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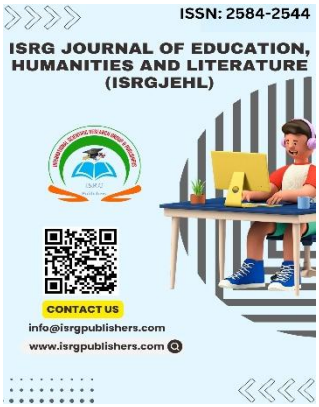

Bisexuality and Gender Fluidity in Akwaeke Emezi's The Death of Vivek Oji

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Abstract

Sexuality or any ancillary issues related thereof are areas many Africans abhor or shy away from; perhaps as a result of cultural and traditional values and ethos. This paper however examines bisexuality and gender fluidity in Akwaeke Emezi's The Death of Vivek Oji through the critical lens of queer theory, emphasizing Judith Butler's concept of performativity and Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality. Anchored upon a qualitative textual analysis, the paper interrogateshow Emezi destabilizes binary gender constructions and heteronormative expectations by foregrounding a protagonist whose identity traverses normative categorizations. Vivek's embodiment of both masculine and feminine traits, coupled with his fluid sexual and emotional attachments, challenges the ontological fixity of gender and sexuality. Drawing on Butler, the analysis reveals how Vivek's performative acts—wearing women's clothing, adopting feminine mannerisms, and exploring non-normative desire—constitute a radical assertion of queer becoming. Simultaneously, Rich's notion of the "compulsory heterosexual" is invoked to expose the family, societal, and cultural imperatives that violently enforce heteronormative conformity, thereby leading to Vivek's tragic erasure. The paper argues that Emezi's narrative resists these regimes by centering queer desire and presenting an alternative vision of fluid, self-determined identity. Findings suggest that The Death of Vivek Oji functions not only as a literary intervention in African queer discourse but also as a site of affective and political resistance to colonial-gendered norms. The text affirms bisexuality and gender fluidity as valid modes of existence, situating Emezi as anessential voice in contemporary African queer literature. This paper contributes to the growing body of scholarly efforts to theorize queerness beyond Western paradigms, attending to the specificities of post-colonial and Nigerian contexts.

Keywords: Bisexuality, Gender Fluidity, Performativity, Compulsory Heteronormativity, African Queer Literature

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Introduction

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) emerges as a key literary text in contemporary African queer discourse that presents a deeply detailed exploration of bisexuality, gender fluidity, and the violent repercussions of heteronormative social systems. Rooted in the Nigerian socio-cultural background, the novel interrogates the enforced binaries of gender and sexuality while foregrounding the lived realities of those whose identities defy conventional categories. The central character, Vivek Oji, inhabits a liminal space—emotionally, sexually, and corporeally—resisting the epistemological limits imposed by colonial and post-colonial heteropatriarchal structures. Vivek's existence as both a transgressive and vulnerable subject challenges normative ideologies of gender and sexuality that continue to dominate African societies. This paper thus explores bisexuality and gender fluidity in the novel through the lens of queer theory, engaging Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality as key analytical tools.

Judith Butler's seminal formulation of gender as performative— "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 191)—serves as a foundational framework in this analysis. Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity but a set of enacted behaviours that over time produce the illusion of coherence and naturalness. This contextualization is pertinent to Vivek's character, whose performative embodiment of femininity resists the rigid masculinity expected of Nigerian male bodies. By wearing dresses, growing out his hair, and embracing affective softness, Vivek engages in gender acts that subvert dominant norms and foreground fluidity over fixity. The performative choices he makes are not simply aesthetic but ontological and political—articulating a selfhood that queers gendered expectations.

Similarly, Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" elucidates the systemic ways in which societies enforce heteronormative desire and repress queer identifications. Rich asserts that heterosexuality is not merely a sexual preference but an institution that compels conformity through cultural, political, and family coercion. This is reflected in *The Death of Vivek Oji* through the community's response to Vivek's non-conforming gender presentation and relationships. The novel dramatizes how the violence of compulsory heterosexuality manifests in psychic trauma, social ostracism, and ultimately, physical annihilation. Vivek's death, therefore, is not only a narrative event but a metaphor for the erasure of queerness within hegemonic cultural frameworks. However, Emezi's novel does not capitulate to this violence. Instead, it recuperates Vivek's queer life through fragmented storytelling, inter-subjective memory, and affective resistance, projecting a counter-narrative that celebrates non-normative identities.

The qualitative methodology employed in this paper involves close reading and interpretive analysis of the novel's character development and thematic resonances. This approach allows for a textured understanding of how queerness is constructed, contested, and ultimately reclaimed within the text. The focus on bisexuality and gender fluidity situates the analysis within larger discourses on African queer identities, challenging the assumption that queerness is a Western import and instead revealing its embeddedness within indigenous and post-colonial African realities. Scholars such as Amadiume (1997), Nnaemeka (2005), and Tamale (2011) have argued for the presence of non-normative sexualities and gender expressions in precolonial African societies, asserting that colonialism introduced and enforced many of the rigid gender binaries and sexual taboos now seen as traditionally "African." Emezi's novel can thus be read as a decolonial gesture—reimagining African identity beyond the restrictive legacies of colonial modernity. Furthermore, Emezi's own identity as a non-binary and trans author complicates the relationship between fiction and autobiography, challenging the one to confront the instability of gendered subjectivity. Their work blurs the boundaries between the personal and the political, fiction and testimony, drawing attention to how narrative can function as both survival and resistance. *The Death of Vivek Oji* becomes a space in which queer desire and gender nonconformity are not only represented but theorized, contributing to a growing corpus of African literature that resists the epistemic violence of compulsory heteronormativity and affirms queer becoming as a legitimate mode of existence.

In examining the novel through the intertwined frameworks of performativity and compulsory heterosexuality, this paper illuminates how Emezi's text reconfigures gender and sexual identity as fluid, contingent, and deeply situated within cultural politics. It argues that the narrative provides a potent critique of the structural violence faced by queer bodies in African contexts while simultaneously projecting a vision of resilience, desire, and self-fashioning that transcends normative limitations. In doing so, it positions *The Death of Vivek Oji* as a vital intervention in both literary and theoretical conversations about queerness, identity, and post-colonial subjectivity in African literature.

Gender Fluidity and Bisexuality in African Literary Scholarship

The scholarly engagement with gender fluidity and bisexuality in African literature has evolved in recent decades, reflecting a shift toward inclusive and inter-sectional understandings of identity. While queer theory has historically emerged from Western academic contexts, its critical tools have been increasingly mobilized to interrogate literary texts that foreground non-normative gender and sexual expressions in post-colonial settings, particularly within African literature. Foundational queer theorists such as Adrienne Rich (1980) and Judith Butler (1990) have challenged the fixity of identity, arguing that both gender and sexuality are socially constructed through performative acts and institutional enforcement. Butler's concept of performativity destabilises gender binaries by positing identity as an ongoing performance rather than a pre-given essence. Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality exposes the normative pressures that marginalize or erase queer subjectivity, including bisexuality, within both private and public spheres.

Within African literary studies, the interrogation of gender and sexuality has often contended with the legacy of colonialism, which imposed binary logic and moral codes that disrupted indigenous epistemologies of embodiment and desire. Scholars such as Amadiume (1997) and Tamale (2011) have emphasized that precolonial African societies exhibited more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality than contemporary post-colonial states suggest. Amadiume, for instance, documents the presence of dual-sexed and female husband roles among the Igbo, illustrating that gender fluidity was embedded in indigenous cultural systems prior to colonial intervention. Similarly, Tamale argues that colonial Christian moralism imposed rigid heteronormative frameworks that persist today in African legal and social institutions. Despite these insights, representations of

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bisexuality and gender nonconformity in African literature have historically been scarce, often rendered invisible due to cultural taboos and censorship. However, a new wave of African writers and scholars are challenging this erasure. Writers such as Unoma Azuah, Jude Dibia, Chris Abani, Chinelo Okparanta, and Akwaeke Emezi have contributed significantly to a growing corpus of queer African literature that resists the silencing of dissident sexualities. Okparanta's Under the Udala Trees (2015), for instance, presents a poignant portrayal of a bisexual woman navigating both personal desire and social repression in Nigeria. Azuah's work also foregrounds female bisexuality and queer coming-of-age narratives, challenging hegemonic constructions of African femininity and sexuality (Azuah, 2016).

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) fits squarely within this emerging body of queer African literature. As a non-binary writer who openly resists gender categorization, Emezi brings both lived experiences and critical intentionality to their narrative construction. Recent scholarly appraisals of their work emphasize how Emezi's queer narrative form and character identity to foreground fluid embodiment and bisexual desire (Okuyade, 2021; Dunton, 2022). Their protagonists often exist in liminality states—inhabiting spaces between male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, living/dead—thereby troubling binary ontologies. This liminality is especially relevant for bisexuality, which is often marginalized not only in heteronormative discourses but also within mono-sexual queer frameworks. Bisexual characters in African literature have historically suffered from narrative invisibility or erasure, making Emezi's explicit engagement with bisexual desire both innovative and politically significant. In addition to this submission, literary scholarship increasingly emphasizes the necessity of contextualizing queer African texts within local socio-political realities. Ekine and Abbas (2013) advocate for a decolonial queer framework that resists the universalizing tendencies of Western queer theory by foregrounding African histories, cultures, and epistemologies. They caution against projecting Western paradigms onto African texts without attending to local specificities. This call for contextual specificity aligns with Emezi's narrative strategies, which embed queer resistance within the fabric of family, religion, language, and communal memory. Vivek's queer identity is not imported but inscribed within the complexity of Igbo culture, family obligation, and spiritual ambiguity.

The intersection of gender fluidity and bisexuality in literary scholarship has gained prominence as critics move beyond conventional analyses of mono-sexual identities to explore the complexities of non-binary and fluid expressions of sexuality. A significant aspect of this shift is the growing recognition that bisexuality—often marginalized within both heterosexual and homosexual discourses—demands a diversified theoretical approach. While bisexuality has been historically framed as a transitional or ambiguous phase in sexual identity, contemporary queer theory challenges these reductive narratives by asserting bisexuality as a legitimate, autonomous mode of sexual orientation that disrupts the binary logic of heterosexual/homosexual categorization (Hickson, 2019). This is particularly relevant for African literature, where queer identities, including bisexuality, are often silenced due to cultural taboos or legal and social prohibitions against same-sex relationships.

Within the context of African literature, the visibility of bisexuality is notably absent in many works due to socio-cultural norms and the pressures of maintaining heteronormative family structures. However, there is an increasing body of scholarship that highlights the representation of bisexual characters and queer relationships in contemporary African writing. Bisexuality is not only explored as an individual sexual preference but also as a form of resistance to oppressive structures of power. The discourse surrounding bisexuality in African literature is also deeply entwined with the socio-cultural understanding of gender roles and family structures. In much of African literature, sexual orientation and gender identity are shaped by traditional expectations that assign individuals to specific roles based on their biological sex. These roles are often reinforced by religious and family structures that dictate acceptable modes of behaviour. Scholars such as Nzegwu (2006) have argued that African gender systems are often based on a fluid understanding of gender roles, especially in precolonial societies where roles were not as rigidly defined. However, colonialism and the introduction of Western Christianity and legal systems disrupted these indigenous understandings, introducing binary gender roles that continue to shape modern African identity. In this sense, bisexuality and gender fluidity, as represented in contemporary African literature, can be seen as acts of cultural resistance that challenge colonial-imposed gender norms and sexual expectations.

In addition to the cultural context, the development of bisexual and gender-fluid characters in African literature also reflects the global shift toward recognizing the complexity of human sexuality. Works by African authors are increasingly informed by international discourses on LGBTQ+ rights, decolonization, and the body. While queer theory originated within Western contexts, it has been adapted to interrogate the specificities of African sexuality and gender politics. Scholars such as Epprecht (2008) and Makumbi (2016) have examined how queer identities, including bisexuality, are interwoven with post-colonial narratives of resistance and survival. These scholars argue that the visibility of queer characters in African literature is not just about sexual liberation but about reclaiming agency within socio-political systems that have historically silenced and marginalized sexual minorities.

Bisexuality, in particular, challenges the binary structures that undergird both Western and African sexual politics. While homosexuality has garnered more visibility in both African and global queer discourse, bisexuality remains a contested and often misunderstood identity. Bisexual people are frequently stigmatized by both heteronormative and queer communities, accused of being indecisive or opportunistic (Gurevich, 2016). In African context, where sexuality is often framed as a private and moral matter, bisexuality is particularly a taboo. Thus, the representation of bisexuality in literature not only subverts these stigmas but also demands recognition for fluid forms of desire that do not conform to a singular, stable identity.The literary representation of gender fluidity is similarly vital in the ongoing decolonization of the body in African literature. In post-colonial contexts, where the effects of colonialism continue to shape cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality, literature provides a space for imagining alternative forms of selfhood. The presence of gender-fluid characters in African literature provides an opportunity to envision a future where identities are no longer bound by colonial-imposed categories. Emezi's exploration of a non-binary protagonist who navigates the complexities of gender and sexuality challenges the essentialist narratives that often dominate both African and

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Western discourses. This is crucial for social and cultural shifts toward acceptance and understanding of gender diversity.

The growing body of queer African literature thus serves as a critical site for the articulation of gender fluidity and bisexuality. Centering these often marginalized identities, authors such as Azuah, Okparanta, and Emezi, contribute to the reshaping of African literary traditions. Their works offer a space for the exploration of new sexual and gender possibilities that resist colonial legacies and advocate for greater recognition of diverse forms of self-expression and identity. In the context of contemporary African literature, bisexuality and gender fluidity are not just thematic concerns but represent acts of resistance that challenge both historical and contemporary systems of control and oppression.

Performativity and the Architecture of Compulsory Heteronormativity

This discourse explores the theoretical scaffolding upon which the analysis of bisexuality and gender fluidity in Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* is grounded. Queer theory provides the principal analytical lens, with particular emphasis on Judith Butler's concept of performativity and Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality. These frameworks enable a detailed interrogation of how gender and sexuality operate not as stable ontologies but as contingent practices shaped by social norms, cultural scripts, and historical power relations. Butler (1990) reconfigures gender not as a natural expression of biological sex, but as an effect of repeated performances that align with culturally intelligible norms. For Butler, gender materializes through a stylized repetition of acts, gestures, and discourses, all of which are governed by what is deemed culturally coherent. In this view, Vivek Oji's gender identity is not a deviation from a stable norm but a subversive iteration that exposes the instability of gender itself. Vivek's fluid embodiment, which alternates between masculine and feminine performativities, unsettles the assumption that gender is innate or binary. Their identity is not merely androgynous but radically queer in the sense that it resists legibility within dominant gender taxonomies. As Butler (1993) later elaborates, such performative disruptions expose the fictionality of the norm and create space for alternative modes of becoming.

Adrienne Rich's (1980) critique of compulsory heterosexuality complements Butler's performative framework by emphasizing the institutionalized nature of sexual orientation. Rich asserts that heterosexuality is not merely a personal preference but a political institution sustained by economic, cultural, and ideological mechanisms. Bisexuality, within this schema, is rendered illegible or suspect because it defies the either/or logic upon which heterosexual/homosexual binaries rest. This theoretical erasure is mirrored in social realities, where bisexual people often face invalidation, hypersexualization, or accusations of confusion. Within *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's bisexuality is not only marginalized by societal norms but also rendered unspeakable within family discourse. The affective turmoil experienced by characters in the novel reflects Rich's argument that compulsory heterosexuality structural relationships, inheritance, and moral legitimacy.

The intersection of Butler and Rich's theories provides a potent framework for analyzing how Vivek's identity disrupts both gender and sexual norms. Vivek performs femininity through dress, mannerism, and effects while engaging in intimate relationships with both male and female characters. These acts are not simply expressions of an inner truth but strategic negotiations with normative visibility. In this way, Emezi's narrative enacts what Butler describes as "gender trouble," a form of agency enacted through stylized dis-identification with hegemonic norms (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Vivek's identity cannot be reconciled within dominant ideologies that require coherence between assigned sex, gender expression, and sexual desires. Instead, they embody what Butler (2004) later terms "precarious life"—a life whose value is not universally recognized, and whose mourning is socially constrained.

In addition, the novel's social context—set within a conservative Nigerian society governed by colonial legacies and religious dogmas—intensifies the stakes of queer performativity. As queer African scholars like Tamale (2011) and Ekine and Abbas (2013) observe, African queer subjectivities are often situated within hostile environments that conflate queerness with moral degeneracy or Western contamination. Within such a milieu, queer resistance is not only existential but epistemic; it challenges dominant ontologies of personhood. Vivek's resistance is therefore not overtly political but ontologically radical: by living and loving outside sanctioned boundaries, they rupture the architecture of heteronormativity from within. Their death, while tragic, becomes a narrative strategy that foregrounds the precarity of queer life in hostile spaces, echoing Rich's insistence that the erasure of lesbian and bisexual existence is both ideological and material.

Emezi's use of first-person plural narration, spectral presence, and nonlinear time reinforces this theoretical disruption. The fluid temporality of the novel resists the linear logic of development and identity consolidation, paralleling the fluidity of Vivek's own becoming. In this sense, the narrative structure itself performs queerness—it disorients, refracts, and defies normative resolutions. Such formal innovation aligns with what Halberstam (2011) describes as "queer time," a temporal frame that departs from heteronormative milestones and embraces failure, ambiguity, and non-reproductive futures. Thus, the theoretical apparatus of Butler and Rich—when filtered through post-colonial queer critique—illuminates the interplay of performance, repression, and resistance in *The Death of Vivek Oji*. It also affirms the necessity of reading African queer literature not through deficit models but as sites of epistemic possibility, where new forms of subjectivity and kinship emerge against the grain of normative life. In other words, the interlocking frameworks of Butler's performativity and Rich's compulsory heterosexuality find fuller resonance when considered alongside the embodied strategies of resistance enacted by queer subjects in heteropatriarchal postcolonial contexts. *The Death of Vivek Oji* not only problematises essentialist notions of gender and sexuality but also interrogates the very institutional apparatuses—family, religion, medicine—that reinforce normative scripts. These structures operate through what Butler (2004) terms "grids of intelligibility," which determine the legibility of a subject's life and death. Vivek's refusal to abide by these grids—his gender-nonconforming performance and bisexual orientation—renders him socially unintelligible, even within his most intimate relationships.

This social unintelligibility becomes a source of vulnerability and, ultimately, narrative violence. The denial of recognition from family and community is not merely emotional but ontological; it constitutes a negation of personhood (Butler, 2009). Vivek's mother, Kavita, while loving, struggles to comprehend her child's difference, invoking a maternal gaze laced with normative

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expectations. In this way, even love becomes a site of coercion, mirroring Rich's (1980) critique that heteronormative institutions often mask their violence beneath the façade of care. Vivek's death is not merely a plot device but the culmination of epistemic and social rejection—a symbolic outcome of a society unwilling to make room for fluid identities. Furthermore, Vivek's bisexuality, though central to his self-expression, is narratively marginalised—a metafictional commentary on the erasure of bisexual subjectivity. Bisexuality in both literary and theoretical discourse often functions as a spectral category, one that disrupts binary logics but is rendered unstable or deviant (Yoshino, 2000). In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, this tension is mirrored in the clandestine relationship between Vivek and Osita, which is shrouded in guilt, secrecy, and family taboo. Their intimacy, while tender, is also politically fraught, reflecting what Rich terms the "institutionalization of heterosexuality" that polices kinship and inheritance. Osita's own internalized homophobia and complicity in maintaining silence after Vivek's death exemplify the subtle mechanisms through which compulsory heterosexuality sustains itself—not only through overt violence but through complicity and silence.

Therefore, queer performativity in the novel is not solely a site of trauma—it is also a mode of becoming. Vivek's navigation of gendered embodiment, especially through his adoption of feminine dress and mannerism, signifies a rearticulation of the body as a text of resistance. This aligns with Butler's assertion that performativity, while regulated by hegemonic norms, is never fully determined by them; it is precisely within the repetition of norms that subversion becomes possible (Butler, 1990). Vivek's embodiment becomes an "unruly archive" of possibilities, where femininity is not confined to CIS female bodies, and desire exceeds binary sexual orientation.

In extending Butler's framework, theorists such as Muñoz (2009) propose the concept of queer futurity—the idea that queer life gestures toward a horizon of potentiality rather than normative resolution. Vivek's posthumous narration—speaking from beyond the grave—embodies this spectral futurity. Their voice, though silenced in life, transcends death, offering an alternative temporality and epistemology. In this liminal space between life and afterlife, between male and female, between love and taboo, Vivek exists as an unresolved presence, a queer ghost haunting the heteronormative order. Thus, Emezi constructs a narrative that does not merely depict a queer subject but theorizes queerness as a mode of defiance, temporality, and embodiment. The novel resists closure, embracing instead the ambivalence that Butler identifies as foundational to gendered and sexual being. Vivek's subjectivity is not reducible to a singular identity label—transgender, non-binary, gay, or bisexual—but is rendered in all its multiplicity, echoing what Anzaldúa (1987) terms a "mestiza consciousness"—a site of intersection, hybridity, and resistance.

Queer Desire and Gender Disruption in *The Death of Vivek Oji*

Bisexuality, an often marginalized aspect of human sexuality, is one of the central themes in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Through vivid portrayal of the characters of Vivek, Osita, Juju, and Elizabeth, the text presents an exploration of bisexuality in a manner that questions conventional understandings of sexuality and stereotypes surrounding non-normative sexuality. One of the main characters through which bisexuality is explicitly explored is Osita. Osita's bisexual desire is made known against the backdrop of normative society, where rigid gender norms and expectations often obscure non-binary identities. His bisexuality is depicted as fluid which transcends binary categorizations of sexual orientation. He reveals that "There had been one or two girls at school that I'd knacked before, but..." (Emezi, 29) "No man had touched him since Vivek died..." (Emezi, 45). Throughout the text, Osita forms intimate connections with both men and women, defying normative expectations and asserting autonomy over his sexual desires. However, to save himself from normative backlash, Osita lies to his parents that he has a girlfriend in Nsukka not mentioning that he is as well sexually attracted to men. He creates the impression that he is heterosexual. But Vivek knows the truth and he says to him in private: "Maybe it's not a woman you're seeing in Nsukka...One of my friends at boarding school used to lie like you. He even had one of his classmate's sisters pretend to be his girlfriend" (Emezi, 67).

Osita's attractions are not portrayed as mere deviations from normative norms but rather as integral aspects of his identity. The text explores Osita's internal struggles and desires with sensitivity and portrays his bisexuality with depth. Through the depiction of his character, the text disrupts the monolithic understanding of sexuality. Therefore, bisexuality is not portrayed as a fixed identity but rather as a spectrum of experiences fashioned by the characters' sexual desires and connections. Osita, expresses his sexual feelings of attraction towards Vivek, his cousin and childhood friend, blurring the lines between brotherhood and romantic love. Osita reveals that "I kissed him like I wanted to seduce uncertainty away, slow and gentle...Gradually, I felt him relax and relief overwhelmed me. His mouth softened undermine and then he was kissing me back..." (Emezi, 126). But the death of Vivek spurs him to "fuck only women...It felt safer..." (Emezi, 45). The text, by implication of Osita's fluid sexual desire, confronts the assumptions and biases about bisexuality and projects the diversity of human sexuality.

The examination of bisexuality in the text, however, is entwined with themes of identity and self-discovery. Vivek's bisexuality is a catalyst for his journey of self-exploration. His character defies normative expectations throughout the text. He genuinely clinches to his authentic self. Reflecting on his sexual encounter with Osita, he admits that "...if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. They could have it. I'd take the blinding light of his touch, the blessed peace of having him so close, and I would stop being a man. I was never one to begin with, anyway" (Emezi, 131). The text reveals Vivek's non-normative sexuality as a source of strength and empowerment, which makes his mother, Kavita, to rethink her preconceived notions of sexual orientation. However, the text does not merely present bisexuality as a standalone aspect of Vivek's identity; rather, it weaves it into the fabric of normative expectations and cultural norms. To Vivek, he "...knows what they say about men who allow other men to penetrate them. Ugly things; ugly words. Calling them women, as if that's supposed to be ugly too" (Emezi, 131).

Through Vivek's relationship with his family members, particularly his parents, the text exposes the complexities of negotiating non-normative sexuality within a conservative cultural context. Vivek's sexual orientation challenges the patriarchal expectations of his father, Chika, who struggles to accept Vivek for who he is. "He said nothing more to Kavita about his shame, or the new headstone, or the photographs" (Emezi, 228). Vivek's mother, Kavita, on the other hand, resists her own internalized biases and fears. She takes her dead son's photographs "...out of the drawer and arranged them in an album, which she had hid under her side

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of the mattress. She pored over it for hours...trying to find the child she'd lost, trying to commit to memory the child she'd found" (Emezi, 228). The family dynamic mirrors normative attitudes towards non-normative sexuality, foregrounding the pervasive stigma and discrimination faced by individual characters that do not conform to heteronormative standards. Similarly, Juju's character defies conventional expectations of sexual desire. Her fluid sexual desire enhances the portrayal of bisexuality in the text. Juju stares at Elizabeth's "...skin...the smooth cleavage that the singlet couldn't quite cover...her legs, the smooth bulge of her calves, the soft places behind her knees..." (Emezi, 139). Juju, however, has "...been looking at girls that way, with interest in the texture of their flesh..." (Emezi, 139-140). It is despite the clarity that Vivek and she "...fit into each other's lonely worlds" (Emezi, 137).

Elizabeth's sexual desire fluctuates over the course of the narrative, and goes beyond conventional binaries and defies heterosexuality. Elizabeth's intimate relationship with both Osita and Juju portrays sexual desire as dynamic, shifting and morphing in response to individual character's experiences and emotional connections. In a conversation with Osita about their first sexual expedition, Elizabeth intones that if Osita "...didn't do a good job..." (Emezi, 34) she would not have returned to him for another sexual expedition. It is expedient to note that Elizabeth encouraged him to touch her despite her sexual attraction to girls. Elizabeth's fluidity of sexual desire reflects the complexity of human sexuality. "She and Juju were in a new relationship, hiding it from all their parents..." (Emezi, 132) because "...who could they even go and say that to?" (Emezi, 142). Elizabeth, however, looks "...like such a lesbian that it was a miracle Aunty Maja hadn't realized she was knacking her daughter..." (Emezi, 181). Her sexual attractions, however, are not confined to one gender but rather span a spectrum of possible intimacy with both male and female genders. Her character, therefore, reflects the fluid nature of sexual desire and experience.

Juju's character as stated earlier, defies normative norms of sexual desire. "Between her new relationship and what was happening with Vivek..." (Emezi, 133) Juju is distracted. She has fallen in love with Vivek "...in a way – not like she fell for Elizabeth later, but she and Vivek had clicked" (Emezi, 137). Her bisexual character gives a different perspective on sexual desire that transcends conventional categories. It is "...her first time dating a girl..." (Emezi, 133) and "...the terrifying feelings..." (Emezi, 133) makes her uncomfortable yet she wants to please Elizabeth by buying her some books. Juju reasons that she could "...at least do that one as her girlfriend" (Emezi, 133) because she has "...been feeling guilty about not being present enough" (Emezi, 132). Through the various character portrayals the text projects the fluidity of sexual desire as a natural and integral aspect of human experience. In other words, the characters of Osita, Elizabeth, Vivek, and Juju depict that sexual desire is not static but rather is fluid.

Gender fluidity emerges as one of the central motifs woven into the fabric of the text. Vivek's gender identity is depicted as dynamic. It dismantles conventional binaries and defies normative expectations of gender role. In the text, Vivek oscillates between masculine and feminine identities. He likes to dress "...in dresses of all kinds, sleeveless ones, short tight ones, loud printed ones, his lips painted red or pink or just glossed till they shone, his eyes always lined, sometimes with a bright splash of eyeshadow" (Emezi, 216). His character challenges the notion of fixed gender roles and brings to limelight the fluidity of gender identity. His experience of gender fluidity is marked by moments of both joy and struggle as he traverses the tension between family expectations and his own sense of self. Vivek tells Osita and Juju to make sure his parents "...don't find out about Nnemdi" (Emezi, 238) his feminine identity. The text's portrayal of Vivek's gender fluidity is not merely superficial but projects into the internal conflicts and external pressures that shape his identity. The inner conflict of Vivek is captured in his lament about external perception of his gender identity. He laments: "I'm not what anyone thinks I am. I never was. I didn't have the mouth to put it in words, to say what was wrong, to change the things I felt I needed to change..." (Emezi, 38). His exploration of gender is depicted as a genuinely personal and introspective journey that draws attention to the complexity of gender fluidity as an aspect of individual experience. For Vivek, "...everyday it was difficult, walking around and knowing that they were wrong, so completely wrong, that the real me was invisible to them. It didn't even exist to them" (Emezi, 38).

Vivek's character defies masculinity. He complicates conventional notions of gender identity and expression. The text's projection of gender fluidity is knotted with the theme of social acceptance. Vivek's journey is marked by struggles to reconcile his gender identity with normative expectations, particularly within the context of Igbo culture. Mary draws Kavita's attention to the danger of Vivek's expression of his gender fluidity in a normative society. She argues that "...It's not safe for him to be walking around Ngwa looking that...feminine. If someone misunderstands, if they think he's homosexual, what do you think is going to happen to him?" (Emezi, 71). The text sensitively portrays the tensions and conflicts that arise as Vivek traverses his gender fluidity within the Igbo culture that privileges traditional gender roles.

The text's portrayal of gender fluidity disputes preconceived notions and biases surrounding gender. It confronts the limitations of binary thinking and embraces the diversity of gender identity. Through Vivek's insistence on taking the feminine name Nmemdi, the text campaigns for inclusivity and acceptance of non-binary identities and gender diversity within sociocultural background. The text draws attention to the importance of self-acceptance and self-expression in Vivek's passage towards embracing gender fluidity when he declares: "I'm Nnemdi" (Emezi,234) to Osita who corrects his initial use of the masculine pronoun "he" to "she". Therefore, Vivek's gender identity is not solely about conforming to normative expectations or seeking validation from other characters but rather about finding inner peace and authenticity.

Vivek's gender fluidity challenges traditional power dynamics and structures within Igbo society. He "...wonders if anyone is pleased that I finally got my Igbo name", Nnemdi (Emezi, 245) after his mother "...has changed the inscription on..." (Emezi, 245) his grave to "VIVEK NNEMDI OJI..." (Emezi, 245). She has changed it from the initial inscription which only acknowledges him as Vivek Oji. The text's portrayal of Vivek's gender fluidity also serves as a critique of the gender binary itself. Maja reveals that "...sometimes I forget that he's not one of the girls" (Emezi, 103). Depicting Vivek's gender fluidity as natural and valid, the text disrupts the binary thinking that underpins many normative attitudes towards gender. Chika admits to Kavita that "The boy has his own life, and we can't control every aspect of it" (Emezi, 73). Therefore, Vivek's existence as both male and female challenges the notion

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that gender is fixed and immutable. It considers the possibility of an expansive and inclusive understanding of gender identity as fluid.

On the other hand, the text interrogates how normative norms and expectations marginalize and silence individual characters that deviate from traditional gender roles. It is evident in Vivek's admittance that he knows he is "...dancing with death every day..." (Emezi, 245), especially when he appears in public with "...his toes...painted a red that matched the flowers on his dress" (Emezi, 232). Through Vivek's defiance, the text questions oppressive systems that seek to limit individual character's freedom and expression of fluid gender.

Vivek's experiences as a gender-fluid individual intersect with his sexuality. Therefore, the text does not isolate gender fluidity as a singular aspect of Vivek's identity. It rather depicts it as part of a web of intersecting identities. Portraying the intersections, the text emphasizes the significance of understanding gender fluidity within the context of systemic oppression and social inequality and draws attention to the significance of support and solidarity in affirming gender fluid identities. Vivek finds solace and acceptance among his peers, Somto, Juju, Osita, Ulunne, and Elizabeth, who embrace his gender fluidity and provide unconditional support. They keep his fluid gender identity "...from their parents, to protect Vivek from those who didn't understand him. They barely understood him themselves, but they loved him, and that had been enough" (Emezi, 212). The relationship with his peers serves as a source of strength and empowerment for Vivek. It allows him to traverse the challenges of self-discovery and self-acceptance in a normative society that often marginalizes non-conforming identities. Juju captures it in her revelation to Kavita that "...Vivek said it was just part of who he was, that he wanted the opportunity to express it, so that's all we gave him, that opportunity...he was so happy, it really made a difference" (Emezi, 217).

Conclusion

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* presents a richly textured exploration of bisexuality and gender fluidity within a deeply heteronormative and patriarchal Nigerian context, challenging entrenched binaries of identity, embodiment, and desire. Anchored upon the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler's performativity and Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality, this paper has illuminated how Vivek's queer subjectivity subverts normative configurations of gender and sexuality through embodied resistance, affective disobedience, and ontological multiplicity. The novel's narrative structure—inflected with nonlinear temporality, spectral presence, and shifting perspectives—mirrors the fluidity and complexity of Vivek's self-fashioning, while also critiquing the sociocultural mechanisms that render queer African lives precarious and unintelligible. Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper foregrounds how Vivek's bisexual and gender-fluid identity resists assimilation into dominant heteropatriarchal paradigms, ultimately enacting a queer ontology that transcends legibility, biological determinism, and cultural expectation. In so doing, Emezi not only narrates a queer life but theorizes queerness as a site of possibility, precarity, and liberation, compelling literary and critical discourse to expand its epistemological horizons and ethical commitments to marginalized forms of becoming.

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