

Mental Illness or A Dwelling Place of the Gods? Exploration of Psychopathology in 'Freshwater'

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The novel, *Freshwater*, by Akwaeke Emezi, explores a sense of identity, and boundaries of the mind. Boundaries exist among the parts of the mind as well as between the self and the outside world according to Ernest Hartmann[1]. He states that boundaries lie on a continuum from 'thick' to 'thin'. People with thin boundaries have difficulty separating their sense of self from the environment and may have difficulty distinguishing dreams and fantasies from reality. These people slipped easily between more conscious and more unconscious states, could easily imagine themselves as being the opposite sex, and many were bisexual or had bisexual fantasies.[1,2]

Ada, the central character, can be described as having a thin boundary. This inability to inhabit liminal spaces defines her journey from childhood to adulthood, and is a constant source of conflict, leading her down several paths to find 'salvation'. She ultimately embraces an explanation for her distress, one rooted in her cultural beliefs, shared by some of her friends and individuals she meets along her journey (the priest, the historian, and Malena).

Ada's story depicts the natural history of mental illness: first, a vulnerability acquired at birth, then, a series of events that break the soul until a threshold is reached, at which point the mind's defense is overwhelmed and unravels. Symptoms appear, and if misunderstood or misinterpreted, worsen, eat away at the mind, leaving the mind in tatters and the individual broken, disabled, and devastated.

The central role of trauma in the predisposition to mental distress and suffering, especially childhood trauma is also explored. Ada had many risk factors: growing up in a city rife with conflict; family dysfunction and parental separation; parental neglect and emotional deprivation; sexual and physical abuse in childhood; being a victim of bullying and fat-shaming; migration and acculturation; and rape, many of which occurred before she was eighteen years old. The huge impact of rape on victims' mental health is also portrayed.

In Ada's case, that was when her 'beastself' was birthed and she spiraled towards self-destruction.

The role of culture in identifying, understanding, and dealing with a mental dysfunction is also a prominent theme in the novel. Ada, in coming to terms with her distress, accepts a cultural explanation, that she is an 'ogbanje', a god inhabiting a human body. Before this, she tried mental health experts and therapists but none helped, due, partly to a cultural disconnect between her and the therapists. A successful therapeutic relationship is possible only when a provider understands the cultural background of the patient.

Ada in embracing a cultural explanation for her mental distress finds peace. For one, it was a better explanation than being 'mentally ill', a term that carries a lot of stigma and isn't discussed in Nigerian cultures. Secondly, the sense of being chosen to be inhabited by the gods leads her into acceptance and help-seeking. As the novel ends, Ada begins to learn how to live with her many 'selves'. This can be likened to gaining true emotional insight.

References

1. Hartmann E. Boundaries in the mind: A new psychology of personality. Basic Books; 1991.
2. Hartmann E, Rosen R, Rand W. Personality and dreaming: Boundary structure and dream content. *Dreaming*. 1998;8(1):31–9.

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