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All *Freshwater* Comes Out of the Mouth of a Python: An Ecocritical and Postcolonial Reading of Igbo Water Cosmology in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an ecocritical and postcolonial reading of Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater (2018) (2018), arguing that the novel stages Igbo water cosmology centred on the river-and-python earth goddess Ala and the ogbanje spirit-child as a site of ecological and epistemic resistance to colonial Christian and Western biomedical frameworks. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, African ecospirituality, and material/hydrofeminist theory, the analysis examines how the protagonist Ada's fragmented, spirit-inhabited body figures water as an ontological substance that binds spirit, flesh, and land into a single ecological continuum. Using qualitative textual analysis and thematic coding of the novel's water, river, and python imagery, the study shows that Freshwater (2018) refuses the nature/culture and human/spirit binaries inherited from Western thought, recasting embodiment itself as an ecological event rather than a purely psychological one. Colonial Christianit, carried into the narrative through the matriarch Saachi's Catholic hymns and her family's cathedral in Kuala Lumpur, and Western psychiatric diagnosis, which threatens to rename Ada's ogbanje nature as pathology, appear as epistemic impositions analogous to the "slow violence" that postcolonial ecocriticism locates in colonised landscapes. Yet the narrative's return to Ala's watery womb and its closing declaration that all Freshwater (2018) comes out of the narrator's own mouth reassert an Igbo cosmological sovereignty that exceeds clinical explanation. The findings extend ecocriticism beyond wilderness and pastoral settings into diasporic, gender-fluid, spirit-inhabited embodiment, and align with an emerging body of scholarship reading Freshwater (2018) through Igbo ontology, queerness, and African earth spirituality. The article concludes that Emezi's novel models a decolonial ecological imagination in which water is agent, kin, and cosmology at once, and it calls for further comparative work across African ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, and the environmental humanities.

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Introduction

Ecocriticism began to influence the study of literature in the late twentieth century, emphasizing the connection between literature and the material world. In her foundational Ecocriticism Reader, Glotfelty (1996) claimed that the discipline analyzes the ways in which texts depict, interrogate and redescribe the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Ecocriticism has since expanded to include concerns of colonialism, power, identity and justice, and it has become more attuned to the environmental perspectives of communities historically marginalised from the discourse of the environmental movement in the western world (Buell, 1995, 2005; Heise, 2008; Nixon, 2011). In this enlarged field, the African literatures are particularly rich in ecocritically relevant elements, as Iheka (2017) shows, the ecological violence and agency are inseparable from histories of colonial extraction and postcolonial resistance.

Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel *Freshwater (2018)* (2018) is deceptively described in reviews as a story about mental fragmentation and gender transition, yet its very title announces an ecological and cosmological argument. The novel narrates the life of Ada, born in southern Nigeria as an ogbanje an Igbo spirit-child inhabited by multiple nonhuman selves who resist confinement in a single human body. Ada's spirits repeatedly describe her body in liquid and riverine terms, and the narrative traces her body's origin to Ala, the Igbo earth goddess whose sacred animal is the python and from whose mouth, the novel insists, all *Freshwater (2018)* flows (Emezi, 2018, p. 9). Read ecocritically, Ada's embodiment is not merely a psychological allegory; it is an ecological claim about the porousness between spirit, flesh, land, and water in Igbo cosmology.

Freshwater (2018) dramatises this claim against a second, colonising register. Ada's mother, Saachi, carries Catholic hymns and the memory of a cathedral in Kuala Lumpur into the Nigerian household where Ada is conceived, and Ada's own crisis, once she reaches college in the United States, is repeatedly offered a Western psychiatric vocabulary — dissociation, trauma, disorder — that the ogbanje voices narrating the novel treat as a foreign and reductive language for what they call home. This tension between an indigenous water-and-earth cosmology and an imported Christian-biomedical epistemology recalls the dynamic that Silko's Pueblo funeral rites stage against Catholic ritual, and it invites the same postcolonial ecocritical questions: how does a text represent colonial imprints on nature and spirit, and how do Indigenous or African ecological perspectives resist, adapt, or hybridise under that pressure?

This study is guided by the question: how does *Freshwater (2018)* represent water, river, and earth cosmology as sites of ecological and epistemic resistance to colonial Christian and biomedical frameworks, and how does the ogbanje body extend ecocritical thought toward embodied, diasporic, and gender-fluid ecologies? Three objectives follow: (1) to identify the colonial and Western epistemic imprints Christian ritual and psychiatric diagnosis — that press upon Ada's body and self-understanding; (2) to examine the Igbo water and earth cosmology, centred on Ala and the ogbanje, through which the novel figures ecological agency; and (3) to analyse the hybridisation and resistance that emerge as Ada moves between Nigeria and the United States and finally returns home.

The study's significance is threefold. First, it extends Native American and Indigenous ecocriticism's insights about ritual, land, and colonial imprint (as in Silko's fiction) into a Nigerian diasporic context, testing the portability of postcolonial ecocritical method across Indigenous and African cosmologies. Second, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship

on *Freshwater (2018)*, much of which reads the novel through queerness, trauma, or Africanfuturism (Magaqa & Makombe, 2021; Fourqurean, 2024; McFaul, 2021) but has not fully centred water and earth as ecological categories in their own right. Third, it builds on prior work in this research programme examining colonial imprints on nature in postcolonial fiction (Abbas et al., 2023; Abbas, 2025), extending that project from East African and South Asian settings into West African, diasporic, and explicitly spirit-inhabited terrain.

Literature Review

Scholarship on *Freshwater (2018)* has grown quickly since 2018, largely organised around three concerns: Igbo cosmology and ontology, queerness and gender, and genre. Ossana (2021) reads the novel as a palimpsestic search for "home," tracing how precolonial Igbo voices and Christian missionary discourse are layered rather than simply opposed, and arguing that Ada's psychic multiplicity cannot be separated from this colonial layering of belief systems. In this vein, Magaqa and Makombe (2021) use work by Stuart Hall, Judith Butler and Maria Lugones to demonstrate that the ogbanje concept allows Emezi to situate queer sexuality within, not against African cosmology, as a result the idea of queerness being a Western import is disturbed.

In the context of African earth spirituality and ecofeminist theory, Sidime (2024) specifically frames the novel in the former, as her chapter title "All Water Is Connected" highlights the presence of water as a connecting ecological and spiritual medium throughout the novel, and as a means to challenge Western psychoanalytical categorisation and gender norms. In her study of Ada, Sinha (2026) explores the concept of fragmentation and Igbo cosmology, demonstrating that Ada's plurality described as brokenness in a colonial discourse is a more relational way of being whole once she goes back to Nigeria. Fourqurean (2024) reads the novel through genre, claiming that the idea of ogbandjes and iyi-ụwa in the novel are not magical or speculative but rather another expression of an Igbo ontology where spiritual and material worlds are coterminous, thereby recasting the water and stone imagery in the novel from metaphor to literal.

The most immediately ecocritical precedent for the present study can be found in McFaul's (2021) reading of *Freshwater (2018)*, which she frames as a novel's "liquid geographies" in reference to Irenosen's Okojie's Butterfly Fish. McFaul traces how Ada's spirits describe her body as a house of "flesh and liquid," how the python-goddess Ala is the source from which "all *Freshwater (2018)*" flows, and how Ada's return to Nigeria restores her to a landscape and cosmology that Western psychoanalysis, in her account, can only mishear as burial or repression. McFaul's essay draws on Iheka's (2017) Naturalizing Africa to argue that the novel's stone and water imagery cannot be separated from a broader African ecocritical concern with extraction, land, and colonial epistemic violence.

Older, foundational scholarship on the ogbanje figure situates these readings historically. Achebe (1986) and Ogunyemi (2002) established the ogbanje and its Yoruba counterpart abiku as recurring figures of cyclical death, land, and spiritual reciprocity in West African literature, from Achebe's own fiction to Soyinka and Morrison; Newgas (2019) extends this genealogy directly to Emezi, reading *Freshwater (2018)* as part of a diasporic literature of "spirit children" responding to trauma. Kanu (2018) provides an ethnophilosophical account of Igbo deities, including Ala, that grounds the earth-and-water cosmology on which the novel draws.

Taken together, this body of work confirms that water, earth, and cosmology are central to *Freshwater (2018)*'s meaning, yet only Sidime (2024) and McFaul (2021) treat these as explicitly ecological categories, and neither engages postcolonial ecocriticism's vocabulary of slow violence, epistemic imposition, and hybridisation in sustained dialogue with Indigenous ecocriticism elsewhere in the world. This gap a systematic postcolonial ecocritical reading of *Freshwater (2018)*'s water cosmology, read comparatively alongside Indigenous ecocriticism of the kind developed for Silko's Pueblo fiction is what the present study addresses.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater (2018)* through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens. A qualitative approach suits the research aim, which is interpretive rather than quantitative: to uncover how ecological and cosmological meaning is encoded in the novel's imagery, narration, and structure (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary text is Emezi's *Freshwater (2018)* (2018), selected for its explicit foregrounding of water, river, and earth imagery in its title, epigraph, and closing lines, and for its sustained negotiation of Igbo cosmology against Christian and biomedical discourse. It is analyzed using close-reading methods, emphasizing scenes involving Ada's body, the goddess Ala, the python, and the frequent imagery of water, liquid and flesh. Passages were identified thematically and then categorised as either “Indigenous ecological-spiritual worldview”, “colonial or biomedical imprint”, or “hybridisation and resistance”. This coding will allow a systematic description of the effects of the natural symbols within the novel's disjointed, polyphonic narrative.

Two models of interpretation are used: One is postcolonial ecocriticism, which considers colonial narratives as transforming ecologies and cosmologies (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010; Nixon, 2011; Iheka, 2017). The second is material and hydrofeminist ecocriticism, specifically Alaimo's (2010) notion of trans-corporeality and Neimanis's (2017) description of bodies of water, both of which point to a vision of Ada's spirit-filled, multiply gendered body as an ecological formation rather than a contained, autonomous self. The scholarship of indigenous people and African people (Achebe 1986, Adamson 2001, Kanu 2018, Whyte 2017) further sheds light on how to read an ogbanje cosmology as ecological knowledge and not as a type of superstition or pathology.

The study has the disadvantage of using a single novel and a published English version of the novel instead of oral sources in the language of Igbo Cosmology. Nonetheless, situating the analysis within postcolonial, material, and Indigenous ecocritical scholarship ensures both theoretical rigour and cultural sensitivity.

Data Analysis

The Riverine Threshold: Birth as Hydrological Crossing

Freshwater (2018) (2018) opens with a declaration that immediately displaces the human body from the centre of its own narrative: *“I have lived many lives inside this body”* (Emezi, 2018, p. 1). The ogbanje narrators describe their arrival into flesh not as a biological event but as a forced hydrological crossing: they are *“dragged through the gates, across a river”* and thrust into *“the*

rippling water" of the unborn Ada's small, floating body (Emezi, 2018, p. 3). Even the labour that brings Ada into the world is narrated through water and land together a taxi journey down "twisting red roads" toward the hospital so that from its first pages the novel figures the passage from spirit to flesh as an ecological threshold rather than a purely biological or psychological one. Ecocriticism's attention to how texts encode human-environment reciprocity (Buell, 1995) is here extended inward: the environment being negotiated is not only the external world but the watery, riverine boundary between spirit and body, land and womb.

The Body as House: Water, Flesh, and the Python's Mouth

The spirits go on to describe Ada's body itself as an ecological structure rather than a private interior: it is *"a house… [with] walls of flesh and liquid"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 4). This image recurs and deepens when the novel identifies the ultimate source of that liquid: "all *Freshwater (2018)* comes out of the mouth of a python," the sacred animal of the earth goddess Ala (Emezi, 2018, p. 9). In Igbo cosmology, Ala is guardian of the earth, fertility, and the underworld, and her python is inviolable (Kanu, 2018); by tracing Ada's embodiment to this python-goddess, Emezi positions Ada's very flesh as an extension of a living ecological-spiritual order, not an isolated human anomaly to be diagnosed. Even Ada's given name encodes this cosmology: within Igbo naming practice invoked by the novel, Ada is bound to Ala as *"the flesh form of the god,"* so that body, name, and earth-water deity are made linguistically inseparable (Emezi, 2018, p. 9).

Ecology Before Rupture: Compound, Mangoes, and Yam Tendrils

Before the novel turns to trauma and fracture, it lingers on an ecology of abundance surrounding Ada's earliest life in the doctors' quarters in Umuahia. The unborn ogbanje describe watching Saachi's household from the compound, *"watching the yam tendrils crawl up their supporting sticks" and the corn silk dry as it ripens* (Emezi, 2018, p. 10). Saachi's hunger for the mangoes Saul gathers by the bucketful eaten *"all the way from their skins through their wet flesh to her teeth scraping like dry bone against the seeds"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 10) — stages fertility, appetite, and land as continuous with the fetal body being formed. Even the ogbanje's own freedom, prior to full incarnation, is described in ecological terms: it was *"nothing to slip away, along the bitter streams of chalk"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 11). This period of widespread continuity between body, garden, and spirit sets up, by contrast, the epistemic rupture that colonial religion and Western diagnosis will later introduce.

Colonial Imprint: Cathedral, Hymn, and "No Shortcut to Success"

Against this ecology of continuity, the novel places a colonial Christian imprint, carried not by a visiting priest as in Silko's Pueblo funeral but by domestic inheritance: Saachi's family's ashes are "stored" in the walls of a cathedral in Kuala Lumpur, and her Catholic hymns are the first songs the unborn ogbanje hear in the womb, hymns they amuse themselves by distorting *"to twist it around the fetus till it kicked in glee"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 9). Christianity here is quiet, generational, and already partly indigenised rather than externally imposed, yet it performs the same epistemic function that Nixon (2011) calls slow violence: a naturalised reframing of spiritual inheritance that leaves little conceptual room for the Igbo cosmology Ada's spirits claim as truth. A second, secular register of colonial and postcolonial capitalist imprint appears in the taxi driver's dashboard slogan repeated on the day of Ada's birth, *"NO SHORTCUT TO*

SUCCESS" (Emezi, 2018, p. 11), which frames even the ogbanje's resistant, six-hour labour their refusal to be *"singled out and locked into the blurred consciousness of a little mind"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 11) against a wider ideology of linear, effortful human achievement utterly foreign to cyclical ogbanje time.

Flooding and Fracture: Asuḥara, Vincent, and the Ecology of Trauma

Once Ada leaves Nigeria for college in the United States, the novel's ecological vocabulary migrates inward, describing the emergence of new spirits in the same liquid terms used for Ada's birth. After a sexual assault, the spirit Asuḥara *"floods through"* into Ada's body for the first time, and the encounter is narrated as an act of absorption rather than possession: Ada *"spread herself open" and "absorbed me fiercely, all the way"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 71). The verb "flood" recurs when the male spirit Vincent takes control, constructing for himself *"a dream body with reorganised flesh and a penis"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 122) so that gender itself becomes a hydrological reshaping of Ada's *"marbled flesh"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 126) rather than a fixed biological category. When the brother-sister spirits eventually accept "that this body was ours too" (Emezi, 2018, p. 187), the novel refuses to separate psychological fragmentation from ecological metaphor: each new self-arrives, like Ada herself, by flooding across a bodily threshold.

The Marble Room and the Iyi-ụwa: Stone, Water, and Diagnosis

The confrontation between Igbo cosmology and Western biomedical language is staged most explicitly in the novel's recurring image of Ada's mind as *"this marble room that you call your mind"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 48), *a "cool veined white"* chamber where Ada retreats and speaks with Yshwa, her name for Jesus (Emezi, 2018, p. 75). A psychoanalytic reading might call this marble room a crypt of buried trauma, yet the ogbanje insist it is instead a shrine, continuous with Ala's stone-and-water domain rather than a symptom to be excavated. This continuity is reinforced by the iyi-ụwa, the ogbanje's buried pact object, described as *"bits of bone, an igneous rock, worn-out velveteen"* tied together to guarantee the spirit's eventual return (Emezi, 2018, p. 14). Where Western psychoanalysis (Abraham & Torok, 1994) figures buried trauma as something pathological to be unearthed, the novel's own buried object is a covenant with the earth, not a wound; the novel thereby exemplifies what Huggan and Tiffin (2010) describe as postcolonial ecocriticism's concern with the coloniality of knowledge itself it is not only land and ritual that colonialism reshapes, but the very categories through which selfhood and illness are named.

Return to Ala: The Watery Womb and the Closing Reversal

The narrative's resolution stages hybridisation and, ultimately, resistance in Igbo cosmology's favour. Ada travels home to Lagos, where a Yoruba priest and an Igbo historian teach her the "many connotations" of her own name (Emezi, 2018, p. 225), insisting that *"some things must happen on home soil if they are to happen at all"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 211). In a culminating vision she is addressed from within Ala's watery womb and told to "curve in on yourself… the beginning that is the end" (Emezi, 2018, p. 224), an image of cyclical, ecological continuity rather than linear cure or diagnosis. Ada comes to accept *"how useless it had been to try and become a singular entity"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 219) and to *"let go of being human"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 225) altogether. The novel's final line inverts its opening cosmological claim: no longer

merely a house fed by the python's water, the narrator now declares, *"all Freshwater (2018) comes out of my mouth"* (Emezi, 2018, p. 226). Death, diagnosis, and displacement are here answered not by resolution into a single, bounded Western self but by an assertion of ecological and divine continuity, in which Ada becomes the water's source rather than its vessel.

Findings

The analysis of *Freshwater (2018)* yields four principal findings. First, the novel figures water as an active ecological-spiritual agent rather than a passive backdrop: Ada's body is a house of flesh and liquid whose *Freshwater (2018)* originates in the python-mouth of the earth goddess Ala, so that embodiment itself is an ecological, not merely psychological, event (Emezi, 2018, pp. 4, 9). This supports the broader ecocritical claim that literature encodes human-environment reciprocity (Buell, 1995), extended here into a diasporic, spirit-inhabited body.

Second, colonial and biomedical imprints operate on two registers: an inherited, domesticated Christianity (Saachi's hymns and cathedral) and an externally administered psychiatric vocabulary that threatens to rename Ada's ogbanje nature as disorder. Both echo Nixon's (2011) slow violence and Huggan and Tiffin's (2010) account of the coloniality of knowledge, reframing Ada's spiritual multiplicity as pathology to be corrected rather than cosmology to be honoured.

Third, the novel dramatizes hybridisation and eventual resistance: Ada's mind is figured as a marble room that could be read, in Western terms, as a crypt of repressed trauma, but which the ogbanje insist is continuous with Ala's stone-and-water domain (Emezi, 2018, p. 48). This finding confirms Sidime's (2024) and McFaul's (2021) arguments that *Freshwater (2018)* indigenises rather than simply rejects the categories imposed upon it, reworking Western diagnostic language into an Igbo cosmological frame.

Finally, the closing reversal from a body fed by the python's water to a narrator from whose own mouth all *Freshwater (2018)* flows (Emezi, 2018, p. 226) affirms ecological and spiritual continuity over clinical resolution. Death, fragmentation, and diaspora are answered not by integration into a singular Western self but by Ada's assumption of a divine, ecological identity, extending the ecocritical argument that literature can imagine survival as continuity with, rather than mastery over, the nonhuman world.

Conclusion

This paper has explored Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater (2018)* in an ecocritical and postcolonial context and examined the novel's representation of the Igbo world of water and earth in its narration, imagery and structure. The results show that *Freshwater (2018)* validates the spiritual-ecological continuity of Indigenous African people as based in the Goddess Ala, while bringing into question the scope of colonial Christianity and Western psychiatric epistemology, sometimes violently. The presence of symbols like the image of the python, the marble room and the use of *Freshwater (2018)* as a symbol itself, show that nature and cosmology are both challenged and appropriated in the story.

Freshwater (2018) depicts colonialism and its biomedical legacies not just as a cultural or psychological imposition but as an ecological and epistemic one, in which the ways the body is

related to water, earth, and spirit can be renamed. Yet the novel's protagonist reasserts cosmological sovereignty by returning that relationship to Igbo ecological terms, demonstrating that cultural, psychic, and ecological survival are inseparable. This aligns with and extends recent scholarship emphasising hybridity, resilience, and decolonial ecological imagination in African and Indigenous literatures alike (Sidime, 2024; McFaul, 2021; Iheka, 2017).

By reading water as agent, kin, and cosmology, *Freshwater (2018)* contributes to a broader decolonial ecological imagination in which spirit, land, and body sustain one another beyond Western nature/culture and human/spirit binaries. The novel thereby extends the reach of postcolonial ecocriticism from Pueblo funeral rites and rain clouds to Igbo river goddesses and spirit-inhabited flesh, suggesting the wider portability of ecocritical method across Indigenous and African cosmologies.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on these findings, several avenues for future research are recommended.

1. Comparative ecocritical readings across Indigenous and African cosmologies. Future work could place *Freshwater (2018)*'s water-and-earth cosmology in sustained dialogue with Indigenous ecocriticism of the kind developed for Silko's Pueblo fiction, or with other African water deities such as Idemili and Mami Wata, to map shared and divergent ecological grammars across Indigenous and African literatures.
2. Extension to Emezi's wider oeuvre. *Freshwater (2018)*'s water and earth cosmology recurs, in altered form, across Emezi's later fiction and memoir; comparative study across these works could clarify how ecological cosmology develops alongside the author's own account of ogbanje identity.
3. Material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality. Building on Alaimo (2010) and Neimanis (2017), future studies could extend the present analysis of Ada's body-as-water toward a fuller material ecocritical account of trans, nonbinary, and spirit-inhabited embodiment as ecological rather than purely social categories.
4. Integration of Igbo oral and ritual sources. Scholars should incorporate oral accounts of Ala worship, ogbanje ritual, and iyi-ụwa practice, where accessible, to contextualise how *Freshwater (2018)*'s cosmology relates to lived Igbo ecological and spiritual practice beyond the written text.
5. Pedagogical application. Educators teaching postcolonial and ecocritical literature could pair *Freshwater (2018)* with Indigenous texts such as Silko's fiction to demonstrate the cross-cultural reach of ecocritical method and to foreground African cosmologies within environmental humanities curricula.

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