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Non-Binary Identity and Fragmented Selfhood in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

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Abstract

In recent Nigerian fiction, questions of gender identity and embodiment have gained renewed focus. Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater explores this space by presenting a protagonist, Ada, who embodies multiple fragmented selves—Asughara, Saint Vincent, We, and Ada—each shaped by trauma, spirituality, and cultural belief. These internal figures operate as distinct identities within Ada, disrupting the coherence of a singular self and reflecting the complexity of gender as experienced beyond the male–female binary. Through close textual analysis, this study highlights how these selves reflect a non-binary, fluid experience of identity that resists categorisation as strictly male or female, and instead foregrounds the lived realities of those whose identities fall outside normative categories. This paper concludes that Emezi's work not only expands representations of queer subjectivities in African fiction but also offers a new lens for understanding gender diversity, the multiplicity of selves, and embodiment.

Keywords: Non-binary, identity, fragmented selves, queer subjectivities, gender diversity

Introduction

In recent years, Nigerian literature has increasingly explored questions of gender and identity, often challenging dominant binary heteronormative narratives and embracing diverse expressions of multiple selves. Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* emerges as a landmark text in this evolving discourse, offering a compelling exploration of non-binary identity within both Nigerian and diasporic contexts. By portraying a protagonist whose sense of self is divided among multiple, gendered and non-gendered personalities, the novel transcends traditional frameworks and redefines the possibilities of identity. *Freshwater* thus holds a central place in literary discussions on gender fluidity and multiplicity in Nigerian literature.

Freshwater is an autobiographical fiction that follows the life of Ada, a young Nigerian woman born with multiple identities, each embodying different

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aspects of gender and selfhood. The narrative begins with Ada's early life in southern Nigeria, where she is a troubled infant and a source of deep concern to her family. Her parents, Saul and Sachi, successfully prayed her into existence, but as she grows into a volatile and splintered child, it becomes clear that something has gone terribly awry. Upon reaching adulthood and moving to America for college, the group of selves within her grows in power and agency. A traumatic assault leads to the crystallisation of her alternate selves: Asughara, Saint Vincent, and We. As Ada fades into the background of her own mind, these selves come to dominate, steering her life in a dark and dangerous direction.[1]

Representation of Non-binary Identity in *Freshwater*

A non-binary person is someone who does not exclusively identify as male or female, or who identifies as both. Their gender identity falls outside the traditional binary categories of "man" and "woman". According to Bosson et al., a non-binary individual may identify as a mix of genders, or as neither.[2] Thus, a non-binary person can identify with more than one gender, no gender at all, or possess a fluctuating gender identity that does not remain fixed.[3]

In Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*, Ada, the protagonist, is portrayed as a non-binary character who embodies multiple distinct personalities within a single body. These internal selves are not just imagined or symbolic; they each possess their own voices, desires, gender identities, and functions in Ada's life. The four central personalities are: 'the Ada' (the core personality and the socially recognisable self), Asughara (a dominant, assertive female persona), Saint Vincent (a gentle and calm male presence), and We (a genderless, plural identity that identifies as neither male nor female). These personalities are so deeply interwoven into Ada's sense of self that the boundaries between them blur, leaving Ada to question her own authenticity and whether any one of these selves can truly be called the 'real' Ada:

> Sectioning the Ada gave her isolated pockets of memory, each containing a different version of her. There were versions to whom bad things had happened and, therefore, there were also versions of her to whom these things had not happened. The Ada could look back on her life and see, like clones, several of her standing there in line. This terrified her, because if there were so many of her, then which one was she? Were they false and her current self-real, or was her current self-false and it was one of the others, lost in the time, who was the real Ada?[4]

Despite her internal struggle over which of the personalities is truly hers, Ada eventually arrives at the profound realisation that her identity is not limited to a

[1] Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (New York: Grove Press, 2018).
[2] Jennifer K. Bosson, Joseph A. Vandello, and Camille E. Buckner, *The Psychology of Sex and Gender* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 3.
[3] Claire Ruth Winter, *Understanding Transgender Diversity: A Sensible Explanation of Sexual and Gender Identities* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2010).
[4] Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (New York: Grove Press, 2018), 229.

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single self. Rather, she embraces the multiplicity within her, recognising that all her selves — 'We,' Asughara, and Saint Vincent — are parts of her and yet complete in themselves. This moment of clarity is captured in her declaration: "I am here and not here [...] I am my others; we are one and we are many"[5]. This statement encapsulates the fluid and collective nature of her identity, where fragmentation does not mean disconnection but a unified coexistence of diverse selves. Each personality inhabiting Ada has its own distinct traits, desires, and behaviours — Asughara is bold and destructive, Saint Vincent is gentle and serene, while We is genderless. Yet, despite their differences, they all reside within Ada, who serves as the central vessel through which these selves express themselves. Together, they form the core of Ada's non-binary identity, which resists singular categorisation. This fluidity is further illustrated when the narrative notes: "Ada was living in multiple realities at once, floating loosely between them, forgetting what each one felt like as soon as she moved to a new one"[6].

This suggests that Ada inhabits multiple emotional and psychological states, with different personalities taking turns to lead. When one personality emerges, the others recede, allowing that self to experience and act independently. For example, when Asughara is dominant, the other personalities withdraw, enabling her to exist within her own reality. Ada herself acknowledges this structure when she states that there are versions of her to whom bad things have happened and versions to whom they have not, highlighting that each personality has unique memories and experiences: "Asughara's presence was not our presence, never that. 'We' fell back when she burst forward [...] but we are many and she was just one of us"[7].

Through this layered depiction of identity, Emezi not only portrays the psychological and spiritual complexity of Ada's existence but also critiques rigid constructions of selfhood. They offer a model of identity that is plural, evolving, and inherently non-linear. Ada's multiplicity therefore challenges traditional conceptions of gender as strictly male or female. In a similar vein, each of her personalities, representing different gender identities, uses distinct pronouns such as 'I,' 'We,' 'He,' and 'She' — demonstrating that Ada's gender identity is fluid and unconstrained by societal binaries. She may be male (Saint Vincent) one day, female (Asughara) the next, and gender-neutral ('We') at another, highlighting her refusal to conform to fixed gender categorisation.

Non-binary Character Identity Variation in *Freshwater*

While Ada's multiplicity has already been established, a closer examination of her four distinct selves — Asughara, Saint Vincent, We, and Ada herself — reveals further variation in identity that underscores her non-binary nature. These personalities are not just psychological fragments; they function as independent entities, each with their own desires, behaviours, and gendered expressions. Ada is portrayed as gentle and emotionally sensitive, Asughara as

[5] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 248.
[6] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 230.
[7] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 95.

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selfish and destructive, Saint Vincent as calm and tender, and We as a neutral, stabilising force.

This differentiation becomes even more apparent in how each personality navigates relationships, fashion, and other aspects of lived identity. Their distinct preferences in romantic and sexual attraction highlight their autonomy. Asughara, for example, is drawn to multiple men, 'We' is attracted to married men, Ada (the core personality) prefers kind, emotionally available men , meanwhile, Saint Vincent desires women:

> Asughara play with men...the men all confessed their love to her...she left them, after she threw them all away[8]. ... "We" took lovers who belonged to other people, kissed husbands after the sun has set[9] ...but Ada was gentleness[10] ... Saint Vincent wanted a girl[11].

These varying attractions show that each personality within Ada expresses a different facet of identity, especially in terms of gender and sexuality. The autonomy of each self-reinforces Ada's non-binary condition: she is not one person expressing fluctuating traits, but many selves sharing one body — each complete in their own right. This multiplicity challenges the singular and fixed understanding of identity often assumed in dominant cultural and gender norms.

Ada: The Core, Emotional and Gentle Personality (Female)

Ada is portrayed in the novel as the core personality who serves as the physical body for all of her multiple selves. She is depicted as emotional and gentle, often putting others before herself. However, the other personalities do not like being referred to as Ada, as they view themselves as entirely separate individuals. For instance, Asughara feels insulted whenever people mistake her for Ada:

> Itohan's family couldn't tell the difference[...] I was a little insulted to be mistaken for Ada. She was so gullible: she went to threw herself right into the arms of people who broke her; she would see danger and instead of avoiding it like a person with sense, she would walk behind its teeth. As if she would be safe. I refused to believe I look anything like her-it must have been the humans who just couldn't tell the difference[12].

Asughara, is offended whenever she is mistaken for Ada, whom she considers naive and emotionally vulnerable: "She walks right into the arms of people who broke her," Asughara remarks with scorn as seen in the extract above. This frustration stems from the fact that outsiders cannot distinguish between the

[8] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 214.
[9] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 217.
[10] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 168.
[11] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 135.
[12] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 82

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personalities, since they all occupy Ada's body. Asughara notes, with irritation, that people "usually couldn't tell the difference".This confusion becomes most evident in Ada's romantic life. Outwardly, it appears that Ada is involved with two men at once — Soren, her boyfriend, and Itohan's brother. However, this perception is misleading. While Ada is in a relationship with Soren, it is Asughara who is emotionally and physically drawn to Itohan's brother. Because both relationships occur through the same physical body, outsiders assume a single identity is acting, when in reality, each relationship is driven by a separate self:

> Ada ...loved the boy, I allowed it. It would make things easier for her. She was not like me; she was not strong[13] ... I liked Itohan's brother...Soren didn't count [14]...I continue to sleep with Itohan's brother...Ada went with him to get the morning-after pill...but she was never the one he slept with- I was [15].

Itohan's brother believes he is romantically and sexually involved with Ada because she is the physical body he interacts with. However, unbeknownst to him, it is Asughara — one of Ada's alternate personalities —who is truly engaging with him. Asughara is the one who initiates and maintains the relationship, while Ada herself remains emotionally uninvolved. Because Itohan's brother cannot perceive the internal distinctions between these personalities, he assumes that all his interactions have been with Ada. This misunderstanding highlights the complexity of Ada's internal multiplicity and the difficulty others have in recognising the presence of distinct, autonomous selves within one body.

In addition, Ada's gentle and emotionally vulnerable nature often prevents her from managing situations that demand boldness or emotional detachment. When Ada falls in love with Ewan , a man who is already in a committed relationship, she cannot bring herself to confront the emotional consequences of such an entanglement. It is in this moment that Asughara takes over, stepping in as the more assertive and reckless alter ego, fully aware that Ada would never willingly pursue someone already involved with another woman. Asughara's intervention once again underscores her role as a coping mechanism , one who protects Ada by doing what Ada herself is unwilling or unable to do.

> I've been feeling bad about what I'm doing to my girlfriend, he confessed[...] I wonder how the conversation would have gone if he could have reached Ada in that moment. She probably would have reciprocated; she always responded to honesty and vulnerability, she was sweet like that. But I had her body that night, and so he had to deal with me and I really hate when people talk about feelings[16].

[13] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 72
[14] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 81
[15] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 84
[16] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 114

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This passage highlights the stark contrast between Ada and Asughara. Ada, known for her empathy and emotional sensitivity, would likely have responded to Ewan's confession with compassion, perhaps even choosing to end the relationship to avoid causing harm. Asughara, on the other hand, is emotionally detached and dismissive of vulnerability. She is unconcerned with feelings and chooses instead to proceed with the relationship on her own terms. This moment reinforces the autonomy of each personality, as well as Asughara's dominance in situations requiring emotional detachment.

Furthermore, the narrative reveals that Ada is not always aware of what her alternate personalities do while in control of her body. This results in moments of confusion and shock when she later discovers their actions. For instance, Ada is unaware that the 'We' personality had been engaging in a sexual relationship with her boyfriend, Soren. She only realises this when Soren casually references birth control pills, leaving her confused and unsettled because she has no memory of being sexually intimate with him. This moment not only illustrates the disconnect between Ada and her alters but also underscores the emotional and psychological complexity of her fragmented selfhood.

> "Soren stood up from the bed and looked down at our body. "You need to get birth control pills." His voice was calm[...] The Ada didn't understand. She blinked and there was a pause, a teetering moment. She had no idea what he was talking about. Then slowly, information started filtering through[...]the words swirled in nausea around her. Birth control pills, because this boy had released clouds into her. But she couldn't remember any of it and she couldn't remember saying yes because she couldn't remember being asked[17] .

Ada does remember her supposed sexual relationship with Soren or how many times it has happened, because it is the 'We' personality who has been intimate with him, not Ada herself. Overwhelmed by the revelation, Ada lets out a scream — a response that, unfortunately for Soren, triggers the emergence of Asughara. When he follows her to understand her reaction and express his feelings, he finds himself face-to-face not with Ada, but with Asughara — a completely different personality of whom he is unaware:

> Soren came looking for her...He was angry that Ada had disappeared and furious when he saw the crusted scratches on her forearms. He took her to his room.[...] "I love you. You have no idea how much I love you". Except Ada wasn't there anymore. At all, at all[...] there was only me[...]she was gone[...]and I was mad...I liked making him angry. It was good that he lived with pain. Ada was never there[18].

[17] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 62,6.
[18] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 70.

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Soren believes he is talking to Ada, but in reality, he is speaking to Asughara, a completely different personality. Unaware of the switch, he expects Ada's usual warmth and affection. However, Asughara, who harbours hatred towards him, responds with hostility. This creates a tense and confusing situation for Soren, as he is met with a version of Ada that not only does not reciprocate his feelings but actively dislikes him, completely altering his expectations of the interaction. As depicted, Ada's personality is fragmented by the distinct selves that inhabit her body. These alters often take control, complicating her relationships and leaving others, like Soren, confused and unaware. Ada's experience reflects the complexity of non-binary identity, where conventional gender expectations fail to account for the fluid and multifaceted nature of selfhood. Like many non-binary individuals, Ada does not conform to a single, fixed identity, and this lack of clarity often leads to misunderstanding from those around her. Ada's fluctuating nature reflects how non-binary people are often misunderstood, as their identities do not conform to clear categories.

Asughara: The Reckless and Destructive Personality (Female)

Asughara is one of the characters within *Ada*. She is a strong-willed woman who values her independence and has no time for emotions. It is essential to note that when Asughara's personality emerges, she prefers to wear bold makeup, often choosing deep shades of lipstick and darkening her eyes. To her, this is beyond makeup; it is a statement of who she embodies. In essence, this dramatic look reflects her bold and reckless nature, which contrasts with Ada's preference for a more natural appearance. The distinct makeup styles serve as a clear way to differentiate the two personalities:

> Of course I came. Why wouldn't I? Let me tell you, Ada meant every world to me. But I can't lie; this third birth of a thing was a shock. I had been there, minding my business as part of a shifting cloud, then the next thing I knew, I was condensing into the marble room of Ada's mind... I already knew that Ada was mine: mine to move and take. I stood her body up...then I moved her to the house down the hill[19]. I made my mouth as *red* as silk, I turned my eyes *black*, and I made sure no one trick me. When I did cruel things, I did them with my eyes open...I was selfish[20].

It is further revealed that Asughara usually takes over when Ada is in a vulnerable state. Asughara believes she is a much stronger personality who can handle anything, unlike Ada, who struggles with her emotions. According to Asughara, her reckless nature stems from the fact that she was "born out of a scream," which symbolises the intense, raw energy and defiance that define her: Ada loved me, sha. She loved me because I hated... I was reckless; I had no conscious, no sympathy, no pity. She loved me because I was strong and I held her together. [21] But I came to the world the way I did because of Soren...I was a

[19] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 67,68.
[20] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 82.
[21] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 77.

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child of trauma; my birth was on top of a scream ...and by the time Ada brought me...I was ready to consume everything I touched [22].

It is clear that Asughara's destructive nature stems from the trauma she is born out of. She emerges as a result of Ada's deep emotional pain and a scream that comes from the shock and devastation Ada feels upon discovering that she has been intimate with Soren multiple times without realizing it. This revelation causes immense trauma for Ada. Asughara, born from that pain, becomes a powerful, reckless personality. Asughara embodies destruction, and Ada often allows her to take over during her most vulnerable moments, believing that Asughara's strength and lack of emotional restraint make her more capable of handling difficult situations:

> In the moment of her devastation, the moment she lost her mind, that girl reached for me so hard that she went completely mad, and I loved her because when I flooded through, she spread herself open and took me in without hesitation, bawling and broken[23].

Similarly, Asughara is revealed to be an unforgiving and vengeful personality, which aligns with her destructive traits. For example, when Ewan rejects Ada and ends their fling because he is already in a relationship with someone else, Asughara immediately takes over. Fuelled by her desire for revenge, she seduces Ewan's friend, making it clear that she seeks to hurt Ewan in return for his rejection. This act illuminates her ruthless nature, using manipulation and destruction as a way to retaliate:

> Eventually, Ewan was the one who ended it. "I can't do this anymore," he said. "I can't be with you anymore. She makes me happy". For the first time. I let Ada cry in front of him. I watched her sob into his shoulder[24] But I was unforgiving and petty and vindictive. Don't expect anything else[...] I targeted one of Ewan's friends[...] A boy who had always seemed to hate Ada, but I could see him and I could smell the truth[...] there was bound to be desire lying under his hatred[...] so it was easy to take him home at the end of the night, and of course he agreed[...] I had Ada put her pain with me because I could use it as fuel, I could do things with it she couldn't[...] Trust me, I didn't need Ewan, and if Ada thought she did, I would make her forget[25].

Asughara always emerges when she senses Ada's devastation or distress. She uses Ada's pain as fuel to strengthen her vengeful and unforgiving personality. In this way, Asughara acts as both a coping mechanism and a protective shield for Ada. Her presence shields Ada from the full weight of her emotional

[22] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 80.
[23] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 78.
[24] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 124.
[25] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 126-127.

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struggles, but in doing so, she also embodies a more dangerous and reckless side that Ada cannot always control.

Furthermore, Asughara, unlike Ada, is revealed to have a strong preference for a more masculine appearance, which she feels represents the daring and destructive personality she embodies. This is evident when Asughara takes control of Ada's body and goes to the salon to cut her hair. The dramatic decision shocks everyone, including the hairstylists, who are well aware that Ada would never willingly cut her hair. However, they do not realize it is Asughara making the choice:

> Ada sat in one of the raise chairs and stared at her reflection, all that heavy hair hanging from her scalp. "Cut it off," she said. The stylists, even the other clients, were appalled ." [...] All that pretty hair?" they asked horrified. "You sure?". "I'm sure," Ada said. Of course she was. I was sure[...] I had arrived and something had to mark that, so cutting her hair felt correct. "Make the first cut then," the stylist said. She didn't believe Ada would do it, but she didn't know her and she certainly didn't know us[...] Ada took the scissors[...] the women in the room gasped, staring in shock. I grinned- Ada belong to me now...when she finished. She walked out of the salon looking more like me [26].

The act of cutting the hair may seem simple, but it holds significant meaning for Asughara's personality and what she represents. It goes beyond just a physical change; it symbolizes her complete takeover of Ada, not only in terms of personality but also in appearance. By altering Ada's hair, Asughara creates her own physical identity, marking a clear distinction between herself and Ada. This transformation reflects her full control, which is evident when she says, 'She belonged to me now'. Even Sachi, Ada's mother, notices the drastic change in Ada once Asughara has fully taken over:

> Saachi had walked out of the room...they had argued about Ada's cut when she first got there, and Saachi had left Bible verses in the bathroom on notes, about how a woman's hair was her crown. I had Ada ignore the notes. She was still getting used to moving with me... I made her different[...] " you used to smile", Saachi said. "You were such a happy child. Why are you not eating?". This was actually true, but the not eating was just an experiment I was doing, to see how close to the bone I could get Ada down to[27].

Sachi notices a significant change in Ada's personality, but she does not realize that it is not Ada at all but Asughara, a completely different person. Asughara, however, is aware that Ada may not be happy when she takes over and finds out that Asughara has made her lose a considerable amount of weight during her takeover. Despite this, Asughara is unconcerned. She is a selfish character who

[26] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 72-73.
[27] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 75.

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believes that since she currently controls the body, she has the right to do whatever she wants, regardless of how it might affect Ada later. Asughara's dominance over the body and her disregard for Ada's well-being reflect her complete detachment from the emotional consequences of her actions:

> She had dropped down to 114 pounds of flesh... I felt a new power, a flood of greatness that yes, Ada would regret later but for now it was good; and it meant I was an I, like I and I, like I wasn't going back to that larger we[...] I was free. I had elevated, transcended, in fact. Risen like stream until it was me standing in the field of Ada's body Asughara[28].

From this extract, it is seen how selfish and cruel Asughara is. She takes pleasure in the fact that Ada will regret the changes she has made to her body and has no remorse for her actions, knowing that Ada will be upset. In essence, this reflects Asughara's complete indifference to Ada's well-being. She is willing to cause harm and emotional distress, simply because she feels entitled to do whatever she wants while she controls the body.

The climax of Asughara's destructive personality occurs when she attempts to use Ada's pain as a means to push her toward suicide. In this moment, Asughara fully embraces her ruthless, vengeful nature, exploiting Ada's emotional suffering to drive her to the edge of despair. For Asughara, this is an opportunity to seize total control, no matter the cost. Her actions reveal the extent of her cruelty as she uses the pain that created her to break Ada entirely:

> It's not easy to persuade a human to end their life-they're very attached to it, even when it makes them reasonable, and Ada was no different. But it's not the decision to cross back that's difficult; it's the crossing itself. I had high hopes, sha, since Ada was in a lot of pain. It was always easier to push my agenda when she was hurting, and to be fair, she was always hurting[29][...] .in the middle of Ada's pain, I kept looking for a window I could use to take her 'home'. She didn't have the strength to fight me[30] [...] I calculated that if one tablet of cyclobenzaprine prescribed for Ada's sciatica could knock her out for thirteen hours, then a whole bottle of them would easily take her...she spilled the pills on the table...I followed its gaze, looking down at the thousands of milligrams that were on our side. I leaned to Ada's ear. "you know how they say take things a day at a time? I said. "You manage a pill at a time". And I kept the count for her. A few hundred milligrams down, several thousands...[31].

This shows just how destructive Asughara is, as she tries to obliterate everything in her path. Her attempt to make Ada commit suicide by taking pills

[28] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 76.
[29] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 163
[30] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 166
[31] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 192.

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proves that she is in total control at that moment, using Ada's pain to push her toward self-destruction. In response to Asughara's actions, the "We" personality takes over Ada's body, stepping in to stop Asughara from inflicting any more damage. The "We" personality acts as a protective force, preventing Asughara from going any further with her plans, including the possibility of ending their lives:

> Tell a child to was her body and she washes her stomach. Asughara was a fool for what she tried. Of all the paths she could have chosen, she went and picked the one that was taboo. she should have remembered that . [...] .none of us die like this[...] .so we were still caged inside the Ada[...] We painted the Ada's mouth and lined her eyes and we went out[32].

In essence, Asughara's reckless and destructive personality stands as a stark contrast to Ada's more reserved and emotional nature. Born from trauma and pain, Asughara becomes the embodiment of chaos, using her control over Ada's body to wreak havoc and manipulate those around her. In essence, her actions are driven by power and trauma, not by gender expectations, which reflect the complexity of non-binary identities. Asughara exists beyond the traditional binary of gender, embodying a fluid and unpredictable nature that defies simple categorization, much like how non-binary individuals navigate spaces that do not accommodate their multifaceted identities.

Saint Vincent: The Gentle and Calm Personality (Male)

Saint Vincent is the only male personality within Ada. Unlike Asughara, who is reckless and destructive, Saint Vincent embodies gentleness and softness, making him a calming presence among the other personalities. Saint Vincent represents purity and light, untouched by the darker emotions that sometimes define Ada's other selves. When he emerges, he brings a concentrated burst of peace and comfort, which the other personalities appreciate:

> There was another one born through the window. His name was Saint Vincent...The Ada named him and he remained in the marble of her mind[...] He was not expected to come through the window, but he did and so he was born[...] He was gentle, soft as a ghost. When he came, his pleasure was a concentrated burst of light[...] Saint Vincent was uncontaminated, quarantined...Where the Ada was not split and segmented, she and Saint Vincent might have been one thing together[33].

When Saint Vincent takes over Ada's body, a notable shift occurs: Ada, who is typically female, transforms into a male identity. This shift in gender is significant, as it marks the moment when Ada's body is no longer simply hers, but instead a vessel for a completely different self. As Saint Vincent controls the

[32] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 200–201.
[33] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 131–132.

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body, Ada physically appears and behaves as a boy, which reflects his male gender and persona. This transformation is not just about appearance but also involves changes in how Ada moves, speaks, and presents herself — showcasing the fluidity of identity within her multiple personalities. The fact that Ada can switch between genders depending on which personality is dominant further emphasises the complexity of her identity and the way her self-expression is not bound by a single, fixed gender:

> The Ada had been seen as a boy...The Ada felt like a trickster, which felt right. She could move between boy and girl, which was a freedom for her and for us[34] [...] when Saint Vincent showed up, the Ada was not surprised. She welcomed his delicate masculinity arranging itself in folds inside her[35].

It is important to note that because Saint Vincent is male and heterosexual, he experiences attraction to women. When he takes control of Ada's body, this attraction is expressed outwardly, leading those around her to mistakenly believe that Ada herself is a lesbian. However, this assumption is incorrect: it is not Ada who holds this attraction, but Saint Vincent — a male identity within her — who is interested in women::

> His hungers were different, but simple. Saint Vincent wanted the soft name of a girl's neck against his mouth and wanted it enough that the Ada went to get it for him. It was a clumsy attempt. The Ada tried to explain the existence of Saint Vincent to one of her college friends who he found beautiful...as the Ada spoke the words exposing Saint Vincent's existence and desires, she knew it sounded crazy[...] her beautiful friend was polite but uninterested [36].

From this passage, it becomes clear that Ada faces misunderstanding when trying to explain her situation to others. She attempts to clarify that she, as Ada, is not attracted to women, and that it is Saint Vincent — a male identity within her — who desires them. Despite her efforts to explain this however, her explanation sounds strange, and the women she speaks to struggle to believe her. This moment illuminates how difficult it is for others to understand the complexities of Ada's multiple personalities, especially when the behaviours and desires of these personalities contradict the external perception of Ada. Despite being rejected by Ada's friend however, Saint Vincent persists in pursuing his attraction to women. He takes control, dressing Ada in skinny jeans and going out to clubs where he meets his desired women: 'Saint Vincent step to the front. He dressed Ada in skinny jeans[...] Saint Vincent went to clubs [...] where he kissed women with Ada's mouth' [37].

[34] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 133.
[35] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 135.
[36] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 135.
[37] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 178.

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Because of Saint Vincent's actions, Ada's family begins to believe that Ada has suddenly become a lesbian. This confusion stems from their lack of awareness of Ada's multiple personalities. They are angered and confused by the change, especially since Saint Vincent, in Ada's body, is now living with his girlfriend, Donyen. The family's frustration grows, as they assume that Ada's behaviour represents her true desires — not realising that it is Saint Vincent, a male personality, who is making these choices: 'Ada was at her girlfriend Donyen's apartment... Everyone find out that Ada was dating women and flew into fits'[38].

Saint Vincent's character represents the fluidity of Ada's existence, as she shifts between genders based on which personality is dominant. This transformation challenges conventional understandings of gender and reflects the complexities of non-binary experiences. Saint Vincent's actions, driven by his male desires, also illustrate how his presence complicates the understanding of Ada's identity, as others mistakenly perceive her as a lesbian — unaware that these desires originate from a separate, male self. In this way, Saint Vincent embodies the non-binary struggle of being misunderstood and misrepresented by a world that expects fixed and easily identifiable gender identities.

We: The Gender Fluid Personality (Neither Male nor Female)

'We' are the first personality to be birthed, and they are the first characters introduced in the text. 'We' have been with Ada since she was in her mother's womb. The first notable thing about 'We' is their unique understanding of identity. While they acknowledge a connection to Ada, they make it clear that they are not fully the same as her. This distinction is emphasised in their words, as they describe themselves as "distinct" from Ada, even though they share the same body. This suggests that 'We' perceive themselves as an entity separate from Ada — a personality that exists within her but is not completely tied to her individuality:

> 'We' are *three* ...The first time our mother came for us, we screamed...her name was Saachi, she flew to London and married a man named Saul[...] By the time our body was embedded in her lining, they had moved to Nigeria and Saul was working in Umuahia[39]. They already had a little boy, Chima, who had been born in Aba three years before, but for this baby (us) it was important that they return to Umuahia [...] By the time she (our body) struggled out into the world...we were her and yet not...we were a distinct *We* instead of being fully and just her[40][...] We called her the Ada...the Ada (our body)[41] [...] we danced through her body, our body, the one that had been built so carefully for us. We were distinct in her head[42].

[38] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 182.
[39] Emezi, *Freshwater*, 1.
[40] Emezi, *Freshwater, 5.*
[41] Emezi, *Freshwater, 11.*
[42] Emezi, *Freshwater, 58.*

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From the extract, it is evident that 'We' see themselves as a distinct personality from Ada. Their existence within Ada reveals a further fragmentation — they see themselves as multiple, not singular, indicating a deep sense of multiplicity and division within identity.

It is important to also note that, in terms of gender, 'We' do not conform to traditional gender roles or classifications. They reject the labels of male and female, instead identifying as being "in between." This non-binary perspective further complicates their identity, as they are neither fully one gender nor the other. By stating they are "in between," 'We' introduce the idea of gender fluidity, highlighting the complexity of identity beyond the male-female binary. This aligns with the broader theme of non-binary experiences, where individuals do not feel confined to traditional gender categories and instead navigate a more flexible understanding of self:

'We have understood what we are, the place we are suspended in, between the inaccurate concepts of male and female'[43].

Furthermore, it is revealed that the 'We' personality feels Ada's physical appearance does not fully capture or embody their true essence. As a result, they decide to modify the body to reflect their own identity. They believe the body belongs to all the personalities and therefore should reflect their needs and desires. In particular, 'We' feel that Ada's feminine physical traits, such as her breasts, do not align with their gender-neutral identity. To better represent themselves, they choose to undergo a procedure to reduce the size of Ada's breasts. This decision stems from their belief that a smaller chest, one that does not resemble conventional feminine features, would create a more neutral and androgynous appearance:

> This body is ours. This girl was ours[...] she had to understand[...] The Ada used a therapist to assist with our carving plan and we discovered that humans had medical words-terms for what we were trying to do- that there were procedures, gender reassignment, transitioning. We knew what we were planning right[...] We considered removing the breasts utterly and tattooing the flat of her chest bone, but that decisiveness still felt wrong[...]So we chose a reduction instead of a removal; we cut down the C cups of blatant mammy tissue to small As, flat enough to not need brassieres, to not move, to be a stillness...small chests, small enough to where we didn't think of them as breasts ... we were neutral like we should have been[44] [...] This was our body and it would become what we wanted[45].

From the above, it is clear that through these changes, 'We' modify Ada's body to align with their internal sense of self, a self that exists beyond traditional

[43] Emezi, *Freshwater, 210.*
[44] Emezi, *Freshwater, 206-207.*
[45] Emezi, *Freshwater, 209.*

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gender boundaries. This transformation illuminates their non-binary and fluid gender identity, showcasing a self-concept that does not conform to the conventional male or female binary. In essence, it reflects their desire to express a gender-neutral identity that transcends societal norms.

Conclusion

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* presents a protagonist, Ada, who challenges the traditional binary classification of gender. Ada is portrayed as a complex, fluid identity that defies categorisation, embodying multiple personalities with distinct gender expressions. Through these different selves — Asughara, Saint Vincent, and 'We' — Ada navigates a wide spectrum of gendered experiences.

As Asughara, Ada assumes a traditionally feminine persona. When she becomes Saint Vincent, she transforms into a more masculine identity, displaying behaviours and desires typically associated with masculinity. However, the most striking aspect of Ada's identity is 'We', the gender-neutral presence that exists beyond the binary of male and female. 'We' expresses a non-binary identity, reinforcing the concept of gender fluidity.

This multiplicity of identity demonstrates that gender is not fixed, but fluid and multifaceted. Through Ada's journey, Emezi critiques the rigid constructs of gender and sexuality, illustrating that identity is not confined to societal norms, but can be diverse, evolving, and situated beyond traditional distinctions such as male/female or heterosexual/homosexual.

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