

Religious and Sociocultural Values and Their Role in Self-Identity Construction

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Abstract

Religious and sociocultural values play a significant role in constructing a person's self-identity and influencing their choices. This paper explores the religious and sociocultural values depicted in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) and the impact of those values on Vivek's life decisions. Vivek's self-identity construction is highlighted, as well as how religious and sociocultural values influence his decisions and isolate him from the world of adults in favor of spending time with peers he trusts and who show more tolerance and openness toward his choices. Through a sociocultural and textual lens, this study traces Vivek's transformation, and how his lifestyle choices impact both his appearance and the discovery of himself. This paper outlines why the choices Vivek makes do not match the sociocultural and religious values of his community, which leads him to isolate himself and choose a life he prefers, away from his family and the world of adults. His choices lead him to a tragic end, with his bewildered mother finding her son dead, rolled in colorful fabric, at her front door. Vivek's disorienting blackouts distract his parents from recognizing the shifts taking place in their son's life, beginning with changes to his appearance: long hair, interest in makeup, and women's dresses. His parents find out after his death about the life Vivek led as a homosexual, which the religious and sociocultural values of the community could not appreciate or approve of.

Keywords: religious, sociocultural, death, Vivek, identity, homosexual, style

1. Introduction

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Akwaeke Emezi uses a town in southeastern Nigeria as the setting for the novel. The beginning of the narrative reveals the death of the protagonist, Vivek: "They burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died" (p. 8). Vivek's mother opens the door to find her son wrapped in colorful fabric on the doorstep. She doesn't have any clue about what occurred. The narrative refers to a vague "they" without recounting specific details, arousing the reader's curiosity about what has happened. Then the story of Vivek Oji begins, with the reasons behind why he ended up dead on a doorstep revealed in a series of flashbacks. The narrative highlights how the life of Vivek evolves, unveiling the parts of himself he kept hidden from his family about the changes in his self-identity as a transgender person. Knowing about Vivek's end at the beginning does not mean that his life events, and the sequence of those events, are predictable. Instead, the element of suspense is heightened toward uncovering the reasons for his death in such a mysterious way.

Vivek keeps himself, isolated from his family and community. The only peers who seem to tolerate his sexual orientation are the daughters of the so-called "Nigerwives," foreign-born women who have married Nigerian men. Somto and Olunne, are two of these friends; their mother Rhatha is from Thailand. Vivek's neighborhood becomes multiethnic, with many cultures and social traditions blending together. In such a community, there are many individual lifestyles that Vivek can draw from to bring to himself comfort and peace.

Vivek's father, Chika, is distant and busy with his affairs and does not pay much attention to his son or recognize the shifts taking place in his son's life. While his mother is so overprotective that Vivek feels constricted, such overbearing attention does not provide him with a sense of security or peace. Accordingly, Vivek detaches himself from the world of adults to find a kind of solace among his friends and peers, particularly female friends, who show more tolerance and sympathy toward his transgender identity. In the absence of his parents' sexual and emotional orientation, Vivek grows up responding to his instincts that drive him to break the binary system of male or female, propelling him on his journey to discover his self-identity.

The paper is an attempt to examine the mysterious life of Vivek, and the role that community played in Vivek's decisions and self-identity formation. Using a sociocultural approach comprised of the community and family's religious values, this study explores the shifts in Vivek's life that determined the choices he made, as well as how such values influenced Vivek's options. It also explores how Vivek brought himself comfort and peace from realizing that he is queer, and from assuming the identity he prefers. A sociocultural approach brings society and culture together to examine how an individual's identity, beliefs, and values are shaped as part of a larger social process of influence from adults and the attitudes of peers. This research probes deeply into the conflict between Vivek's options and the social, religious, and cultural values of his community that run contrary to Vivek's desires.

Emezi narrates the story from different points of view to widen the reader's perspective, allowing deeper insight into the story of Vivek. Among those voices is Vivek's cousin, Osita, who narrates a large part of the story due to their close relationship. Later on, Osita's story is developed to take a different trajectory.

2. Emezi's Literary Work and the Development of the African Novel

Akwaeke Emezi is a Nigerian-Tamil author who was born in Umuahia and raised in Aba, both cities in southeastern Nigeria. They are ethnically Igbo, and attempt to infuse an African mythological spirit into their literary work. Emezi elucidates the concerns and traditions of African communities in their writing, particularly those of Nigerian communities. Even though Emezi lives in the United States, they give special recognition to their home of Nigeria in their narrative work, bringing Nigerian culture, traditions, mythology, and religious values to life in their novels.

Emezi's work has won many accolades, putting them on the path of unique writers who take care to build a body of work based on their home. Their debut novel, *Freshwater* (2018), was developed into a TV series, and also won the Nommo Award and the Edmund Award for Debut Fiction, among others. *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) received the Stonewall Book Award and was also nominated for the 2021 Aspen Words Literary Prize. This was followed by their memoir, *Dear Senthuram: A Black Spirit Memoir* (2021). Their young adult novel *Pet* (2019) was a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award and was nominated for the Lambda Literary Award in the category of Young People's Literature in the same year. *Pet* was also named a 2019 Best Book of the Year by the *School Library Journal*. In their literary work, Emezi explores the concepts of transgender and transformation in the lives of their characters, focusing on Igbo tradition and mythology. Emezi is not the only author who brings the spirit of the Igbo to their narrative. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe describes an African spirit that imposes unbreakable traditions. In cases where a tribe member deviates from these traditions, that member is isolated and punished. This is the case for the character Okonkwo, who is sent away from his community for his transgression.

Some African writers stress African culture and traditions in their fiction, using their home as raw material, blending facts with African myths and social values. Those authors might elaborate on various facets of their history that have been distorted by the colonial discourse, such as the depiction of Africa as a continent of cannibals in Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899). These authors realize they must shape their legacy themselves, to address the imbalance created by the West. Emezi recounts the rich legacy of the culture and social traditions of Nigeria's middle class, a community that is known to be multiethnic, in part from the arrival of foreign-born women who married Nigerians, known as "Nigerwives." Nigerwives have their special lifestyle and community organization that looks after their interests. They have established their own, separate world, where they socialize with each other and go about their daily activities freely, away from the complexities of the local indigenous Nigerian people.

Emezi's *The Death of Vivek's Oji* unravels the position of women in the Nigerian community, breaking down the various mythological, cultural, and religious values that are embraced by women that sometimes result in their destruction or the loss of their family. The imposition of such values can cause pain for the people around the women who adopt those beliefs, as occurred with Vivek and his journey to realize his self-identity. The novel examines the relationship between parents and their children, and between friends and their peers, highlighting narratives of sexuality, homosexuality, heterosexuality, the construction of self-identity, and the establishment of friendship and romantic relationships. In an interview with NPR journalist Ari Shapiro, Emezi explained their thinking behind *The Death of Vivek Oji*: "So, with Vivek, I wanted to show a character who is true to himself the entire way. There is no version of him that is more or less authentic than the other" (2020).

Joelle Cruz (2020) elaborated on African feminist and queer perspectives in literature, and what makes those approaches distinctive: "Finally African feminine queer perspectives can draw on holistic and pre-colonial indigenous logics, which emphasize community-building across different constituencies. Traditionally, African feminists focused on the inclusion of children, men, and women" (p. 3). African feminists stand against stereotypical assumptions "that construct Africa as a fundamentally anti-queer space" (p.3). Sexuality as a subject in African literary work is connected to African feminism. *The Death of Vivek Oji* unveils the construction of the queer

self-identity and the influence of the surrounding community's culture and traditions on that process. Some African literary works attempt to envision a space for liberation from the cultural, social, and religious shackles of the community. Such attempts may succeed in lifting a person out of the rigid restrictions of the community but in some cases, the removal may result in death. The literature shows how violence against certain genders or transgender people is derived from locals perceiving these concepts as part of a Western policy to weaken African nations. Therefore, they fight to maintain their rigid traditions and customs.

Chris Dunton (2020) outlined the diversity of African fiction, particularly in the areas of theme, narrative, technique, and form, as developed by renowned African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Thiong'o, and others. Through his examination of novels published between 2015 and 2018, Dunton illustrated the diversity of the African novel, highlighting a range of themes that in the past would have been considered taboo or irrelevant in African communities. African novel unfolds its topics through depictions of life experiences and in particular, through the experiences of immigrants who move to Western countries, such as the United States or Britain, and are exposed to a new culture and language. Diversity has become a hallmark of the African novel, however, sometimes African immigrant cannot escape their culture or traditions, as exhibited by their daily routines.

More recently, Nigeria has become a focus of the contemporary African novel, with Nigerian novelists such as Achebe, Soyinka, and Theong'o, as well as a new generation of novelists, including Emezi, carving out a place for the African novel in world literature. These authors represent authentic African literature, changing the narrative of African cultural and mythological legacy to reflect their experiences of the African life and culture they are part of. Rodwell Makombe and Tina Magaqa (2021) work to decolonize queer sexualities, focusing on Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018). They traced queer sexualities and how it is handled by African indigenous peoples, as well as how Emezi introduced queerness in their novel. African communities claimed that queerness is a Western concept, which helped them channel their culture and reality more strongly. Drawing from anti-colonial discourses, these communities determined that queer sexualities have no place among them and simultaneously, glorified their nationalistic values of African identity. Makombe and Magaqa investigated "how Emezi deploys the ogbanje concept to delineate the complexity of Igbo ontologies concerning sexualities. Secondly, to investigate how *Freshwater* uses ogbanje as a framework to locate queer identities and sexualities in African Cosmologies" (p. 24).

This study explores Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* using a sociocultural approach to highlight the shifts in the life of Vivek, as well as the roles his family and the community's values and traditions, play in Vivek's isolation to uncover his self-identity as homosexual. These influences in his life lead him to an unexpected death that leaves his mother puzzled when she finds her son's body on the doorstep; she then starts the journey of searching for the truth behind her son's death.

3. Self-Identity Construction and the Sociocultural Values of the Community

Vivek was born the same day as his grandmother Ahunna's death. That day was the beginning of a new life and the end of another: "it is the beginning and the end of everything" (p.14). Vivek shares something in common with Ahunna, a starfish mark on his foot. Vivek is the protagonist, and the narrative addresses the mysteries of his life and death.

Vivek's relationship with his family and the world of adults is marked with complexities. His father Chika keeps to himself, away from his son's problems, and does not bother with the details of his son's life. His mother Kavita is overprotective, placing restrictions on Vivek when his life requires more freedom: "You're keeping me in a cage!" he shouts. "You think I want to stay in this house every night like a prisoner?" (p.64). Vivek is fed up with the social restrictions imposed by his mother, in particular, as well as by the larger community. He wants to live his life freely and develops a striking physical appearance. His long hair and weight loss become noticeable, signs that something is wrong in Vivek's private life. Vivek intends to liberate himself from the constraints of his family and community, whatever the cost. Eventually, he pays for his choices with his life. The reader knows of Vivek's death in the first chapter, but that is only a prelude: "They burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died" (p. 8). The narrative does not share the identity of the rioters who burn down the market and perhaps, are behind the mysterious death of Vivek. Vivek's mother then begins the journey of unraveling the mystery of her son's death.

Vivek grows up weak, soft, and behaves like females. The scar on his foot, just like his grandmother Ahunna, is a sign that he may be a girl, according to local mythology and tradition, an assertion that is strongly denied by his parents: "Vivek was a boy and not a girl, so how can?" (p. 15). Due to Vivek's weak and soft character, his father decides to send him to a military academy, "to toughen up, to stop being so soft and sensitive" (p. 16). From early childhood, Vivek seems feminine and even though his father always remains distant, Chika cannot accept such vulnerable aspects of his son's character. It stigmatizes both and leads Vivek away from the cultural and social values

of the community, which does not accept a man who seems weak and feminine. Although Chika sends his son to a military academy, the school does not change Vivek's behavior or character to be more to his father's liking. In addition, Chika does not give his son sufficient time or consideration during such a critical stage in Vivek's life.

Vivek cannot resist the hidden desires of his sexual instincts: "Vivek rubbed the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. It's nothing. Just small-small blackouts, forget it" (p.21). Vivek's life begins to take different turns that reflect his hidden identity, first reflected in his appearance. His hair grows long, he loses weight, and his attention to his physical appearance becomes noticeable. Eventually, he acknowledges his sexual orientation and his appearance indicates the path he is going to take.

Vivek is well aware that the culture and traditions of his family and the community cannot accept him as transgender. As a result, he is very careful to hide his desires from his parents and adults. He is only open with his peers, the daughters of the Nigerwives, who show him tolerance and with whom he has an outlet for his sexual inclinations. He detaches himself from his family and the world of adults to find space of freedom in the houses of the Nigerwives, where he can live his feminine lifestyle freely. Eventually, Vivek's long hair and weight loss illustrate a significant aspect of the identity he chooses for himself. His aunt, religious Mary, believes that Vivek's long hair and insistence on distancing himself from adults is a sign that he is possessed by demons. Boys on the street throw bottles at him: "And every day it was difficult, walking around and knowing that people saw me one way, knowing that they were wrong, so completely wrong, that the real me was invisible to them. It didn't even exist to them. So: If nobody sees you, are you still there? (p. 30). He realizes that he has his own identity and his own life that is invisible to his friends, family, and community.

The sociocultural values and traditions of the community cannot accept Vivek's self-identity as a queer person. The community's view toward transgender people is denial, which makes children throw empty bottles at Vivek to express their rejection of a queer person. The community regards transgender people as immoral, a Western construction intended to weaken African communities and render them feminine. The indigenous people of Africa view masculinity as power, part of their cultural pride that they have to maintain. Vivek cannot deny his sexual orientation, and the absence of his father, who is always tied up with other private affairs, leaves him lost and struggling. Vivek needs his parents' guidance during the critical time of adolescence, to protect him from indulging his whims and taking the wrong path. Vivek encounters many challenges with his family and friends, and his unacknowledged transgender identity drives him to distance himself to find space to live his life.

The cultural and social values of the community, along with a religious background that is blended with myth, do not help Vivek. He is driven to pain and misery from his path to the queerness that determines his self-identity as transgender, a path that is rejected by the community. A transgender person in the Nigerian community becomes a social outcast. In the world of his peers, Vivek finds more tolerance toward his sexuality. He also finds safety in the homes of the daughters of Nigerwives, including Somoto and Olunne, whose mother is from Thailand, and Elizabeth, whose mother is from Texas. These women allow Vivek to indulge in his feminine behaviors, providing him with makeup, dresses, and other feminine items. Perhaps, these daughters of foreign-born wives are more open to Western culture and lifestyle, as they do not reject Vivek's sexual orientation.

The Nigerian community does not allow a brother to covet his brother's wife: "Chika stole a glance at Mary from the Veranda" (p. 10). His mother looked at him angrily, "'Mind yourself,' she warned as if she could read his mind. 'That's your brother's wife'" (p.10). The boundaries of the community's social values must be respected, and any sort of transgression is a violation of those values. The community has very strict moralities regarding relationships between family members, specifically sexualities. It seems impossible for a community that cannot accept an illegitimate glance between a man and a woman to accept a heterosexual or homosexual relationship outside the legal bounds of that community. Here, the reader realizes the community's sexual intolerance, and that the process of self-identity discovery that Vivek goes through may cause his death.

After Vivek's death, his desperate mother searches for an explanation for her son's mysterious life and death. She is determined to find out about the life her son led, even though her efforts will not bring Vivek back to life. In reality, Vivek not only develops a sexual relationship with strangers but also with his cousin, Osita. Osita struggled to protect him and accordingly, the relationship between the cousins took a sexual trajectory. Vivek's scar, which resembles the same one his grandmother had, prophesizes a girl in Nigerian mythology, although his parents try to deny the signs: "superstition, he said, it was a coincidence, the mark on their feet—and besides, Vivek was a boy, not a girl, so how can?" (p. 15). The community in the narrative, located in southeastern Nigeria, presents a meticulous cultural and social mosaic of the daily traditions of the Nigerian people. The novel harshly criticizes the intolerance of the Nigerian community toward the discovery of sexual self-identity.

The reader learns about Vivek's lifestyle through the perspectives of his friends, lovers, and relatives, such as Osita, whose protection of his cousin evolved into a sexual relationship. Osita's narrative reveals that he is closer to Vivek than the others, and he understands more about the details his life. When Vivek decides to declare his identity publicly, he walks down the street at a critical time—when rioting and chaos are rampant—wearing a dress to challenge the cultural, social, and religious values of the community. The rioters see Vivek's daring confrontation with the community's culture and traditions and they show him no tolerance, throwing stones at Vivek's head, ending the misery in his life. "Ahn! Kavita. You know how things are here. It's not safe for him to be walking around Ngwa looking that . . . feminine. If someone misunderstands if they think he's a homosexual, what do you think is going to happen to him?" (p. 50). The Nigerian community cannot accept the transgender orientation and therefore, Vivek is punished for breaking the cultural, social, and religious values of the community.

4. Religious Values and Their Impact on the Community

The community's religious values are embodied by Vivek's aunt Mary. When she notices the transformations in Vivek's life—how he grows his hair long and loses weight—Mary thinks he is possessed by demons. She assists Vivek because of her religious beliefs, even if those beliefs are just superstitions in the eyes of others. Mary's narrative illustrates how Nigerian beliefs are rooted within the heart of her religious practices. Accordingly, Vivek's aunt decides to take him to church to remove any evil, because spiritual disturbances cannot be resolved in the hospital. "'Let me take him to my church,' Mary insisted when she called that evening to ask how the visit went. 'It can't hurt, Kavita. They will try and remove any evil thing that has attached to him. You believe in prayer'" (p. 52). Mary views the church rituals as deliverance for Vivek's spiritual problem of demons, which accounts for his different appearance. "In Igbo culture, the term *ogbanje* refers to children who retain their spiritual connection after they have been born to their biological parents. The concept is located in a cultural worldview that perceives the natural physical world as interconnected with the spiritual world" (Makombe and Magaqa, 2021). Here, it is clear that Igbo culture impacts African writers, becoming raw material for novels, as *The Death of Vivek Oji* illustrates.

As an Indian woman, Vivek's mother is not concerned with such religious treatments. She does not believe in the religious or mythological rituals that Mary claims will heal Vivek and help him overcome his troubles by removing the evil from his spirit. Likewise, Vivek does not support the notion that the religious rituals of the church will heal him. On the contrary, the acts increase his suffering and drive him to even more misery. The community is unable to distinguish between Vivek's spiritual problems, physical disease, and the choices he has made: "'They are bastards!' he spat. 'You think it's all right to treat someone as if they're an animal? In the name of their useless deliverance? Mba, wait. They called it an exorcism'" (p. 53). The religious rituals of the church make the situation worse. Vivek suffers physically from the beating he receives in the church: "'They had to beat it out.' He lifted up his shirt, revealing a swath of dark red welts on he is side'" (p.53). "'Supernatural forces are feeding on him—on your child! Pastor said we must cut his hair because they are drawing their power from it, like the locks of Samson'" (p.54).

Emezi's characters represent *Ogbanje*, an expression in Nigerian Igbo culture of spirits who comes and go. Emezi explained in an interview with Arifa Akbar that such a character causes pain and suffering to their parents: "*Ogbanji* are children who die over and over again. They are considered to be tricksters, torturing their parents who hope they will stay alive" (2018). Vivek's death shocks his parents, especially his mother, who is determined to unravel the mysteries of his life and death alike. When she learns the secrets of his life, and his identity as transgender, Vivek's mother accepts the life he chose. As a result, she changed the inscription on his grave to reflect the life he lived, the life of Nnemdi, and the name by which he liked to be called. This act was also a kind of atonement for her ignorance about her only child's life.

The reader recognizes how the mingling of the community's religious beliefs with mythological tradition may have increased Vivek's suffering and ended his life. Kavita and the Nigerwives do not embrace these community beliefs and mock them because they reflect ignorance and superstition: "All the Nigerwives liked to make fun of what they called the fanatic Christians, always catching the Holy Ghost and convulsing on carpets...etc." (p. 58). These religious beliefs are rooted in the Nigerian community, especially those that are relevant to the human spirit.

5. Community Attitude Towards the Transgender Identity

Vivek begins to openly live a feminine lifestyle and emphasize his identity as transgender. When Vivek's peers decide to tell his mother the truth about his life, showing her some photos of Vivek dressed as a woman, she is shocked: "He was dressing like a woman?" (p. 139). However, the young generation of his peers, especially those with dual backgrounds, like Somto, do not see any shame in Vivek's exploration of his self-identity. On the contrary, they help him and give him a space to practice his sexuality: "He said he was dressing like himself" (p. 139). This younger generation shows more tolerance and openness toward Vivek's decisions, but the children on the street

cannot accept Vivek's long hair. Vivek's appearance goes against their values, and they throw empty bottles at him as an expression of their rejection.

In the adults' world, Vivek's transformation is a violation of their social and cultural values, and he should be punished. Many African novelists, and Nigerians in particular, argue that the traditional and mythological values of the community are red lines, and to cross their means to be punished. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo goes against the community's values, he has to leave his tribe for a while as a punishment. The community's values are viewed as a scary code that should not be broken, otherwise, that person should expect harsh punishment for their violation. Eventually, Okonkwo commits suicide, unable to adhere to the tribe's cultural, religious, and social values.

Here, Vivek is viewed as deserving punishment because he dares to walk down the street wearing a dress, visibly challenging the community's values on the day of the riot. When the rioters see Vivek's challenge to their traditions, they believe he should be punished. They throw stones at his head, causing his death and declaring the same for other violators of the community's code. They removed Vivek's Ganesh necklace, the symbol of his discovery of his self-identity, to demonstrate their refusal of his behavior. However, Vivek's mother recognizes the life of her son and believes in his self-identity. Vivek spent his life attempting to be true to his identity, to find out who he was in a world that did not want to recognize reality, especially when such details did not match the community's culture and traditions.

Ultimately, Kavita recognizes the life her son led. As an Indian, perhaps the traditions of the Nigerian community were not rooted in her life and did not influence her choices. She feels regret because she could not help her son live the life he wanted. To atone for her neglect, she changed the inscription on Vivek's grave to affirm her son's identity: "VIVEK NNEMDI OJI- BELOVED CHILD" (p. 156). This is her approval of her son's life, whatever it was, to acknowledge his queer identity. The name Nnemdi was the name that should have been given to him at birth since he believed he was a girl from the beginning. Vivek's desire to be called by such a name reveals his feminine leanings. Vivek is the only child of Kavita, and the pain of her loss is great: "He is enough,' she would say. 'This was enough'" (p. 15). In the end, a shift in the community situation is represented by Vivek's mother, who accepts the life her son was leading. The daughters of the foreign-born women, like Vivek's mother, exhibit more tolerance and understanding of Vivek's private life and the exploration of his self-identity. The narrative is a discovery of self-identity, belonging, and a cultural portrait of Nigeria. Oluwatomisin Oredein (2021) pointed out the legacy of Vivek: "This is the legacy of Vivek Oji: taking the air around us and converting it to what we need to breathe, to be" (p. 48).

6. Conclusion

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* shows the reader how Vivek's decisions to uncover his self-identity run counter to his community's sociocultural and religious values. The absence and detachment of his parents from the beginning pushed Vivek to detach himself from the world of adults and isolate himself in the young world of his peers, the daughters of the Nigerwives. The peers he spent his time with showed more tolerance and openness toward Vivek's identity as transgender. Moreover, they provided him the freedom to practice a feminine lifestyle, such as wearing dresses and makeup.

This paper traced the influence of the community's sociocultural values on Vivek's decisions. Vivek decided to declare his sexual orientation by walking down the street dressed as a female. His new transgender lifestyle went against the community's traditions and values, and this challenge was viewed as punishable by the community. Vivek was viewed by the community, the Nigerian people, as a boundary breaker, and was not shown any tolerance. As a result, Vivek paid for declaring his transgender orientation with his life. When Vivek's mother realized his story and the life he led as a transgender person, she was sympathetic because she was not influenced by Nigerian culture and traditions. As approval of the choices her son made, Kavita changed the inscription on her son's grave to the female name Nnemdi, the name Vivek liked to be called. The rigidity of Nigerian values did not give Vivek any opportunity to live the life he wanted. Osita buried Vivek's dress beside his grave, informing the reader that he is burying the past, with its pains and secrets, and starting a new life.

The religious values espoused by Vivek's aunt, Mary, who thought that Vivek was possessed by demons, prompted her to take him to church for deliverance. These rituals made Vivek suffer even more and his mother, who regarded these religious traditions as superstitious, asked his aunt to stop. Consequently, the community's social, cultural, and religious values did not help Vivek explore his self-identity or live the life he felt and breathed. Emezi attempted to address the topic of transgender identity in their novel to show how the Nigerian community deals with such new concepts. The community glorifies masculine pride as a mark of power while at the same time, transgender and homosexuality are signs of weakness that can never be approved. This study revealed hybrid families as more open

and tolerant of transgender identity, while the Nigerian community regarded it as a challenge to their traditions. Therefore, in the eyes of the local community, people who go against the community's cultural and social values should be killed because such deviants are a source of destruction to their way of life. The illustration of the Nigerian community in the narrative as homophobic and extremely intolerant made the story poignant.

This paper recommends additional areas for further studies, such as research on the influence of hybrid families using a postcolonial approach, or applying a psychoanalytic approach to the novel to trace Vivek's traumas caused by his family and community. In doing so, the reader will gain a greater understanding of the traditions of Nigerian tribes and their impact on the individual psyche.

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