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## Identity and Social Pressure in The Death of Vivek Oji A Postcolonial Analysis

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**Abstract.** This study examines postcolonial African literature, focusing on the themes of identity and societal pressures in contemporary settings. The research is based on Akwaeke Emezi's novel, The Death of Vivek Oii, which presents a complex portraval of identity formation within a postcolonial society. Using a postcolonial analytical framework, this study critically explores the sociocultural values embedded in the novel and their influence on the protagonist's life decisions. The analysis considers how postcolonial theory helps in understanding the preservation of identity amidst colonial legacies and societal constraints. The findings indicate that postcolonial societies often struggle to maintain their cultural identity due to the historical impact of colonialism, which sought to erase indigenous identities. The novel reveals that traditional values exert significant pressure on individuals, particularly those who deviate from societal norms, leading to conflicts between personal identity and collective expectations. This study highlights how postcolonial societies resist new Western ideologies out of fear of further identity transformation. The rejection of these ideas stems from a deep-rooted need to reclaim and safeguard cultural heritage. The analysis suggests that the protagonist's struggles reflect broader societal tensions in postcolonial contexts. The study underscores the ongoing conflict between cultural preservation and modern influences in postcolonial societies, emphasizing the lasting effects of colonial legacies on identity formation.

*Keywords:* Postcolonial literature; identity, societal pressure; Akwaeke Emezi; *The Death of Vivek Oji*; postcolonial theory

#### 1. Introduction

Literature and society are intricately connected, with literary works serving as both reflections and critiques of societal norms, values, and cultures (Di Pietro, 2023; Törenli Kaya & Bozo, 2022). Novelists often draw inspiration from their surroundings, transforming real-life experiences into narratives that encapsulate the complexities of human existence (Bonora, 2023; Burgess et al., 2023; Peña, 2023). In particular, African literature has long been a powerful medium for expressing historical struggles, cultural identity, and social transformations (Can, 2023; Wen & Piao, 2022; Yékú, 2022). From early oral traditions to modern novels, African literary works have continually evolved, mirroring the continent's shifting political and cultural landscapes.

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Historically, African literature has played a crucial role in reclaiming indigenous heritage and resisting colonial oppression. Prominent African authors such as Chinua Achebe (2011), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2022), and Akwaeke Emezi (2023) have used their works to highlight the richness of African traditions while addressing pressing sociopolitical issues. Early postcolonial African literature was primarily concerned with decolonization, nationalism, and cultural revival, often responding to the historical erasure imposed by European colonial powers. Over time, this literary tradition has expanded to explore contemporary issues, including identity crises, gender norms, and the intersection between African heritage and modernity.

One of the most significant themes in postcolonial African literature is the question of identity (Matthews, 2018). Many postcolonial narratives focus on individuals grappling with the aftermath of colonialism, negotiating their place between traditional African values and the influences of globalization. Writers explore themes such as cultural hybridity, alienation, and the ongoing struggle to assert an authentic self. While much of the scholarship on postcolonial African literature has focused on broader socio-political issues, there remains a gap in studies examining gender identity and non-binary expressions within postcolonial contexts. This research seeks to fill that gap by analyzing how gender and sexuality intersect with postcolonial identity formation in contemporary African literature.

One of the novels that encapsulates this complexity is The Death of Vivek Oji (2020) by Nigerian author Akwaeke Emezi. The novel provides a compelling exploration of gender identity, sexual fluidity, and societal constraints within a postcolonial Nigerian setting. The protagonist, Vivek, defies traditional gender binaries, embodying both masculine and feminine traits while experiencing romantic and sexual relationships with both men and women (Macheso, 2024). Through Vivek's journey of self-discovery, Emezi challenges rigid societal norms and highlights the struggles faced by gender-nonconforming individuals in African communities. Unlike conventional postcolonial narratives that primarily focus on political and cultural identity, The Death of Vivek Oji shifts the discourse to include personal identity, particularly as it relates to gender and sexuality, areas that remain underexplored in postcolonial African literary studies.

Postcolonialism, as a theoretical framework, is central to this research. Scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak have demonstrated that postcolonial literature is deeply intertwined with the sociopolitical realities of formerly colonized societies. Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, in particular, offers a valuable lens for analyzing how identity is constructed in postcolonial settings. By examining The Death of Vivek Oji through a postcolonial analytical approach, this study seeks to uncover how societal pressures shape identity formation and how postcolonial African societies negotiate traditional values alongside emerging global perspectives.

Thus, this study employs a descriptive-analytical approach within a postcolonial framework to investigate themes of identity and societal expectations in The Death of Vivek Oji. This research contributes to the growing discourse on postcolonial African literature by highlighting gender and sexual identity as integral aspects of postcolonial identity struggles. In doing so, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity negotiation in contemporary African societies.

### 2. Methods

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach with a postcolonial theoretical framework to examine how The Death of Vivek Oji portrays identity struggles and societal



pressures in postcolonial African contexts. By employing textual analysis, the research critically explores the novel's narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements that reflect postcolonial identity formation. Given the novel's focus on gender nonconformity and cultural expectations, the study draws on postcolonial theory—particularly the works of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak—to analyze the intersection of colonial legacies, hybridity, and marginalized identities. This qualitative approach allows for an in-depth examination of how Emezi's novel challenges conventional postcolonial narratives by centering gender and sexuality within identity discourse.

The research relies on both primary and secondary data to support its analysis (Desiana, 2024; Jannah et al., 2024). The primary source is the novel The Death of Vivek Oji, while secondary sources include scholarly works on postcolonial African literature, gender studies, and cultural theory. By engaging with academic discussions on African literary traditions, colonial history, and gender norms, the study situates Emezi's work within broader postcolonial discourses. In addition, sociological studies on African gender identities and societal expectations provide critical context for understanding how Vivek's experiences reflect real-world struggles faced by gender-nonconforming individuals in African societies. Through a review of existing literature, the research identifies gaps in previous studies and demonstrates how The Death of Vivek Oji contributes to expanding discussions on identity in postcolonial African narratives.

To systematically analyze the novel, the study employs a thematic approach that identifies key motifs related to identity, societal constraints, and resistance (Barbeira, 2024; Stevens et al., 2020). Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity is applied to examine how Vivek navigates conflicting cultural influences, while Edward Said's notion of othering helps explore how society marginalizes nonconforming individuals. The analysis also considers how the novel critiques traditional gender binaries and challenges dominant postcolonial identity constructs. By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how The Death of Vivek Oji reflects the broader struggles of identity formation in postcolonial African societies.

### 3. Result and Discussion

# 3.1. The Presentation of The Death of Vivek Oji

Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* is a poignant exploration of identity, familial relationships, and societal expectations set against the backdrop of 1990s Nigeria. The novel opens with a striking and tragic moment: Kavita, Vivek's mother, discovers her child's lifeless body outside their home on the same day the market burns. This powerful opening sets the stage for a deeply introspective narrative that unravels through multiple perspectives, offering a layered understanding of Vivek's life and the repercussions of his death. By weaving together different viewpoints, Emezi provides a comprehensive portrayal of grief, identity struggles, and the intricate dynamics within families and communities.

Emezi's narrative style is marked by rich, evocative descriptions that bring the Nigerian setting to life. From bustling markets to the intimacy of family homes, the novel situates itself within a tangible cultural and historical reality, emphasizing the societal tensions that shape Vivek's experiences. Central to the novel is the theme of identity, particularly gender identity. Vivek's journey toward self-discovery—expressed through his true self, Nnemdi—challenges conventional gender norms in a society that enforces rigid binaries. Through a sensitive and nuanced portrayal of Vivek's internal struggles and

societal pressures, Emezi illustrates the pain and beauty of seeking authenticity in an unaccepting world. The novel also critically examines the broader implications of gender nonconformity, portraying both the hostility and the pockets of acceptance Vivek encounters.

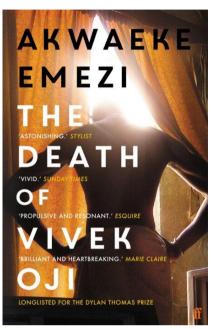


Figure 1 Book Cover The Death of Vivek Oji by Akwaeke Emezi

Beyond identity, the novel delves into the themes of family and community. Vivek's relationships with his parents, Chika and Kavita, and his cousin, Osita, are central to the story, revealing a complex interplay of love, confusion, and tension. The emotional trajectories of these characters are deeply interwoven with Vivek's self-expression, showcasing both their struggles and their gradual attempts at understanding. Notably, the Nigerwives' daughters offer Vivek a sense of belonging that he lacks elsewhere, highlighting the significance of chosen family and communal acceptance. Through this exploration, *The Death of Vivek Oji* emerges as a compelling narrative that challenges societal conventions while celebrating the resilience of identity, love, and self-acceptance.

### 3.2. Postcolonial Analysis

Postcolonial literary analysis examines how literature produced in the aftermath of colonial rule reflects the ongoing influence of colonialism on culture, identity, and power structures. In the case of *The Death of Vivek Oji*, a postcolonial reading highlights the novel's engagement with cultural hybridity, identity formation, and resistance against societal constraints. The story situates Vivek's struggle for self-acceptance within a broader postcolonial Nigerian framework (2021; 2017; 2010), where traditional values and Western influences collide. By centering Vivek's gender identity within this setting, Emezi underscores how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary African societies, particularly in terms of identity norms and societal expectations.

A significant aspect of the novel's postcolonial discourse is cultural hybridity, illustrated through the Nigerwives—a group of foreign women married to Nigerian men. This community serves as a microcosm of postcolonial Nigeria, where diverse cultural identities coexist, merge, and sometimes clash. The Nigerwives' children, including Vivek

and his close friends, navigate a liminal space between inherited African traditions and Western ideologies. This fluid interplay of cultural influences reflects Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, which posits that postcolonial identities are neither entirely indigenous nor wholly Western but rather a fusion of both. Through Vivek's interactions with his family and friends, the novel reveals the complexities of cultural identity in postcolonial societies.

Furthermore, the novel engages with postcolonial resistance and agency, particularly through Vivek's defiance of gender norms. In rejecting rigid, colonial-imposed binaries of male and female, Vivek asserts his right to self-definition, positioning his journey as an act of resistance against patriarchal and colonial legacies. The backlash he faces—from familial discomfort to societal alienation—reflects the deep-seated colonial structures that continue to regulate identity and behavior. Additionally, *The Death of Vivek Oji* highlights the psychological and emotional toll of colonial ideologies, as seen in the struggles Vivek endures in reconciling his personal truth with external expectations. The conflicts within his family mirror the broader tensions in postcolonial societies, where nonconforming individuals are often marginalized.

A postcolonial reading of *The Death of Vivek Oji* enriches our understanding of the intersections of culture, identity, and resistance in the postcolonial African context. Emezi's novel does not merely tell the story of one individual but serves as a broader commentary on how postcolonial societies grapple with identity transformation. By challenging colonial legacies and advocating for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of identity, the novel contributes to critical discussions on postcolonial African literature and its engagement with gender, cultural hybridity, and societal resistance.

## 3.3. The Influence of Traditional and Colonial Gender Norms

One of the most profound themes in *The Death of Vivek Oji* is the intersection of traditional African gender norms with colonial influences. While pre-colonial African societies had diverse and often fluid understandings of gender, colonial rule introduced rigid, binary gender classifications aligned with Western ideals (Cartwright & Nancarrow, 2022). These imposed structures became deeply ingrained in Nigerian society, leading to the marginalization of nonconforming individuals like Vivek.

Vivek's struggles with gender identity illustrate the consequences of these imposed binaries, as he faces misunderstanding, rejection, and even violence from his own family and community. The novel critiques how colonial-era ideals of masculinity and femininity have persisted long after independence, shaping contemporary African perceptions of identity (Coetzee et al., 2012; Schmidt, 2012). Vivek's experiences highlight the ongoing tension between pre-colonial African gender diversity and postcolonial rigidity, reinforcing the argument that colonial influence did not end with political independence but continues to affect cultural and social norms.

Through Vivek's resistance, the novel challenges readers to reconsider the legitimacy of Western-imposed gender norms in African societies (Arugu, 2014; Ndiaye Diallo et al., 2017; Nembaware et al., 2023). The story advocates for a return to more fluid and inclusive understandings of gender, which existed in many African cultures before colonial intervention. In doing so, *The Death of Vivek Oji* becomes not only a personal narrative of self-discovery but also a broader critique of colonial legacies in shaping contemporary identity politics.

### 3.4. The Role of Community in Identity Formation



Community plays a central role in shaping an individual's identity, especially in postcolonial societies where traditional values and cultural expectations remain strong. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Akwaeke Emezi explores the complex dynamics of community through Vivek's experiences with both biological and chosen families. While his immediate family struggles to accept his gender identity, his chosen family—particularly the Nigerwives' daughters—offers him unconditional support and validation. This dichotomy reflects broader themes in postcolonial literature concerning agency, belonging, and self-determination. Through Vivek's journey, Emezi illustrates how communities can either serve as spaces of acceptance or sites of exclusion, profoundly influencing an individual's ability to embrace their true self.

In many postcolonial societies, community and family play a fundamental role in shaping identity, often acting as gatekeepers of cultural and social norms. Family expectations regarding gender roles, career paths, and personal conduct are deeply ingrained, and deviation from these expectations is frequently met with resistance. Vivek's experience of rejection from his biological family is emblematic of the social consequences that many individuals face when they challenge traditional norms. His mother, Kavita, embodies this struggle, as she oscillates between love and confusion, grieving not only for Vivek's death but also for the lost opportunity to understand him while he was alive. Her initial inability to accept Vivek's gender identity reflects the broader tension between individuality and collective cultural expectations in postcolonial contexts.

However, while biological family can be a source of tension and rejection, chosen family—those who share similar experiences and provide emotional support—can offer a safe space for self-expression. In Vivek's case, the Nigerwives' daughters become this sanctuary. These individuals, who also navigate their own complex identities in a hybrid cultural environment, recognize and accept Vivek for who he truly is. Their support allows Vivek to explore his identity without fear of judgment, offering an alternative to the rigid expectations imposed by his biological family. This chosen community functions as a counterbalance to societal rejection, illustrating how marginalized individuals often rely on non-traditional networks for acceptance and emotional security.

The idea of chosen family is not unique to The Death of Vivek Oji but is a recurring theme in postcolonial and queer literature. Many narratives explore how individuals who are ostracized by their families seek refuge in friendships and alternative communities. In the novel, Vivek's bond with Osita, his cousin, represents an attempt to bridge the gap between biological and chosen family. While Osita initially struggles with his own identity and the implications of Vivek's self-expression, he ultimately comes to understand and accept him. This evolution reflects the broader theme of identity as a fluid and relational construct—one that is continually shaped by social interactions and personal experiences. Emezi's portrayal of community also highlights the importance of safe spaces in the process of identity formation. In many conservative societies, LGBTQ+ individuals face significant challenges in openly expressing their identities due to legal, religious, and cultural constraints (Beverage & Herschell, 2023; Cooper et al., 2020; Ozbilgin et al., 2023). Vivek's story underscores the necessity of supportive environments where individuals can freely explore their identities without fear of persecution. The Nigerwives' daughters provide this safe space for Vivek, allowing him to embrace his gender identity in a way that would be impossible within his immediate family. This dynamic illustrates how community can function as both a site of oppression and a means of liberation, depending on the level of acceptance and openness it offers.

Moreover, the novel suggests that community influences not only individual identity but also broader cultural narratives. The way society reacts to nonconformity plays a crucial role in shaping collective attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and personal freedom. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek's story challenges traditional Nigerian gender norms, prompting those around him to question their own beliefs. This mirrors real-world societal shifts, where increased visibility and representation of diverse identities contribute to changing perceptions and greater acceptance. Through this lens, Emezi's novel can be seen as part of a larger conversation about the role of literature in influencing social change.

In addition to exploring the role of community in individual identity formation, the novel also examines the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. Vivek's struggles are not merely personal; they are deeply rooted in the postcolonial legacy of Nigeria, where colonialism imposed rigid gender and social structures that continue to influence contemporary norms. The contrast between older generations, who adhere to traditional values, and younger generations, who seek to redefine them, underscores the ongoing cultural negotiation within postcolonial societies. This tension is particularly evident in Kavita's character, as she grapples with her expectations as a mother and her son's defiance of conventional gender roles.

At its core, *The Death of Vivek Oji* argues that identity is not formed in isolation but is shaped by social relationships and collective influences. Vivek's ability to embrace his true self is contingent on the support he receives from his chosen family, while his struggles stem from the rigid expectations of his biological family and wider society. By portraying both rejection and acceptance within different social circles, Emezi offers a nuanced exploration of how community can either reinforce oppressive norms or serve as a sanctuary for self-expression. This duality reflects the broader reality for many individuals navigating identity in conservative cultural contexts, where acceptance often comes at a high personal cost.

Furthermore, the novel highlights the emotional and psychological consequences of being denied community support. Vivek's internal struggles, combined with the external pressures he faces, ultimately lead to his tragic demise. His story is a poignant reminder of the devastating impact that societal rejection can have on individuals who do not conform to established norms. This reinforces the urgent need for more inclusive and accepting communities that recognize and validate diverse identities. Literature, as demonstrated by *The Death of Vivek Oji*, plays a crucial role in fostering empathy and challenging societal biases by giving voice to those who have been marginalized.

Ultimately, Emezi's exploration of community in identity formation is a powerful commentary on the intersection of culture, belonging, and self-acceptance. Through Vivek's experiences, the novel sheds light on the complex ways in which individuals negotiate their identities within different social contexts. It also emphasizes the transformative potential of chosen family and supportive communities in providing the affirmation and belonging that traditional family structures may fail to offer. In doing so, *The Death of Vivek Oji* contributes to a broader discourse on the importance of acceptance, the impact of cultural expectations, and the enduring quest for self-definition in the face of societal constraints.

As a postcolonial narrative, the novel not only critiques traditional gender norms but also questions the enduring influence of colonial ideologies on contemporary Nigerian society. The imposition of Western binaries on gender and identity has contributed to the rigid structures that Vivek struggles against, making his journey a form of resistance

against both colonial and patriarchal legacies. By reclaiming identity on his own terms, Vivek challenges these deeply ingrained structures, even as his story ends in tragedy. This aspect of the novel underscores the broader implications of identity struggles within postcolonial societies, where the fight for self-expression is often met with formidable opposition.

The Death of Vivek Oji presents a deeply moving exploration of the role of community in shaping identity. Emezi masterfully illustrates how community can function as both a site of acceptance and rejection, profoundly influencing an individual's sense of self. The novel underscores the necessity of safe spaces for marginalized individuals, highlighting the power of chosen families in providing the support and validation that biological families may withhold. By situating Vivek's story within a broader postcolonial framework, the novel also critiques the enduring influence of colonial legacies on contemporary gender norms and identity politics. Through this multifaceted exploration, The Death of Vivek Oji stands as a powerful literary work that challenges societal conventions and advocates for greater inclusivity and understanding.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that *The Death of Vivek Oji* by Akwaeke Emezi is a powerful narrative that explores themes of identity, gender nonconformity, family dynamics, and postcolonial struggles in Nigeria. The novel presents Vivek's journey of self-discovery and societal rejection within a cultural landscape shaped by traditional and colonial influences. Through a multi-perspective narrative, Emezi captures the complexities of identity formation, emphasizing the conflict between personal authenticity and societal expectations. The novel also highlights the importance of chosen family and community as sources of support for marginalized individuals, providing a contrast to the rejection experienced from biological families. These findings suggest that literature can serve as a critical medium for understanding the challenges faced by gender-nonconforming individuals in conservative societies.

The discussion further contextualized these findings within a postcolonial framework, illustrating how colonial legacies continue to shape gender norms and societal structures. The study identified cultural hybridity as a significant aspect of the novel, particularly through the Nigerwives and their children, who navigate the intersection of Nigerian and Western influences. Vivek's defiance of gender binaries was analyzed as a form of resistance against colonial and patriarchal structures, reinforcing the argument that postcolonial identity struggles are deeply intertwined with historical power dynamics. Additionally, the role of community in identity formation was examined, demonstrating how social acceptance and safe spaces contribute to an individual's ability to embrace their true self. These discussions affirm that *The Death of Vivek Oji* serves as both a personal and political narrative, shedding light on the enduring impact of colonial ideologies on contemporary issues of gender and identity.

However, this study has certain limitations. The analysis is primarily literary and does not incorporate empirical data on gender identity struggles in Nigeria beyond the text itself. Future research could adopt a comparative approach by examining other African literary works that address gender nonconformity and postcolonial identity, broadening the scope of understanding. Additionally, interdisciplinary research incorporating sociological and anthropological perspectives could provide deeper insights into the real-life implications of themes explored in the novel. Expanding this research to include the reception of *The Death of Vivek Oji* among different readerships—both within Nigeria and

globally—would also offer valuable perspectives on the impact of literature in shaping conversations about gender, identity, and postcolonial resistance.

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