KURUKAN FUGA

La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales

QUATORZIEME NUMERO DE LA REVUE AFRICAINE DES LETTRES, DES SCIENCES

KURUKAN FUGA
VOL : 4-N°14 JUIN 2025

ISSN : 1987-1465

Website : http://revue-kurukanfuga.net

E-mail : revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com

VOL : 4-N°13 JUIN 2025

Bamako, Juin 2025

KURUKAN FUGA

La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales

ISSN : 1987-1465

E-mail : revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com

Website : http://revue-kurukanfuga.net

Links of indexation of African Journal Kurukan Fuga

COPERNICUS	MIR@BEL	CROSSREF	SUDOC	ASCI	ZENODO
https://journals.indexcopernicus.com/search/details?id=129385&lang=ru	https://reseaumirabel.info/revue/19507/Kurukan-Fuga	https://search.crossref.org/search/works?q=kurukan+fuga&from_ui=yes	https://www.sudoc.abes.fr/cbs/xslt//DB=2.1/SET=4/TTL=1/SHW?FRST=5	https://ascidatabase.com/masterjournallist.php?v=16126	https://zenodo.org/communities/rkf/records?q=&l=list&p=1&s=10&sort=newest

- *OUOLOGUEM Belco,* Maitre de Conférences *(Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako)*
- *MAIGA Abida Aboubacrine,* Maitre-Assistant *(Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)*
- DIALLO Issa, *Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)
- KONE André, *Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)
- DIARRA Modibo, *Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)
- MAIGA Aboubacar, *Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)
- DEMBELE Afou, *Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)
- *Prof. BARAZI Ismaila Zangou* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)
- Prof. N'GUESSAN Kouadio Germain (Université Félix Houphouët Boigny)
- Prof. GUEYE Mamadou (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako)
- Prof.TRAORE Samba (Université Gaston Berger de Saint Louis)
- Prof.DEMBELE Mamadou Lamine (Université des Sciences politiques et juridiques de Bamako,Mali)
- Prof.CAMARA Bakary, (Université des Sciences politiques et juridiques de Bamako,Mali)
- SAMAKE Ahmed,Maitre-Assistant (Université des Sciences politiques et juridiques de Bamako,Mali)
- *BALLO Abdou, Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako, Mali)
- *Prof.FANE Siaka* (Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako,Mali)
- *DIAWARA Hamidou, Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako,Mali)
- *TRAORE Hamadoun, Maitre-de Conférences* (Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako,Mali)
- *BORE El Hadji Ousmane Maitre de Conférences* (Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako,Mali)
- *KEITA Issa Makan, Maitre-de Conférences* (Université des Sciences politiques et juridiques de Bamako,Mali)
- *KODIO Aldiouma, Maitre de Conferences* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako)
- *Dr SAMAKE Adama* (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)
- *Dr ANATE Germaine Kouméalo, CEROCE, Lomé, Togo*
- *Dr Fernand NOUWLIGBETO, Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin*
- *Dr GBAGUIDI Célestin, Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin*
- *Dr NONOA Koku Gnatola, Université du Luxembourg*
- *Dr SORO, Ngolo Aboudou, Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké*
- *Dr Yacine Badian Kouyaté, Stanford University, USA*
- *Dr TAMARI Tal, IMAF Instituts des Mondes Africains.*

COMITÉ SCIENTIFIQUE

- *Prof. AZASU Kwakuvi (University of Education Winneba, Ghana)*
- *Prof.ADEDUN Emmanuel (University of Lagos,Nigeria)*
- Prof. SAMAKE Macki, *(Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)*

- *Prof. DIALLO Samba (Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako, Mali)*
- *Prof. TRAORE Idrissa Soïba, (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Mali)*
- *Prof. J.Y.Sekyi Baidoo (University of Education Winneba, Ghana)*
- *Prof. Mawutor Avoke (University of Education Winneba, Ghana)*
- *Prof. COULIBALY Adama (Université Félix Houphouët Boigny, RCI)*
- *Prof. COULIBALY Daouda (Université Alassane Ouattara, RCI)*
- Prof. LOUMMOU Khadija (Université Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah de Fès, Maroc.
- Prof. LOUMMOU Naima (Université Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah de Fès, Maroc.
- Prof. SISSOKO Moussa (Ecole Normale supérieure de Bamako, Mali)
- Prof. CAMARA Brahima *(Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako)*
- *Prof. KAMARA Oumar (Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako)*
- Prof. DIENG Gorgui (Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, Sénégal)
- Prof. AROUBOUNA Abdoulkadri Idrissa (Institut Cheick Zayed de Bamako)
- Prof. John F. Wiredu, University of Ghana, Legon-Accra (Ghana)
- Prof. Akwasi Asabere-Ameyaw, Methodist University College Ghana, Accra
- Prof. Cosmas W.K.Mereku, University of Education, Winneba
- Prof. MEITE Méké, Université Félix Houphouet Boigny
- Prof. KOLAWOLE Raheem, University of Education, Winneba
- Prof. KONE Issiaka, Université Jean Lorougnon Guédé de Daloa
- Prof. ESSIZEWA Essowè Komlan, Université de Lomé, Togo
- Prof. OKRI Pascal Tossou, Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin
- Prof. LEBDAI Benaouda, Le Mans Université, France
- Prof. Mahamadou SIDIBE, Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako
- Prof.KAMATE André Banhouman, Université Félix Houphouet Boigny, Abidjan
- Prof.TRAORE Amadou, Université de Segou-Mali
- Prof.BALLO Siaka, *(Université des Sciences Sociales et de Gestion de Bamako, Mali*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Vol. 4, N°14, pp. 161 – 174, Juin 2025

ISSN : 1987-1465
DOI : https://doi.org/10.62197/WEMX3771
Indexation : Copernicus, CrossRef, Mir@bel, Sudoc, ASCI, Zenodo
Email : RevueKurukanFuga2021@gmail.com
Site : https://revue-kurukanfuga.net

La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales ***KURUKAN FUGA***

INTERMEDIALITY IN *FRESHWATER* BY AKWAEKE EMEZI: A HYBRIDIZATION OF LITERATURE, ORAL TRADITION, AND IGBO SPIRITUALITY

DIARRASSOUBA Youssouf,

Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny Cocody-Abidjan, Email : diarrayoussouf31@gmail.com

Résumé.
Cette étude explore l'intermédialité dans Freshwater d'Akwaeke Emezi, en analysant la manière dont le roman transcende les frontières littéraires conventionnelles par la fusion de traditions artistiques, spirituelles et culturelles multiples. En intégrant la cosmologie igbo, une narration polyphonique et une structure fragmentée, Freshwater se situe à l'intersection des traditions orales, écrites et numériques, remettant en question les contraintes de la forme romanesque traditionnelle. La recherche met en lumière la manière dont le corps fonctionne comme un médium narratif, reflétant des thèmes de transformation, de multiplicité et d'auto-représentation. De plus, l'engagement d'Emezi avec la culture visuelle et numérique inscrit le roman dans le paysage contemporain de la narration transmédia, établissant un parallèle entre expérimentation littéraire et construction de l'identité numérique. L'étude soutient que Freshwater n'est pas simplement un roman, mais une expérience multimédia, où mythe, mémoire et communication moderne se rencontrent pour redéfinir les possibles narratifs. À travers une approche interdisciplinaire, l'analyse affirme que l'œuvre d'Emezi illustre comment la littérature contemporaine adopte l'intermédialité comme mode fondamental de narration, ouvrant de nouvelles perspectives dans la conceptualisation de l'identité, de la spiritualité et de l'hybridité artistique. En définitive, Freshwater se présente comme un artefact littéraire transformateur, qui reconfigure le dialogue entre littérature, culture numérique et narration visuelle.
Mots clés : cosmologie igbo culture numérique, intermédialité, narration polyphonique, narration transmédia

****

Abstract
This study explores the intermediality of Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater, examining how the novel transcends conventional literary boundaries through its fusion of multiple artistic, spiritual, and cultural traditions. By integrating Igbo cosmology, polyphonic narration, and fragmented storytelling, Freshwater operates at the intersection of oral, written, and digital traditions, challenging the constraints of traditional novelistic form. The research highlights how the body functions as a narrative medium, reflecting themes of transformation, multiplicity, and self-representation. Furthermore, Emezi's engagement with digital and visual culture situates the novel within the contemporary landscape of transmedia storytelling, drawing parallels between literary experimentation and digital identity construction. The study argues that Freshwater is not merely a novel but a multimedia experience, where myth, memory, and modern communication intersect to redefine narrative possibilities. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the analysis affirms that Emezi's work exemplifies how contemporary literature embraces intermediality as a fundamental mode of storytelling, offering new ways of conceptualizing identity, spirituality, and artistic hybridity. Ultimately, Freshwater serves as a transformative literary artifact that reshapes the dialogue between literature, digital culture, and visual storytelling.

Key words : **Digital culture, Igbo Cosmology, intermediality, polyphonic narration, transmedia storytelling.**

Cite This Article As DIARRASSOUBA, Y. (2025). INTERMEDIALITY IN *FRESHWATER* BY AKWAEKE EMEZI: A HYBRIDIZATION OF LITERATURE, ORAL TRADITION, AND IGBO SPIRITUALITY. Kurukan Fuga, 4(14), 175–188. https://doi.org/10.62197/WEMX3771

Introduction

Intermediality, as a theoretical concept, explores the interactions and intersections between different media within a given work, challenging conventional literary structures by integrating elements of oral tradition, visual arts, digital culture, and spiritual narratives. In contemporary African literature, intermediality serves as a powerful tool for representing hybrid identities, historical consciousness, and the coexistence of multiple realities within a single text. Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) exemplifies this phenomenon by merging literary fiction with oral storytelling, Igbo spirituality, and a fragmented narrative structure that evokes cinematic and digital aesthetics. The novel follows Ada, a Nigerian-born woman struggling with a fractured identity shaped by the presence of ogbanje spirits supernatural entities from Igbo cosmology believed to exist between life and death. Through polyphonic narration, *Freshwater* interweaves indigenous African belief systems, mental health discourse, and postmodern storytelling techniques, making it a rich text for analyzing intermediality in contemporary literature. Given the novel's hybrid structure and its incorporation of multiple media forms, a central question arises: how does *Freshwater* employ intermediality to construct a hybrid narrative that intertwines literature, oral tradition, and Igbo spirituality? This study hypothesizes that Emezi's novel transcends conventional literary forms by integrating multiple narrative voices, indigenous African cosmology, and visual storytelling techniques.

Through intermediality, *Freshwater* not only challenges Western notions of identity and selfhood but also redefines the African literary canon by incorporating traditional and contemporary media forms. The objective of this research is to examine how *Freshwater* mobilizes intermediality through four key aspects: the polyphonic narrative structure and its connection to African oral storytelling, the interplay between literature and Igbo spirituality, the representation of the body as a narrative medium, and the influence of digital and visual culture in shaping the novel's storytelling techniques. The analysis of *Freshwater* is guided by the theory of intermediality, particularly as conceptualized by Lars Elleström and Irina Rajewsky, who examine the relationships between different media and their interactions within literary texts. The study also draws from postcolonial theory, as formulated by Homi Bhabha, to explore how *Freshwater* reclaims indigenous African storytelling methods while resisting Western literary structures.

Additionally, queer and gender theory, particularly the works of Judith Butler and bell hooks, would rovide insights into the fluidity of identity in the text, analyzing how gender, body, and selfhood are redefined through spiritual and intermedial frameworks. Structurally, this study is divided into four parts: the first examines how the novel's polyphonic narration aligns with African oral traditions, the second explores the interplay between literature and Igbo spirituality, the third analyzes the body as a contested narrative medium, and the fourth focuses on the influence of digital and visual aesthetics in *Freshwater*. Ultimately, this study seeks to highlight how Emezi's novel exemplifies a new form of intermedial storytelling in African anglophone literature, blending multiple artistic, cultural, and spiritual influences to create an innovative narrative form.

1. Multiplicity of Voices: Intermediality through Polyphonic Narration

One of the most striking intermedial features of *Freshwater* is its polyphonic narration, which blends multiple voices, perspectives, and temporalities. Akwaeke Emezi structures the novel in a way that challenges the notion of a singular, coherent self, instead presenting identity as fragmented and fluid. This narrative strategy is deeply intermedial, as it draws from oral storytelling traditions, cinematic montage, and psychological interiority, making the novel function like an interplay of different media within a literary text. By integrating multiple narrators, shifting perspectives, and destabilizing linear time, *Freshwater* operates at the intersection of oral literature, modern fiction, and visual storytelling, reinforcing its intermedial nature.

Unlike traditional first-person or third-person narrations, *Freshwater* incorporates a plurality of voices, most notably those of the ogbanje spirits who inhabit Ada. These spirits speak in a collective "we", immediately contrasting their perspective with Ada's individual self-awareness. Their voice dominates the first chapters of the novel, asserting their power over the protagonist: "We were sent through by the gate, tasked to guard the body, to oversee its growing, to make sure it lived as long as it was meant to" (Emezi, 2018, p. 7). The use of the plural first-person pronoun destabilizes the reader's expectation of a singular, coherent narrator, instead presenting identity as polyphonic and multilayered. This strategy aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, where multiple voices coexist within a single text, each carrying its own ideological and cultural weight. As Bakhtin argues, "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even a diversity of languages and individual voices" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 262). In *Freshwater*, this intermedial layering of voices mirrors the

way oral storytelling functions in many African traditions, where myths and folktales are passed down by a chorus of voices rather than a singular narrator.

Furthermore, Emezi's decision to decentralize Ada's voice creates a literary effect akin to montage techniques in cinema, where different perspectives are juxtaposed to build meaning. The novel shifts between Ada's human consciousness, the spirits' omniscient narration, and later, other identities such as Asughara and Saint Vincent. This fragmented perspective mirrors cinematic editing, where different camera angles and sequences convey multiple layers of reality. The disjointed, overlapping voices in *Freshwater* reflect what Walter Murch describes as "a layering of consciousness through images and sounds, each modifying the previous one" (Murch, 2001, p. 18). By cutting between various narrative angles, Emezi creates a visual aesthetic within a textual medium, reinforcing the novel's intermedial character. This structural fragmentation is further influenced by African oral storytelling traditions, which often rely on collective narration, repetition, and the embodiment of supernatural voices. The ogbanje spirits function as ancestral figures, reminiscent of mythological tricksters or spirits in African folklore, who intervene in human affairs and shape destinies through speech. In this way, Emezi incorporates Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of orality in literature, where storytelling is not a solitary act but a communal experience: "The written text, if it is to carry the spirit of the oral tradition, must incorporate the rhythm, the repetition, and the interactive dynamics of speech" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 14). This influence is evident in how the spirits narrate their presence within Ada: "We have always been here, lurking, watching. We whisper in the gaps between your thoughts, shaping your will, guiding your hands" (Emezi, 2018, p. 35). The spirits' performative role echoes the call-and-response technique found in oral traditions, where multiple voices overlap, contradict, and shape the narrative dynamically.

Additionally, the way time is structured in *Freshwater* reflects orality's non-linear approach to storytelling. Instead of following a chronological progression, the novel moves fluidly between past, present, and mythological time, much like oral histories that adapt and reshape themselves with each retelling. The spirits narrate Ada's life as though they are recounting a timeless myth, erasing the boundaries between history and legend. This non-linear temporal structure aligns with Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, where narratives transcend personal experience and become part of a shared, evolving tradition (Assmann, 2011, p. 129). Beyond its oral and cinematic influences, *Freshwater* also functions as a liminal space between media and reality, a quality that aligns with Walter Ong's concept of "secondary orality". Ong defines secondary orality as the "residual influence of oral traditions in literate

cultures, particularly as they are reshaped through new media" (Ong, 1982, p. 136). In *Freshwater*, this is evident in how the spirits' narration serves as an intermedial bridge between traditional oral forms and contemporary psychological fiction. Their presence is not merely symbolic; it fundamentally reshapes how the novel's events are perceived. The reader must navigate multiple, often contradictory perspectives, much like in digital media where different realities coexist simultaneously. Katherine Hayles describes this effect as a "posthuman narrative structure, where identity is fragmented and diffused across multiple consciousnesses" (Hayles, 1999, p. 85).

Moreover, the novel's structure resembles a performance piece, where voices emerge, take over, and then fade away, much like characters in a staged production. This performative aspect is reinforced when one of the spirits, Asughara, takes full control over Ada's body, assuming an entirely new persona and shifting the narrative tone: "Asughara lived in Ada's body with no apologies. She took what she wanted, shaped the world to her will" (Emezi, 2018, p. 112). This transformation is not just a psychological shift but a metatextual performance, where narration itself becomes a medium through which identity is staged, contested, and reshaped.

To conclude, the polyphonic narration, fragmented structure, and interplay between oral storytelling and modern psychological fiction in *Freshwater* exemplify its intermediality. By integrating multiple narrators, fluid temporalities, and oral-inspired structures, Emezi engages with Bakhtinian heteroglossia, Ngũgĩ's theories on orality, and Ong's secondary orality, positioning the novel at the crossroads of literary, oral, and cinematic storytelling techniques. This multiplicity of voices not only reflects the protagonist's fractured identity but also redefines how African literature engages with narrative form, performativity, and media hybridity.

2. Literature as a Medium for Igbo Cosmology

Intermediality in Freshwater extends beyond narrative fragmentation and polyphonic storytelling to engage with Igbo cosmology and spiritual discourse, transforming the novel into a hybrid text where mythology, spirituality, and literary fiction intersect. Unlike Western psychological frameworks that perceive multiple identities as dissociative disorders, Emezi presents a narrative rooted in African spiritual belief systems, specifically the ogbanje

phenomenon. Through this lens, *Freshwater* disrupts dominant epistemologies by presenting a reality where the spiritual and physical worlds are not separate but coexisting and interactive.

One of the central ways in which intermediality manifests in *Freshwater* is through the integration of Igbo mythology within a contemporary literary form. The novel reclaims and reinterprets the concept of ogbanje, spirits that cyclically reincarnate in human bodies, often causing suffering before leaving prematurely. As Emezi explains through the ogbanje narrators, their presence within Ada is not an affliction but an inherent part of existence: "We were born long before she was. We had our own lives, our own histories, our own selves. She was the vessel we chose" (Emezi, 2018, p. 22). This direct acknowledgment of pre-existence before Ada's birth situates the narrative within an indigenous African epistemology, where life and death are fluid, and individual identity is not confined to the body alone. According to Achebe, traditional Igbo beliefs emphasize that "existence is not linear but cyclical, where spirits, ancestors, and the living coexist" (Achebe, 1994, p. 95). Emezi's novel operates within this framework, treating the spirits not as metaphorical projections of trauma, but as active agents within the protagonist's existence. This interplay between literature and mythology can be analyzed through the lens of mythopoeia, the act of creating a new mythology within a literary text (Todorov, 1975, p. 113). Unlike in classical myth-making, where stories are distant from personal lived experiences, *Freshwater* personalizes Igbo mythology by embedding it within Ada's consciousness. The spirits' narration blurs the boundary between fictional storytelling and oral myth, transforming the text into an intermedial artifact that simultaneously serves as literature and spiritual testimony.

Beyond narrative content, the structural design of *Freshwater* mirrors traditional forms of mythological storytelling. In contrast to Western *Bildungsroman* structures, where protagonists undergo a clear journey toward self-discovery, Emezi employs a circular, recursive form that reflects the cyclical nature of the ogbanje. The narrative does not move toward resolution but oscillates between Ada's human experiences and the spirits' metaphysical existence. This is evident in how the spirits describe Ada's body not as an independent entity but as a temporary vessel within a greater cosmic order: "She was an open doorway, and we stepped through, making a home in the wet meat of her" (Emezi, 2018, p. 28). The imagery of the body as an open gateway reinforces the idea that identity is porous, constantly shifting between spiritual and human domains. This aligns with Mbembe's concept of postcolonial subjectivity, where African identities exist within multiple temporalities and spiritual dimensions simultaneously (Mbembe, 2001, p. 147).

Furthermore, the novel's intermedial nature is evident in its ritualistic language and invocation of deities. Emezi employs repetitive incantations, ancestral invocations, and a rhythmic prose style that resembles oral praise poetry, a genre traditionally used in African religious practices. For example, the spirits declare: "We sing in her blood. We drum through her bones. We are the voices in her wind" (Emezi, 2018, p. 56). This passage echoes the traditional Igbo praise poetry style, where repetition and rhythmic cadence are used to invoke spiritual forces (Okpewho, 1992, p. 89). In this way, *Freshwater* does not merely reference mythology but performs it within its literary fabric, creating an intermedial dialogue between text and oral tradition.

Another significant intermedial aspect of the novel is its engagement with syncretic spirituality, blending Igbo cosmology with Christian and Western philosophical influences. Ada's family, steeped in Christian beliefs, views her experiences as signs of spiritual warfare, reinforcing a colonial dichotomy between indigenous spirituality and religious morality. Her mother prays fervently for her daughter's salvation, attempting to expel the spirits: "She took me to the church, and the pastor laid his hands on my head, shouting for the demon to leave" (Emezi, 2018, p. 74). This moment highlights the epistemological conflict between indigenous spirituality and Christian doctrine, a tension that has been historically embedded in African societies since colonial evangelization. As Appiah notes, postcolonial identity is often shaped by the negotiation between inherited African traditions and imposed Western belief systems (Appiah, 1992, p. 207). Through Ada's experience, Emezi portrays the erasure and marginalization of indigenous spiritualities, demonstrating how Western frameworks often fail to comprehend or legitimize African cosmologies.

Yet, instead of completely rejecting either belief system, *Freshwater* creates a syncretic space where multiple spiritual traditions coexist. While Ada struggles with her Christian upbringing, she ultimately embraces her ogbanje identity as a legitimate form of selfhood rather than a pathology. This reconciliatory process reflects Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, where cultural hybridity allows for the creation of new epistemological frameworks beyond binary oppositions (Bhabha, 1994, p. 55). In this light, *Freshwater* serves as an intermedial space that bridges different worldviews, creating a literary form that is both spiritual and philosophical.

In addition to textual elements, *Freshwater* exhibits intermediality through visual and symbolic representations of spirituality. The imagery of mirrors, water, and reflections recurs throughout the novel, reinforcing the theme of dual existence. Water, in particular, functions as

a liminal space between worlds, a motif deeply rooted in Igbo cosmology. The spirits emphasize this connection when they state: "We are the river beneath the skin, the tide pulling in and out of the mind" (Emezi, 2018, p. 119). The novel further explores the metaphor of mirrors and reflections illustrating the ways in which identity is shaped by both the physical and spiritual realms. Emezi suggests that "Ada looked into the mirror and saw all of us staring back" (Emezi, 2018, p. 134), reinforcing the theme of fractured selfhood.

Ultimately, *Freshwater* employs intermediality by fusing literature, myth, and spiritual discourse to create a narrative that transcends Western literary conventions. Emezi's integration of Igbo cosmology, oral invocation techniques, and ritualistic structures not only reflects indigenous storytelling traditions but also reclaims African spirituality as a valid epistemological framework. Through its mythological depth, cyclical narrative form, and syncretic approach to belief systems, the novel positions itself as an intermedial artifact where text, ritual, and cultural memory converge.

3. The Body as Intermedial Space in *Freshwater*

In *Freshwater*, the body is more than a biological entity; it is a site of storytelling, memory, and transformation. Ada's body functions as a contested space where spiritual and physical realities merge, reflecting the novel's intermediality. Unlike traditional Western narratives that frame the body as a stable, singular entity, *Freshwater* presents it as fluid, fragmented, and dynamic. The novel's exploration of bodily transformation highlights its role as a medium through which identity is shaped, contested, and expressed. Ada's body is at the center of a battle between multiple forces, and this tension shapes the way the novel engages with intermediality. The spirits within her, particularly Asughara, assume control at various moments, influencing her actions, emotions, and decisions. "Asughara lived in Ada's body with no apologies. She took what she wanted, shaped the world to her will" (Emezi, 2018, p. 112). This occupation is not merely symbolic but represents a literal embodiment of multiple existences within one body, forcing Ada into a liminal state where agency is constantly shifting. Through this, *Freshwater* presents the body as a textual space in which multiple narratives intersect, each vying for dominance.

The novel also examines gender fluidity through the lens of spiritual possession. Ada, who identifies as nonbinary, experiences gender as a shifting, dynamic state rather than a fixed identity: "I was never just one person. I was always shifting, always multiple" (Emezi, 2018, p. 167). This challenges the rigid binary of male and female, aligning with African conceptions

of gender as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 54). In this sense, Ada's body becomes a performance space where both spiritual and gendered identities are enacted, reinforcing the idea of intermediality between physicality and spirituality.

Furthermore, *Freshwater* engages with the body as a site of trauma and healing. Ada's struggles manifest physically, highlighting how emotional and psychological pain is expressed through the body. The novel details her experiences of self-harm as a means of regaining control over her fragmented self: "I wanted to carve myself into something solid, something real" (Emezi, 2018, p. 145). The act of cutting is not just a reaction to pain but a way of inscribing identity onto the body itself, transforming it into a text that can be rewritten. This bodily narrative is a crucial component of the novel's intermediality, as it bridges internal emotions and external manifestations through self-inflicted marks.

Beyond trauma, the novel portrays the body as an archive of spiritual and personal history. Ada's body carries the imprints of her experiences, much like a sacred text that is continuously revised. As the spirits inhabit her, they mark their presence in her flesh: "We left scratches beneath her skin, etching our presence into the map of her body" (Emezi, 2018, p. 176). This description reinforces the concept of the body as a text, where every encounter—whether with spirits, emotions, or external forces—leaves a trace. This aligns with Butler's notion of performativity, where identity is constructed through repeated acts that inscribe meaning onto the body (Butler, 1993, p. 93).

The intermediality of *Freshwater* is further evident in the way the novel blends physical embodiment with metaphysical experiences. The body does not simply exist within the material world; it serves as a conduit for spiritual energy and ancestral memory. Ada often perceives her body as a threshold between realms: "I was neither here nor there, floating between the skin and the ether" (Emezi, 2018, p. 198). This liminal positioning mirrors the African understanding of the body as a site of transformation, where the spiritual and physical interact dynamically (Mbembe, 2001, p. 214).

Moreover, the novel suggests that the body is not a fixed entity but a fluid medium that adapts to different identities and states of being. When Ada fully embraces the spirits within her, she acknowledges the multiplicity of her existence: "I am more than this flesh. I am the voices that move through it, the shadows that shape it" (Emezi, 2018, p. 221). This fluidity resonates with postcolonial theories of hybridity, where identity is seen as an ongoing negotiation rather than a singular essence (Bhabha, 1994, p. 78). The performative nature of the

body in *Freshwater* also connects to the idea of ritual and transformation. Throughout the novel, Ada undergoes physical and psychological metamorphoses that resemble initiation rites in African spiritual traditions. The spirits guide her through cycles of death and rebirth, marking key moments of transition. “Each time I shed a part of myself, something new took its place” (Emezi, 2018, p. 239). This cyclical transformation highlights the intermedial function of the body as both a narrative and ritualistic space.

Finally, the portrayal of the body in *Freshwater* extends beyond the personal to the mythological, drawing from African traditions where bodily transformation and spirit possession are integral to cultural narratives. Through Ada’s journey, Emezi positions the body as a text where intermedial exchanges between the spiritual, physical, and mythological take place, reinforcing the novel’s hybrid structure. The body becomes a narrative medium in itself, a canvas upon which multiple stories ancestral, spiritual, and personal are written and rewritten.

4. The Influence of Digital and Visual Culture, A New Form of Storytelling

The intermedial nature of *Freshwater* extends beyond its thematic and structural elements to incorporate influences from digital media, visual storytelling, and multimedia forms. Akwaeke Emezi’s novel does not merely function as a traditional literary text; instead, it interacts with contemporary digital culture, self-representation, and cinematic aesthetics to create an immersive, hybrid reading experience. Through its fragmented structure, sensory descriptions, and engagement with digital identity construction, *Freshwater* reflects the changing landscape of storytelling in the digital age. This section explores how the novel integrates elements of modern communication, visual aesthetics, and multimedia narrative techniques to redefine what literature can be in a world increasingly shaped by digital and visual culture.

One of the most striking aspects of *Freshwater* is how its fragmented, nonlinear structure mirrors the ways in which digital media has reshaped contemporary storytelling. In an era dominated by social media, where narratives unfold through posts, tweets, and ephemeral content, *Freshwater* captures this sense of discontinuity and fluidity. The novel’s multiple narrators, abrupt shifts in voice, and cyclical revisitations of key moments resemble the experience of navigating online spaces, where users constantly switch between perspectives, personas, and digital platforms. Lev Manovich’s database aesthetics argues that digital culture

has replaced linear narratives with collections of moments that can be accessed in various sequences, an idea reflected in *Freshwater*'s disjointed storytelling (Manovich, 2001, p. 219).

Beyond its structure, *Freshwater* engages with the influence of digital identity construction. In a world where self-representation occurs across multiple platforms, the novel presents identity as performative, evolving, and influenced by external forces. The protagonist, Ada, exists in a state of multiplicity, inhabited by various spirits that shape her sense of self: "We were real before she was. She learned to name us with foreign tongues, but we existed long before language" (Emezi, 2018, p. 87). This fluid construction of identity mirrors the way individuals curate different versions of themselves on social media, shifting between online personas and real-life selves. Zizi Papacharissi's concept of networked selfhood suggests that digital spaces encourage fragmented and performative identities, much like the ones Ada navigates throughout the novel (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 91).

Additionally, *Freshwater* employs a highly visual writing style that borrows techniques from cinematic storytelling. The novel's descriptions often function like film sequences, using sensory detail and poetic imagery to evoke strong visual experiences. For example, Ada's internal struggles are described in terms that mimic film aesthetics: "The world blurred, colors bleeding into one another, the air thick with voices that did not belong to the living" (Emezi, 2018, p. 154). This passage resembles the language of a film script, emphasizing movement, color, and atmosphere. The use of abrupt shifts in narration and fragmented perspectives also evokes jump cuts in cinema, where scenes transition abruptly without traditional continuity. The novel's storytelling techniques align with Laura Marks' haptic visuality, which suggests that literature can create an almost tactile sensory experience through its descriptions (Marks, 2000, p. 132).

The novel's engagement with digital culture extends to its performative, multimodal nature. Emezi's presence on social media, where they share personal reflections, artistic projects, and discussions about their work, turns *Freshwater* into more than just a novel—it becomes part of a larger, multimedia dialogue. Emezi frequently interacts with readers through Instagram and Twitter, blurring the boundary between author and audience. In this way, *Freshwater* embodies Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling, where narratives unfold across multiple platforms rather than being confined to a single medium (Jenkins, 2006, p. 105). The novel's themes of identity, transition, and self-discovery are echoed in Emezi's digital presence, reinforcing the idea that literature can now exist beyond the printed page.

Moreover, *Freshwater* challenges the static nature of print literature by existing in conversation with other artistic forms. The novel's lyrical, incantatory passages resemble spoken-word poetry, making the act of reading feel performative rather than passive. Some sections unfold like monologues, reminiscent of stage performances or experimental theater. "She did not belong to herself. We carved our way into her thoughts, braided her will with ours" (Emezi, 2018, p. 102). This rhythmic, poetic structure enhances the sense that the novel is meant to be experienced as much as it is meant to be read. The interplay between written text and oral performance suggests that *Freshwater* operates as an intermedial work that bridges literary and performative traditions.

Another key element of *Freshwater*'s intermediality is its relationship to memory and digital consciousness. The novel suggests that identity is a constantly evolving process, much like the way digital memory functions in online spaces. Just as digital archives store and recall past versions of ourselves, *Freshwater* portrays memory as non-linear and interactive. Ada's reflections often loop back to previous events, reconsidering them from new perspectives: "Time did not move forward; it bent and folded, bringing us back to what was already known" (Emezi, 2018, p. 212). This cyclical approach mirrors the way digital platforms allow users to revisit and reshape their past selves through images, status updates, and shared memories. In this sense, *Freshwater* participates in what Katherine Hayles describes as hypertextual consciousness, where digital culture encourages non-linear, interconnected thinking (Hayles, 1999, p. 87).

Ultimately, *Freshwater* exemplifies how literature can engage with digital and visual culture to create a new form of storytelling. By incorporating cinematic techniques, embracing the aesthetics of digital media, and existing as a transmedia experience, the novel redefines the possibilities of literary fiction in the digital age. Emezi's work does not merely tell a story; it immerses the reader in a sensory, multimedia experience that reflects the complexities of identity, perception, and self-representation in the modern world. Through its hybrid approach, *Freshwater* challenges the boundaries of print literature, demonstrating how novels can evolve to incorporate the fragmented, nonlinear, and visually rich nature of contemporary media landscapes.

Conclusion

Through its fusion of mythology, spirituality, corporeality, narrative experimentation, and digital aesthetics, *Freshwater* establishes itself as a profoundly intermedial work. The novel

blends Igbo cosmology with modern literary techniques, positioning the body as a dynamic narrative medium. It disrupts linear storytelling through fragmented narration, mirroring oral traditions while embracing cinematic and digital influences. Furthermore, its engagement with self-representation and visual culture highlights the novel's dialogue with contemporary multimedia storytelling. Each of these dimensions reinforces *Freshwater* as a text that transcends conventional literary boundaries. In response to the hypothesis that *Freshwater* embodies intermediality through its synthesis of artistic, spiritual, and cultural traditions, the analysis confirms its validity. The novel does not merely reference diverse media; it structurally and thematically integrates them. By merging oral storytelling with digital aesthetics, Igbo spirituality with modern identity exploration, and literary conventions with visual techniques, Emezi creates a fluid, hybrid work that redefines narrative possibilities. Critically, *Freshwater* demonstrates how literature can evolve beyond traditional forms to engage with transmedia storytelling. Its intermedial approach suggests new directions for contemporary fiction, emphasizing hybridity and multiplicity. Future research could explore how Emezi's later works continue to challenge literary norms and reshape the landscape of postmodern storytelling.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. (1989). *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays*. Anchor Books.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. (1992). *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*. Oxford University Press.

Assmann, Jan. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.

Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Butler, Judith. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.

Emezi, Akwaeke. (2018). *Freshwater*. Grove Press.

Hayles, Katherine. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.

Jenkins, Henry. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.

Manovich, Lev. (2001). *The language of new media*. MIT Press.

Marks, Laura U. (2002). *Touch: Sensuous theory and multisensory media*. University of Minnesota Press.

Mbembe, Achille. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.

Murch, Walter. (2001). *In the blink of an eye: A perspective on film editing*. Silman-James Press.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Heinemann.

Ong, Walter J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. Routledge.

Okpewho, Isidore. (1992). *African oral literature: Backgrounds, character, and continuity*. Indiana University Press.

Oyěwùmí, Oyeronke. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2011). *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*. Routledge.

Todorov, Tzvetan. (1984). *Theories of the symbol*. Cornell University Press.