RECONSIDERING *ANAFEMALE BODIES* IN AFRICAN SELF-WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The ontological imperative of the black African anafemale body has been subjected to a wide range of literary investigation only recently. The traumatic triple threat of subjugation, exploitation, and exclusion (or possibly, displacement) of the body (the black, African, anafemale body) under the triad of race, class, and gender is at the front burner of feminist and indeed humanist discourses. From the lenses of Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's (1997) and Ifi Amadiume's (2002) African feminist theoretical approaches, this paper offers a critical study into the nature of biological determinism in the understanding of the categories of sex and gender within the African milieu as a precursor for the conceptualisation of "the woman" under the (neo-)colonial hegemony of power. In doing so, this paper analyzes the *anafemale* body as a site of fluidity, dissidence, and transgression in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018), in opposition to the Eurocentric norms of gender.

Keywords: African feminism, *Anafemale* bodies, Colonialism.

RESUMO

O imperativo ontológico do corpo *anafeminino* negro-africano passou a ser objeto de uma ampla gama de investigações literárias apenas recentemente. A ameaça tripla e traumática de subjugação, exploração e exclusão (ou possivelmente, deslocamento) desse corpo (negro, africano e *anafeminino*) sob a tríade de raça, classe e gênero, está na linha de frente dos discursos feministas e, de fato, humanistas. A partir das lentes das abordagens teóricas feministas africanas de Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) e Ifi Amadiume (2002), o presente artigo propõe um estudo crítico sobre a natureza do determinismo biológico na compreensão das categorias de sexo e gênero no contexto africano, como precursor da conceituação da "mulher" sob a hegemonia (neo)colonial do poder. Nesse percurso, analisa-se o corpo *anafeminino* como espaço de fluidez, dissidência e transgressão na obra *Freshwater* (2018), de Akwaeke Emezi, em contraposição às normas eurocêntricas de gênero.

Palavras-chave: feminismo africano, corpos *anafemininos*, colonialismo.

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THEORIZING AFRICAN BODIES

The Western conceptualization of difference and differentiation is rooted in the axiom that *biology is destiny*. Consequently, the very possibility of being is contingent upon the presence or absence of certain biological traits or organs. The advancement of the axiom only means that those who put themselves in the position to determine what biological elements matter will appear to have the power to impose their perception on social relations. The overt reliance on biological fundamentalism and determinism is the hallmark of Euro-phallocentric epistemologies, which sustain male dominance in all spheres of society while systematically silencing, subjugating, exploiting, excluding, and displacing the Anafemale body.

In her work *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997), Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí offers a critique of the dependence on what she calls the bio-logic in the construction and comprehension of social relations in the West and the universalization and imposition of this ideology on African societies through imperialism. Her study of the pre-colonial Yoruba society provides a template to debunk the biology-is-destiny axiom. From her perspective, social relations in pre-colonial Yoruba society are not determined by physicality or maleness or the absence of maleness. In other words, social relations were not constructed on biological facts, even though biological facts had their import in the pre-colonial Yoruba culture. She explains:

> In Yoruba society, in contrast, social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts, not from biology. The bare biological facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation, where they must. Biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can trade in the market (OYĚWÙMÍ , 1997, p. 12).

As we know, the pre-colonial Yoruba society functioned under a monarchical system of governance, which had a sovereign king. However, this system was not strictly male-dominated, as there were also queens or, in this case, *Obas* who were not *anamales*, a term coined by Oyěwùmí to refer to "anatomic males" (OYĚWÙMÍ, 1997, p. xii). In her work *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (1997), Ifi Amadiume offers a critique of the history of patriarchy and matriarchy in pre-colonial Africa based on select works of Cheikh Anta Diop. Her critique centres on the distortion and the resultant masculinization of historical facts about the nature of African societies. According to her

reading of Diop, before the invasion of the Indo-Europeans into Africa, African societies had a significant number of matriarchs and hence were not opposed to matriarchy. This argument further substantiates the claim that anatomical differences or differentiation did not correspond to hierarchical differences. It is also important to note that when there were *anamale Obas*, there was the *Iya Oba* or the *Yeye Oba* (the queen mother) who wielded significant influence over the king and his council.

In Amadiume's reading of the Diopian perspective on matriarchy and the pre-colonial black African society, the masculinization of governance only became universalized after the transfer of kingship to *Osiris* from the then Queen of Egypt through marriage (AMADIUME, 1997, p. 56). The sheer size and might of the Egyptian dynasty perhaps led Eurocentric sociologists to assume that Africans were, by default, patriarchal. In Igbo culture, there is still strong evidence to counter this assumption. In her study on the Nnobi Igbo society, a micro-state within the Igbo nation, Ifi Amadiume unfurls the politico-economic structure that presents the dual-sex relations that typify the Igbo culture. The smallest unit of familial relations is the *Obi* (the compound), which is the first form of social interaction a child is exposed to after birth. Within the Obi, the *Diokpala* (the husband, head of the house) is in charge of the Obi. Part of his duties is to protect, defend, and ensure order in the Obi. The *Mkpuke* (wife and/or mother) is a joint stakeholder in the family (AMADIUME, 1997, p. 84). Perhaps, this is why it is commonplace in Africa to say that if the man is the head, the woman is the neck because, without the neck, the head cannot properly fit the body. The *Mkpuke* is largely in charge of the economics of the *Obi*. In Nnobi culture, the women run and maintain markets, which are a central aspect of Igbo culture.

In addition, the *Mkpuke* becomes the matrilineal force of the Obi, which is important for maintaining the ideology of collectivism, compassion, peace, and love. The micro-group called the *Umunne* (children from the same mother) is a fundamental ideology in Igbo culture that extends beyond familial ties to a spiritual dimension, as it is believed that the Igbo people originated from the *Idemmili* goddess.

It is also important at this point to make a conceptual clarification of the term *Anafemale*. In this paper, we shall refer to both the Yoruba and the Igbo cultures, and, as such, many words will be retained in Yoruba and Igbo since translating them may lead to misinterpretation. As has been argued earlier, the pre-colonial Yoruba and Igbo societies were not organized based on anatomical differentiation or sexual hierarchy. Social relations were based on an order of seniority. Women were neither "inferior" to men nor

othered in relation to men. Oyěwùmí explains the immateriality of the Eurocentric bio-logic or body reasoning in the Yoruba culture. To her mind, gender is a social construct and culture-bound . In other words, it is subject to the nature of the culture where it operates. In the pre-colonial Yoruba culture, the bio-logic model of social relations is nonexistent, since social roles are not determined by biological facts. Based on this discussion, the words *Obinrin* and *Okunrin* cannot be translated to man or woman in the sense that woman is perceived as a prefix to the word man. In other words, *Obinrin* cannot be examined in opposition to *Okunrin* as suggested by the dualistic Eurocentric logic, which reinforces the idea that *Obinrin* is inferior to *Okunrin*. Oyěwùmí further explains that the suffix *-rin* in both words suggests a common humanity; hence, the bound morphemes *Obin* and *Okun* simply express an anatomical variety (OYĚWÙMÍ, 1997, p. 33).

The above analysis is important because it debunks and disowns the centrality of the male sex/gender in African thought. It is also necessary to note that while the word for human in both Yoruba and Igbo are *Eniyan* and *Mmadu,* respectively, and are non-gender specific, it is not so in the Eurocentric view. The word man automatically alludes to the male sex and attributes certain privileges to him (OYĚWÙMÍ, 1997, p. 33). To resolve this conundrum, Oyěwùmí prefers the terms *anamales* or *anafemales*. She explains that:

> The basic terms *okunrin* and *obinrin* are best translated as referring to the anatomic male and anatomic female, respectively; they refer only to physiologically marked differences and do not have hierarchical connotations like the English terms 'male/men' and 'female/women.' The distinctions these Yoruba terms signify are superficial. For ease of deployment, 'anatomic' has been shortened to 'ana' and added on to the words 'male,' 'female,' and 'sex' to underscore the fact that in the Yoruba world-sense it is possible to acknowledge these physiological distinctions without inherently projecting a hierarchy of the two social categories. Thus I propose the new concepts *anamale, anafemale,* and *anasex.* The need for a new set of constructs arose from the recognition that, in Western thought, even the so-called biological concepts like male, female, and sex are not free of hierarchical connotations (OYĚWÙMÍ, 1997, p. 34).

An association may easily be made between language and social relations in society. From the colonial and neo-colonial perspectives, this means that "woman" is a social construct. The dichotomization of gender signals and enables the conceptualization of the "woman" as subordinate to the man. It is possible to further assert that there is a relationship between colonial and neo-colonial hegemonic power structures and the *inferiorization* of the anafemale.

In her essay titled “Cultura, etnicidade e trabalho: efeitos linguísticos e políticos da exploração da mulher” (2020), Lélia Gonzalez offers her reflect ion on the political, social, and economic condition of black women in Brazil. She observes the subjugation and eventual othering of the woman necessitated by the double tragedy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and brute colonization. The black woman forced onto boats and transported to the sugar cane plantations and the *Casa-Grande* in the south of the Americas, particularly Brazil, became immediately subjected to an insidious ranking based on their bodies. The *anafemale* body was offered up for slave labour and sexual exploitation at the hands of the male slave owners.

The advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonization transformed the condition of *anafemales* into women, further subjecting them to the triad of race, class, and gender. The *anafemale* at once finds herself at the bottom end of the upended triangle. The anecdote “Preta pra cozinhar, mulata pra fornicar e branca pra casar”, expressed by Gilberto Freyre and cited in Gonzalez (2020, p. 59), underscores the place of the black woman in the socio-economic ladder in the Americas. The black *anafemale*’s job is to work — whether in the sugar cane plantations, the cotton fields, or the *Casa-Grande* — where she is neither seen nor appreciated.

The socio-economic conditions created by imperialism set out to deny the *anafemale* body access to favourable social conditions. The lack of social amenities like quality education for *anafemales* is the hallmark of imperialism. In Nigeria, while there were boys’ schools from the mid-nineteenth century, the first girls’ school was established only in 1927 thanks to the tenacity of Lagos female elites who raised one thousand pounds (OYĚWÙMÍ, 1997, p. 134). This goes further to show that the education of African girls was not crucial to the colonisation agenda. The colonial government invested more money in the *anamales* because they needed them to take up job roles that were important for the advancement of the colonisation of black African bodies. This became observable as fewer women worked in the civil service or took up governance roles than the *anamales*.

Curiously, not only were *anafemales* subjugated by Western hegemonic worldview and imperialism. The African societies, as argued, do not conform to the dualistic view of gender that prioritizes manliness (or its version of physicality), or femaleness. There is evidence of the existence of gender-fluid people who were either *anafemales* or *anamales* in precolonial African societies. This category is called the third gender (OYĚWÙMÍ, 1997, p. 11). It, therefore, presents a conflict because, on the one hand, the Eurocentric view of gender is based on the biological fact that there only exist

two sexes/genders: male and female. On the other hand, they propose a further category called the "third gender" which foregrounds the proposition that social relations were not determined by anatomy. In her article titled "'Gender H egemony': How Colonialism Distorted African Perspective on Trans Identity" (2022), Cassandra Roxburgh provides an account drawn from the archives of the Portuguese Inquisition about the first "discovery" of an *anamale* gender-fluid person originally named Antonio who took up the name Vitoria. Vitoria was said to have been engaged in sexual relationships with other men but was eventually arrested and imprisoned on charges of sodomy. According to Vitoria, there were other people like her back home in Benin (ROXBURGH, 2022). This implies that one of the categories "othered" by the invasion of the Europeans was the gender-fluid people referred to by Vitoria.

Cassandra Roxburgh further explains that this category of people was quite known and accepted within several African cultures. She further submits that:

> For example, during precolonial times, the *mudoko dako*, effeminate males among the Langi of northern Uganda, were treated as women and could marry men. The *Mwami* prophets of the Ila people in Zambia were men who dressed as women, went about traditional women's work and slept with women without having sex with them. Among the Lugbara people, transgender individuals often carried out communication with the spirit world. Due to the duality of their existence, their qualities meant they were better suited to serve as messengers between the human and spirit worlds. Transgender women mediums are named *okule* ("like women"), and transgender men mediums are called *agule* ("like men"). The *chibados* of Angola were male diviners who channeled feminine spirits by acting like women (ROXBURGH, 2020).

It is possible to glean that in pre-colonial Africa, biological facts were not only irrelevant in social relations, but gender was also fluid. As has been exemplified, the gender-fluid *anamales* or *anafemales* performed spiritual roles because they were believed to exist in the interstices, neither here nor there. We choose not to refer to them as queer or transgender because, as Roxburgh agrees, it would not only be anachronistic but would also return to the dialectic of biological determinism proposed by the West. Rather than use terms like trans and queer, we prefer to use "gender-fluid" because it captures the nature of their identity.

This is not different in the Igbo culture. The Igbo cosmology considers the question of the duality of consciousness as a fundamental principle in understanding the world. This notion of duality refers to the possibility of having more than one thing at a

given time rather than an opposition with only two options. In other words, where one thing stands, another stands beside it (CHINUA ACHEBE, 2014). This immediately disproves the logic that gender is a strict dualistic principle. In the Igbo world sense, the world is divided into three parallel but interconnected worlds: the world of the living, the world of the dead or ancestors, and the world of the spirits. Human beings are limited to the world of the living because the human body cannot access the other realms. Every human being is embodied by a chi which may be conceptualized as their spiritual consciousness that is capable of penetrating the spiritual realm.

The land of the spirit is believed to be populated by *Ajommuo* (or evil spirits), *Akaliogoli* (the spirits of the condemned), and various other vagrant spirits. Another group of beings that exist in the realm of the spirits but are often omitted in the discourse of the nature of Igbo cosmology is the group known as the unborn. The existence of this group is validated by *Ino uwa* (roughly translates as return, rebirth, or reincarnation). The unborn are believed to be children waiting to be born or those who had their lives tragically cut short. It also includes the *Ogbanje*.

In explaining the concept, Chinua Achebe (1986) observes that the *Ogbanje* phenomenon is important in Igbo society and is founded upon the belief in reincarnation and the cyclic nature of the worlds in Igbo cosmology. The fundamental belief is that human beings come into this world through two possible crossings: the water crossing and the land crossing. The unborn human and its chi with whom it already has an agreement about their sojourn into *Uwa* (earth) may decide to alter this agreement at the point of crossing. Those who adjust their agreement at the water crossing become beholden to *Nne Mmiri* (the water goddess), and those who alter their agreement at the land crossing become beholden to *Onabuluwa* (the goddess of misfortune). The children are born into *Uwa* but find themselves straddling the land of the living and the land of the spirits. According to Chinua Achebe (1986), some characteristics of an *Ogbanje* include paranormal powers (like being able to communicate with spirits of the dead), beauty, and wealth, but they are often afflicted by illnesses, short inconsistent social ties, barrenness, and waxy flexibility.

Ifi Amadiume (2002) argues in her critique of Flora Nwapa's *The Lake Goddess* that *Mammy water* child, Ona (which is another variant of the *Ogbanje*), struggles to conform to the heteronormative gender expectation of performing her conjugal duties with her husband but fails because, as an *Ogbanje*, she is incapable of having a stable

sexual relationship with her husband. However, she is bound by a heteronormative society standard to bear the burden of appearing as a wife.

In Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2019), the main protagonist, Ada, shares a similar condition with other *anafemales*, a group argued to constitute the third gender. The novel follows the narrative of Ada, who, like most women in the course of history, has been subjected to sexual exploitation by heterosexual men but also presents a fluid sexuality and identity. As an *Ogbanje*, Ada is located within the interstices of sexuality — that is, being an *anafemale*, but also complex in terms of her identity.

THE INTERSTICES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN *FRESHWATER*

In Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*, the main protagonist Ada straddles the human and the spiritual worlds; hence, the complexity of her gender and sexuality fits the category of the third gender argued earlier. The novel opens with the first-person plural pronoun "We" which immediately offers an insight into the polyvocality of the narrator who is telling her own story from an autobiographical perspective. Consequently, we start to imagine a narrator with multiple identities, which represents a break from the norm. The pronoun "We" also reinforces the fundamental principle of collectivism in African societies, which ensures that the African subjects are linked not only by consanguineous ties but also spiritually through their spirit double or embodied spirits. This fact is also emphasized as the narrator describes a period before the birth of Ada in her human form:

> The first time our mother came for us, we screamed. We were three and she was a snake, coiled up on the tile of the bathroom, waiting, but we had spent the last few years believing our body — thinking that our mother was someone different, a thin human with rouged cheekbones and large bottle-end glasses. And so we screamed. The demarcations are not that clear when you're new. There was a time before we had a body, when it was still building itself cell by cell inside the thin woman, meticulously producing organs, making systems. We used to flit in and out to see how the fetus was doing, whistling through the water it floated in and harmonizing with the songs the thin woman sang, Catholic hymns from her family, their bodies stored as ashes in the walls of a cathedral in Kuala Lumpur (EMEZI, 2018, p. 1).

The complex nature of Ada is revealed in the first lines from the pronoun "us' and the sentence "we were three", which presents a different perspective on the classical Greek proposition of the tripartite nature of man (body, soul, and spirit). By "three," the

narrator informs us about the different identities that were later revealed in the novel all having an independent logic to the performativity of their roles. The narrator further mentions that these identities take time to reveal themselves because "the demarcations are not clear when you are new." The ideology of collectivism and reincarnation is also enunciated in the text above as the baby is depicted to be connected to a member of her maternal family who had died and their "bodies stored in ashes."

Emezi, through Ada, makes the argument that the black *anafemale* body is seen purely as an object for sexual exploration. When Ada moves to the United States for her studies, her body becomes racialized and identified with a specific racial group, which is an experience she never had back in Nigeria.

> She ran a wide-tooth comb through the Ada's hair, admiring how all the curls had gone. The other girls came to check it out, to give their approval, then they took her around to meet the other Black kinds on campus, because the Ada was now one of them, welcome to America (EMEZI, 2018, p. 49).

The reaction from the guys when she was introduced to some of them implied how she was perceived by them:

> 'Hey girl,' they drawled. 'Where are you from?'
> It wasn't a question we were used to, not yet. 'Nigeria,' the Ada replied, smiling politely, wondering if it sounded strange. We never had to say that when we lived there. […]
> 'Watch out now,' they said, smirking. 'She's only sixteen.'
> The Ada watched as the boys visibly recoiled.
> 'Oh, hell no!' they said, drawing out the hell. 'We gon' have to wait till you eighteen, shit' (EMEZI, 2018, p. 49).

Although it is not exactly clear what they would wait for or why she must turn eighteen for them to get it, it cannot be denied it has to do with her physical appearance. Lélia Gonzalez (2020) opined that the exploitation of black *anafemales*, which is a product of a myth about the black *anafemale* body, has been sidestepped by feminist movements headed by white middle-class women. The sexualization or the implication of the sexualization of black *anafemale* body is an important fact in most black-dominated societies. According to Gonzalez (2020), the black *anafemale* body is viewed as an object of sexual exploration by men. She makes the case of young black *anafemales* who were contracted by adult women under the pretext of working for them as domestic assistants, only for them to be sexually violated by the children of these same women. Gonzalez states:

> There are still, for example, 'ladies' who try to hire beautiful young black women to work in their homes as maids, but the main aim is for their young children to be able to 'initiate themselves' sexually with them. (Needless to say, the salary of a maid is extremely low). With this, we have yet another example of the economic-sexual overexploitation we talked about above, as well as the reproduction/perpetuation of one of the myths spread by Freyre: that of the special sexuality of black women[3] (GONZALEZ, 2020, p. 60).

In Ada's case, there was a willingness to maintain the standard expectation of most people about young girls, which is that they are assumed to be sexually active without any proof. For Ada, her virginity was supposed to be protected as it was a portal to a world of different possibilities. Despite not knowing much about sex, Ada had to play along because admitting she had not had sex would seem "strange." The narrator observes that though the desires were there, she was shielded from materializing them because "it was not meant for her" (EMEZI, 2018, p. 51). It is important to note also that one of the marks of the *Ogbanje* child is the difficulty with initiating or maintaining sexual relations. As observed by Ifi Amadiume, heterosexual encounters proved difficult or often time toxic as the *Ogbanje*'s ties with the other world presume that they can only have allegiance to one side of the divide. Therefore, having sex or maintaining an amorous relationship in the human world is often difficult for an *Ogbanje*.

Also, elements of the third gender are depicted as Ada's other identities are gradually unveiled in the story. Asughara, who appears to be assertive and aggressive, embodies what are thought to be masculine traits which contend with the idea of how women are perceived in heteronormative societies. Owing to her being raped by Soren, Asughara takes a centre position in Ada's body and begins to speak for and "protect" her. Asughara's form of protection was the manipulation of men into submitting their bodies to her to explore her sexual desires rather than the other way around. Arising from her traumatic experience with Soren, Asughara develops an uncontainable desire for men's bodies, as depicted in the story. This action subverts the heteronormative idea of a woman being expected to remain on the receiving end of men's sexual advances. Asughara's arrival marked the suppression of the femininity of Ada and all other things that

[3] Our translation of the following text: "Por exemplo, ainda existem 'senhoras' que procuram contratar jovens negras belas para trabalharem em suas casas como domésticas; mas o objetivo principal é que seus jovens filhos possam 'se iniciar' sexualmente com elas. (Desnecessário dizer que o salário de uma doméstica é extremamente baixo). Com isso temos um exemplo a mais da superexploração econonômico-sexual de que falamos acima, além da reprodução/perpetuação de um dos mitos divulgados a partir de Freyre: o da sexualidade especial da mulher negra" (GONZALEZ, 2020, p. 60).

accompany it. It is possible to glean that Ada was not the one in her body when Soren resumed his sexual relations with her.

> He took her back to his room, and the wounds on her arms didn't stop him, the memory of her sitting in the sheets and screaming didn't stop him. No, the boy fucked her body again, that day and every day afterward, over and over. He would look into her eyes and swear in time with his thrusts as he fucked her, never bothering with a condom, always coming inside her. 'I fucking love you. You have no idea how much I fucking love you.' Except Ada wasn't there anymore. At all, at all. She wasn't even a small thing curled up in the corner of her marble. There was only me (EMEZI, 2018, p. 65).

The use of bawdy language is not a natural feminine characteristic. The narrator's stylistic choice of the word "fucked," rather than a euphemism, allows for two interpretations. First, it underscores that the sex was non-consensual, emphasizing that Ada was being violated. Second, Asughara's presence reinforces the separation between Ada's body and her consciousness, showing that the body (anatomy) and the mind (identity) exist independently. Ada was relegated, and Asughara took prominence to block the memory of the painful experience Ada's body was being subjected to. The marble referred to represents Ada's mind, and her absence from it illustrates her ability to disconnect from the real world. It also shows the fluidity of her identity. We could glean the aggressiveness in Asughara's narration as it attempts to take control of Ada's body, asserting that it is impervious to the violence inflicted by Soren. Asughara comments: "She might as well have been dead. I was powerful and I was mad, he could not touch me no matter how hard he pushed into her body, he could definitely not touch her. I was here. I was everything. I was everywhere" (EMEZI, 2018, p. 64). Ada's anafemale body develops a self-protecting mechanism that is connected to her identity which prevents her from being directly affected by the actions of her violator.

Another image portrayed by Ada's body is that it is divinity. As earlier argued, Ada is an Ogbanje, which means that she maintains constant relations with the other side. Her body becomes a tool for the veneration of her "Mother." It should be observed that "Mother" here refers to the ideology of communal living that epitomizes the Igbo culture. Mother also refers to *Ala*, the Igbo deity of birth, rebirth, and fertility.

Despite being the daughter of *Ala*, Ada struggles with being an *Ogbanje*, which means that she has to return to her "brothersisters." An important piece of information here is the word "brothersister" which translates to *Umunne* in Igbo. It is a gender-neutral

term, further foregrounding the emphasis on collectivism rather than individuality and the fact that social relations are not defined by gender or anatomy. In traditional Igbo societies, children birthed by the same mother usually ate from the same pot. This singular act promoted and strengthened familial ties between the children from one mother. It is interesting how this dialectic is presented in *Freshwater,* as it is also believed that *Ala* is the supreme mother from which we all came.

It should be recalled that Ada's crossing into the human world has been interpreted as occurring through the land portal. This means that her type of *Ogbanje* must have been one that negotiated with the *Onabuluwa*, the deity of misfortune, which makes heavy demands on the body, including blood sacrifices of its host. Ada's body becomes a medium to appease the deity through the mutilation of her skin. This act serves as a form of resistance and survival for Ada, who visibly struggles to stay in the human world and hence has to appease the other side.

It is important to argue that this deviation from conventional gender roles may not necessarily be queerness. Besides being a fairly recent term in feminist and transgender discourse, it is believed that "queer" does not adequately capture the complexity of Ada's identity. Additionally, Ada's sexual experiences are never depicted as sources of pleasure but rather as acts of protest resulting from her rape. Hence, she reverses the power dynamic in every sexual encounter, which gives the idea of her being in control — trait conventionally associated with masculinity. Therefore, the lack of pleasure or attraction for people has more to do with the spiritual dimension of her identity rather than her anatomy.

The concept of the third gender is also expressed through Ada's other manifestation, Saint Vincent, who has a masculine name but appears less masculine. It is noteworthy that among all her manifestations, Asughara happens to be the most assertive and aggressive. However, it is impossible to tell what gender category Asughara would be classified into because the name does not suggest any gender. Despite the presence of Saint Vincent and Ada's decision to appear in male clothing to emphasize her masculine side, Ada often falls back on Asughara when she needs to engage in sex.

> She welcomed his delicate masculinity arranging itself in folds inside her; she welcomed his company because she was, of course, always lonely. It brought her a small amount of grief when she realized that he was restricted to only a dreambody because hers was simply wrong. Her body worked for her Asughara, but Saint Vincent would be neutered within it, with nothing weighing down

> between his legs, just canals lined in velveteen. His hungers were different, but simple. Saint Vincent wanted soft nape of a girl's neck against his mouth and he wanted it enough that went to get it for him. (EMEZI, 2018, p. 125)

Little is known about Saint Vincent, and Ada never introduced herself as him, but it can be inferred that a change in her outfit signaled an intention to express the masculine traits of Saint Vincent. Interestingly, Ada's defence for the existence of Saint Vincent is that "everything has existed in another form prior to its current one" (EMEZI, 2018, p.124). This signifies that though bodies are reinvented through reincarnation, we still maintain some connections with our former selves. In essence, Saint Vincent may have been one of the former selves of Ada that had been reinvented and re-embodied in the isotopy and multiplicity of human existence. This may be crucial to understanding that gender is not fixed or time-bound; it exists in a continuous state of flux and beyond the bounds of linear time.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper has examined the notion of biological determinism as expounded by classical Eurocentric philosophies, which place maleness or physicality in a privileged position while relegating other bodies to the margins. In this context, the white man takes prominence and extracts certain benefits from this position. The imposition of imperialism on the African subject is witnessed in the subjugation, exploitation, and displacement of Africans, especially the African *anafemales*.

According to Oyěwùmí's theoretical framework, patriarchy is equally a construct as the notions of a "woman." Pre-colonial African societies operated in a non-gendered form of social relation. It is natural to assume this position because the Yoruba and Igbo languages lack gender-specific pronouns. Hence, where does the notion that being male equals superiority and being female connotes inferiority come from? The construction of the African woman is a product of slavery and imperialism, whose ultimate goal was the complete dominance of Africans.

The African *anamales* were more viable during the trans-Atlantic slave era because they were a means of entrenching the capitalist tendencies of the enslavers. The *anafemale*, on the other hand, was not so viable according to the enslavers but was not

spared from the dehumanization already been inflicted upon the African peoples. Black women were reduced to domestic servants, primarily tasked with taking care of the homes and children of the white enslavers. In this process, the construct of the black mother was established (Evaristo, 2020; Rodrigues, 2023).

According to Nora Chipaumire (2014), the black African female body has always been on a collision course with power, masculinity, and whiteness. It is a never-ending contest, which formed the focus of this paper. The fundamental idea is that the condition of the black African *anafemale* body has been shaped by the phallocentric views of the imperialists, which position the male body as a body of reason and the female body as only mattering as a site for regeneration, therefore lacking essence.

However, it is necessary to put forward an African feminist perspective on the lingering questions of gender and sexuality. Again, African societies were not founded upon biological determinism. However, if we must take the concept of dualism of gender, it can only mean that there is more than one form of anything — a key principle in Igbo cosmology. Fundamentally, this opens up the possibility of the existence of other genders, which has been the main argument of this paper.

A case in question is the Ada in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*. As has been explored, her identity as an *Ogbanje* expands the concept of a third gender as she straddles the human and spirit worlds. Her unsuccessful attempts at maintaining heterosexual relationships reinforce her condition as *Ogbanje*, whose allegiance is more to the other side. Though her biology never changed, her identity was always in a state of flux.

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