

Analysis of Dissociative Disorder in *Freshwater* by Akweake Emezi

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Abstract

This paper analyses the dissociative disorder in the protagonist of Akweake Emezi's first novel, *Freshwater*. It is explored that due to trauma and abuse, the psyche alters or fractures one's personality to survive and to protect it from further damage to the mind and body. The traumatized mind is unable to decide what it is and what it wants, and the frustration leads them to various other conditions that include substance abuse, self-harm, and being suicidal. This paper discusses dissociative disorder, its causes, and how the character finds a solution for her ailment. The broken psyche searches for relief from the people around it, but sometimes solutions come from unlikely places.

Key words: dissociative disorder, disorder, alters, personality

Akweake Emezi, a Nigerian transgender writer, in her debut novel *Freshwater* tries to bring a balance between her beliefs as an Igbo native and the progressive reality of western world. The reality that she tries to put forth is camouflaged with the intricate use of Igbo folklore. Magic, spirits, deities, enchantments and curses are used as a tool to describe far more disturbing attribute of humans suffering. Emezi introduces to the fantastical spirit beings, which can travel between the realms of deities and the humans, to serve the purpose of bringing suffering to the living world. The magical elements are efficiently used by the author to diminish the lines between the reality and illusion. The author illustrates the existence of spirits that possess human children. In the case of the Ada, the protagonist, she is introduced as an ogbanje or spirit child, who is born with the spirits.

The author utilizes the Igbo legend of ogbanje, where an ‘ogbanje’ is a child that repeatedly dies and is born again to the same mother bringing anguish to the mother and the family. In the novel the spirits describe themselves as “We, on the other hand . . . godlings, ogbanje—can endure so much more horror. Not that this mattered—it was clear that she (the baby) was going to go mad” (13).

In contrast to the legend, the spirits in return protect the Ada from harm. It is understood that the Ada had multiple spirits in her, namely -‘we’ asughara, yeshua, and St. Vincent who come in the fore front whenever Ada is vulnerable. The Ada as a child experiences various trauma and for every trauma she births a spirit to shield her from further damage. As the author brings in her perspective of how human beings are tormented by supernatural beings which reside in them, the western progressive world on the other hand diagnoses it as multiple personality disorder or dissociative personality disorder.

Jack Drescher in his article published in *Psychiatry.org* explains what dissociative disorder is, its types and how it affects the person. He explains that “Dissociative disorders involve problems with memory, identity, emotion, perception, behaviour and sense of self. Dissociative symptoms can potentially disrupt every area of mental functioning.” There are three major dissociative disorders, namely, dissociative amnesia, dissociative identity disorder and depersonalization/derealization disorder. Two of the categories of disorders are evident since Emezi in her novel includes all the symptoms that demonstrate that Ada had the disorder.

Dissociative identity disorder or multiple personality disorder is a condition where two or more personalities exist in a person and each personalities present itself every time the core personality is threatened. The human brain is powerful yet susceptible to trauma and abuse. Its defence mechanism from lack of love and care, mistreatment, abandonment and abuse may result in producing an alter ego which is created to face the trauma and abuse. The person suffering from the dissociative personality disorder may have multiple alters, and each alter having all the traits that the human lacked at the particular moment of abuse, comes forth with much readiness and strength to take the abuse when it happens again.

The central character, the Ada is described to have multiple spirits from a young age which torment her often. The spirits or the personalities that torment the Ada are result of some trauma the character has endured in her life since child hood. In the novel it is

understood that the spirits ‘we’ were actually born when Ada’s sister annuli met with an accident and Ada witnesses the pain and bloodshed on the journey to the hospital. The child felt guilty of not being able to protect her little sister and also felt traumatised seeing the blood. The author reveals that the spirits kept the Ada safe when she was not being able to accept her mother’s departure to Kuala Lumpur for her sister’s treatment and also when she leaves to Saudi Arabia for her career.

When Saachi left, we saw the way her children reeled, the way the Ada retreated deeper into her head, closer to us. She rooted like she’d lost her face, snuffling in the particular heartbreak of a little child, crying for her mother to come back, come back, please just come back. We struggled in response, coming alive not just for ourself, but for her.(36)

Abandonment at a young age by the only source of love and comfort (her mother), and also neglect from the proud father made the Ada recede into her own self. She searched for comfort and care and discovers ‘we’, the spirits who kept her company and made her less lonely. Downside of having spirits is the side effects that come along with it which includes blood sacrifices. Emezi explicates the spirits demand blood sacrifices to stop tormenting her. Self-harm is the offshoot of dissociative disorder and it can be alleged to calm them down. According to the *Journal of Psychotraumatology* “Individuals engage in self-injury for a variety of reasons. Most commonly, self-injury is conceptualized as a mechanism of avoidance and escape – that is, it allows individuals to avoid their emotions, be distracted from their trauma-related symptoms and memories, and escape from their internal experiences and bodily sensations”.

Encountering trauma after trauma can make a person vulnerable to an extent that they tend to lose themselves and birthing alters guard them to evade further psychological trauma. Sexual assault can be one of the main reasons for dissociative identity disorder. National Criminal Justice Reference Service in a published paper revealed that: “Traumatized individuals may develop a sexual desire disorder with hypo-, hyper- or asexuality. Hyposexuality is evidenced by low initiatory behaviour, while hypersexuality employs frequent sexual initiation as a means of dealing with most negative affective states, including loneliness, fear and sadness.”

The Ada is shown birthing another spirit or personality when she is raped by a fellow student. It is explained by the spirits that they had kept her away from sexual act to protect her from spiralling down in guilt. But when she is drugged and is raped by Soren multiple times, she brings forth a personality to shield her from further damage. The authors explore the mental and emotional damage that the Ada endures and in order to safeguard her from further damage she brings forth Asughara, a promiscuous personality who overtakes her body when she is either being physically abused or indulge in a sexual act. It is evident that she developed hypersexuality as a means to forget the past. The Ada does get romantically and emotionally attached to people but unknowingly she would shut herself and Asughara takes over whenever she gets intimate. It is also obvious in the novel that Asughara protects her emotionally from getting hurt by her partners. Asughara takes the place of Ada so she doesn't have to go through the potentially harmful situation, therefore she is no longer in control of her body.

Another ramification of the condition is a lack of attachment or apprehension about entering a committed relationship. The act of self-defence does hamper her relationship with various people. They tell her that they couldn't emotionally connect with her and they would eventually break up with her. The Ada does fall in love with a man named Ewan but because her body is controlled by her alters, she is incapable of committing to the relationship completely. She struggles to be herself even in her marriage. Interference of the alters is the reason that broke her marriage.

Another form of dissociative disorder is depersonalising, in which the victim's memory of a traumatic experience is made to seem to be from the perspective of someone else or as an observer. When a highly traumatic event occurs, the brain compartmentalises the memories and causes the individual to either forget, or believe that the incident occurred to someone else as they witnessed it. A person might either forget about the occurrence or come to believe that it happened to someone else by compartmentalizing the memories. They can avoid reliving traumatic events and experiencing them again by forgetting about them or recalling them in an impersonal way.

The spirits who had the Ada in their control, in order to protect her from revisiting bad memories, they sectioned off her memories. This enables the Ada to forget the horrible past, like how her neighbour and her father molested her when she was twelve years old. This

episode was sectioned off in a way that she does remember it but from the perspective of an onlooker. “Sectioning the Ada gave her isolated pockets of memory, each containing a different version of her” (185). In other words, her brain in a survival mode, altered her memory making her believe it all happened to someone else.

Alter ego are her brains defence mechanism where there was no physical escape for her. She had nowhere to seek comfort or love and was trapped when her mother left. Her father never bothered to take care of her, not did her elder brother who would beat her to do his bidding. She did find peace when her mother returned, but she was constantly reminded of her brother that she would leave soon. “ “She will leave,” Chima reminded the Ada, when she tried to report him to Saachi, “and it will be just you and me again.” By the time he raised a belt to her, the Ada knew no one would stay long enough to protect her” (208).

It is sad to note that though people around the Ada felt difference in the behaviour but no one felt the necessity to consult a medical expert. The trauma she under goes is so overwhelming that she is unable to trust or share it to anyone and she is left to fend for herself. Her loneliness and not being able to find a solution for her detachment makes her to stop eating, taking drugs and further urge to commit suicide. People around her are overwhelmed by her behaviour but do not know how to deal with her eccentric personality(ies).

Psychotherapy which is therapy through talk, is believed to be a reliable method of treatment for dissociative disorder. During the treatment the experts digs deeper into the conscience to find the causes and bring the core in the fore front. The Ada begins her healing journey when visits Lagos she meets Leshi. Akwaeke call him a priest who identifies the personalities in the Ada. Their meeting was life changing for the spirits and also for the Ada. Leshi alone could recognize the symptoms because he himself suffered from dissociative disorder.” Leshi exclaims after meeting her thus: “I can see you change . . . your body language. How you talk. Your eyes. You’re not the same person, are you?” (213).

The result of their interaction made Ada realize what she was and it helped her take control of her body mind and thoughts. “We were ready to stop the births and namings – the Ada was ready to take her own front (216).” She went back to the same place which gave her scars in order to heal from her past, she explores the native Igbo culture to find her true self. It is vital to understand that the personalities do not completely disappear, they do stay with

her but this time she has more control over them. Sometimes the darkest scars can be healed by the kindness and empathy of a stranger. Engaging with others who have had similar experiences might help ease the burden of feeling alone in one's circumstance or that no one else understands the issue.

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