# GENDER DECONSTRUCTION IN AKWAEKE EMEZI'S *FRESHWATER* AND TENDAI HUCHU'S *THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE*

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**BENIN CITY**

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## CERTIFICATION

I certify that this project was carried out by **Isioma Obianke ERUEMOLOR** in the Department of English and Literature under the supervision of **Prof. (Mrs) A.O. Eruaga** at the University of Benin, Benin city, Edo state, Nigeria.

**Prof. (Mrs) A.O ERUAGA**
**(Project Supervisor)**

**Date**

# DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Almighty God, whose grace, wisdom, and strength have guided me throughout this journey. I also dedicate it to my beloved mother, whose love, prayers, and unwavering support have been my greatest source of inspiration.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores gender deconstruction in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*. It examines how both writers question traditional gender norms and present identity as fluid and socially constructed. Drawing on Queer Theory and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the research analyzes how characterization, narrative technique, and symbolism are employed to challenge heteronormative ideals within African societies.

Emezi's *Freshwater* portrays the protagonist's fragmented identity through spiritual and psychological dimensions, redefining gender beyond Western binaries, while Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* explores gender and sexuality within a conservative Zimbabwean context, revealing through irony and social critique the marginalisation of queer identities.

Using a qualitative analytical approach, the study concludes that both texts disrupt fixed gender categories and reimagine selfhood as performative and evolving. Through this, Emezi and Huchu expand the discourse on gender and identity in contemporary African literature, emphasizing diversity, self-definition, and the freedom of individual expression.

# CHAPTER ONE

# GENDER DECONSTRUCTION IN EMEZI'S *FRESH WATER* AND HUCHU'S *THE HAIR DRESSER OF HARARE*

## 1.0 Introduction

In recent years, African literature has become an important space for the interrogation of identity, especially as it relates to gender and sexuality. Traditionally, African societies have upheld rigid gender roles that align with binary understandings of male and female, often reinforced by cultural, religious, and colonial influences. However, contemporary African writers are beginning to resist these limitations by presenting characters who do not conform to conventional gender expectations. These writers challenge the idea that gender is fixed, natural, or tied solely to the body. Instead, they suggest that gender can be fluid, socially constructed, and shaped by individual experience.

The increasing presence of queer voices in African literature marks a significant shift in the literary and cultural landscape. Through the use of narrative experimentation, spirituality, and social critique, African authors are redefining what it means to be male, female, or neither in societies that often promote strict heteronormativity. This growing body of work aligns with the principles of gender deconstruction, a theoretical approach that questions the stability of gender categories and seeks to uncover the cultural performances that produce them.

This study focuses on two texts that offer unique perspectives on gender identity: Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*. Both novels explore characters who challenge dominant gender norms in different but equally significant ways. While *Freshwater* uses spirituality and fragmented narrative voices to portray gender as multiple and unstable, *The Hairdresser of Harare* addresses the social consequences of gender non-conformity in a conservative Zimbabwean society. By placing these two novels in conversation, this study aims to examine how gender is represented not as a biological certainty, but as a complex and dynamic performance shaped by personal, cultural, and social forces.

**1.1 Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* and Tendai Huchu's The *Hairdresser of Harare* challenge traditional gender norms through their portrayal of characters whose identities do not conform to fixed male or female roles. Using the lens of gender deconstruction, this essay analyses how both novels present gender as a fluid, socially constructed identity rather than a rigid biological category. The study also aims to highlight how African literature is increasingly becoming a space for questioning dominant cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality.

**1.2 Scope of Study**

This study focuses on deconstructing gender in *Freshwater* and *The Hairdresser of Harare*. It limits its analysis to the main characters Ada in Freshwater and Dumisani in The Hairdresser of Harare as key examples of individuals whose identities resist traditional gender expectations. The study also examines how each author uses narrative voice, spirituality, cultural context, and character relationships to disrupt the binary view

of gender. Only the primary texts will be analysed in detail, while relevant secondary sources will be used to provide theoretical and contextual support.

**1.3 Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, textual method of analysis. A close reading of both novels will be conducted, with attention to character development, narrative structure, symbolism, and language, Attention will be paid to how literary devices such as symbolism, imagery and the likes help to reveal and critique gender norms. The study will draw on the theoretical frameworks of gender deconstruction, particularly Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is constructed through repeated social performances rather than grounded in biology (Butler 25). Queer theory will be employed to interrogate the fluid and non-normative identities depicted in the texts. In addition, African feminist and postcolonial perspectives will help contextualise how societal, spiritual, and cultural forces shape gender identities in African settings.

**1.4 Theoretical Background**

This study adopts Queer Theory, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and relevant perspectives from African feminist scholarship. These lenses offer tools for analysing the ways gender identities are constructed, performed, and resisted in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*. Both novels feature characters who exist outside of conventional gender expectations and whose identities are shaped by cultural, spiritual, and social forces. These theories help to unravel the layered meanings of gender fluidity, performative identity, and postcolonial resistance embedded in the texts.

Queer Theory emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the limitations of traditional gender and sexuality studies. It challenges the idea that identity categories—such as "man," "woman," "gay," or "straight"—are fixed, stable, or biologically

determined. Instead, queer theory views identity as flexible and socially constructed, shaped by discourse and power relations. Annamarie Jagose notes that queer theory "interrogates the many ways in which sexualities are produced and regulated" and resists "settling into stable formations" (Jagose 3). This resistance to categorisation is central to both novels examined in this study. In Freshwater, the protagonist's Ada's self is fragmented and spiritual, refusing any coherent gender identity; in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, Dumisani must conceal his sexuality to survive in a heteronormative and homophobic society, illustrating the high social costs of queer existence.

A key influence within queer theory is Judith Butler, whose work on gender performativity provides critical language for understanding how identities are enacted. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler asserts that gender is "an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler 191). In other words, gender is not something one is but something one does, repeatedly and often unconsciously, in ways that conform to cultural expectations. These performances—gestures, speech, clothing, behaviour—are governed by societal norms that create the illusion of stable gender identities.

Butler's theory is especially relevant to both Emezi's and Huchu's novels. In *Freshwater*, Ada's gender is not biologically determined or socially stable; it shifts based on which of her internal selves is in control. Asụghara, for instance, is described as bold, sensual, and aggressive—traits often coded as hyper-feminine or even masculine—while Saint Vincent displays emotional detachment, control, and a protective instinct, aligning with normative ideals of masculinity. These characters are not external beings, but aspects of Ada herself, suggesting that gender is deeply internal yet always unstable. As Akin Adesokan explains, *Freshwater* "dramatizes gender as performance not only in a social but also a spiritual dimension, using Igbo cosmology to deepen Butler's theoretical insights" (Adesokan 45).

Butler's theory also helps to explain Dumisani's role in *The Hairdresser of Harare*. Although Dumisani identifies as male and gay, he is forced to perform heterosexual masculinity in public to protect himself in a conservative Zimbabwean society. He creates stories about girlfriends, avoids overt expression of desire, and cultivates a public image that aligns with expectations of "respectable" manhood. This is what Butler calls a "compulsory performance" of gender, where failure to conform to norms results in punishment or violence (Butler 185). Dumisani's double life highlights how rigid gender structures are maintained through fear, silence, and social policing.

However, while Butler's theories offer valuable insights, they are rooted in Western experiences and must be applied cautiously in African contexts. This is where African feminist thought plays a vital role in deepening and complicating the theoretical foundation of this study. African feminists have long argued that Western gender theories often overlook the historical and cultural specificity of African societies. For example, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, in *The Invention of Women*, argues that colonialism imposed Western gender categories on African communities that had previously organised social roles through other means, such as age, spiritual power, or seniority (Oyěwùmí 14). She suggests that the binary distinction between "man" and "woman" was not the primary way of understanding identity in many precolonial African societies.

This insight is crucial to interpreting *Freshwater*. Emezi does not depict gender as a Western category but as something shaped by ogbanje spirituality and indigenous belief systems. In Igbo cosmology, the self can be fragmented, divine, and multiple. Ada's experience of being inhabited by different spirits is not pathologised in the narrative; rather, it is presented as a legitimate form of selfhood. Sophia Azeb argues that the novel "queers the spiritual" by presenting African metaphysics as a framework for

understanding non-binary identities (Azeb 83). In this way, Freshwater challenges both Western medical discourse and colonial gender ideology.

In *The Hairdresser of Harare*, African feminist critique helps illuminate the intersections of gender, sexuality, and social marginalisation in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Amina Mama, for example, emphasises that gender in African contexts is inseparable from the colonial legacy, socio-economic conditions, and family structures that shape daily life (Mama 104). Dumisani's experiences—his need to hide his true self, the community's gossip, and the narrator Vimbai's betrayal—demonstrate how queer people in Africa are not just resisting gender roles, but also navigating social and economic survival under systems that punish difference.

By combining Butler's theory of performativity, queer theory's resistance to fixed categories, and African feminist critiques of colonial gender imposition, this study develops a theoretical foundation that is both global and locally grounded. It recognises that gender deconstruction in African literature cannot rely solely on Euro-American frameworks. Instead, it must engage with the realities of African history, culture, and spirituality, especially when authors like Emezi and Huchu center their narratives on characters who embody resistance, multiplicity, and transformation.

**1.5 Review of Related Scholarship**

Over the past decade, African literature has experienced a significant shift in how gender and identity are portrayed. Traditionally, many African narratives have reflected heteronormative and patriarchal values, often reinforced by colonial structures and religious ideologies. However, more contemporary African writers have begun to challenge these limitations by crafting characters and stories that resist binary definitions of gender and sexuality. This literary shift has given rise to academic interest in how

African texts explore gender fluidity, queer identities, and the deconstruction of traditional gender roles.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as first laid out in *Gender Trouble* (1990), remains one of the most influential frameworks in this field. Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity or biological truth, but rather a performance—something that is enacted and repeated in response to cultural expectations (Butler 191). Gender, from this perspective, is not something one is, but something one does. This concept has been widely applied in literary analysis to understand how characters adopt, resist, or are forced into specific gender roles by societal forces.

Several scholars have extended Butler's theory into African contexts. For instance, Amina Mama argues that colonialism not only reshaped African economies and governments but also imposed Western gender norms that were previously foreign to many African cultures (Mama 105). In many precolonial African societies, gender roles were more fluid, and social identity was not always determined by one's biological sex. As such, applying gender performativity to African literature can reveal both the lingering impact of colonial systems and the resistance against those imposed structures.

One of the most prominent African theorists to critique the application of Western gender frameworks in Africa is Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí. In The *Invention of Women*, Oyěwùmí argues that gender, as understood in the West, is not a universal organising principle. She explains that in traditional Yoruba society, for example, social identity was primarily based on seniority and age rather than on male-female distinctions (Oyěwùmí 12). This critique is especially important when analysing an African novel like *Freshwater*, which blends spiritual and cultural systems with questions of gender identity.

Scholars have paid close attention to Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* for its bold and unconventional portrayal of gender. Emezi introduces a protagonist, Ada, who is not

a singular entity but a being composed of multiple selves, many of whom are spiritual ogbanje from Igbo cosmology. This portrayal has prompted critical acclaim and academic inquiry. Sophia Azeb describes Freshwater as a novel that "queers both gender and personhood," arguing that the text refuses stable definitions and instead offers a model of identity rooted in multiplicity (Azeb 82). Akin Adesokan similarly notes that Emezi's fragmented narrative technique reflects Ada's fractured selfhood and blurs the lines between gender, spirit, and sanity (Adesokan 44). These scholars view the novel as a challenge to both Western and African normative understandings of gender, offering a new way to think about queer identity through indigenous African frameworks.

Other critics have explored how *Freshwater* disrupts Western psychological diagnoses, especially those related to gender dysphoria or multiple personality disorders. Padmini Mongia argues that Emezi intentionally resists these medical labels by centering Ada's experience in traditional spirituality, where being inhabited by multiple beings is not a mental illness but a spiritual reality (Mongia 109). Through this lens, the novel becomes not just a story about gender, but a radical reinterpretation of identity itself.

On the other hand, Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* has been analysed through a more socially grounded lens. Unlike Emezi's spiritual narrative, Huchu uses realism and satire to explore how queer identity functions in a homophobic society. The character Dumisani is a talented and stylish hairdresser who hides his sexuality in order to survive in conservative Zimbabwe. Kizito Muchemwa observes that Dumisani's double life illustrates the "hypervisibility and invisibility" of queer Africans—visible in their difference but invisible in public discourse (Muchemwa 68). According to Ranka Primorac, Huchu's subtle narrative style allows readers to witness the complex social negotiations that queer individuals must perform in order to maintain safety while expressing authenticity (Primorac 91).

Additionally, scholars have pointed out how the setting of the salon in *The Hairdresser of Harare* becomes a metaphor for gender performance. Hairdressing, a traditionally feminine profession, becomes a space where gender boundaries are blurred. Dumisani's success in this space both challenges and conforms to gender expectations, depending on how he is perceived by others. This has led scholars like Kundai Chirindo to argue that Huchu is critiquing not just homophobia, but also the fragile nature of masculinity and the pressures of conforming to a socially acceptable gender role (Chirindo 76).

While *Freshwater* and *The Hairdresser of Harare* have been individually examined in terms of gender and identity, there is a noticeable gap in comparative scholarship that reads the two texts together through the lens of gender deconstruction. Most literary critics tend to focus either on Emezi's use of Igbo spirituality and personal identity, or on Huchu's exploration of queer life in urban Zimbabwe. This study, therefore, contributes to a growing body of work by analysing both novels side by side. It examines how they use different narrative strategies—one mystical and fragmented, the other realistic and satirical—to critique gender norms and expose the social and psychological complexities of gendered life in postcolonial Africa.

**1.6 Thesis Statement**

This study argues that Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* deconstruct traditional gender norms by presenting characters who resist binary understandings of gender and also explores the literary devices developed in the two novels.

# CHAPTER TWO

# GENDER DECONSTRUCTING IN THE NOVELS

## 2.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the subversive representations of gender within the works of Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*. The chapter suggests that both narratives employ different strategies and character development to explain superficial portrayals of gender, engaging with its fluidity, performativity, and the ways it intersects with cultural identity, spirituality, and mental health considerations.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, asserts that gender is not a fixed identity but rather "a stylised repetition of acts" (172). This conceptualisation of gender as performance is pivotal to the analysis of Dumi in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, whose role as a hairdresser and subsequent emergence as a gay man in a homophobic context contests conventional notions of Zimbabwean masculinity. Likewise, Emezi's *Freshwater* extends the exploration of gender identity through the character of Ada, who embodies a fractured self-influenced by multiple, gender-fluid spirits known as ọgbanje.

This chapter therefore investigates how Ada's journey resonates with Jack Halberstam's notion of "female masculinity," a framework that challenges the male-female binary and facilitates alternative forms of gender expression (13). The analysis, in addition, utilises postcolonial feminist theory to explain how these authors engage with the intricacies of gender within an African framework. Oyeronke Oyewumi's critique of the imposition of Western gender categories upon Yoruba society in *The Invention of Women* (42) serves as a valuable lens through which Hunchu's and Emezi's deconstructions of colonial gender legacies can be understood. By emphasising indigenous spiritual beliefs alongside contemporary urban experiences, these narratives present a unique African perspective on gender deconstruction that defies simplistic categorisation. Therefore, this chapter will scrutinise selected excerpts from both novels to illustrate their contributions to a dynamic and evolving discourse on gender deconstruction in contemporary African literature.

**2.1 The Concept of Gender Deconstruction**

The concept of gender deconstruction originated from a broader intellectual movement that questioned foundational assumptions surrounding identity, knowledge, and power. Central to this inquiry is post-structuralism, which highlights the instability of meaning and the significant role of language in shaping our understanding of reality. Within this framework, it is asserted that categories such as "*man*" and "*woman*" are not innate or essential; rather, they are constructs arising out of linguistic, cultural, and power dynamics.

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida and other post-structuralist theorists have examined the idea of fixed and stable meanings and contend that language functions through a system of differences, wherein the term "*man*" derives its meaning in contrast to "*woman*." The aims of gender deconstruction are to reveal and dismantle this

hierarchical structure, demonstrating that the "natural" order of gender is ultimately a product of social and linguistic constructs (32).

Within the field of gender deconstruction, Butler Judith, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, asserts that gender is not a fixed identity but rather an ongoing act. She introduces the notion of gender performativity, articulating that gender manifests through a stylised repetition of behaviours that collectively foster the illusion of a consistent and inherent gender identity. This assertion does not imply that individuals choose their genders; instead, it highlights that gender represents a performance compelled by societal norms. As Butler contends, there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (33). Through the repetition of these performative acts, individuals inadvertently engage in the system that both defines and limits them.

The deconstruction of gender is connected to broader social justice movements. It acknowledges that gender is not an isolated construct but is deeply intertwined with dimensions such as race, class, sexuality and ability. For example, the experience of womanhood is not rigid; rather, it is influenced by factors such as racial identity and socioeconomic status. Mingus, Mia speaks about gender deconstruction in *Intersectionality as a Deconstructive Framework.* He recognises that the categories employed in discussions of identity are inherently intersecting, suggesting that genuine liberation necessitates the dismantling of these interconnected systems of oppression (139). Such an intersectional perspective is crucial for a holistic understanding of the mechanisms of power.

Feminist scholars express apprehension that the deconstruction of the category "*woman*" may weaken the political foundation necessary for feminist mobilisation and

collective action. They contend that if "*woman*" is perceived as a fluid construct rather than a stable category, it becomes increasingly challenging to rally around common experiences of sexism and oppression. Critiques highlight that the often theoretical and abstract nature of deconstruction risks becoming inaccessible, alienating those directly engaged in the realities of gender inequality. These observations underscore the persistent tensions within feminist and queer theoretical discourse, particularly regarding the need to balance theoretical rigour with actionable political effectiveness.

**2.2 Gender Deconstruction in Emezi's *Freshwater***

In *Freshwater*, Akwaeke Emezi engages in a profound deconstruction of gender and identity, approaching these themes not through conventional psychological frameworks, but via a non-Western spiritual and philosophical paradigm. The novel offers a unique interpretation of the Igbo concept of the ọgbanje, viewed not merely as a curse, but as a state of perpetual rebirth. At the heart of the narrative is Ada, who embodies this divine essence that exists within the confines of a single human body. The underlying message of the book is that identity is a Spiritual experience, surpassing mere physicality and revealing itself in spiritual and metaphysical dimensions.

Ada's spiritual fragmentation unfolds through a narrative voice that often adopts a plural "we," representing a collective of deities residing in her mind. They articulate their distinction from their physical vessel by stating that they were her and yet not. This is evident in the lines;

> "We were at once old and newborn. We were her and yet not. We were not conscious but we were alive—in fact, the main problem was that we were a distinct we instead of being fully and just her." (Emezi 10)

This theme is further illustrated by the presence of diverse personalities within Ada, including Asụghara, a "beastself" or "weapon" and Saint Vincent. These identities,

alongside the united "we," inhabit the "marble room" of Ada's psyche, showcasing a range of selves living within one physical form. The spiritual realm is linked to Ada's body; the godlings form an "oath of the world" (iyi-ụwa), tying them to both the spiritual domain and Ada's physical existence. This bond is symbolised by a hidden rock in her stomach and a strip of human hide along her back, creating a connection where her bodily demise would result in their destruction and her survival hinges on their return to their world.

Ada navigates the challenge of harmonising her human consciousness with spiritual entities throughout her life, and she realises that true relief comes not from defeating them but from embracing her complex identity as intertwined with both the physical and spiritual realms.

The narrative initiates its exploration of a fractured self from the outset through the employment of a collective first-person plural narrator, "We," who show their connection to Ada's physical form. This distinction is clearly defined: "I have lived many lives inside this body. I lived many lives before they put me in this body. I will live many lives when they take me out of it" (Emezi 7).

This assertion underscores the notion that the spiritual self is not only separate from the physical body but also exists prior to and subsequent to it, using the body as a vessel. The narrative reflects on a “time before we had a body, when it was still building itself cell by cell inside the thin woman” wherein the "We" perceive the fetus as an autonomous entity, whimsically whistling “through the water it floated in.” Their entry into this body is depicted not as a seamless integration but as a violent and enforced confinement. The text articulates: “we were wrenched, dragged through the gates, across a river, and through the back door of the thin woman's womb, thrust into the rippling water and the small sleeping body floating within” (Emezi 9).

This experience is characterised as an “abomination of the fleshly” and a form of madness that the collective "We" initially rejects.

This excerpt serves as the philosophical foundation for the novel’s examination of gender, showing a profound disjunction between the spiritual self and its physical vessel, culminating in a state of existence described as “her and yet not” (Emezi 10). This internal multiplicity is not merely an introspective phenomenon; it manifests in the perceptions of external observers. Saul, Ada's father, is characterised as an otherwise “blind man” who somehow senses the duality within his daughter. Upon gazing into her eyes, he acknowledges that “whatever looked back out of his child was not his mother, but someone, something else” (Emezi 10). This external acknowledgment reinforces the spiritual legitimacy of the plural self. The human body, portrayed as “organized and souled” (Emezi 9), is thus presented as a potential locus of chaos, with the gods exhibiting indifference toward the fate of flesh (Emezi 9). Consequently, Ada's body, being improperly souled with the “gates” between realms left ajar, becomes an inherent site of chaotic potential and a catalyst for her unfolding “madness.”

The concept of the ọgbanje is further explained through the iyi-ụwa, or "oath of the world," which represents a spiritual pact undertaken by the godling to return to the spiritual realm. Within the text, this oath is materially manifested, rendering the body a paradox: "To destroy it, they would have to destroy her. To keep her alive, they would have to send her back." (Emezi 17)

In the end, the body transcends its role as a mere vessel, evolving into a spiritual instrument, an embodiment of the vow of non-permanence. The formation of this oath is achieved through the incorporation of spiritual objects such as "an igneous rock in the pit of her stomach," "velveteen inside the walls of her vagina," and "a strip of human hide... draped over her back and stitching it to her other skin" (Emezi 17). These components

are not biologically inherent; rather, they are foreign spiritual entities that expresses the body's role as a contested and alien space.

This continuous state of "in-betweenness" serves as the novel's explanation for the protagonist Ada's perceived madness. The body, characterised by its "gates" left "swinging wide like a slack mouth," is perpetually "leaking mindlessly" with knowledge derived from "the other side," which human cognition is "not meant to remember" (Emezi 29). Thus, the human mind is inadequately equipped to navigate this metaphysical reality, resulting in an instability that is interpreted as a mental disorder. This narrative suggests that the protagonist's condition should not be regarded as an indicator of madness, but rather as a manifestation of a spiritual and metaphysical reality, which engenders what is perceived as madness.

The inauguration of the distinct self, Asụghara, is characterised as a ″third birth" (Emezi 36), marked not by tranquil emergence but by a traumatic event that occurs "on top of a scream" and is "baptized in blood" (Emezi 56). Asụghara, referred to as the "beastself," is a manifestation born of anger, violence, and an aspiration for power. She is explicitly linked to a predatory, masculine-coded sexuality, appropriating Ada’s female body not as a means of connection but as an instrument of empowerment. Asụghara unequivocally claims ownership of this body, conveying that "Ada was mine: mine to move and take and save" (Emezi 48). Her identity is characterised by an insatiable "hunger" and a mission to "consume everything [she] touched" (Emezi 56). A significant act of physical deconstruction initiated by Asụghara involves the severing of Ada's long hair; a symbol described by her mother, Saachi, as a "crown" of femininity. This act serves as a tangible representation of Asụghara’s assertion of dominance and a deliberate subversion of conventional femininity. Asụghara's frank acknowledgment of being "selfish" (Emezi 57) reflects her inaugural experience with a corporeal existence, an

assertion that underscores her primary motivation: to engage with the physical world autonomously, disentangled from Ada's human inclinations.

The introduction of Saint Vincent presents a distinct yet equally radical interpretation of deconstructed gender. Although born at the same time with Asụghara, Saint Vincent exists as a separate entity conceptualised as a "grace." He is characterised as a "son of flux space,″ and is noted to be "not godspawn like Asụghara" (Emezi 89). His identity embodies gentleness and androgyny, described as a "cool," "long-fingered" figure with "slow and simmering hungers." Saint Vincent expresses his gender identity through a conscious rejection of traditional female bodily representation. He "dressed Ada in skinny jeans from Uniqlo, thick cotton T-shirts, and a binder, a tight black vest that flattened our chest into a soft mound of almost nothing" (Emezi 119). This choice of attire exemplifies a physical act of deconstruction, reshaping gender presentation away from its female associations. The inclination towards a non-female identity reflects Ada's childhood experiences, where she felt more comfortable being perceived as a boy, signifying that "the misfit of it fit, the wrongness was right" (Emezi 90). Furthermore, Saint Vincent's sexuality disrupts normative expectations; he frequents queer clubs and "kissed women with Ada’s mouth" (Emezi 119). This expression of queer desire, coupled with his physical presentation, illustrates a fluid and non-conforming sense of self that transcends the initial biological form of the body. The narrative suggests that internal identities, or "genders," are neither fixed nor binary, but rather a collection of fluid behaviours, desires, and roles that emerge from the same body. It posits that gender manifests as a performative construct of the mind or spirit rather than an intrinsic characteristic of the physical form.

A prevailing theme within the narrative is the spiritual self’s intense strong rejection of reproductive functions inherent to the female body. From the standpoint of

the godlings, the concept of fertility is described as a “pure and clear abomination” (Emezi 135). The prospect of procreation is regarded as an act that would “unbelievably” and “cruelly” tether the ọgbanje to the human realm, thus infringing upon their essential nature. The processes of pregnancy and childbirth are depicted as actions that would cause the body to “swell so unnaturally” and “mutate our human flesh in order to birth another one” (Emezi 135). This narrative connects to the foundational premise that the "We" reject being “locked into the blurred consciousness of a little mind” (Emezi 9) and maintain a connection to “the other side.” In this context, fertility emerges as the quintessential act of human “souling” and is therefore denounced as a menace to their spiritual existence.

The rejection of the body’s femininity results in a radical physical transformation: the excision of the breasts. The narrator articulates that the body was “becoming unsatisfactory, too feminine, too reproductive” (Emezi 135). The underlying motivation for this transformation does not revolve around a transition to a different human gender; rather, it seeks to render the body a more accurate “home” for the plural, non-binary selves residing within. The objective is to alter “the Ada into us” (Emezi 135). The surgical procedure is portrayed as a spiritual act, a re-appropriation of the corporeal form. The medical professionals assume the role of instruments within this spiritual journey, executing the physical rites of passage. The surgery experience is articulated in metaphysical terms, wherein the self appears to be “just gone and then we were back and it was hours later” (Emezi 138). The absence of “gates, no middle spaces” shows the Contrast between the spiritual self and the physical experience of medical intervention

The body serves not merely as a medium for alteration but as a canvas upon which memory and identity are inscribed. In the narrative, Ada's early self-harm; characterised by the use of a blade to "carve herself for us" (Emezi 34) in a primitive

sacrificial act, transforms into a more deliberate and ritualistic practice: tattooing. This transformation is depicted as a "worthy sacrifice" that supersedes her previous behaviours. Ada obtains "a thick sleeve of black ink tattooed down her left forearm, where she usually performed the blood offerings" (Emezi 152), resolving to "never cut herself again after that." This relationship between the two practices is framed as ritualistic, suggesting a significant connection between them. The tattoos serve as a means for Ada to "remind herself of her past versions" and to etch her multifaceted identity onto her body, rendering it "closer to being what we already knew it was" (Emezi 152). Furthermore, she chooses to have a portrait of her plural self on her arm, depicted as "us peering over her shoulder with our mouth fastened to the junction of neck and trapezius" (Emezi 152). This act of physically inscribing her plural identity upon her skin by  shows a blend of the spiritual and the physical, highlighting a strong sense of self-ownership.

Ada's pursuit of peace reflects a mental and spiritual exploration aimed at understanding, rather than simply healing a broken mind. She seeks insight from both a historian and a priest; figures capable of contextualising her experiences within a spiritual framework rather than a medical one. The historian’s discourse serves as both a spiritual diagnosis and a directive: ″The experiences you’ve had suggest that there is a spiritual connection, which you need to go and learn about. Your journey will not be complete until you do that" (Emezi 158). This acknowledgment provides validation for Ada’s "madness" as a spiritual imperative. She ultimately recognises that the ọgbanje paradigm represents the ″only path that brought me any peace" (Emezi 158), marking an important moment in which she embraces her spiritual reality. This acceptance directly questions the Western psychiatric idea that having one unified self is the only model of mental health.

The concluding phase of Ada's journey involves the acknowledgment of her non-human heritage and her identity as a liminal entity. She comes to understand that her siblings, despite their playful antics, were merely ″trying to scare me, or warn me" (Emezi 161). The profound sense of peace she experiences is rooted in her acceptance of her nature. Through her act of prayer to her mother, Ala, Ada finds herself "cast into a vast, empty space... inside her, suspended and rocked" (Emezi 162). This moment of spiritual connection ends with an important lesson: to ″Find your tail" (Emezi 162). This directive encourages her to ″Curve in on yourself,″ urging a deeper understanding and acceptance of her divine origins and spiritual mission. The story's ending questions traditional ideas of ancestry and family by presenting a spiritual connection that goes beyond biological ties. Ada recognises, ″I did not come from a human lineage and I will not leave one behind. I have no ancestors" (Emezi 163). This realisation marks the peak of her deconstructive process, liberating her identity from constraints related to her body and gender, as well as from her human familial ties, thereby embracing a solely spiritual and divine origin.

*Freshwater* offers a significant model for gender deconstruction that is both culturally specific and universally applicable. The novel interrogates the assumed coherence of mind and body by proposing a more fluid, fragmented, and spiritually informed understanding of selfhood. The odyssey of the ọgbanje can be characterised as a process of becoming rather than a return to a prior state. By foregrounding a non-Western spiritual framework, the narrative introduces a lot of vocabulary for articulating fluid and non-conforming identities. The penultimate integration of a deconstructed, liminal self; characterised as being "here and not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone" (Emezi 163) represents the work's act of liberation. It suggests that genuine peace is attained not through adherence to conventional human standards of

gender and identity, but through an authentic and brave acceptance of one's unique metaphysical reality.

**2.3 Gender Deconstruction in Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare***

Tendai Huchu's novel, *The Hairdresser of Harare,* presents an insightful analysis of the performance of masculinity within the contemporary context of Zimbabwe. The protagonist, Dumi, a skilled male hairdresser, actively challenges conventional perceptions of masculinity in a societal framework characterised by rigid gender roles. His choice of profession serves as a direct affront to traditional norms, particularly given that hairdressing is largely regarded as a domain for women. Upon his entry into the salon, Dumi faces mockery and skepticism. The narrator, Vimbai, initially regards him as an outlier, remarking, ″A male hairdresser, who'd ever heard of such a thing?″ (Huchu 13-14). This reaction shows the ingrained societal expectations that delineate acceptable professions for men. Yet, Dumi's extraordinary talent and his capacity to engage with his female clients on a profound level establish him as a significant figure within the salon environment. His inherent comprehension of femininity appears to exceed that of some of his female counterparts, as Vimbai notes, ″He knows how to do the job better than some of you who've been here years." (Huchu 21)

Dumi's expression of masculinity is characterised not by conventional markers such as brute strength or emotional indifference, but rather by his creativity, emotional intelligence, and adeptness in maneuvering through a domain often perceived as traditionally feminine. As a performer, he embodies a softer, more intuitive model of masculinity that facilitates his success in the hairdressing profession. His ability to connect with clients is particularly illustrated in a notable interaction with a new client who initially hesitates to accept a significant change in her hairstyle:

> “You have beautiful eyes and your long hair tilts the balance away from your fine face. Your cheeks are sculpted but your long hair makes it impossible to admire them. Trust me.’ There was magnetism about him that lured her in. She sat back silently in the chair.” (Huchu 41)

Dumi's capacity to attract and persuade clients indicates his profound understanding of the Complexities of human relationships, a characteristic that diverges from traditional notions of masculinity. His skilled performance not only secures his acceptance but also earns him recognition as the best hairdresser within the salon setting. Nevertheless, Dumi’s enactment of masculinity serves as a coping mechanism within a society marked by homophobia. He is forced to navigate his identity as a gay man with caution:

> "I had to find out more. I scrunched my nose when I picked up the diary, as if it smelt of something putrid. The page was open where I’d left it. What happened next, right under my nose, astonished me. The day I came home and found him and Mr M___ at my house was the day they had consummated their unnatural passions in the bed that I had shared with Dumi. I rubbed my body, feeling dirty and needing a long bath. Which one of them was the man and which was the woman anyway? The journal did not shed any light on this. As far as I knew, Dumi had been raised in a good Christian family (if Catholics are Christians) and here he was turning my house into his own Sodom and Gomorrah." (Huchu 166)

His charm and professional accomplishment, while authentic to a degree, also function as a façade that veils his genuine self. The eventual revelation of his sexuality coupled with the violent repercussions he faces, shows the harsh realities faced by those who diverge from established gender and sexual norms. The tragic dimension of Dumi's narrative resides in the fact that although his performance grants him a certain level of freedom

and success, it ultimately fails to shield him from the violent assertions of heteronormativity.

The novel explores the dynamics surrounding gender roles and societal expectations within contemporary Zimbabwean culture. This narrative, rich in character development and social critique, reveals a setting where traditional gender norms are both reinforced and contested, particularly through the experiences of Vimbai, the protagonist, in her personal and professional endeavours..The novel's strength is not in a formal academic discussion of gender, but in showing how femininity and masculinity are constantly negotiated and redefined within patriarchal system made worse by economic struggles

The hair salon is initially portrayed as a dominantly female environment, serving as a place where women hold both professional authority and social power. Vimbai, who identifies herself as the *Queen Bee* of this space, demonstrates how her professional abilities relate to her social status. Her assertion of authority is profoundly linked to her gender and expertise, rendering the notion of a male hairdresser an inconceivable concept. The introduction of Dumisani, a male employee, by Mrs. Khumalo, the salon owner, elicits from Vimbai a response characterised by disbelief and disdain: ″A male hairdresser, who'd ever heard of such a thing?" (Huchu 13). This skepticism reflects the entrenched gendered divisions within labor markets, where particular professions are culturally designated as exclusively male or female. In this context, the salon, as a site of female empowerment and aesthetic care, traditionally excludes male involvement.

Dumisani's artistic proficiency and exceptional talent effectively challenge the prevailing constraints inherent within the salon environment. His capacity to create a glamorous look that allows a client to resemble icons such as Naomi Campbell makes both the female staff and clients to reconsider their biases:

> "Five minutes later he was finished. He put his hands on Matilda's shoulders and made her look in the mirror. She blinked. He picked up a mirror so that she could see the back of her head as well.
>
> 'What do you think?' he asked.
>
> 'Sweet Jesus, I look like Naomi Campbell.' Matilda's body was trembling with excitement." (Huchu 14)

In this context, the gender of the artist becomes subordinate to the caliber of the artistic output. This professional disruption poses a significant threat to Vimbai, who perceives her "crown" as growing unstable (Huchu 10). The traditional professional hierarchy, which has been historically dictated by seniority and gender, is undergoing a transformation centered on talent, thus initiating a shift that destabilises Vimbai's sense of identity. The narrative implies that economic pressures and professional aspirations can, in specific circumstances, supersede deeply entrenched gender expectations.

In terms of economic independence and masculine roles, the women portrayed in the novel regard financial autonomy not merely as an aspiration but as an essential component that informs their identities and decisions. Vimbai, serving as both a single mother and a career-oriented individual, exemplifies a form of independent femininity that contrasts with the traditional dependent female archetype. As the primary provider for her daughter, her employment constitutes a means of survival rather than a mere leisure pursuit. Her ambition is propelled by a motivation to assure a more favourable future for her child, a function typically associated with a male figure within a household. Furthermore, her pride in her identity as a "top hairdresser" (Huchu 3) serves as a source of self-esteem that exists independently of any male acknowledgment or validation.

The theme is explored through Dumisani's complex character, which stands in stark contrast to traditional masculinity by showcasing him as a caring artist who actively

participates in household chores, thereby challenging established gender norms. Vimbai's observations of him prompts a combination of surprise and appreciation, as she remarks that he was a good man around the house:

"Dumi proved himself to be a considerate housemate. The toilet seat was left down. He washed the bath-tub after use and even helped Maidei with cleaning the house every so often. He was handy too. The first day he saw the cottage he went into action sweeping up all the broken glass." (Huchu 67).

In a society where masculinity often emphasises physical strength and wealth, Dumisani proves his value through professional abilities and cooperative home life, presenting himself to Vimbai as a supportive and equal partner, which enhances his appeal. The narrative suggests that for women aspiring to independence, a partner who contests traditional masculinity and shares domestic responsibilities is deemed a more valuable companion.

The novel also delivers a critique of the social policing of femininity, primarily manifested through gossip and societal pressure. The salon, while functioning as a center of community and social interaction, also serves as a platform for rumour dissemination and judgment. Other hairdressers and clients frequently speculate about Vimbai's personal life, focusing on her romantic relationships, particularly with Dumisani. This gossip operates as a mechanism of social control, wherein women's reputations are evaluated against a set of social standards. For example, the hairdressers are quick to circulate rumours suggesting that "Vimbai was a little bit loose, you know, a bit of a slut" (Huchu 23) upon witnessing her with Dumisani.

In terms of identity, Vimbai's experience is deeply intertwined with her status as a single mother. Her daughter, Chido, serves as the primary motivation behind her aspirations and decisions. The complexities associated with motherhood, coupled with

the aspiration to secure a stable future for her child, are pivotal to her characterisation. This responsibility significantly influences her interactions with men; she is particularly cautious regarding the introduction of a new partner into her daughter's life. As her feelings for Dumisani grow, she increasingly contemplates how this relationship will impact Chido. She admits thus:

"I wanted to give her a father figure," (Huchu 142)

This thereby creates tension between her individual desires and her maternal duties. The narrative portrays motherhood as a dynamic force that shapes a woman's identity through the blend of strength, ambition, and anxiety, showcasing Vimbai's dual role as a nurturing caregiver and a determined professional, which challenges conventional gender roles.

**2.4 A Comparative Analysis of the Two Novels**

The texts are contemporary African novels that address themes of identity, self-perception, and social realities under the umbrella of gender deconstruction. Therefore, the primary distinction between the two texts lies in their narrative perspectives of the authors.

In *The Hairdresser of Harare,* Vimbai expresses herself with a blend of practicality and humor, reflecting the everyday challenges and triumphs of her life in Zimbabwe. For example, her perspective on hairdressing and the competitive landscape is conveyed with a straightforward, realistic insight: "There's only one secret to being a successful hairdresser and I've never withheld it from anyone. 'Your client should leave the salon feeling like a white woman." (Huchu 10)

*Freshwater* on the other hand employs a collective "we" as its primary narrative voice, which originates from the ogbanje, a spiritual entity that inhabits the protagonist, Ada. This narrative choice effectively distances the reader from a singular human

perspective, thereby immersing them in a framework where the self is perceived as a multiplicity rather than a discrete entity. The "we" articulates its existence from a spiritual viewpoint, rather than a strictly human one: "We were used to the warm thuds of two heartbeats separated by walls of flesh and liquid, used to the option of leaving, of returning to the place we came from, free like spirits are meant to be." This narrative approach is characterised by its abstract and philosophical nature, contrasting sharply with Vimbai's more straightforward narrative style.

The texts delve into the complexities surrounding the construction and deconstruction of the protagonist's identity. In *The Hairdresser of Harare,* Vimbai's sense of self is intrinsically tied to her profession and her renown as the preeminent hairdresser in Harare. Her identity is a construct shaped by her professional competence and her social standing as the "queen bee" of the salon. The arrival of Dumi, whose superior skills and unexpected gender challenge her established professional supremacy and personal sense of security, destabilises this identity. Vimbai's conflict is predominantly external, revolving around the struggle for social recognition and respect within a challenging economic landscape.

In *Freshwater*, identity goes beyond social boundaries and emerges as a fundamental metaphysical state. The protagonist, Ada, embodies a "compound of selves," rather than a singular self. This duality is introduced at the moment of her birthing, described as "trapped by this unfamiliar birthing, this abomination of the fleshly." The internal conflict is presented as a struggle between the human aspect (Ada) and the multiple spirits inhabiting her being. This tension is highlighted when the spiritual narrator reflects thus: "I didn't always follow what Ada had been up to, so things easily slipped by me when I wasn't paying attention." (Emezi 107)

The novel's core conflict arises from the fractured identity of its characters and their struggle to reconcile its diverse elements.

Huchu’s novel is intricately situated within the social and economic landscape of contemporary Harare. The narrative engages with significant themes such as poverty, political instability, and the challenges encountered by single women in a patriarchal society. The characters are profoundly influenced by their material circumstances, which encompass navigating the complexities of city traffic and coping with frequent power outages. Vimbai's practical concerns include managing a business and ensuring her family's safety. Emezi’s novel on the other hand emphasises less on social critique and more on the spiritual and psychological journeys of its characters. It delves into Igbo cosmology and the notion of ogbanje, which refers to a child who repeatedly dies and is reborn, possessing a spiritual link to a realm beyond the human experience. Ada's challenges are reflective not of economic survival but of the internal struggle between her human and spiritual identities, resulting in mental health issues and a quest for belonging. The narrative of *Freshwater* prioritises the spiritual facets of identity over the political realities of the nation.

# CHAPTER THREE

# LITERARY DEVICES IN THE NOVELS

## 3.0 Introduction

Literary devices are essential in shaping the themes within a text. In Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*, these devices are

employed strategically to explore and deconstruct traditional gender roles and identity. Emezi and Huchu utilise different language devices alongside narrative structure, characterisation, and symbolism as tools to challenge binary thinking, thereby presenting more fluid understanding of the self. For instance, Emezi tells the story with the use of first person plural 'we' which is a collection of spirits or selves known as ogbanje that inhabit the protagonist Ada's body in *Freshwater* while Hunchu uses first person perspective in *Hairdresser of Harare* which is done from its main character, Vimbai to explore deconstruction of gender roles and identity.

### 3.1 Literary Devices in Emezi's *Freshwater*

In *Freshwater*, Emezi skillfully utilises a range of literary devices to interrogate the notion of a singular, stable gender deconstruction and gender identity. The text transcends mere narrative, functioning as a profound exploration of the self as a complex arrangement of identities. As it is shown below, Emezi deploys a plethora of literary devices in her novel. The literary devices she deploys include simile, personification, metaphor, symbolism etc.

#### 3.1.1 Characterisation

Akwaeke Emezi uses characterisation to portray the fluid and complex nature of identity. The characters are not fixed or easily defined, instead, they are shaped by spiritual, emotional, and psychological layers that shift throughout the story. Through Ada and the voices that inhabit her, Emezi explores how a person can exist in multiple forms at once, making characterisation a means of expressing fragmentation and the search for balance between body and spirit.

The novel is narrated by a collective voice called "We," which represents the different selves within Ada such as Asụghara and Saint Vincent. From the beginning, Emezi introduces Ada as more than one person. The spirits say, "We were at once old

and newborn. We were her and yet not. We were not conscious but we were alive. in fact, the main problem was that we were a distinct we instead of being fully and just her" (Emezi 10). This description presents Ada as both human and divine, male and female, whole and divided. Her identity is fluid and cannot be confined to a single body or consciousness. The use of plural narration emphasizes this fragmentation and shows that Ada's personality is built from many voices rather than one.

Emezi also reveals Ada's difference through her childhood behavior. The narrator notes, "Ada belonged to us and Ala and Saachi, and as the child grew, there came a time when she would not move on all fours, as most babies do. She chose instead to wriggle, slithering on her stomach, pressing herself to the floor" (Emezi 13). This strange, movement signals that Ada's body operates outside normal human patterns. It becomes the first sign of her spiritual nature and her distance from ordinary gendered expectations. From infancy, she symbolises resistance to social and biological norms.

Physical appearance also plays a key role in Ada's characterization. At one point, the narrator observes that "she was always being mistaken for a boy when she was a child, when her hair was short for the first time" (Emezi 90). This detail highlights how gender perception depends on outward appearance. Ada's shifting presentation, sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine, reflects her internal complexity and shows that gender is not a fixed identity but something that changes with context and perception.

Emezi further develops Ada's character through her attitude toward fertility and womanhood. The narrators state, "You must understand, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us. It would be unthinkable, unbelievably cruel for us to ever swell so unnaturally, to lactate, to mutate our more careful after that" (Emezi 135). Here, Ada rejects the traditional idea that a woman's worth is tied to reproduction. Her refusal of

fertility reflects her struggle to define herself beyond the roles assigned to women, deepening her portrayal as a character who resists social expectations.

Each of Ada's inner selves also shape her character in distinct ways. Asụghara is bold and protective, often taking control after traumatic experiences, while Saint Vincent is calm, rational, and masculine, influencing Ada's physical appearance and attraction to women. These shifting personalities show that Ada's body is shared among different expressions of self, each representing a part of her evolving identity. The constant changes in voice and behavior illustrate that Ada's characterisation is built on movement, conflict, and transformation rather than stability. Through this, Emezi presents identity as something fluid, layered, and always in motion, reflecting the novel's wider concern with the multiplicity of selfhood.

### 3.1.2 Personification

This literary device ascribes human characteristics, emotions or actions to non-human entities, abstract ideas or animals. Ada, in Emezi's *Freshwater* exemplifies a profound of personification, endowing a non-human entity with the capacity to think, feel and narrate its experiences.

Gods are portrayed in a unique way. Their movements are likened to that of a fluid, non-human entity: "But these are gods and they move like heated water, so the rules are softened and stretched." (Emezi 29) This comparison gives life to the actions of the gods, indicating an adaptable and non-linear essence. The imagery of "heated water" stands in stark contrast to the traditional, rigid masculinity often linked to divine figure. By doing this, the narrative challenges the notion of a fixed or dominant deity, instead showcasing a form of power that is more fluid and unpredictable, mirroring the gender-fluid identities throughout the story.

The novel delves into those connections between the spirit realm and the human world to portray the gates with distinctly human traits thus: It has to be a temporary channel, though, a thing that is sealed afterward, because the gates stink of knowledge, they cannot be left swinging wide like a slack mouth, leaking mindlessly." (Emezi 29) By attributing smell and a loose, open mouth to the "gates," the narrative breathes life into a metaphysical idea. These gates transform from mere barriers into lively, permeable beings. This interplay softens the divide between the physical and spiritual realms, reflecting the protagonist's shifting identity and pushing back against the rigid categories that separate human from spirit, as well as traditional notions of gender.

The dust in the village scene takes on a life of its own, intertwining with Ada's essence and blurring the lines between her being and her surroundings. This is evident in the excerpt below:

> The dust was weaving in the air, light against her face, softly scraping her eyes. It breathed on her skin. Sand flew up around her feet and the skin on her back prickled. (Emezi 19)

Here, the dust is portrayed as if it "breathed on her skin," erasing the distinction between the character and her environment. This mirrors the novel's key theme of a fluid, interconnected identity, suggesting that Ada is not solely an individual but part of a collective spirit. The environment around her is not merely external; it is an integral, living aspect of her existence, embodying a broader, more inclusive understanding of self.

Saachi's anxiety is embodied as a cat, transforming a human emotion into something tangible and relatable. This is evident in this excerpt: "The anxiety curled up on her chest like a cat and purred through her bones." (Emezi 26)

This personification brings the emotion to the surface, presenting it as an independent entity nestled within her. This approach underscores the novel's central

theme of identity as a various components coming together to form a cohesive whole rather than a singular concept. It challenges traditional notions of a unified self, emphasising the fluid and multiple "selves" that exist within the protagonist.

The protagonist's father's mouth is depicted as an empty, silent void: it is said that "his mouth was a gray space: Saul had already left in all the ways that mattered, so it was not surprising that he said nothing, that his mouth was a gray space. (Emezi 28)

By characterising Saul's mouth as a "gray space," the text conveys a profound sense of emotional and communicative barrenness. This portrayal signifies a departure from conventional notions of masculine communication, typically associated with strength and authority. The absence of a clear, robust presence in his mouth undermines the expected masculine persona, revealing him instead as a passive, non-confrontational individual, an intriguing contrast to the earlier depiction of him as "forceful" in the narrative.

### 3.1.3 Metaphor

In a plain definition, metaphor is a creative way of comparing one thing with something else, even if they're quite different. Metaphorical expressions help in painting vivid pictures, amplifying certain traits or actions, and conveying intricate concepts in a relatable manner.

The human body serves as a central metaphor for negotiation and conflict within the text. Ada's body is presented as a vessel, a "house" accommodating multiple gods, thereby resisting the notion of a static, singular identity. The predominant metaphor in the text revolves around the concepts of the "ọgbanje" and the "fractured self". This metaphor, which is deeply rooted in Igbo spirituality, presents the protagonist, Ada, not merely as an individual but as a human body inhabited by a multitude of divine entities referred to collectively as "We." This foundational metaphor provides a compelling

framework for examining the deconstruction of gender by questioning the notion of a singular and stable identity that is confined within a physical form.

The narrative unfolds through the lens of this collective "We," which finds itself ensnared within Ada's human body. The spirits articulate their predicament as an "abomination of the fleshly" (Emezi 9) owing to the circumstances surrounding Ada's birth, where "the gates" between the spiritual realm and the corporeal world were inadvertently left opened. As a result, the spirits exist not as a singular entity, but rather as a "distinct we" within her.

The depiction of the body is consistently characterised as a "flesh-ridden cage," (Emezi 30) a restrictive vessel that inhibits the spirits dwelling within. This dual existence, being Ada, the individual and "We," the collective of gods, serves as the foundation for the protagonist's various "madnesses." The metaphor underscores the tension between individual physical identity and the pluralistic, spiritual self. The metaphor of the `ọgbanje` becomes a salient commentary on gender deconstruction as it relates to the spirits' connection with Ada's body. They perceive the body's assigned femininity and its reproductive capabilities as constraints that inhibit their authentic essence.

The spirits articulate their dissatisfaction with Ada's body, describing it as "too feminine, too reproductive," and "unsatisfactory." (Emezi 135) They experience it as a "flesh-ridden cage" (Emezi 30) that necessitates reshaping for them to feel at home. This underscores the direct link between the spiritual pursuit of stable identity and the physical deconstruction of the body. The spirits regard the biological functions associated with the body, such as fertility, as an "abomination." (Emezi 135) This sentiment transcends mere personal aversion; it highlights a profound conflict between their divine, genderless existence and the inherent limitations imposed by a female human form. The choice to

undergo a mastectomy represents a significant act of rejection and transformation, allowing for greater alignment with the non-binary nature of the self, as articulated in the narrative: "Removing her breasts was only the first step."

The collective identity represented by "We" encompasses a variety of entities, such as the "beastself" Asụghara and the "son of flux space" (Emezi 89) Saint Vincent. The coexistence of these distinct "selves" within a singular physical form challenges conventional understanding of gender and identity, suggesting that an individual can manifest multiple forms of existence. This portrays a human figure with a luminous, open portal situated at its back, through which various serpentine forms are emerging. This image symbolises the entry of spirits into Ada's body and maintains a visual connection to the "other side."

This depiction showcases a singular human silhouette filled with a multitude of distinct or fragmented figures. One embodiment may represent an enraged, snarling beast (Asụghara), while another could take the form of a serene, gentle presence (Saint Vincent), supplemented by a third figure illustrating confusion in a human guise (Ada).

This imagery presents a physical transformation of the body, illustrating the shedding of its feminine characteristics. This could be represented through a comparative visualisation of a figure with and without breasts, or through a more abstract representation of a body deconstructing or shedding its outer layers to reveal a fluid and less defined form beneath.

### 3.1.4 Symbolism

In *Freshwater*, the author constructs an intricate tapestry of symbolism that serves to interrogate the deconstruction of gender and identity, positioning them as mutable

concepts rather than as fixed biological truths. Ada, who embodies not a singular self but a conduit for a multiplicity of non-human identities, is collectively designated as the "We." This narrative approach fundamentally challenges the notion of a singular, stable identity, which is a foundational element of conventional gender roles. The "We" are articulated as "a distinct we instead of being fully and just her," thereby complicating the dichotomy between the human and the divine, as well as the boundaries between the physical body and the spirit.

A significant symbolic motif within the narrative is the characterisation of the body as a "flesh-ridden cage." (Emezi 30) For the "We," Ada's physical form, marked by femininity and reproductive potential, is perceived as an "abomination." This perspective posits the body not as an intrinsic aspect of identity but a constraining entity to be modified to align more closely with their non-binary and essence. This culminates in a symbolic act of gender deconstruction, exemplified by the experience of top surgery, during which they express feeling "missing weight from our chest," (Emezi 138) signifying a rebellion against the prescriptive biological destiny of the body as articulated in the text:

> But now that we had been spurned from the gates, now that we were sentenced to meat, it was time to accept that this body was ours too. And with Saint Vincent, our little grace, taking the front more than he used to, the body, as it was, was becoming unsatisfactory, too feminine, too reproductive... We were a fine balance, bigger than whatever the namings had made, and we wanted to reflect that, to change the Ada into us. Removing her breasts was only the first step. You must understand, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us. (Emezi 135)

The concept of the "gates" emerges as another potent symbol, delineating the division between spiritual and human domains. These gates were intended to close at Ada's birth; however, their persistent openness places the "We" in a perpetual state of flux, rendering them unable to fully inhabit either realm. This liminal existence, characterised as a "halfway spirit bastard," (Emezi 30) resonates with a non-binary identity that eschews fixation on a rigid position within the gender spectrum.

The serpent, particularly exemplified by the python, recurs as a symbol for the "We" and their spiritual progenitor, Ala. Ada's serpentine movement as an infant, demonstrated by her choice to "wriggle, slithering on her stomach, pressing herself to the floor", (Emezi 13) embodies a physical manifestation of her spiritual, non-human essence, thereby challenging the normative upright stance associated with traditional gender identity. This symbolism is further underscored by the python's capacity to "swallow anything whole," representing the all-encompassing nature of the "We," which poses a potential threat to the individuality of Ada.

**3.1.5 Simile**

A simile is a group of words that use like or as to compare two things. In other words, there is a connection between two elements that are compared with as or like. In *Freshwater*, similes are used to show how gender is deconstructed.

The simile in “She ate them all the way from their skins through wet flesh to her teeth scraping like dry bone against the seeds.” (Emezi 8) highlights the intensity and almost primal nature of Saachi’s hunger for the mangoes, likening the sound of her teeth on the seeds to the unsettling sound of “dry bone” This image suggests a powerful consuming drive. This stands in stark contrast to the meticulous and restrained manner in which women are frequently encouraged to eat across various cultures. It represents an

uninhibited and unconventional approach to consumption, which emphasises a disregard for social norms.

The simile “Its touch was like a machete running me through” (Emezi 95) evokes a striking and unsettling image that goes beyond merely describing pain. It explores themes of identity, trauma and the intricate bond between the self and the “brothersisters”

By comparing the sensation to a machete, the simile communicates an experience that is not only painful but also deeply invasive and slicing. The choice of a machete as a symbol is telling; it is not just a tool for healing or precision like a surgical instrument but rather something that conveys brute force rawness. The phrase “running me through” indicates an ongoing, penetrating action. This starkly contrasts with a simple touch, turning a seemingly innocent gesture into something akin to a psychological and spiritual violation. It suggests that the contact from the brothersisters is not just a physical sensation but also a profound attack on the narrator’s very essence, tearing into their core identity.

In this excerpt: We put the velveteen inside the walls of her vagina and we spat on the human hide, wetting like a stream.” (Emezi 17) describes how iyi-uwa was constructed. That is, the phrase in the excerpt amplifies the ritualistic aspects of the iyi-uwa’s creation. This simile operates on several layers, enriching readers’ comprehension of the brothersisters and their origin. The comparison of spittle on “human hide” to a stream may seem contradictory.

A stream evokes thoughts of flowing water, often linked to life and purity, whereas spittle is a bodily fluid that could be viewed as trivial and unremarkable. The simile suggests that the actions of brothersister, though bizarre and disturbing to human, are governed by a natural order within their own world. The reference to a “stream”

indicates that this behavior is a part of a larger, inevitable process, a mere fragment of a powerful current.

The comparison of a cowhide to a fountain in this excerpt: “Their raffia flew wildly around them, the cowhide springing like a fountain from their hands” (Emezi 19) paints a vivid picture that captures the energetic chaos of masquerades, but it takes on a deeper significance when examining gender roles. While fountain is typically seen as a controlled and elegant structure, here it represents a wild outburst of life. The word “springing” conveys a sense of sudden, forceful energy rather than graceful movement, contrasting sharply with often restrained expressions of traditional femininity. The image suggests a dynamic force that upends the expectations of how bodies are supposed to move; just like participants in the masquerades transcending mere performance. They embody spirits and their chaotic, free movements challenge rigid notions of gender and identity.

### 3.2 Literary Devices in Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare*

Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare* critically examines gender deconstruction through the literary mechanisms of characterisation and situational irony. Huchu deploys language devices like simile, metaphor, characterisation, personification, etc. to explore gender deconstruction in this novel. The narrative follows Vimbai, a woman who epitomises conventional gender expectations. However, the introduction of a new character disrupts her established worldview, compelling her to grapple with her own biases.

#### 3.2.1 Irony

Irony refers to a situation where the intended meaning of words contrasts sharply with their literal interpretation, or where the outcome of an event defies expectations. It

often carries a humorous touch or highlights the disparity between appearances and reality, revealing how a situation can be quite different from what it seems.

Vimbai, who refers to herself as the "queen bee" (Hunchu 40) of the salon, takes pride in her ability to make clients feel "like a white woman." (Hunchu 10) This phrase signifies her internalisation of Western beauty ideals and her extremely limited notions of success and femininity. *The Hairdresser of Harare's* central irony resides in the challenge to her authoritative position posed by Dumi, a male hairdresser. Her initial surprise and dismissal of him reflect her limited understanding of gender roles: “Young man, d'you think I am looking for a garden-boy? I want a hairdresser.” (Hunchu 13) Ironically, it is within the domain she controls, which is conventionally deemed feminine, that a man assumes prominence.

Vimbai calls herself "Ms. Independent," convinced that she does not need a man to thrive on her own. Yet, the irony is hard to miss: she finds herself increasingly reliant on Dumi. The concrete excerpt below shows it:

> The extra money that I was going to get from him would go some way in helping me with the bills and other things that I needed around the house. It was an unusual arrangement for a single woman to take in a male lodger, but I was freed from having to consider the feelings of my extended family. I could do what I liked and I didn’t have to care for my reputation either, because I didn’t want a man in my life. Ms Independent. (Huchu 67)
>
> "To be dispensable is a woman’s worst nightmare and I was beginning to live it." (Huchu 42)

He moves into her place, takes care of chores, and even contributes financially. Her professional achievements start to hinge on his presence; when he is absent, her business takes a hit. This reliance, however platonic, starkly contrasts her declaration of

independence. Dumi's character challenges the norms of traditional masculinity in a profound way. As a hairdresser, a profession often labeled as a "woman's job," he embodies a nurturing spirit and emotional intelligence, with a voice that carries both softness and clarity: "I've come to see Mrs Khumalo. His voice was soft yet clear." (Huchu 13)

The twist comes when he reveals his true identity as a gay man, leaving Vimbai, who has developed feelings for him, to confront the illusion she created around his masculinity. "That Dumisani of yours seems a decent chap, not like the other black guys I've seen who always seem to have another woman somewhere." (Huchu 151). The image she projected shatters as she realises he won't meet her romantic or societal expectations. "I knew then that the secret which made him the best hairdresser in Harare was that he knew how to make anyone feel like a woman." (Huchu 187). This reflects the poignant revelation of Dumi's true nature and identity towards the close of the novel.

Vimbai's perspective on hairdressing is steeped in a superficial, colonial view of beauty. She believes that for her clients to truly succeed, they must "feel like a white woman." (Huchu 10) However, Dumi takes a completely different stance. He prioritises what looks best for each individual, advising a client, "instead of these curls, we need to layer it so it flows with the smooth contours of your face." (Huchu 14) The twist there is that Dumi's authentic approach, which is less about commercial trends and more about genuine beauty, actually leads to greater success for the salon. His clients leave feeling beautiful and confident, an experience that eludes those who follow Vimbai's formula. She boldly claims:

> There's only one secret to being a successful hairdresser, and I've never withheld it from anyone. Your client should leave the salon feeling like a white woman. Not coloured, not Indian, not Chinese. (Huchu 10)

Meanwhile, Dumi observes, "Your hair was set beautifully, but the style she's given you is not for you." (Huchu 14) He then thoughtfully reaches for a fine-toothed comb from the table and gently runs it through her hair.

### 3.2.2 Metaphor

A metaphor is a creative way of making comparisons by suggesting that one thing is actually something else, even if they are quite different (for instance, calling a chef a magician). It helps paint vivid pictures, amplify certain traits or actions, and convey intricate concepts in a relatable manner.

The characters' attire and physical traits symbolise their performance of gender and societal roles. Vimbai takes note of how the clothing and appearances of those around her can either hide or expose their authentic selves. For example, Dumi's "black trousers and shortsleeved white shirt made him look like a junior clerk in the civil service." (Huchu 13) This is merely a facade, as his true passion lies in hairdressing, a profession often associated with women. The characters frequently use their outfits to curate a specific image, yet Dumi's unique talent for recognising and enhancing a person's inner beauty challenges the notion that external appearance defines identity. The narrator reflects on Dumi, noting, "The young man could not take his eyes off her," (Huchu 13) not in a predatory manner, but as an artist captivated by a "living sculpture" (Huchu 14) he yearns to transform.

Dumisani, affectionately referred to as Dumi, embodies a challenge to the rigid gender norms prevalent in Zimbabwean society. The initial reaction of the narrator, Vimbai, is one of astonishment and derision upon Dumi's application for the position. This moment extends beyond the mere notion of a man entering a traditionally feminine field; it invokes a broader discourse regarding the capabilities and sensibilities that a male figure might possess in this context. The reaction of other characters compounds

this notion, as they engage in laughter, with the salon proprietor, Mrs. Khumalo, humorously suggesting a preference for a "garden-boy" as opposed to a hairdresser. Such interactions underscore the entrenched societal beliefs that delineate professional roles strictly along gender lines.

The salon serves as a powerful metaphor, reflecting a small-scale version of society where gender roles are both upheld and contested. At first, it's a space dominated by women, with Vimbai proudly holding the title of "queen bee," catering primarily to her female clientele. However, the arrival of Dumi, a male hairdresser, disrupts the status quo, leaving Vimbai and her colleagues astonished. As the narrator points out: "A male hairdresser, who'd ever heard of such a thing?" (Huchu 13-14)

This salon soon transforms into a stage for the clash of traditional and progressive gender views related to work. Dumi's rise to prominence highlights that talent and skill know no gender, prompting both the characters and readers to reevaluate the limits placed on various professions. The metaphor illustrates that gender is not a fixed notion; instead, it is a flexible construct that can be interrogated and reshaped through demonstrated ability and action.

The main character, Vimbai, sees herself as the salon's greatest treasure. This is evident in the statement: "Everyone knew I was the goose that laid the golden eggs. If I left, half the customers would follow me" (Huchu 9)

This metaphor likens Vimbai to the beloved fable's goose, underscoring her vital role in the salon's success. It reflects her belief that she is essential to the business's thriving reputation.

**3.2.3 Symbolism**

In Huchu's novel, *The Hairdresser of Harare*, symbolism plays a crucial role in examining and reinterpreting conventional gender roles and norms, particularly through

the character of Dumisani (Dumi) and the setting of the hair salon. The narrative subverts established perceptions of masculinity and femininity by depicting Dumi as a male figure who excels in a profession traditionally associated with women.

One of the most significant symbols in the text is Dumi himself that his presence as a male hairdresser in an establishment predominantly managed by women directly contradicts the expectations held by Vimbai and the broader society. Vimbai's initial reaction to this is one of incredulity, as illustrated by Mrs. Khumalo's statement: "Young man, d'you think I am looking for a garden-boy? I want a hairdresser." (Hunchu 13) This remark encapsulates the strict gender roles endemic to their society, which assigns specific occupations based on gender identity.

Dumi's remarkable proficiency in the context of a female-centric profession not only affirms his capabilities but also dismantles the stereotype that hairdressing is an inherently feminine vocation. His craft is likened to that of a sculptor, as he is described as working "like an artist working on a living sculpture." (Hunchu 14) This comparison elevates hairdressing from a mere service to a legitimate art form, thereby challenging the gender-specific stereotypes typically associated with the profession.

Throughout the narrative, hair serves as a potent symbol. For Vimbai, hair operates as a commodity, a tool intended to afford clients a sense of resembling "a white woman," (Hunchu 10) which reflects a colonial legacy linking beauty to whiteness. Conversely, Dumi perceives hair as a manifestation of individual identity and self-expression. He approaches his craft with an understanding that goes beyond simply fulfilling clients' requests; he collaborates with their unique features to create a look that fosters a sense of beauty and authenticity. This is particularly evident when he restyles a client's hair, asserting: "Your hair was set beautifully, but the style she's given you is not for you." (Hunchu 14)

Dumi's methodology facilitates a departure from superficial, standardised notions of beauty, contributing to the client's liberation. The transformative effect of his work is encapsulated in the client's exclamation: “Sweet Jesus, I look like Naomi Campbell.” (Hunchu 14) This metamorphosis extends beyond mere physical enhancement, profoundly influencing her confidence and sense of self.

In the context of gender dynamics, the hair salon is framed as a "personal fiefdom" (Hunchu 9) for Vimbai, characterised by unique female power relations and established social hierarchies. The narrator affirms, “The salon was my personal fiefdom and I was queen bee.” (Hunchu 9) Dumi's entry and subsequent rise within this environment serve to disrupt the prevailing order. The incessant ringing of the phone, filled with requests for Dumi, underscores a shift in client preferences, as customers increasingly seek him out by name, thereby challenging Vimbai's previously unassailable reputation as the foremost hairdresser. This significant symbolic transition in power reflects a deconstruction of Vimbai's rigid worldview and compels her to engage with her own biases.

A pivotal moment in the narrative concerning the deconstruction of gender occurs when Vimbai becomes aware of Dumi's sexual orientation. This revelation induces considerable shock, as she had initially perceived him as "masculine" and "normal." The complexity of Dumi's identity presents a challenge to her foundational concepts of gender and interpersonal relationships. Vimbai's internal conflict is encapsulated in her inquiry, "Which one of them was the man and which was the woman anyway?" (Hunchu 166) This statement underscores her struggle to comprehend a relationship that exists outside the traditional male-female binary. Furthermore, her aversion to the notion that Dumi and Mr. M shared an intimate relationship "in the bed that I had shared with Dumi" (Hunchu 166) highlights the extent of her ingrained prejudices.

The exploration of Dumi's identity therefore prompts both Vimbai and the reader to reassess conventional interpretations of masculinity, love, and familial structures. Dumi's identification as a "Ngochani," or homosexual, is perceived by Vimbai as "so far outside of nature it can never happen," (Hunchu 168) illustrating a critical example of the traditional views that the text aims to challenge. Through Dumi's character, the narrative illustrates that gender and sexuality exist along a spectrum, contrary to the often rigid and distinct classifications imposed by societal norms.

**3.2.4 Simile**

A simile is a figure of speech that draws a comparison between two different things by using the words "like" or "as." Some popular examples are phrases such as "cool as a cucumber," "cold as ice," and "sly like a fox." Writers frequently incorporate similes to evoke vivid images when discussing more abstract ideas.

Dumi's influence in the salon goes well beyond just hair styling; he also takes on the important task of educating his clients. When he demonstrates how to use a female condom, the narrator remarks: "He looked like a high school teacher..." (Huchu 45)

This comparison effectively positions Dumi as an authoritative figure, akin to a knowledgeable instructor, which is a role typically associated with men. Yet, he harnesses this authority to engage in discussions about female reproductive health—an area that is frequently regarded as private or even taboo. This dynamic showcase a breaking down of traditional gender norms, with a man stepping up as a straightforward and compassionate educator on topics concerning women's bodies.

The novel introduces Dumi, a male hairdresser who breaks the mold in more ways than one. Upon his arrival, the narrator notes that: "The black trousers and shortsleeved white shirt made him look like a junior clerk in the civil service." (Huchu 13)

This comparison instantly challenges the usual perceptions surrounding male hairdressers. By likening him to a "junior clerk," the narrator associates Dumi with a conventional, office-based role, which stands in stark contrast to the creative and often feminine domain of hairdressing. This juxtaposition emphasises Dumi's defiance of traditional gender roles and sets the foundation for the novel's deeper dive into masculinity beyond societal norms.

As Dumi begins his work, his movements are captured by a vivid simile: "The stranger worked quickly like an artist crafting a living sculpture." (Huchu 14) This comparison raises the status of Dumi's profession, transforming it from a mere service industry role into a genuine art form. It invites us to reconsider the often-gendered view of hairdressing as "women's work." By depicting Dumi as an artist, this simile reframes his labour as a creative and skilled craft, challenging the oversimplified gender binary that frequently shapes our understanding of labour and talent.

The protagonist's battle with the complexities of Dumi's identity is strikingly illustrated through a powerful simile: "I felt as if I'd been torn in half, become two people with two different minds and two different hearts." (Huchu 155) This vivid comparison highlights the narrator's turmoil as her traditional worldview collapses. The revelation of Dumi's true identity creates a significant rift in her understanding, compelling her to confront her own rigid notions regarding gender, sexuality, and love. The "two people" symbolise her former self, tied to conventional beliefs, and the emerging self that must navigate a richer, more intricate reality

**3.3 Conclusion**

In both Freshwater and The Hairdresser of Harare, literary devices function as powerful tools through which Akwaeke Emezi and Tendai Huchu deconstruct conventional ideas of gender and identity. They employ tools such as characterisation,

symbolism, metaphor, and irony to question fixed notions of masculinity and femininity while highlighting the fluidity of selfhood. These techniques show how identity in African contexts is shaped by spirituality, culture, and social experience rather than by rigid binaries. In Freshwater, Emezi's use of fragmented narration and spiritual imagery dismantles the idea of a singular self, portraying identity as layered and constantly shifting. In contrast, Huchu employs realism and irony to reveal how social expectations and prejudice shape people's understanding of gender and sexuality in everyday life. Both writers demonstrate that identity is fluid and cannot be confined by biological or societal definitions. Through their use of language and creative expression, they present characters who challenge traditional gender roles and offer new ways of understanding the self in African societies.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# CONCLUSION

The project explores a comparative analysis of gender deconstruction in Emezi's *Freshwater* and Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare.* It shows that, despite their different narrative styles, the novels deliver strong critiques of the rigid, binary gender norms shaped by tradition, culture, and colonial influences in African societies. Using a theoretical framework that blends Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity with African feminist and queer theory, the authors portray gender as a fluid, socially constructed, and unstable identity. This examination reveals that understanding gender through a deconstructed lens is not just a theoretical venture rooted in Western thought, but is linked to African experiences, history, and spirituality.

Both *Freshwater* and *The Hairdresser of Harare* challenge traditional gender norms by showcasing characters who defy rigid binary definitions of gender. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is central to this analysis as it offers a perspective that views gender as a fluid performance shaped by societal expectations. This lens is relevantly used for examining Dumisani in Huchu's narrative, whose public persona embodies a "mandatory performance" of heterosexual masculinity necessary for survival within a conservative backdrop. However, the research also acknowledged the constraints posed by applying this Western framework in African contexts.

The framework is supported by insights from African feminist thinkers like Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, who argues that colonial rule disrupted precolonial African societies that do not naturally align social roles with a male-female binary. This essential perspective enriched the interpretation of Emezi's *Freshwater*, which presents gender

through an indigenous Igbo worldview rather than through a Western medical or psychological lens. By merging these theories, the study established a foundation that is both globally aware and locally relevant as it recognises that gender in Africa cannot be separated from its colonial history, socio-economic contexts, and spiritual practices.

This study has made a meaningful addition to the scholarship on African literature by conducting a comparative analysis of *Freshwater* and *The Hairdresser of Harare,* addressing a previously noted gap in literary critique. The study highlights the dynamic nature of discussions surrounding gender deconstruction in Africa and it demonstrates that African authors are actively engaging with Western queer and feminist theories, while also enhancing and expanding these concepts through the incorporation of indigenous belief systems and grounded social critiques. The contrast between Emezi's exploration of spiritual deconstruction and Huchu's focus on social performance illustrates the rich literary and ideological diversity present in contemporary African discussions on gender.

The project has established that gender in modern African literature is not a static, biological concept but rather a dynamic and often debated performance influenced by a mix of social, spiritual, and personal factors. Both authors present a liberated view of identity that goes beyond traditional binary thinking. Emezi embodies this through a spiritual acceptance of complexity, while Huchu approaches it with a practical and critical analysis of performativity.

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