between humans and spirits. The narration of "Freshwater," which is represented mostly by "we" voice along with the voices of Asughara and Saint Vincent, defies the tradition of having one unifying narrator.

Both fragmentation and silence shape the construction of Ada's subjectivity throughout the text. The reason for her fragmentation is the presence of both spirit and self in the same body, while the reason for her silence is caused by trauma, lack of familiarity within her family, and an inability to be truly known by others. Nevertheless, neither of these aspects is seen merely as lacking something. In this article, it is argued that the strategies used in *Freshwater* go beyond the categories of subjectivity proposed in Western feminism due to the use of Gyno criticism.

For this reason, the article aims to achieve three interconnected goals: to analyze the representation of Ada's fragmented and multiple identity by means of *Freshwater*; to explore the dual nature of the oppressive and resistant use of silence in Ada's experiences; and to consider the construction of female subjectivity in the novel from a gynocritical perspective taking into account Igbo spirituality. This can be translated into the following research questions: How does *Freshwater* portray Ada's fragmented and multiple identity? How does silence function as oppression and resistance in Ada's experiences? How does a gynocritical interpretation of the novel help us understand the construction of female subjectivity in it? The questions above also help to fill a certain gap in current scholarship on the novel: even though *Freshwater* is analyzed through various theories – including queer, postcolonial, trauma, and speculative fiction – a gynocritical analysis of the novel has not yet been developed and Showalter's paradigm has not been applied to an African indigenous spiritual text before.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is a review of previous research related to Gyno criticism, silence, fragmentation, and the criticism of *Freshwater*. Section 3 provides an overview of the theoretical framework used in this analysis. Section 4 discusses the methodology employed. Section 5 contains a textual analysis in four movements. The results are discussed in Section 6.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gyno criticism and the Feminist Literary Tradition

Gyno criticism is a relatively recent form of feminist criticism that developed in the late 1970s. Instead of focusing on the representation of women in the literature by men, Showalter suggested that women themselves were the meaning makers, and therefore the literature should be analyzed using frameworks based on their experiences rather than frameworks borrowed from the male perspective (Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics" 25). In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Showalter further formulated four models of difference, biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural, to analyze the literature written by women (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 184). Another contribution to this area of feminist criticism was made by Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which described the "anxiety of authorship" of nineteenth-century women's writings, as well as the concealment and doubling of female characters to express the experience repressed.

As Gyno criticism keeps developing in the twenty-first century as a consequence of challenges from postcolonial studies, queer theory, and intersectional feminism, which have criticised the tendency of Gyno criticism of focusing on the literary tradition of being white, Western, and middle class (Plain and Sellers 97), African women's literature has made the approach to adapt to the worldview, folklore, and decolonizing perspectives of the indigenous population (Plain and Sellers 97; Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 197). In this article, the approach is used for analyzing the work by Emezi, titled *Freshwater*.

2.2 Silence in Contemporary Women's Fiction

Silence is an important feature of feminist literary criticism since it may mean either oppression or autonomy. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the silencing of women has been an important means of patriarchal domination, along with the culturally accepted perception

that a woman who speaks is acting in an “unfeminine” and hence “dangerous” way (Gilbert and Gubar 36; Showalter, “Feminist Criticism” 201). In the face of such difficulties, female authors have found a way to use disguise, metaphor, irony, and doubling to say what could not be said (Gilbert and Gubar 78; Showalter, “Feminist Criticism” 201).

However, some authors warn about taking silence as an indicator of submission or failure. According to Jane Parpart, silence can serve as a source of power when women do not feel the necessity to take extra risks while maintaining their ability to take actions independently, as opposed to the silence imposed from outside (Parpart 315–24). Likewise, Maggie MacLure, Rachel Holmes, Liz Jones, and Christina MacRae maintain that silence is not necessarily something to decode or replace with speech in order to give it sense; silence can become a means of resistance that enables a person to preserve control over her reality (MacLure et al. 492–500). Silence of women who work across cultural borders has particular connotations because indigenous cultures can both provide protection and impose constraints on female voice in a way that cannot be understood in Western feminism framework. In the case of Ada's silence in *Freshwater*, the author takes into account the culture of Ada's Nigerian family, her trauma, and the agency of *ogbanje* spirits (Emezi, ch. 6; Newgas 23).

2.3 Fragmented Identity in Women's Writing

The idea of fragmented identity is one that comes up quite frequently in women's literature. According to Gilbert and Gubar, this idea can be seen as far back as nineteenth-century literature by women, where women, because they could not overtly show their anger or ambitions, had to fragment their characters in two, with a traditional character and a “mad double” – a ghostly alter ego who would speak for them when society did not allow it. In more modern literature, fragmentation has also become a means of expressing the idea of the multifaceted woman.

In African feminist literature in particular, fragmentation comes with a cultural significance beyond mere psychological implications. Spiritual possession and sense of community make difficult the predominance of the Western focus on the limited individual self (Magaqa and Makombe 28; Cobo-Piñero 216). In the case of Ada from *Freshwater*, the fragmented self can only be comprehended in the context of Igbo cosmology, as opposed to psychology, since as an *ogbanje*, a creature between worlds of living people and spirits, she is a spiritually split creature (Ossana 82; Newgas 21).

2.4 Critical Reception of *Freshwater*

Since the time of its publication, *Freshwater* has been receiving much scholarly attention, although this attention has focused on queer, postcolonial, transgender, and speculative fiction, rather than gynocritical interpretation. Magaqa and Makombe provide a decolonial queer interpretation of Emeki's utilization of the *ogbanje* concept in which the usage of the concept “not only problematiz[es] the notion of 'being human' within the Igbo cosmology, but also... the social fluidity and contractedness of identity” (Magaqa & Makombe 24). Cobo-Piñero interprets the novel within Black Atlantic and diaspora studies; he maintains that Emeki's writing makes several diasporic African gendered identities visible within both Western and African literary traditions (Cobo-Piñero 214, 216). Newgas offers a trauma theory reading of the novel and asserts that Ada's *ogbanje* identity enables Emeki both to express her experience of personal and collective trauma and to transcend it and to critique the Western trauma-informed psychoanalysis and to reveal that memory in the novel is not recollection but actualization of the present influenced by the ancestral cosmology (Newgas 21, 23).

The critic Fourqurean examines *Freshwater* at the crossroads of literary realism and speculative fiction, noting that its “fantastical” features should be regarded as a manifestation of Igbo cosmology where human and spirit worlds co-exist (Fourqurean 457). Ossana, using

post-colonial criticism as her methodology, defines Freshwater as a palimpsest that combines pre-colonial Igbo ontology and Western interpretive traditions, especially in relation to the issues of gender, spirituality, and bodily change (Ossana 82, 89–90).

These approaches show that Freshwater is an object for different critical approaches. The thing is that Showalter's Gyno criticism was not fully developed in the context of Freshwater, and this article aims to address this gap.

2.5 Trauma, Spirituality, and the Female Self

The interplay between trauma and spirituality presented in Freshwater challenges the established Western models of psychology. Trauma theory traditionally emphasizes the impact of catastrophic experiences on the psyche of a person (Newgas 21); however, postcolonial feminist scholars argue that this approach often fails to take into account the specific conditions of African literature, where suffering is relational and spiritual in nature, as well as the influence of colonialism on the breakdown of traditional beliefs (Newgas 21; Ossana 83; Magaqa and Makombe 25; Cobo-Piñero 215). Indeed, in the novel, Ada's trauma cannot be separated from her existence as an *ogbanje*, an entity that is half-dead and half-alive (Emezi, ch. 4; Ossana 84; Magaqa and Makombe 26; Newgas 22). While spirituality in this case does not symbolize anything but serves as a narrative power of a generational kind in line with Showalter's cultural model, where the historical context of women's literature is taken into account (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 197), the analysis of Ada's fragmentation through the lens of Igbo cosmology presupposes the expansion of gynocritical boundaries from Anglo-American traditions (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 197; Ossana 85).

2.6 Research Gap

In spite of all the work that has been done on Freshwater by scholars from 2018 onward, a sustained gynocritical study of the novel remains an untapped area. The focus so far has been on queer, transgender, postcolonial, and speculative fiction interpretations. Thus, the most relevant aspects for Gyno criticism—female literary tradition, voice, silence, and fragmentary subjectivity—are yet to be considered (Emezi, ch. 1; Showalter 25). There are two important reasons why that is a gap worth addressing. First, the novel focuses on female identity, voice, and the idea of the "we" in a way that requires but does not have a sustained gynocritical study of it. Secondly, there has been an absence of gynocritical studies of non-Anglo-American literature in general, which is one of the limitations of the field (Plain and Sellers 97). This paper addresses both the gaps at once, offering the first gynocritical interpretation of Freshwater.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Showalter's Gyno criticism and the Four Models of Difference

The current paper is based on Showalter's Gyno criticism as elaborated in "Toward a Feminist Poetics" and "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Gyno criticism calls for a focus on women's writing, experience, language, and literary tradition "in its own right" (Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics" 25). In accordance with Showalter's models of difference, including the biological model that focuses on the influence of the female body on the literary text; the linguistic model that concerns women's speech, silence, and narrative voice in relation to patriarchal language; the psychoanalytic model that concentrates on inner division, desire, and complexity of psyche; and the cultural model that involves the context of women's writing (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 184, 197), each of the novels under analysis can be analyzed according to all the four models, because Ada's body can be regarded as the biological model; Ada's multiple voices are related to the linguistic model; Ada's inner division is connected with the psychoanalytic model; and *ogbanje* identity can be regarded as the cultural model.

3.2 Gilbert and Gubar's Female Doubling

The idea of female doubling as articulated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in "The Madwoman in the Attic" offers another perspective for interpretation. According to them, the lack of literary models of themselves and being under pressure from the "anxiety of authorship," women authors tend to create doubled or divided characters, madwomen, monsters, ghosts or alternate selves who can give vent to feelings which society does not allow them to show (Gilbert and Gubar 49, 78). This perspective sheds light on the plurality of Ada, especially her connection to Asughara, who speaks for those feelings of Ada which her socially acceptable self cannot articulate. Nonetheless, the plurality of Ada cannot be understood in terms of female doubling of the nineteenth century because it originates in the cosmology of Igbo people.

3.3 Silence and Voice in Feminist Theory

For this reason, given the relationship between voice, power, and recognition, questions relating to silence and voice have been integral parts of the feminist discourse. There are different ways of silencing: either directly through violence and direct patriarchy or indirectly by emotional deprivation (Gilbert and Gubar 36). The distinction drawn by Jane Parpart between concealment of power in silence and powerlessness in imposed silence (Parpart 315–24), as well as MacLure, Holmes, Jones, and MacRae's suggestion that silence may serve as an act of resistance regardless of being transformed into voice (MacLure et al. 492–500) guide the main methodological distinction drawn in this study – between silence that is imposed on Ada and silence that she intentionally creates to control herself.

3.4 Synthesis: Toward a Gynocritical Reading of Freshwater

In combination, these approaches make possible reading *Freshwater* as a novel which is equally embodied, linguistically multi-voiced, psychically divided, and culturally positioned in the cosmology of Igbo spirituality. The biological approach by Showalter explains the existence of spirits in the body of Ada; the linguistic approach takes into account the shift from collective to individual voice; the psychoanalytical approach explains the division inside and desire; and the cultural approach incorporates the *ogbanje* and Igbo spirituality on which Ada is constructed. Female doubling by Gilbert and Gubar makes it easier to understand the connection between Ada, Asughara, and Saint Vincent, whereas feminist theories of silence and voice help explain the dynamics of power and resistance inscribed in the structure of the novel. For applying Gyno criticism to *Freshwater* in this expanded version, the approach should remain flexible enough to accommodate Igbo spirituality rather than to marginalize it.

4. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative and interpretative methodology is adopted appropriate for a text that creates meaning from the use of narrative voice, symbolism, silence, and culture, as opposed to variable data that can be measured statistically. Following Creswell et al.'s definition of qualitative research as "research on meaning and interpretation," the research analyzes *Freshwater* as a literary and cultural text whose meaning can only be derived from close textual analysis.

The main primary source used is Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (Grove Press, 2018). Since the version of the text used in this study is an e-book, page numbers do not exist and therefore chapter number has been included in-text citation where necessary. The passages analyzed were chosen based on their relevance to three main themes related to the research questions of this study. They include: (1) fragmented identity and voices, (2) silence as oppression and resistance, and (3) female identity and body, language and Igbo spirituality.

The method of analysis was done in three steps. First, the book was thoroughly read several times to get familiar with the story and spiritual context of the plot. Second, the selected

passages were determined according to word choice, use of pronouns, repetitions, images, dialogues, narrative voices, body descriptions and spirituality descriptions. The last step involved interpretation of the passages through the theoretical framework presented in Section 3, including Showalter's biological model of embodiment, linguistic model of transition between collective and individual voices, psychoanalytical model of internal divisions and desires and cultural model of Ada within Igbo cosmology. Moreover, the findings were triangulated using the literature review of Section 2 to place the analysis within the broader context of the critical debate on the book and Gyno criticism.

5. Textual Analysis

In this section, the analysis is segmented into four interconnected steps: fragmentary self of Ada and multiple voices; silence as repression; silence as resistance; and Gyno criticism reading of female subjectivity.

5.1 Fragmentary Female Self and Multiple Voices of Ada

The novel begins by showing us that the identity of Ada is multiple instead of single. The *ogbanje* spirits express their entrance into Ada's body in terms that are fragmented:

"At the time when she (our body) had to force her way into the world, slippery and louder than a village of storms, the doors were wide open. We should have already had our anchor set deep within her and be resting in her membranes and in harmony with her mind. However, because the doors were wide open, we got mixed up. We were both old and just born."

The oscillation between "we," "our body," and "her" incorporates fragmentation into the narrative voice itself rather than describing Ada through an outside observer. The spirits go on to say that "the main difficulty was that we were our own distinct 'we' rather than just her whole and completely herself" (Emezi, ch. 1, p. 18). The spirits' description of themselves establishes a multivoiced narrator that is neither fully detached from Ada nor fully attached to her. In their analysis of Freshwater, Magaqa and Makombe understand multivoiced narration to be a specific way in which Freshwater subverts rigid concepts of identity and personhood (32). This multivoiced narrative continues even in bodily memory: "We lost a lot of blood and Saul himself gave us the injection, but there's no scar on the Ada, so maybe this is a memory" (Emezi, ch. 1, p. 22).

Such a plurality may also be understood as an act of protection. One of the spirits states, "I told her to keep us in her mind, in the marble room, because they would have taken Ada away to tell her that she was mad or that we were not there at all. I needed to protect us... The whole is greater than the individual" (Emezi, ch. 1, p. 27-28). This collective voice is both a hidden consciousness and a protective system, and it is in line with the notion of silence as self-protection discussed in section 5.3.

Spirits possessing a character are not just something supernatural; instead, it is one of the primary ways in which identity is created. These spirits, Ada, Asughara, and Saint Vincent, are depicted as existing simultaneously in one body: "They were balanced now, the Ada, her little beast, and her saint, the three of them locked in the marbled flesh, burning through the world" (Emezi, ch. 11, p. 123). At the end of the novel, Ada understands her identity through plurality: "I am my others. We are one and we are many" (Emezi, ch. 22, p. 215). In the light of Magaqa and Makombe's claim that the idea of *ogbanje* breaks the stereotypes about gender and identity (28), one may say that Emeki uses cultural fragmentation to create a spiritual female identity.

5.2 Silence as Oppression

Along with fragmentation, silence plays an important part in structuring Ada's emotional pain throughout the book. The character's silence is conditioned by the experience of trauma,

social detachment, and asymmetrical relations of power. As the spirits point out: "She did not die, yes, but she was not guarded; she was violated, so as far as we were concerned, they failed" (Emezi, ch. 20, p. 198). Consequences of this kind of violation manifest themselves further on in the form of multiple hurt personalities: "The Ada could look back on her life and see, like clones, several of her standing there in a line" (Emezi, ch. 20, p. 199). In this context, silence becomes inseparable from both physical and emotional harm, and this is what postpones Ada's ability to recognize herself, which becomes clear from the following phrase: "When you have been hiding in a great shadow, it hurts to look at the light, to be awake, to feel" (Emezi, ch. 21, p. 205).

Silence within the family takes the form of emotional neglect instead of physical violence. The contrast between the internal complexities of Ada and her family's perception of her is evident through the confession of the spirits, "the major issue was that we were our own we instead of all and solely hers" (Emezi, ch. 1, p. 18). Ada is not a straightforward daughter and cannot be perceived as such, and her internal complexities do not find much room in the environment around her. This perception is reinforced when she states, "I shouldn't even have existed" (Emezi, ch. 16, p. 166), which shows how silence and lack of understanding can intensify a feeling of loneliness. Thus, as seen in this example, oppression in *Freshwater* does not necessarily occur in the form of violence but through the means of silence as well.

Patriarchal silence, on the other hand, seems to relate more directly to Ada's control over her own body and expression. The spirits observe, "She was not guarded; she was violated, so as far as we were concerned, they failed" (Emezi, ch. 20, p. 198). As such, violation of the body corresponds with the broader social convention according to which female pain should remain silent. As the linguistic theory offered by Showalter—exploring women's literature from the perspectives of speech, silence, and alternative forms of expression under patriarchy (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 184)—indicates, the assertiveness of Asughara—"Ada meant every word to me... I was a me! I had a self" (Emezi, ch. 8, pp. 61–62)—is used to compensate for the things that Ada herself is unable to say. In addition, the theory of female doubling developed by Gilbert and Gubar seems to apply in this context, since divided female characters often speak up for the thing a single self cannot express (Gilbert and Gubar 78). Indeed, in the end, the spirits realize that "Ada was easier to control when she thought she was weak" (Emezi, ch. 21, p. 204).

5.3 Silence as Resistance

At other times, silence takes the form of a resistance strategy rather than just a symptom of oppression. At times when Ada's own interiority finds itself resistant to normal expression, she is silent not because she is defeated but because she is making a choice: "What are your fears? Why are you doing this? No, that is a lie. Try again. That is also a lie. Stop being afraid" (Emezi, ch. 21, p. 204). In other instances, silence keeps alive aspects of the self that others are unprepared to understand and accept. For example, the spirits remember their anticipation of a "safest way" of staying hidden inside Ada "asleep inside her membranes," until confusion ruined this hiding process (Emezi, ch. 1, p. 18).

This protective nature is brought into focus when Ada says, "I am my others. We are one and we are many" (Emezi, ch. 22, p. 215), thereby situating her silence as protection for a self that is already plural and spiritual in nature, and not something that is to be fixed or remedied. This notion is supported by feminist theories of silence, which explain that if speaking puts women at risk of more control or danger, then silence can be a way of surviving (Parpart 315–24; MacLure et al. 492–500).

In this case, the function of silence is also that of refusal, namely the refusal of being named and categorized from outside. Ada herself states: "I am here and not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone. I am my others; we are one and we are many. Everything

becomes clear each day, so long as I listen. Each new morning makes me less afraid" (Emezi, ch. 22, p. 215). Her acceptance of her Chi cannot be confused with any form of passivity. As Ada admits herself: "a person cannot fight his or her Chi in a wrestling match" (Emezi, ch. 22, p. 207). On the contrary, such an acceptance represents a refusal of any forms of self-evaluation within the framework which ignores the spiritual background of Ada's identity. Although it takes time and hurts, as Ada herself claims: "it is difficult to emerge from a very large shadow into light" (Emezi, ch. 21, p. 205), yet this acceptance allows for the more confident self-articulation: "Why am I afraid? I am the spring" (Emezi, ch. 22, p. 215).

5.4 Female Subjectivity through a Gynocritical Lens

The portrayal of the female subjectivity in *Freshwater* is not restricted to one voice and one body, but incorporates embodiment, culture and spirituality in its construction. The statement of the spirits who say "We were her and yet not" (Emezi, ch. 1) reflects the idea of subjectivity created on the basis of the coexistence of both connection and separation of Ada who keeps her individuality but is inhabited by voices which cannot be hers alone. It is possible to speak about the combination of all four models of Showalter at once, including biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 184), since Ada is embodied, linguistically diverse, divided within herself and cosmological from the point of view of Igbo.

The link between the body, voice, and spirituality is maintained in the novel. Body of Ada is not merely a physical form, but also a dwelling place for spiritual beings, who communicate and fight for supremacy, as seen when the spirits narrate to Ada the story of her birth through the voice of her body: "When at last she (our body) struggled into the world, wet and stormier than a village, the gates had already been thrown open...We were both her and not" (Emezi, ch. 1, p. 18).

From a gynocritical female subject's perspective, Ada is at the center of the narrative due to, rather than despite of, her fractured self. As the spirits repeatedly say, "we were her and yet not" (Emezi, ch. 1), the fact of fragmentation becomes the starting point of the narrative instead of something that has to be solved. The concept of female doubling developed by Gilbert and Gubar provides an explanation of why fractured subjects can say something that an intact social subject would not be able to say (Gilbert and Gubar 78). However, Ada's multiplicity goes beyond that of usual doubling in the sense that it is based on the spirituality of the Igbo culture.

6. Findings and Discussion

The analysis in Section 5 generates three major conclusions, all of which have implications for the field of Gyno criticism.

First, *Freshwater* portrays female subjectivity as plurality rather than singularity. The multiplicity of Ada's voice through spirits, voices, memory, and culture is an integral part of her personality and provides the novel with its richness of theme and narrative. This conclusion subverts the prevailing assumptions about the necessity of the female subject having a sense of singularity in herself and indicates that multiplicity can be a valid mode of self within women's writing (Plain and Sellers 110).

Secondly, the practice of silence in the novel works to serve two purposes at once: one, it speaks of oppression, neglect, and patriarchal oppression, but on the other hand, it functions as an act of defense and refusal. This dualism means that silence cannot simply be taken as the opposite of agency because speech does not necessarily mean freedom, nor does silence necessarily mean submissiveness. Ada's silence is at times imposed on her, and at times it is constructed by herself, and the distinction between these two levels is crucial for comprehending her identity.

Thirdly, the novel proves that female subjectivity can be embodied, spiritual, and cultural at the same time in a way that cannot be fully explained using just Western models of psychology. Ada's identity is formed through her body, multiple voices, trauma, and connection to Igbo cosmology, which can be explained through Showalter's four models in their combination (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 184).

The implications are literary, theoretical, and cultural. In a literary sense, the novel proves that fragmentation and multiplicity of voices, including "we," can serve as constructive means of narration that help enrich, rather than simply disrupt, the depiction of female experience. Theoretically, the research results show that while Showalter's concept is still relevant, it should be further developed as far as its application to texts that are based on cosmologies different from the Western ones is concerned; Ada's identity is consistent with all Showalter's categories—biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical, and cultural—but it does not fit into Western feminist theory, which proves that Gyno criticism can benefit from the incorporation of indigenous theories of subjectivity and self into it. Culturally and politically, the novel emphasizes the insufficiency of Western feminism in defining an experience shaped by African spirituality, which confirms the idea that African indigenous studies and worldviews are needed to widen the scope of Gyno criticism beyond its originally Anglo-American borders (Plain and Sellers 97).

7. Conclusion

The discussion in this paper has shown that in *Freshwater*, Emezi uses the techniques of fragmentation, silence, embodiment, and spiritual inhabitation to create female subjectivity. The gynocritical reading of the book helps us see what aspects of women's literature other theories such as queer, postcolonial, trauma, and speculative fiction do not cover. The fragmented nature of Ada's identity and her use of silence can be viewed as her strengths rather than weaknesses.

Indeed, through an analysis of *Freshwater* according to the four models of difference put forward by Showalter and through the theory of female doubling developed by Gilbert and Gubar, taking into account at all times Igbo cosmology and the *ogbanje*, this paper seeks to show that Gyno criticism can effectively be applied to a contemporary Igbo-Nigerian novel that was not initially meant for the application of Gyno criticism. The paper, therefore, makes a contribution to the limited gynocritical studies on African women's literature as well as to the critical study of *Freshwater* itself.

Future studies may explore other avenues in the exploration of this topic by looking at other stories of fragmented identity that are African feminist in nature or infused with spirituality as well as by examining other works by Emezi. Indeed, the field of Gyno criticism is set to gain a lot from engagement with African and diasporic women writers whose works challenge fixed ideas of identity and gender.

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