

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA  
Edmond, Oklahoma  
Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

**Supernatural Bodies: The Intersection of Nigerian Feminism  
and Body Autonomy**

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

By

Jacob Allen Crystal

Edmond, Oklahoma

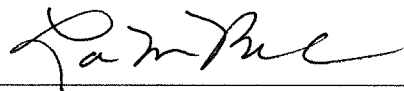
2019

**Supernatural Bodies: The Intersection of Nigerian Feminism  
and Body Autonomy**

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

8 April 2019

By  \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Laura Bolf-Beliveau  
Committee Chairperson

 \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Lindsey Churchill  
Committee Member

 \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Timothy Petete  
Committee Member

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank Dr. Laura Bolf-Beliveau for her willingness to help foster this project into what it has become and helping me grow as an individual, both academically and personally. I cannot imagine undertaking an endeavor such as this without your help and guidance.

I would like to thank Dr. Lindsey Churchill for introducing me to gender and feminism half-way through my course work at the university. I am a better person because of you – now let's go be feral feminists.

I would like to thank Dr. Timothy Petete for taking me under his wing my very first semester and showing me the importance of attending academic conferences. Without him I would not have bridged the gap between literature and culture.

To my wife, Lauren: I would not have been able to complete this body of work had you not respected my writing time while simultaneously pointing out when it was time for a break. Thank you for listening intently as I ranted incessantly about this project. To my parents, Craig & Stacey: Thank you for bringing me into this world, without you I would not be here – literally.

Lastly, I have to thank my grandma, Kathie Donnell. You taught me that witches are not always the scary monsters society makes them out to be – sometimes they are the people closest to you.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
Chapter 1	
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2	
Pregnancy and Voodoo: Discourse on Motherhood and the Body.....	17
Chapter 3	
Consumption and Witchcraft: Feminine Agency and the Body.....	37
Chapter 4	
Scars and Cosmology: Trauma and How It Shapes Discourse on the Body....	60
Chapter 5	
Conclusion.....	80
Works Cited.....	93

## Abstract

University of Central Oklahoma

Edmond, Oklahoma

NAME: Jacob Allen Crystal

TITLE OF THESIS: Supernatural Bodies: The Intersection of Nigerian Feminism and Body Autonomy

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Laura Bolf-Beliveau

Pages: 102

Many Nigerian women are depicted in literature as possessing little to no personal agency. Due to socio political issues, these women are often relegated to the margins of discourse surrounding Nigerian literature. Because of the chasm left within this arena, it becomes apparent that a critical investigation should be compiled on the ways in which Nigerian feminism is employed within literature of the Global South. Specifically, with the recent surge in young, female, Nigerian authors being published, there has been an increase in the usage of the supernatural as a key element to provide women a semblance of agency. These young writers use various supernatural elements to open the discourse on Nigerian bodies, and how previous scholarship has failed to adequately capture underpinnings that are crucial to Nigerian feminism.

The female protagonists in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*, and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* each find agency via supernatural elements. Applying the theoretical framework of Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, specifically regarding gender roles in Nigeria, it becomes clear that each of these protagonists adheres to but also rejects Nigerian gender roles. Through this subversion of Western patriarchal notions of gender and feminism, the three authors studied provide a new type of Nigerian feminism, one that accounts for all feminine bodies, binary or non. By looking at how each author uses supernatural elements in tandem with bodies, it becomes clear that a discourse on the body cannot be parsed from its attachment to agency

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Less than a decade ago, Kristy Bamu, a young Congolese child, was visiting his sister in London when things decidedly took a dark turn. Whilst staying with his sister for Christmas, Magalie Bamu and her boyfriend, Eric Bikubi, subjected Kristy to intense physical and psychological abuse. As reported by the Guardian “things turned sour when the couple, who were said to be obsessed with *kindoki*, the word for witchcraft in their native Democratic Republic of Congo, accused him of putting spells on a younger child” (Association). The final attempt to force confession out of Kristy led to his drowning, during what they deemed a ritual cleansing. During the subsequent autopsy it was revealed that Kristy suffered from “130 separate injuries and died from a combination of being beaten and drowning” (Association). Kristy, an innocent fifteen-year old boy, was subjected to unimaginable torture, all in the name of cleansing the world of witches.

Bamu is just one out of thousands of children who are murdered or physical harmed for their purported witchcraft. Not only are African children fleeing their countries for safety of false persecution, but children living in Africa are murdered yearly due to witch hunting. Long before children became the central figures in the modern-day witch hunting, elderly women were most often prescribed the role of “witch.” The discourse surrounding much of the supernatural has reached such a tumultuous peak, that the literature is beginning to reflect the horrors that are witnessed daily, stories just like the one shared by the Guardian about Kristy.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria often remains at the pulpit of the discussion surrounding witchcraft and Africa. Therefore, when Nigerian authors decide to tackle the subject of witchcraft and magic, it is often surprising. Women in Nigeria often have their

genitals mutilated, are forced to live in a polygamous marriage, and forced to live under the rule of a central male figure. This male figure takes the central position in most scholarship surrounding witchcraft, as it becomes increasingly difficult to allow women to enter the conversation. Daniel Offiong, a pivotal scholar in the field of witchcraft, consistently places a male figure into his academic discussion. In his ground-breaking research, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic and Social Order Among the Ibibio of Nigeria*, Offiong provides examples for ways in which individuals can be labeled as a witch in Ibibio society, yet always affords the material to speak specifically about men. In a similar vein, when he does grant women a few sentences devoted to his studies of witches, he simplifies it in such a way that is easy to overlook. It becomes evident that with the modern horrors that Bamu faced, and the inability to discuss women in regard to the supernatural, female writers are attempting to reclaim a narrative that so intrinsically belonged to them in the first place.

Surprisingly, some women with Nigerian ancestry are fighting the stigma that surrounds the supernatural. Influential writers such as Ayobami Adebayo, Helen Oyeyemi, and Akwaeke Emezi all push back against the notion of being an awful woman who takes part in supernatural practices. These three modern authors take the agency that has been deprived of Nigerian women and attempt to paint a picture for what it might look like if women were allowed to consult with the supernatural to find their own agency. It is at this intersection of feminism and supernatural that a critical conversation on the body is allowed to be conducted via three texts by the aforementioned authors: *Stay with Me*, *White is for Witching*, and *Freshwater*. All three provide varying representations on what it means to be a Nigerian woman, and what it means to find agency with help from the supernatural.

With the three, Westernized waves of feminism, scholars and society alike are unhappy with its seeming inability to be all inclusive. Thus, a Westernized feminist rendering of three Nigerian novels would not create new meaning, but rather regurgitate notions that have already been established. In order to adequately use theory as a meaning making tool, readers must employ the theoretical framework that is created by Nigerian women, in doing so, readers allow women who have grown up within the society and continue to live by its governance the chance to speak to a larger audience.

It is imperative to understand that the lens with which is often applied to Nigerian texts, within literary criticism, is mainstream, white feminism. This feminism does not adequately address issues women of color go through, which is why Alice Walker proposed the term womanist. However, within this research, the feminist theoretical framework applied is much more akin to a relational feminism. This feminism is more widely seen with non-Western countries, and it is separate from the traditional, ivory tower feminism. The main binary thus generated is an individual feminism, mainstream and white, versus a relational feminism, which this work will delve into in the subsequent chapters.

To better understand how supernatural elements provide women with agency, we must begin by applying a Nigerian feminist theoretical framework. In doing so, we shed the potential for Western feminist theories proffering up their version of how women find agency within society and allow Nigerian feminist theory to speak for Nigerian women. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí provides the best framework to analyze the texts as she critically asserts how Nigerian gender roles vary from Westernized gender roles. She understands that:



it has become axiomatic that gender is socially constructed: that the social differences between males and females are located in social practices, and not simply biological facts. (1).

Thus, it is of the belief of Oyèwùmí that gender is socially constructed, not historically. This in itself does not appear wholly different from Westernized notions of gender, which is true, however the best understanding of the three texts surfaces when readers look at how the authors subvert Oyèwùmí's theory. All three primary novels employed in this research subvert and take part in Oyèwùmí's theory to varying degrees. However, the biggest difference among the three novels is their usage of supernatural elements.

Unfortunately, the field of Nigerian theorists remains marginally small. Oyèwùmí is the most frequently cited Nigerian theorist in relation to gender and feminism, which is why she was selected for this research. Specifically, only a female Nigerian theorist would offer up the best understanding for a theoretical investigation of feminist Nigerian texts. In using a critical male theorist, this research would have been relegated to a Western second wave feminist approach. The crux of this research seeks to answer how feminism is portrayed *differently in Nigeria*, and how female authors use supernatural elements to regain body autonomy as it relates to feminism. With a large gap of critical feminist theorists being published in Nigeria, the most frequently published and cited theorist has been chosen to proffer the best understanding of feminism with the three central novels. Oyèwùmí does not have one single body of work that is deemed to be superiorly her best; rather, Oyèwùmí has published a total of three books to critically examine gender and sex within Nigeria, and she is the sole editor of the *African Gender Studies* reader that provides scholars with a larger picture of the topics that are crucial within gender and Africa.

Congruently, while the feminism investigated in this research is strictly rooted in Nigerian feminism, so too are the supernatural elements. Western notions of the supernatural all circulate around the tropes that popular culture feeds society. A Western audience perceives voodoo to be a practice that is situated entirely in and around New Orleans culture, when in reality it belongs to Haitian culture, and the global south at large. Witches are seen as individuals that consort with the devil, or at the very least, demonic spirits. The cosmology employed in the third novel, in a Western lens, would be deemed possession. Using the literal definition of possession, this is true, however, in doing so readers negate the cultural aspects that are married to the cosmological tale that Emezi is weaving for mass audiences. It is because of the nuances within the discourse on Western supernatural versus how the global south view supernatural elements that a distinction is made between the two.

In Nigeria, and Africa at large, the practice of voodoo is indeed viewed skeptically just like in Western societies. However, the biggest difference is rooted in the parallels with voodoo and religion. For most, voodoo is a religious experience, one that helps connect the practitioner more intimately to a plethora of topics, earth and divinity being the two most popular. Similarly, as evident with the murder the started this chapter, witchcraft is perhaps viewed more negatively within Nigerian culture. While the case aforementioned is specific to the Congo, Africa as a whole still takes issue with witchcraft. It is at this point that we see a Nigerian female writer complicating the notion of witchcraft. Oyeyemi uses Miranda as a stand-in for the intersection of politics and witchcraft. Yet, Oyeyemi shows witchcraft as a means to explain how feminism and the supernatural can coexist. Instead of portraying the witchcraft negatively, Oyeyemi shows Miranda using it to challenge racist patriarchal

notions within Dover England. The ultimate subversion of Westernized notions of the supernatural is situated with the final novel researched, *Freshwater*.

When analyzing Emezi's novel from a Western lens, the simple metaphor that readers will grasp is a possession narrative. This generalization would work well for a novel that is written by an individual who has a Westernized background but given Emezi's fraught identities this explanation is not wholistic. It is imperative to not negate the cosmological history that Emezi is drawing from, rather than lump the story into a gross category of possession, the social underpinnings within the novel are allowed to speak more clearly. Possession, in a Western sense, is something that needs to be remedied; we see it as something that is inherently wrong or corrupt, thus it needs religious intervention. However, in *Freshwater*, Ada is depicted as being divinely chosen. Therefore, relegating her to a higher status because a god has chosen her body as a conduit. Because of the relationship that the authors create between feminism and the supernatural, the main site for problematizing the two is the body.

Notions of the body are positioned, especially within academia, as a site for colonization. When it is a feminine body in question, this is made doubly worse as these bodies are viewed as belong to society. Within a postmodern, Westernized notion of the body, much has been written. In these writings, the body is placed within the binary of being an object or a subject. Melanie Suchet writes:

Fraser and Greco (2005) as, Is the body something we have (the body as object), or something we are (the body as subject), or something we become (the body as process and performativity)? The body is no longer simply regarded by postmodernists as the unified entity, organized by a central administrator with the properties of interiority and depth (Deleuze, 1992). It is posited as an ever-emerging

unfinished product whose meaning is acquired through symbolic gestures...We have viewed bodies as being shaped by identity. Can identity be altered through the body? How do we understand this body that is no longer being viewed as a personal projection of the self? In what ways can the self be stabilized through the body (Pitts, 2003)? (114).

Since Westernized notions are being rejected within this research, a new approach to the body is established. The approach implemented here is one that positions the body as being able to inhabit both the object and subject positioning while performing individualized ideological understandings of one's own body. Body autonomy, within this research, is understood as the way in which female characters gain and maintain agency of their own body. The three central female protagonists are introduced as having little to no agency for themselves, thus resorting to supernatural elements to gain the agency they deserve. It is from this relationship with the supernatural that a bulk of the analysis comes forth.

Firstly, a conversation over the supernatural must include the topics of voodoo and witchcraft. While the first book, *Stay with Me*, finds the protagonist consulting with a voodoo practitioner to find agency, *White Is for Witching* shows readers an interesting look into a matriarchal line of witches. While these two topics consist of two supernatural elements that are often viewed contrastively to one another, we must parse the differences between the two. In doing so, it becomes clear that voodoo, within this research, is a practice that contains similarities to religion, and witchcraft is seen as a more communal or familial practice.

Like most witch trials and accusations, being labeled as a witch has more to do with social order than anything. Complicating studies on women and witchcraft is the usage of the terms, magic, witchcraft, and religion. For the purposes of this study, witchcraft is

comprised of magic or supernatural, and rituals which in and of itself connotes religion. Daniel Offiong provides the best succinct description for what magic truly means. He writes, "...magic involves an attempt by man, through the aid of gods and spirits to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his personal benefit" (33). While he frequently only speaks of magic as being practice by men, his failure to include women in the conversation speaks volumes to the superstition of women and witches in Nigeria. Additionally, when religion enters the conversation on witches the discussion becomes more muddled.

According to Offiong, Nigerian belief in magic is usually juxtaposed with religion. The idea being that witches have fornicated with the devil, therefore, being the stark opposite of a good Christian woman. However, Offiong does concede that religion tends to bleed into magic, especially in Nigeria. With this in mind:

"...religious efforts at supernatural control involve a request in the form of such rituals as prayer and sacrifice direct to a specified supernatural being whose response is determined by its own independent will." (34)

These rituals play out in full in *Stay with Me*. With the religious aspect, also comes particular signs that women are witches; most frequent sign of witchcraft is barrenness of a wife (Offiong 37). This inexplicitly links motherhood to witchcraft, as one of the most singularly feminine aspects that is policed and politicized stands to be women and their ability to give birth. It is at this intersection of religion and witchcraft that voodoo is often found, as evidenced by the plot of *Stay with Me*.

In the Adeybayo's novel, *Yejide*, the protagonist, explains from the beginning that she has not been able to conceive a child for some time. After her husband brings home another wife, even though their previous promises were to stay monogamous, she becomes

desperate. A chance of fate leads her to a local witch doctor, or voodoo practitioner, who explains that he can help her get pregnant if she meets him at the top of the Mountain of Miracles and performs the ritual. This ritual is the exact topic that Offiong references due to the nature of the ritual leading to her eventual ability to conceive a child. However, the agency with which Yedjide is able to operate within, due to this voodoo makes her an immensely complex character, not unlike the protagonist in *White Is for Witching*, Miranda.

Motherhood enters the conversation, yet again, within the second novel in this research. Oyeyemi's protagonist begins to exhibit signs of magic, only after her mother has mysteriously died while abroad. This forced disconnect from her mother's death in turn brings Miranda closer to her mother as she inherits the abilities that were previously held by her mom. Only once Miranda inherits the powers she begins to feel as if she has agency. However, Miranda carries over one disability that apparently has insidious ties to the women in her family as well: pica. Only once readers see Miranda fighting against her pica does the story come full circle with the persecution of witches. In Nigeria, like other countries who have been the victim of witch hunts, women who were often accused, were dealt such awful allegations because they were stealing food to survive. This positions women and the agency closely tied to their bodies, since pregnancy affects the body, as well as consumption of food.

The last novel investigated, *Freshwater*, offers a completely different approach to the supernatural and feminism. In this novel, readers see Nigerian cosmology play out with the protagonist Ada. While the prior to novels dealt with the ways in which masculine bodies attempted to control feminine ones, this novel shows what happens when feminine bodies attempt to hijack other feminine bodies. Emezi's novel is the most insidious as it

shows what happens when bodies are deemed inferior and are relegated to the margins. After a critical conversation about the three novels, it becomes clear that the authors are in communication with one another beyond the page. Ayobami, Oyeyemi, and Emezi are offering up a new type of Nigerian feminism that includes all bodies, not just the ones that adhere to patriarchal notions. However, this research would not have been possible without the huge influx in published female Nigerian writers.

The literary world has recently seen quite a big influx of female writers coming from Nigeria. It is unclear if there is a definitive reason for such a large increase, but it is important to note that Chimamanda Adichie, well-known, prolific writer and activist, recently did a TedTalk on the danger of what she deems a “single story.” In 2009, Adichie, took a stand against the lack of Nigerian writers being published by the bigger publishing houses. She shared her fears of a “single story,” which she defined as one novel being a stand-in for all people of Nigerian culture. Meaning, that when one individual, outside of Nigeria, reads only one novel written by a Nigerian author, that the individual would then believe that everything presented in that work stands true for all Nigerians. Besides the erroneous hasty generalization that is created this way, it is incredibly destructive to the multiple identities that many Nigerian writers hold. It is quite possible that the large number of Nigerian writers being published are a direct result from Adichie calling the public’s attention to the lack of diversity in Nigerian published works.

With the literary world becoming more robust in the publishing of Nigerian writers, it became clear that a large body of research is necessary to look at the ways in which feminist theory can be used to drive meaning making within the new works. This research will critically assess three different novels, and the ways in which Nigerian feminism is used in tandem with a discussion on the body. This discussion will be housed with the

supernatural, as each writer uses elements of the supernatural to discuss feminism and the body. The three authors hold varying backgrounds as well, this was an intentional move that enables the research to provide a stronger foundation for the trajectory of this discussion.

Akwaeke Emezi, was born and raised in Nigeria; Helen Oyeyemi was born in Nigeria but raised in the United Kingdom; and Ayobami Adebayo was born in Nigeria but raised in the United States. From the various backgrounds, readers are given a chance to look at the ways in which all of these writers, who have Nigerian background, navigate the discussion of feminism and the body. Additionally, the two authors who emigrated from Nigeria have minor discussions in which the topic of diaspora plays out within the book. The diasporic discussions usually appear very close to their critical assertions on the body as well, but these discussions are used as subplots within the novels. Thus, in order for the research to be easily followed, a basic template will be used in each chapter to allow for better understanding.

Each chapter in this research will follow the template of: overview of the book, when, where, and who published it; introduction to the author who wrote it; the theoretical framework being applied; and end with an answer to the so, what question. Additionally, each chapter highlights the ways in which the protagonists both adhere to the framework of gender that Oyèwùmí provides and subvert it. Within the subversion, a new kind of Nigerian feminism beings to emerge, one that is more inclusive of body types that the patriarchal one Oyèwùmí describes. Through this subversion it becomes clear that the authors of the texts are offering up a new understanding of feminism, one that will encompass many body types, and one that works beyond the geographical boundaries of the country.



Chinua Achebe, in response to *Heart of Darkness*, said that one must be careful with the rhetoric they employ when discussing cultures and people that we cannot self-identify with. Thus, being cultural outsiders, we must use sensitive and non-pejorative language when discussing aspects of cultures beyond our own. Achebe writes:

*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are fully mocked by triumphant bestiality. (15)

This research, being consciously aware of the delicate ways in which we discuss subject positioning, has opted for a creative approach to better allow sources and writers to speak to the maximum level. Thus, when quoting from the primary novels or from secondary sources, this research will not speak for the quotes, but rather use analyze through other writers who have been deemed cultural insiders. The creative approaches will appear in the format that follows this paragraph.

*Throughout this research, the chapters will contain brief breaks in which I will transition into first-person writing allowing myself to speak from my subject positioning. These interludes are modeled after the work of Maggie Nelson and her influential text, The Argonauts. While brief, the awareness of subject positioning is wholly necessary as I do not identify as Nigerian, nor as a woman. Being a cis-white male, it is important to allow the writers’ work to speak for itself, thereby never interrupting and imposing westernized ideas and notions, which therefore enables the research to speak clearly to all. This chapter, not having a foci book, does not warrant an expansive discussion on my subject*

*positioning versus the Nigerian writes. However, it is important to note the training I have received thus far in academia, and its focus on Westernized feminist theory.*

*In my undergraduate, and graduate work, my education has been rooted completely in Westernized feminist theory. I have had the privilege of studying the likes of bell hooks, Virginia Woolf, and Judith Butler, but I was never exposed to a feminist theorist who identified with a culture outside of America and the United Kingdom. Thus, my training in Western feminist theory left a chasm in which I could not discuss books outside of these two powerful countries. During my research White Is for Witching chapter of this work, I found one critical Nigerian feminist, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. Her theory, while at first seemed not very different from Western feminist theory, the richness of its application comes by looking at the differences between the two. Additionally, while the authors of my three novels adhere to Oyèwùmí's framework, a more enriching understand is had when read against the framework.*

*Additionally, it is very important that it be pointed out that this work takes a white perspective to the supernatural elements within each novel. It is my hope that I have adequately conveyed that I attempt to take a cultural perspective approach when possible. However, in some instances, I refer back to the white perspective on supernatural to bridge my gap in knowledge.*

*Lastly, one topic not addressed within this research, that I hope to explore much more later on, is how the diaspora relates to the authors and their works. Each author has Nigerian ancestry yet was educated and raised outside of their ancestral country. This leads to me to wonder whether or not they are attempting to bridge their own diaspora via their written works. I understand that this a crucial part of the big picture, but I believe it does not weaken the research here as it is a different topic that is would have steered my*

*analysis and synthesis away from the crucial problem, that of the body and the supernatural.*

Within this research, three novels highlight the underpinnings of bigger societal issues. In order to accurately convey how these societal issues, affect various people, three protagonists are examined that come from vastly different backgrounds. The first novel, *Stay with Me*, shows a straight Nigerian cis-gender woman, Yejide, and how her body is manipulated and used by the men around her. Secondly, *White Is for Witching* shows audiences a lesbian British cis-gender woman, Miranda, who is forced to challenge the nationalism that is forced upon her from every conceivable angle. Finally, the last novel, *Freshwater*, shows readers how bodies that identify as non-binary and trans, Ada, are mistreated by men, women, and society. While it is not possible to cover every single identity that one can elect to identify as, the combination of the three aforementioned provided a broader picture of that is encompassing of three identities that are often relegated to the margins by the globe. This attempt at providing a wholistic picture opens up the discourse to enable other scholars to carry on the attempt to analyze the ways in which bodies that are not white, straight, men are viewed and treated by society at large.

With a large number of Nigerian female authors being published, it became clear that this research had to be very purposeful when selecting the three primary authors. The first author, Ayobami Adebayo, is a relatively new author. Yet, with only one book published, she appears on several lists of authors to keep our eyes on. *Stay with Me* shows readers a traditional example of patriarchal society enforcing strict requirements on Yejide. Analyzing and synthesizing this novel provides readers with a clear view of a straight woman being denied agency. While the second author, Helen Oyeyemi highlights how this conversation shifts when the woman self identifies as a lesbian. Miranda shows what

happens when a body that is deemed additionally marginal, beyond the designation of female. This simultaneity of oppression is deepened when critically analyzing Emezi's novel. Ada shows what happens when a body is given beyond two layers of identity and how that works to marginalize even further than being female. Thus, the three authors in this research provide three different depictions of bodily agency being denied first because of their sex, but then even further given their different subject positionings.

None of the three authors wholly take part in the gender model that Oyèwùmí provides. Rather, they all subvert traditional Nigerian notions of gender, sex, feminism, and agency. While there are threads of Oyèwùmí's theory within the novels, the best understanding happens when they three authors depart from these notions. They inherently embrace their supernatural elements as an essential part of them. Not once do the female protagonist completely reject their aspects of supernatural. Thus, while society, both Western societies and African societies, view it as something to eradicate, Adebayo, Oyeyemi, and Emezi embrace it. Similarly, they subvert notions of Nigerian feminism as well. Instead of operating with the Nigerian feminism that would give each character agency, the authors seem to be saying that the current feminism does not work for all feminine bodies. This kernel of truth manifests the best within the penultimate chapter of this research. Finally, all three authors use their protagonists as conduits to show who really has control over one's body. Shockingly, it is the person who resides within the body. However, not only do they show that each individual contains their own body autonomy, they provide readers with a warning of who will try and control these bodies. By showing readers that men, society, and women will attempt to control feminine bodies, they highlight the fact that the supernatural can often help one realize that nobody has control over someone else's body.

While this research has attempted to provide a bigger picture that accounts for various feminine bodies, implications still remain. Largely, the implications discovered within this research is that much more needs to be written over critical theories for Nigerian texts. While Oyèwùmí is one theorist, the lack of a larger pool to draw from forces scholars to adhere to the most frequently published voice on the topic. Doing a traditional Western theorist approach would have allowed scholars to choose from the likes of Butler, Virginia Woolf, or bell hooks, this opportunity is not afforded to scholars of Nigerian feminist theory.

With the increase of publications coming from female Nigerian writers, this is a serious gap that must be filled. Additionally, the publishing houses that have taken up the task of promoting more Nigerian writers are not receiving the same level of commercialization that other Western writers receive. The fault for this, surely, cannot rest solely with the publishing houses. Academia and society must do a better job of broadening their reading materials. Only reading material from Westernized societies will only regurgitate the same story in a different way. In electing to read material that comes from a culture and society that is different from our own, we disrupt our perceptions of said culture. It is from this disruption that we learn, respect, and appreciate cultures and societies beyond our own.

## Chapter 2

### **Pregnancy and Voodoo: Discourse on Motherhood and the Body**

The recent surge in Nigerian-published writers has enabled scholars to critically analyze the ways in which Nigerian feminism handles the supernatural. While authors use supernatural elements in varying ways, a lot of the supernatural elements harken back to witchcraft and voodoo. Each has their own social commentary that manifests through elements within the aforementioned categories, yet one thing remains consistent across these works: social commentary on the body. While the publications of supernatural Nigerian texts have seen an increase, and the deaths committed against alleged witches in many parts of Africa rises, it becomes clear that a discussion must be had on the ways in which Nigerian authors use the body to comment on a very real problem in their homelands.

A recent novel, *Stay with Me* by Ayobami Adebayo, highlights this discourse on the body through the topic of infertility and pregnancy. The novel was published by Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Penguin publishing, in August of 2017. Originally published in the United States, *Stay with Me* has since seen publication around the globe. Set in and around the area of Lagos, the plot starts in the 1980s during a time of deep political unrest. Ayobami Adebayo was born in Lagos, just like her characters, but received an education under the guidance of two incredible women: Margaret Atwood and Chimamanda Adichie. Adebayo holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, and she also holds an additional MA in creative writing from the University of East Anglia. At the young age of twenty-nine, she has already been labeled as a prolific storyteller, a title she earned from her debut novel, *Stay with Me*.

To summarize the novel, the struggles that Yejide encounters throughout her life makes up the central plot. Readers are introduced to Yejide in real time, in 2008, as she is leaving her husband, with an ominous presence hanging over the audience. The introduction to her character cuts short as readers are taken back to where the problems all started: 1985 when Yejide and her husband, Akin, are attempting to have a baby. Yejide feels like a good wife, and she reflects on her various marital duties that she completes throughout the day with ease. Yet despite how perfect she may seem; she has one major flaw: she cannot have children. Much to the chagrin of Akin, they unsuccessfully attempt to have children various times throughout the start of the novel. With the success rate of attempts feeling at an all-time low, Akin brings home a second wife—something that is customary in Nigeria, but something Yejide and Akin had promised to do. Desperate, Yejide seeks the help of a local witch doctor in the Lagos. He promises her a child beyond her wildest dreams if she simply pulls a white goat up the side of the mountain and partakes in a voodoo ritual.

Upon making it to the top of the mountain, the witch doctor, with the help of his disciples, perform the ritual and ask Yejide to feed the goat milk from her breast. Reluctant and revolted, she begins to nurse the goat. Afterwards, the witch doctor takes from her breast the goat, which has now miraculously turned into a bundle of blankets containing a baby, and he tells her she must remain sexually abstinent for a month. Then, as promised, she will find herself able to get pregnant. She assures Akin that the ritual will work, and shockingly it does provide them with a child, three in fact. Yet each child dies in mysterious ways after having lived only a few years. Feeling depressed about the infantile deaths, Akin asks his brother, Dotun, to be sleeping with his wife, as readers are clued into the fact that it is actually Akin who is infertile and not Yejide.

Rebuking his advances at first, Yejide eventually succumbs to Dotun's seductiveness and the two create a child with ease and, but hide the truth from Akin. After years of a rocky marriage, and the alleged death of yet another child, Yejide figures out that Akin asked his brother to get her pregnant, and feeling disgusted and betrayed, she leaves the marriage. Back to 2008, she learns that her daughter with Dotun never really died, and they are reunited at her birthday party. The novel leaves readers wondering if Yejide will be able to have a relationship with her daughter after all the betrayals she has faced, or if she will simply leave her daughter in the care of Akin for the rest of her life.

*Stay with Me* tackles central topics of feminism, body, and the supernatural in different ways. However, the use of all three in tandem paint a picture of the ways in which Nigerian feminism attempts to manifest through Yejide. While Nigeria itself withholds many rights from women, Adebayo provides a vision of the length's women will take to acquire their own agency. It just so happens that Yejide finds her agency when consulting with voodoo practices, something that is greatly discouraged in Lagos today. However, when Adebayo allows the voodoo ritual to give Yejide some agency that she felt that she never had before, Adebayo allows for a conversation on the ways in which voodoo intersects with the discourse on feminism and the body.

Nigerian feminism is different from a Westernized notion of feminism, and the feminism in Adebayo's book stays rooted closely to her Western education. In the novel women are depicted as individuals who are submissive to their husbands in many ways. Additionally, the women readers encounter in the novel always discuss the ways in which they can be better wives to their husbands, regardless of their husbands' characteristics. There are few spaces in which women are allowed to converse openly and freely about the men in their lives, and one of those spaces happens to be the salon that Yejide owns. At the



salon, readers are introduced to a plethora of women who share some core beliefs of marriage, while some hold conflicting views. This eclectic collection of women gives readers a better sense of the varying viewpoints of women in Lagos during the late twentieth-century. Indeed, this assortment of beliefs is actually where Yejide learns about the local witch doctor who is known to perform miracles on the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Victory. From this moment on the body remains a central point of the conversation in the book.

While Yejide's body is never critically discussed, it is interesting to note the many ways in which her body enters the conversation. From the start of the novel it becomes apparent that her body is not entirely hers. Akin's mother constantly touches her belly, before she becomes pregnant, while expressing her hopes for the legacy of her family. Additionally, pregnancy aside, Akin does not view Yejide's body as belonging to her, in fact he sees it as a site that he owns a monopoly on—as evidenced by his auctioning of her body to Dotun. After each child Yejide delivers, Akin always offers her body up for nutrients when the children cry for food. Without even taking into consideration the option of formula, Akin assumes automatically that nothing would bring Yejide more joy than to nourish his children via his wife's breasts. Even before the plot becomes muddled by the male characters, it is assumed that Yejide is infertile because she never got pregnant with Akin – a problem readers find out towards the end of the novel rest solely with Akin. While the body remains the centerpiece of the conversation within the feminism in the book, this discussion cannot be had without the element of the supernatural.

The supernatural elements in the novel are housed exclusively in the scene at the top of the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Victory. Yejide finds out that if she fulfills the requests of a local witch doctor, who can be more adequately called a voodoo practitioner,

she will finally be successful at getting pregnant. Adebayo does not simply provide an eerie depiction of a traditional voodoo ritual; she makes the ritual necessary for Yejide to learn that she does in fact hold agency in a society in which she feels like she has none. She gains this agency by taking the pregnancy matters into her own hands, and this agency is something that she always had within her; it was simply dormant until it was awoken. Now, Nigerian feminism is able to be discussed, along with the topic of the body, as Adebayo has created a situation in which both are inextricably linked and cannot be separated. While the topic of Nigerian feminism has not been written over extensively, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí provides a loose framework to operate from.

Oyèwùmí, prolific Nigerian scholar, discusses how motherhood plays a role in Yoruba society. In her chapter “Beyond Gendercentric Models: Restoring Motherhood to Yoruba Discourses of Art and Aesthetics,” she points out that woman’s sole purpose is to create life—mold life out of clay, so to speak. Oyèwùmí posits that “the institution of motherhood in Western and scholarly discourses that derive from their dominance is represented as paradigmatic of female gender” (225). Working from this mindset she goes on to elaborate on the ways in which this is different from a Western idea of motherhood. Oyèwùmí writes:

Western accounts of motherhood reduce it to a gender category: mother is represented as a woman first and foremost, a category that is perceived to be customarily disadvantaged and oppressed because women are subordinated to males, who are the privileged group. The traditional Yoruba elaboration of motherhood is radically different and is anything but gendered. (232)

Indeed, Westernized societies tend to view motherhood just as Oyèwùmí has described, but the later part of the quote becomes problematic when applying it to Nigerian texts. The

application of this theory on motherhood becomes complicated when using it to drive meaning making in Ayobami Adebayo's novel.

Ifi Amadiume provides a basic framework with which to analyze the role of motherhood in *Stay with Me*. He writes that women served as four roles throughout their life in Nigeria: "daughters, wives/mothers and matrons..." and that these "correspond to stages in the life of a woman" (70). He claims that most of the discourse surrounding these stages of life are centered around motherhood, due to the fact that mothers play a very crucial role in the lives of children. Since women in Africa have varying degrees of agency, with most women having very little, Amadiume claims that mothers have the most agency. He writes, "Nnobi women made political use of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers" (86). This use of their roles manifests in the ideology passed down from mother to child. Amadiume writes that this is the most crucial role mothers play in society, and this is evident in Adebayo's novel as well. The passing down of ideological beliefs seems to begin at the very start of the novel when readers witness Yejide climbing the mountain to hopefully become pregnant.

While Adebayo refers to the man who helps Yejide perform the ritual at the top of the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Victory as Prophet Josiah, he seems to align very closely with the term witch doctor. The definition for a witch doctor varies based on geographical location and since this text is rooted solely in Lagos, this research will employ the usage of the term as it applies to the African Witch Doctor. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the African Witch Doctor as "a magician among African tribes whose business it is to detect witches, and to counteract the effects of magic" (OED). The usage of this term is appropriate because early on in the book Yejide is believed to be infertile. In fact, Daniel A. Offiong, Nigerian scholar, comments that the barrenness of a woman is often a sign of

witchcraft. Referring to the individual who performs the ritual on Yejide as a witch doctor is potentially problematic as the ritual described aligns more closely with voodoo practitioners than witch doctors. However, Adebayo provides just enough description in the novel for readers to discern that the ritual they witness definitely has an brings magic into the situation, rather than keeping it out like a witch doctor would do.

Similar to the term of witch doctor conjuring different connotations based on geography, voodoo carries the same dilemma. However, for the most part there is a consistent definition for the practice of voodoo. Will Coleman says that voodoo, or vodun as it is spelled in Western Africa, can be viewed as “indigenous systems of beliefs and practices [that] are geared towards the manipulation of supernatural forces through the use of magic” (536). The practice of voodoo is usually referred to as an imitative form of magic in which the practitioner seeks to imitate old rituals to yield the results they desire. The ritual that Yejide takes part in allows for her character to learn, over the course of the remainder of the novel, that she does in fact hold agency and she always has, but she felt she must remain complicit in this agency as society expects her to do. Additionally, using voodoo as a conduit to figure out that she holds more agency than she believes allows for the discussion of motherhood and the body to take place.

Thus far, scholarship on the body focuses on the ways in which people encounter and experience another human’s body. However, it is crucial to talk about the ways in which this conversation shifts *after* a body has experienced pregnancy. Adebayo’s novel allows readers the chance to have this discussion as the main themes of the novel revolve around motherhood, feminism, and the body. It is equally as important to discuss the ways in which Yejide is forced to believe that her body is not hers, and how that is mirrored by much of society’s beliefs as well. When we meet Yejide, her body “belongs” to Akin, and

after they are able to get pregnant via the voodoo ritual, her body now “belongs” to her child. Finally, at the climax of the novel, it is impressed upon readers that her body has an extra owner as well: Dotun, her brother-in-law. The various “ownerships” of her body lead to problematic conclusions that have implications extending into the real world, something that Adebayo feels in need of desperate attention.

First, looking critically at the ways in which the ritual scene depicts voodoo, and the subsequent effect of Yejide’s motherhood, readers can have a discussion on the ways in which Yejide’s body is manipulated throughout the novel. Additionally, when taking into consideration the historical connotations of voodoo, and applying it in tandem with motherhood, it becomes evident that they are not wholly disparate subjects. In the novel, voodoo becomes a way for Yejide to realize the fact that she holds more power than she originally thought, but the problem with her using this agency is when it is challenged by patriarchal notions via Akin. Before beginning the analysis and theoretical application, it is imperative to briefly discuss the protagonist, Yejide.

Yejide’s background is not divulged in full to the readers. In fact, we are not told a whole lot about her until midway through the novel. However, we do learn that she met Akin in college and that is when the two began dating. Their relationship started out very passionately, and overtime they become complacent in their marriage since Akin desires a child more than anything and Yejide cannot provide one. Readers are also told that we are not sure who is Yejide’s mother. This kernel of truth is shared at the very beginning of the novel, foreshadowing the fact that motherhood plays a critical role in the plot. In fact, if women are motherless and barren, it should be met with heavy skepticism as that often points to witchcraft in African society. This topic is only reinforced when Yejide opts to take part in the voodoo ritual.

One day, while Yejide is working at her hair salon, a client informs her that she knows “someone” who can help her conceive a child. Readers who are well versed in voodoo are clued into the fact that a bizarre ritual will soon take place because of the fact that Yejide holds strong parallels to Marie Laveau, famed voodoo priestess. The most popular way in which Laveau found people in need of help via voodoo was through the salon that she owned in New Orleans. Ironically, Adebayo has taken that historical account and turned it on its head. In her story, the owner of the salon needs help getting pregnant. The account reads “When Mrs. Adeolu, a pregnant customer, told me about the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Victory, I went to Moomi that same day to discuss it with her” (39). Moomi, Yejide’s mother-in-law, informs her that she will help her get pregnant in any way that Yejide sees fit. A notion that is reinforced because “Women manufacture children and if you can’t you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman” (40). Because of this societal pressure, and the success that Mrs. Adeolu has seen, Yejide readily agrees to climb the mountain.

Prophet Josiah, the leader of the group performing the ritual, instructs Yejide to hike up the side of the mountain pulling a pure white goat. Once at the top of the mountain, readers are given a scene that is reminiscent of voodoo rituals. Adebayo’s writing is so vivid that it is worth including in full:

I looked around at all the faces and realised that they were all bearded, all men. I recalled the escort’s lewd stares and felt faint. As if on cue, the men began to moan and tremble as though from some unseen stimulation. I thought of Akin and how beautiful our children would have been. (43-4)

While the voodoo practitioners take part in/perform the ritual, the only thing Yejide can think about is her desire for a child for herself and her husband. This dark scene already

provides readers with a strong supernatural element to provide the image of Yejide consorting with dark magic to fulfill her desire, but Adebayo takes it one step further.

Prophet Josiah, while the men around Yejide continue to moan, asks her to take the newly swaddled goat and “hold it close and dance with it” (44). Having thoroughly given readers a peculiar scene, the final step in the ritual is “breastfeed the child” (45). When Josiah says child, he means the goat. After he commands Yejide to feed the child, the following paragraph is provided by Adebayo:

After he whispered those words, it was natural for me to reach behind my back and unhook the ivory lace bra I wore. To lift up my blouse and push up my bra cups. To sit on the ground with my legs stretched out, squeeze my breast and push the nipple to the open mouth in my arms. (45)

*I think it is important to note, that being a white cisgender male, I cannot fully understand the events that have just been described. However, rather than pass judgment from a third-party perspective on Yejide, I do understand her desire to fulfill her need so greatly, that she would consult with voodoo practitioners. While this scene is quite difficult to logically rationalize through, I think that is Adebayo’s goal. It would seem that this scene is designed to ask readers to suspend their belief systems only momentarily, so that she can show us what it is like when someone wants something so badly, they will do whatever it takes to achieve it. Regardless, this ritual proves to be crucial to motherhood in African societies, as Amadiume points out.*

Amadiume claims that the easiest way for mothers to pass on their ideology is through rituals. He writes about how there are rituals, very different from nursing a goat on

a mountain, that are performed at varying times in a woman's life. These rituals take place before a woman is married, when the married couple is trying to get pregnant, before the birth of the baby, after a woman has died, and at the wake one final ritual is performed. The people of Nnobi from southeast Nigeria practiced these rituals regularly throughout history. Amadiume claims that "from the day of the carrying of palm-wine ceremony to the birth of a woman's first child, she went through various fertility rituals associated with sexuality and child birth" (74). He adds that the Nnobi people have lost the sequencing of these rituals, since most of the rituals are no longer practiced (74). However, he states that high emphasis was placed on the birthing rituals; "most of the rituals appear to have centered on a custom referred to as *ima ogodo*, in literal translation 'tying wrapper,' which could indicate the process of becoming a woman or a mother" (74). While not entirely tying a wrapper, Yejide does swaddle the goat and treat it like her own child when the ritual begins, which provides heavy illusions to the rituals Amadiume discusses.

During the various rituals Amadiume describes, it is noted that the women who partake in the ritual with the soon to be mother all take part in singing songs or reciting poetry that contains heavy ideological aspects. This is one of the many ways in which the women try to impart some ideology on their children, so that they one day might understand that women hold more power than society lets on. One such poem read during the pregnancy period of a woman's life goes: "woman is principal...is principal. /Without a woman, how can a child be born? / How can a child be born?" (79). These lyrics seem to re-inscribe the fact that women are indeed pivotal to the progression of the human race, without whom men would not be able to procreate and continue their legacy. If this is indeed one of the ways that women are able to pass on some inkling of their ideology, the scene at the top of the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Victory does not seem to include that



aspect. It is possible that Adebayo subverts this because Yejide did not know her mother growing up, which in turn would mean that she does not possess any specific ideologies to pass on. This only foreshadows the unfortunate outcome with Yejide's first two children. Problematizing Yejide's narrative even further is the struggle for ownership of her body via Akin and society.

Soon after Yejide's pregnancy ritual is finished, she descends the mountain and waits patiently to become pregnant. Her stomach soon begins to show, and she tells Akin that she consulted Prophet Josiah and he helped them conceive. Akin reacts to Yejide's confession with pure anger. Perhaps he felt he failed at getting his wife pregnant without outside help, or maybe he simply felt betrayed by his wife for not consulting with him first. Regardless of the source of his anger, his response reads "he laughed. 'So, this is an immaculate conception? And what shall we call this child? Baby Satan? When will a demon appear to inform me in my dream?'" (50). His disbelief in the religion is stalled when Yejide does in fact deliver the baby, successfully without any complications. From the moment Yejide gives birth, Akin sees her body as something to be owned, never wholly belonging to her again as she becomes an object in his eyes. In fact, this has consistently been true for society for eons, something Kristeva pointed out in *Powers of Horror*; "from women's sexual freedom in primeval societies, to the sacred status of chastity and frailty, myriad discursive constructions try to explain and control women's bodies, transforming them into abject objects" (qtd. in Stevens 94). It would seem Akin begins to do the same things after the birth of his first child.

At this point in the novel, motherhood becomes a central piece on Yejide's journey to find her agency. Adebayo is not the only writer with African ancestry to write over the topic of motherhood. In fact, Barbara Christian points out, "motherhood is a major theme

in contemporary women's literature..." (212). She goes on further to claim, "since a woman, never a man, can be a mother, that experience should be hers to tell; since we all come from mothers it is striking that such a story remains secondary in world literature" (212). Adebayo takes on the topic of motherhood, while complicating the ways in which we think about it and discuss it. Particularly, Adebayo highlights what happens to the mothers in the home after the children are born.

While much has been written on the topic of Black motherhood in literature, one critical writer challenges our notions of motherhood, in an academic setting and describes why Black motherhood is so vastly different from that of Westernized motherhood. Nina Lyon Jenkins quotes from the well-known Patricia Hill Collins: "motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting themselves and the necessity of...independence" (205-6). She takes this idea further and claims, "It is a site where they can develop a belief in their own empowerment" (206). It is with the combination of this female empowerment granted by motherhood, and the agency used to acquire this via voodoo, that Yejide's journey to implement her agency solidifies. Adebayo does this by underscoring the fact idea that once the female body produces a child, the father figure begins to treat her body as a piece with which to raise the child. Indeed, Akin begins to use Yejide's body as if he has sole ownership of it.

Akin's ownership of Yejide's body justifies asking Dotun to get her pregnant. The shift of motherhood causes him to see her body as a site of colonization, something to be enslaved. Stevens says, "for centuries, women were reduced to their bodies, raw material from which men can create life in all its complex, cultural and symbolic manifestations" (93). Halfway through the novel the audience learns that all of the events that have befallen

Yejide since the voodoo ritual are because of Akin. He internally reflects that "...I already knew that Dotun was the sperm donor. That was how I thought about what he did for me – sperm donation" (161). In the same reflection he thinks, "...I eventually accepted the fact that I needed someone else to get my wife pregnant" (161). It is revealed that the reason they could never conceive originally is because Akin is infertile, not Yejide. Because of his drive to have a child, and not accept that fact that he was to blame, he enlists the help of Dotun to get Yejide pregnant. Yet, the troubling aspect of the stint in extent to which he owns her body, is that his narration provides insight into the difficulty he had with allowing his brother to sleep with Yejide. However, while Dotun does manipulate Yejide's body, he does so in a different manner.

While none of the men in the novel are archetypes for great individuals, Dotun offers the slightest chance of optimism for Yejide. Readers are given their first contrast of Akin and Dotun when Dotun visits Yejide and Akin at their house shortly after they have announced their pregnancy. However, Dotun is not fully allowed to celebrate the matter as he is accosted by Akin as he enters the home while saying, "Yejide, this has to stop. Please, I beg you. Dotun please talk to her. I have talked and talked, my mouth is starting to peel off because of all the talking" (95). Dotun's short response is "What do doctors know anyway?" (95), providing a marked shift from the ways in which Akin discusses his wife's pregnancy. Yejide does not fail to notice this as her reflection is worth quoting in its entirety:

He believed me. There was no mockery, no doubt in his eyes. They met mine evenly. His eyes held something I hadn't seen in Akin's eyes for so long, for far too long. Faith in me, in my words, in my sanity. I wanted to

hug Dotun close to me until his faith in me restored my dwindling hope and drove away the familiar despair that was eating me up. (95)

Yejide finally finds someone who understands her and believes what she is saying. Yet, this optimism in Dotun is silenced by the end of the novel. Even after Dotun tells Yejide that Akin asked him to seduce her and get her pregnant, readers are left unaware of the outcome of Yejide and Dotun's relationship. Assuming Yejide did not decide to stay with someone who manipulated her into sleeping with him, even though he operated under the instruction of his own brother, readers begin to finally see Yejide growing into the agency she was deprived of for so long. However, while Dotun never attempted to manipulate Yejide on his own, he also never attempted to degrade or strip her of femininity or motherhood in anyway.

Shortly after the death of their first child, Olamide, being emotionally devastated by every obstacle they overcame to have her, Yejide seeks to reinvent herself. The first step of this arduous process, Yejide thinks, is to cut her hair. She reflects, "On my first day back at work I asked one of the girls to cut my hair. She refused, glaring at me as though I asked her to chop my head off" (129). The women in the salon recognize that hair, a highly racialized landscape and epitome of female beauty, should not be cut down to the scalp like Yejide requests for fear of regretting the cut. Finally, the only person who fulfills her wish is Akin. Adebayo writes:

he ran his hands through my shaggy hair, then I heard the sharp snips of a pair of scissors, tufts of hair fell across my face, sticking to my skin when they met with the tears falling silently down my cheeks. (130)

This shedding of femininity is the starting point for Yejide to realize she indeed holds agency, regardless of what the men around her say, or society. Yejide's transformation into

a woman who holds an infinite amount of agency only comes full circle after the discovery of Akin and Dotun's gross manipulation of her body. What problematizes Yejide's ascension to her own agency is her constant depiction as the villain by the people around her.

From the moment readers are told that Yejide has failed to provide her husband with a child, a villainous image emerges. The first person who conjures this negative trope is Akin's mother, referred to as Moomi. After doing as Moomi advised—kneeling on a mat fasting and praying for seven days—Yejide faints on day three and is taken to the hospital. When she wakes in the hospital, the following account is provided: “A good mother's life is hard, she said, a woman can be a bad wife, but she must not be a bad mother” (10).

Writing over this trope in literature, Leyla Önal surmises that:

this view illustrates that the ‘feminine realm’ of the motherhood narrative does not necessarily depict the active agency of women. Rather, the female body is conceptualised as a passive means of reproduction and serves a role similar to that of a carrier. (106)

It is of the belief that if the villainous mother image does not provide feminine agency to the woman, she must find it elsewhere. It would seem that Yejide is akin to this realization and takes up the voodoo ritual as a starting point for correcting an issue that she has yet to deal with. Yejide seems to think, if she is being depicted as an evil mother, then she will show them what an “evil” mother will do to get the results she desires.

After having experienced the manipulation of her body on multiple levels, and discovering her agency along the way, Yejide finally leaves the unhealthy relationships she has with Akin and Dotun. The audience is left to assume that their last child, Rotimi died in the same manner as the first two children. However, readers finally discover the reason the

chapters jump back and forth across time: Yejide is going to a party at the request of Akin. There, Yejide learns that Rotimi never actually died in the hospital, but Akin coerced her into thinking she did. At this party, with the agency she has gained along the way, she finally feels that she is ready to be a mother to Rotimi. The novel ends with the hope that Yejide and her daughter will begin to have a relationship. Yejide thinks, “I shut my eyes as one receiving a benediction. Inside me something unfurls, joy spreads through my being, unfamiliar yet unquestioned, and I know that this too is a beginning, a promise of wonders to come” (260). This newly independent woman decides that she is ready to return to a life in which she can live happily with her daughter, while still being independent. At the center of this scene is the story of Yejide’s progression from daughter, to woman, and finally to mother—identities that Yejide learns are analogous to one another.

Taking what Amadiume claims about the passing down of ideology, it would appear that Yejide is ready to take up this challenge. Having multiple identities and lived experiences structuring Yejide’s own ideology, the nuances of which ideology supersedes the others begins to shape their lives beyond the pages. Marianne Hirsch claims that one of the reasons that individuals should be attentive to the mother figure is because she speaks with multiple voices. She writes, “rather than daughters having to ‘speak for’ mothers, mothers would be able to speak for themselves, perhaps with ‘two voices’” (197). The publication of this work is telling as Hirsch fails to include one additional identity with which mothers can speak from: womanhood. Hirsch is correct in her assertion that mothers need to be given a platform with which to speak from, and while mothers are speaking with multiple voices, this idea needs to be extended. Mothers are indeed speaking with multiple voices, the voices of being a woman, first and foremost, a daughter, and a mother, thereby

enabling the passage of ideology to the children as they speak from three different lived experiences.

Numerous arguments can be made about the way in which Yejide reaches the point that she feels like she must engage with ritualistic magic to regain control of her life. While Yejide does seem to have some agency in the reflections of her time at university, it is alluded to the reader that she has never quite felt whole. Psychoanalyst Estella Welldon posits that women fit into three categories, the mother figure, the Madonna figure, and the whore figure. Welldon claims that women form their identity only after they have shed the majority of their mothers. She writes:

the perverse person feels that she has not been allowed to enjoy a sense of her own development as a separate individual, with her own identity; in other words, she has not experienced the freedom to be herself. (8)

The lack of being able to experience one's own freedom is problematic, and it is only further muddled by the fact that Yejide does not know who her mother is. Welldon posits that, "this creates in her the deep belief that she is not a whole being, but her mother's part-object, just as she experienced her mother when she was a very young infant" (8-9). Since Yejide has never known her mother, it becomes difficult to ascertain how to view herself as her own person since she was never given a structural framework to begin with. While Welldon would claim that Yejide would fit neatly into one of the three aforementioned categories, it would appear that Adebayo subverts that entirely.

Yejide is such an interesting and complex character that she does not fit seamlessly into the categories of the mother, Madonna, or whore. In fact, it is from this that readers are able to grasp the overall message of this research. It begs the question as to why women have to fit neatly into one of the three categories, when women can fit into multiple

categories and none at all. If individuals continue to impress upon women the ideology that they have to fit into a neat category, the progression of the world seems unlikely. Adebayo uses *Yejide* in a way that highlights the fact that society continually believes that women and mothers are not synonymous, and she knows this is far from the truth. While large amounts of women and children are persecuted daily in parts of Africa for alleged witchcraft, Adebayo provides a positive portrayal of what these supernatural elements can allow a woman to become.

*I am completely aware that women are forced into more than the three archetypal categories. However, most of those categories, which Welldon does not lists, has a semblance of one of the three at its core. It seems highly unlikely that Adebayo would not be aware of the numerous killings of women and children across Africa for alleged supernatural practicing, which is why I believe she uses it to her advantage in the novel, showing readers “look, women can practice magic and not be painted as the villainous witch that society makes them out to be. Using *Yejide* as a case study proves that if we stop treating women as “suspicious supernatural practitioners,” we can allow them a platform to share their lived experiences with a wider audience. Regardless, women will continue to pass down this ideology to their children, whether men and society choose to listen or not is entirely up to them.*

Amadiume’s theoretical framework is not without limitations. The biggest problem with the theory is that it seems to only work with women who interact with their mothers regularly. Therefore, *Yejide*’s daughter, Rotimi, will be able to partake in the passing down of ideology, but *Yejide* is never afforded that luxury. Since readers are informed that



Yejide never knew her mother, Amadiume's theory is complicated. Having never met her mother, she was never granted the ideology that her mother possessed. Therefore, Yejide, by all accounts, should have been aimlessly wandering and lost in her own ideology, according to Amadiume. However, it can be argued that Yejide was given a loose ideological framework to operate from, since she grew up in a community setting. In fact, Jenkins points out the very fact that Black motherhood is rooted deeply in a community effort. By which she means that it becomes the community's responsibility to raise children who have no parental caretaker. Moving forward, the conversation that needs to happen next is the ways in which women use another woman's body. Thus far, a majority of the scholarship on the body focuses on the way men seek to use a woman's body for their own personal gain. The next point of discourse will show a lesbian-identified woman's struggles with patriarchy and how her body is controlled via consumption.

Motherhood cannot be a separate discussion when entering the critical discourse of the body. With the surge of Nigerian authors being published, a large number of works incorporate motherhood in some manner. Additionally, with the murders of women allegedly practicing voodoo or witchcraft, it is imperative to have a discussion on the ways in which women use supernatural elements to advance their agenda. One of the first steps in this process seems to be educating male-identifying individuals. Motherhood should not be discussed in a woman only space; it should be a conversation that is had in all spaces. After all, all men are born from a woman, and once men realize that they would not exist without woman, the discourse will become just as pressing for men as it is for women.

### Chapter 3

#### Consumption and Witchcraft: Feminine Agency and the Body

Given the inspiring number of Nigerian female writers being published, young Nigerian writers are lending their generational voices to large social issues to disrupt the way society views female writers of color. These young writers shed light on new knowledge for their Westernized readers. A recent novel *White Is for Witching* by Helen Oyeyemi, assesses the intersection of consumption and witchcraft, which by extension leads into a conversation on feminism and the body. Oyeyemi, Nigerian-British writer, positions Miranda, or Miri, at the crux of the novel's social commentary. Miranda, a phenotypically white girl, begins to experience strange feelings inside her when her mother dies traveling abroad. What follows is a curious look into Miranda's family's troubled past with witchcraft. To complicate matters, when Miranda begins to feel these powers she has just come into, she forms a bizarre habit of eating items with no nutritional value. This eating disorder, pica, forces her to consume an odd assortment of objects, which ultimately leads her to being committed for professional intervention. Because of her pica, she begins to appear emaciated to her family members, which allows for a discussion of witchcraft and food, or more appropriately, witchcraft and the body.

*White Is for Witching* was published by Penguin Books in 2009. Originally published in Canada, the subsequent reprints were housed at Riverhead books in New York. Since its publication, reception has been incredibly polarized. Some readers were left confused by her choice in narrative style, while others praised Oyeyemi as being a pioneer for the trajectory of the gothic genre. Additionally, Oyeyemi seems to live a secluded lifestyle, making it hard to garner a plethora of information on her. Nevertheless, she was born in Nigeria but raised and educated in the United Kingdom. Her website states that she

currently lives in Prague and that she has published seven novels. One of her more recent novels, *Mr. Fox* was listed in the top 100 notable books by the *New York Times*. With such a prolific career thus far, Oyeyemi has situated herself as an author to watch, as she continually challenges the way society thinks about gender, race, and the gothic genre, as evidenced by *White Is for Witching*.

Miranda Silver is a young girl with an eating disorder: pica. At the beginning of the novel readers are first introduced to her when she is returning home from a stint at a local rehab facility in the hopes of curing her pica. Oyeyemi makes it potently aware at the start of the novel that this story has a sad ending and will be narrated via four voices: Miranda, Luc, Ore, and the house in which the Silver family resides. Very quickly, we learn that her mother has recently died on a trip abroad in the Caribbean, and ever since her death, Miranda has not been the same. It is suggested that the Silver women have a special ability; however, the true nature of this ability is not divulged until later in the novel. We find out that the Silver women have supernatural abilities that are granted to them via 39 Barton Road, the Silver family house. While the novel appears to be a story about Miranda coming into herself as an adult, a much more malevolent agenda operates underneath.

Since 39 Barton Road has granted the Silver women a semblance of power, they are forced to work under the instruction of the house. This translates to the Silver women being used by the house to help it live a long, lasting life by feeding the house people of color. Perhaps a metaphor for white British Nationalism, the Silver women prior to Miranda comply willingly. Yet, when it becomes Miranda's turn to take up the job, she has great situation with voluntarily sacrificing people simply because the house believes them to be lesser. While this issue is addressed later on, the current issue that needs to be analyzed is

the way Oyeyemi depicts characteristics that are similar to witchcraft, and what this means for Miranda's body.

Contentious debates, like we saw in the previous chapter, make it exceedingly difficult to assign an honest definition to the witch figure. However, most commonly used is the definition that “a witch is a person who carries out harm by supernatural or magical means” (qtd. in Locke 704). Furthermore, Moira Smith, historian, claims this “definition still has power in most of Africa, Oceania, Asia, South America, and First Nations of North America today” (704). Smith's definition becomes fraught with the influx of the demonological aspect of witchcraft that entered the lexicon during the witch hunting mania that permeates across centuries. Additionally, most of the language surrounding the topic of the witch trials are focused on the notion that they are political stunts. Smith reflects this idea that, “some have interpreted these facts to mean that the witch hunts were a thinly disguised excuse for a concerted patriarchal campaign to control women's political power...” (707). While Smith refutes this kernel of thought, it bears being examined as most of the modern, twenty-first century witches are exclusively female. Indeed, Smith offers a concession that directly negates her previous argument. She finally concludes that “most witchcraft beliefs were concerned with household and farmyard affairs—family, health, daily chores, and food” (708). It is succinctly because of this claim that a conversation on the ways in which food and consumption play a role in witchcraft needs to be ascertained. Because the household affairs were a part of the woman's sphere, failure to discuss food and consumption inhibits a wholistic discussion on femininity and witchcraft to take place.

One important fact that remains consistent in both scholarly and social spheres of witchcraft is that the topic is always political. From the various witch hunts that the world

has witnessed throughout the ages, to modern fiction, anytime a witch appears, she should be viewed skeptically in relation to the political agenda the source material attempts to promote. Witches have become a prevalent topic in today's mass media and culture. If readers think back to one of the most ground-breaking portrayals of witches in the twenty-first century, *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), readers who are familiar with the show will conclude that politics indeed played a role in the overall narrative, as it pitted a coven of witches who were phenotypically white against a coven of voodoo practitioners who were phenotypically Black. The representation of witches has grown so much since the stereotypical witches that Shakespeare gave us, all the way up to modern iterations of witches in shows like *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018). This discourse has never been more fraught, and to shift the conversation in the right direction, researchers need to look beyond the femininity they tend to represent and begin a critical look at the political aspect of witches' bodies, and the ways in which they are portrayed and perceived in cultural studies.

Scholarly research on the topic of witchcraft within literature has consistently been rooted in feminist understandings of the subject. While the feminist lens works as an amazing tool for meaning making within cultural studies, one aspect that has been continuously overlooked is that of the body within witchcraft literature. From an American perspective, we know that the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 were focused on the social and political reinforcement of puritanical society. This policing was birthed from the fact that many women who stood accused were already facing punishment for stealing food. The fact that women were being persecuted because they were simply starving in a time when money and crops were sparse speaks to the ways in which the body must be discussed within scholarly research surrounding witches. It is understood that the food consumed by

bodies helps the body to survive, giving it the nutrients that it needs to live. The intersection here with the topics of food, body, and witchcraft is where readers find the central protagonist in Oyeyemi's novel. Starting first with the ways in which womanhood and witchcraft is linked matriarchally, then moving onto a discussion on the consumption in the novel, and finally arriving at the racial aspects within lead readers to the point that the body and femininity are inherently linked when critically analyzing witches.

*Due to the large amount of incarnations of witches in popular culture, it becomes exceedingly difficult to pin down what it actually means to be a witch. I decided, early on in this research, that I would consider a character a witch if she/he has strong supernatural occurrences that happen around her/him, or if she/he readily practices wicca or dark magic. Because of this, it is important to note that I do not identify with individuals who practice witchcraft, but I do have a strong likeness for it. Additionally, I am very aware of the protagonists subject positioning. While I do not believe that Miranda should be viewed as a case study, I instead prefer to view her as an outlier. Miranda is a character who can be used to draw connections between the supernatural and the political, but she should not be viewed as the know-all-be-all when it comes to this topic.*

Oyeyemi uses a well-known issue within Africa to highlight the ways in which consumption is fundamental to the discussion of the body. A recent study, conducted between 2014 and 2015, sheds light on the prevailing issue with pica in Africa, specifically Kenya. Researchers reported that 27.4% of the sampled group became afflicted with pica during pregnancy. In fact, “nearly half of the participants reported the use of soft stones for their pica practice, followed by house construction soil, and termite soil” (Kariuki et al 2).

The way this problem that pregnant women face in Africa manifests within Oyeyemi's novel shows readers that Oyeyemi is definitely clued into a concern that is currently plaguing women. This topic manifests itself seamlessly into her novel, with the pica being passed from mother to daughter and afflicting them both in differing ways.

Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, the theoretical scholar and critic used in the last chapter, complicates the ways in which we discuss gender roles in Africa, and Helen Oyeyemi takes this notion of African gender roles and applies it to a white protagonist. However, it is crucial to point out that Helen Oyeyemi is a British-Nigerian woman. Her subject positioning is thus one of intersectionality, as she was born in Nigerian, but raised in South London. Due to her education being from a Westernized country, it makes complete sense that aspects of this imperial upbringing would eventually bleed into her writing.

Interestingly, this leads her assertions on gender roles to become blended with those from Africa. The two working in tandem allow Oyeyemi to blur the barriers between what sets them apart, while simultaneously showing how closely the two are bridged together. From the marrying of the two, Oyeyemi provides a well-rounded look at the ways in which the social relations work to reinforce and form gender identities across the Atlantic.

Miranda Silver is a phenotypically white British young adult who takes center stage in *White Is for Witching*. Her family is comprised of her twin brother, Eliot; her father, Luc Dufresne; and her mother, Lily Silver. It is from the matriarchal side of her family that the witchcraft is passed down, thereby directly linking the Silver women in a way that is much more intimate than any of them would like for it to be. While all of the Silver women could be discussed in regard to body and witchcraft, since they all suffer from pica, the most complicated conversation is located within Miranda and her struggles with pica. However, before first dissecting the ways in which a critical discourse on the body manifests within

the novel, it is important to look at the nuanced ways in which this feminism varies from a Western ideology.

Much has been crafted over the topics of Western Feminism and African bodies. While it first appears that the feminism is helping drive meaning making within a cross-cultural setting, critical theorist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí posits that this application of Western feminist theory is wholly inaccurate, as African is not a Westernized country. Oyèwùmí explains that, at least in Nigeria, gender does not stand as the basis for social order, but rather, social order is created based solely on social relations. She writes, “consequently, the Yorùbá social order requires a different kind of map, not a gender map that assumes biology as the foundation for the social” (13). Therefore, to take an analytical or theoretical approach to African bodies, the study needs to be rooted in the social relation and how these relations play out within the culture, not biological or gendered relations. In a similar vein to the previous chapter, social relations that the protagonist have seem to inform and shape their own perceptions of agency. Additionally, each of the subsequent chapters in Oyèwùmí’s book offers up a new understanding of these social relations, which have voices from other scholar’s present, to provide a holistic approach to the ways in which African bodies must be dealt with within academia.

While social relations provide a very broad foundation for a discussion on the ways in which African gender manifests, Oyèwùmí asserts that social relations are based on seniority. She writes, “the principle that determined social organization was seniority, which was based on chronological age” (14). Thus, when applying a heuristic to better analyze *White Is for Witching*, one must take into consideration that social relations have everything to do with chronological age. However, a simplistic list of what constitutes the social order for Oyèwùmí would be anyway in which someone’s social perception is



altered or changed based on their social relationship with others. In this respect, it seems that gender roles, as posited by Oyèwùmí would mean that what sets Western gender roles apart from those in Africa would be the social aspect. Meaning that when applying a gendered lens to African texts, or society, one must always take into consideration the social relations that helped shape the way in which someone's particular gender manifests.

Oyèwùmí's critical assertions of the body and the way it manifests within African literature and studies become deeply rooted in social and cultural ties. For Oyèwùmí, the body is a site of social and cultural connections. It is from these connections that the study of bodies needs to take place; it just so happens that these bodies adhere to certain gender stereotypes. From this offshoot, Oyèwùmí then begins to do what she terms decolonizing feminism, which allows readers the chance to reconceptualize African gender, which leads to the opportunity for development and social transformations. These social transformations prove to be the most important part when discussing African bodies, as explained by Oyèwùmí. The strongest aspect of the theory the author sets to establish is highlighted by the fact that all subsequent discussion points for African feminism, at least in the book, are written by women from Africa. This collection of feminine voices helps shed light on the ways in which Western theory and thought have not done justice to countries that are not part of the Western culture.

The most concise description of what Oyèwùmí means comes in another one of her well-received works, *Gender Epistemologies in Africa*; in this book she reasons with the reader, offering up a more succinct way to describe African gender construction. She concedes, first, to the universally understood idea that gender is socially constructed. "It has become axiomatic that gender is socially constructed: that the social differences between males and females are located in social practices, and not simply biological facts"

(1). Oyèwùmí goes on to clarify that what sets African gender roles apart from those of Westernized countries, is the fact that “...in Yorùbá society...gender is not only socially constructed, but historical” (1). It is due to the historical nature of gender roles in Africa that, when analyzing African literature, or literature written by someone of African descent, the historical aspect of the country plays a critical role that offers deeper meaning than that of Westernized feminist theories.

While not all chapters of Oyèwùmí’s *Reader* can be used as tools for meaning making with *White Is for Witching*, there are several chapters that position the body of the African woman towards a conversation about the ways in which the social order reinscribes meaning and reinforces women into the positions that Oyeyemi’s female characters find themselves. For example, the chapter in Oyèwùmí’s book that deals heavily with motherhood is applicable due to the nature in which the witchcraft is passed from family member to family member. Once again, the notion of ideologies being passed down via familial lines surfaces within Oyeyemi’s novel as well. Similarly, Oyèwùmí’s chapter on spirituality, gender, and power offers interesting insight into the ways in which the three aforementioned ideas intersect in the novel. Yet the one of most importance is her discussion on the body. To complicate the application of Oyèwùmí’s theory, she has created a patchwork theory that pulls from various other research, all by women, to offer the first look into the ways in which the West has consistently been wrong about the ways in which feminism works within African itself. This is why an application of her theoretical work is wholly relevant to a discussion on a novel written by a British woman with Nigerian ancestry. Combined with the historical aspect of consumption playing a role in witch hunts, and the theoretical framework proffered by Oyèwùmí, readers are given a

clearer discussion on the ways in which consumption plays such a crucial role in the lives of the twenty-first century feminist witches.

Consumption plays the biggest role in Oyeyemi's novel. Not only does consumption manifest within the protagonist, Miranda, but the house, her family, and the nation of Britain as a whole take on the form of being an entity that consumes. However, while these three different consumers appear vastly dissimilar at first glance, readers learn throughout the novel that one aspect of consumption functions as the nucleus that dictates who and what is consumed: the house. While there is no clear antagonist in the novel, it is evident that the physical house is to be considered as the archetypal villain. Before a discussion of the house can take place, it is important to understand the ways in which people consume things within the novel. This foundational knowledge comes from the Silver family tree.

While the narration of the novel is not stagnant and focused on one character, Oyeyemi allows narrators to flow seamlessly throughout the work, never giving definitive parameters for who is speaking, or whose internal dialogue we are reading. The first narrator readers encounter is Ore, the love interest of Miranda whom the audience does not fully encounter until much later in the book. Ore, a Nigerian woman studying abroad in Britain, provides the folklore framework that drives the story. She quickly asserts the likelihood that Miranda is dead, or at the very least, has left her human body. Ore explains, "[Miranda] chose this as the only way to fight the soucouyant" (1). The soucouyant comes from Caribbean folklore and is known to be a vampiric female spirit. However, this mythological character has been in a re-imagining stage with literature since 2007 (Dobson and Chariandy). This re-imagining often portrays the spirit as more complex than originally

understood. These new iterations of the soucouyant show her as a stand-in for queerness and feminism. Clearly, Oyeyemi felt the need to take part in this resurgence of the spirit.

Oyeyemi's soucouyant is not that different from the original iteration, but the slight differences and liberties she has taken include the fact that her soucouyant contains striking similarities to witches, and the fact that she is the embodiment of femininity. Indeed, the soucouyant resides both within the house in *White* and in tandem with Miri. The soucouyant that lives within the walls of the house found itself there by the magical powers of Anna Good, Miranda's grandmother. When Miranda's grandfather is killed in Africa during the Second World War, Anna's emotional response is so visceral, and her blatant racism projects itself into the house. The latent witchcraft that lived in Anna manifests in a moment when she feels she has no way to process the rage she is feeling. The house, another pivotal narrator, recounts the moment the soucouyant enters it: "Her fear had crept out from the whites of her eyes and woven itself into my brick until I came to strength, until I became aware" (137). Once the soucouyant has gained control over the house, so too does it gain control of its tenants. From the moment the house/soucouyant consumes the racism and hatred that Anna harbors, the house begins to remedy Anna's emotions by acting on xenophobia for as long as it stands. At this point, Miranda enters the conversation of the witchy spirit of the soucouyant.

The xenophobic house, located at 29 Barton Road, forces any visitor that is not of Imperial Britain to consume apples from the various apple trees strewn across the grounds. Once someone consumes the apple, the individual dies, in a way not unlike the Snow-White legend. Food consumption seems to be the easiest way for it to control who enters and who leaves the premises. The house is able to control Miranda through the pica that has been transferred generation to generation from the Silver women, starting with Anna

Good. Interestingly, each woman acquires the eating disorder of pica the second the eldest woman in the family dies. Each woman sets to consuming items that have no nutritional value, but the items vary from each woman—Miranda is obsessed with eating chalk. Because of her insatiable desire to consume chalk, readers discover that her body is emaciated and often times looks physically very ill. Aspasia Stephanou remarks that because of Miri's struggle "consumption consequently becomes the major preoccupation" of the novel, and "Oyeyemi interrogates the relations of consumption on both a personal and national level" (1246).

Beginning with the personal, Miranda's pica forces a discussion on the ways in which consumption relates to the female body. Throughout the novel, numerous references are made to the physical look of Miranda, both by women and men. Her body is stuck in a conversation so fraught that readers are not able to make heads or tails of the conversation, and ultimately left to believe that the reason she is not able to get better is due to the fact that the house has a strong hold on her. At multiple points in the novel readers encounter Miri eating chalk while attempting to hide this fact from everyone except her twin brother Eliot. Eliot is the only one who never chastises her for her struggle with pica, yet he does think about her body as sickly or diseased. While Stephanou attributes the pica to vampirism in her article, it is more appropriate to attribute the disorder to a physical representation of her witchcraft, as Oyeyemi is attempting to subvert the traditional image of the soucouyant.

In fact, approximately halfway through the novel, readers witness one of the most witchcraft laden scenes. The soucouyant/house creates a beautifully gothic image of witchcraft while Miranda is sleeping. In her nightmare Miri witnesses her mother,

grandmother, and great-grandmother around a kitchen table about to take communion. The scene at length reads:

Jennifer and GrandAnna sat side by side with their elbows on the table. They leaned forward, anticipating a meal. They were naked except for corsets laced so tightly that their desiccated bodies dipped in and out like parchment scrolls bound around the middle. They stared at Miranda in numb agony. Padlocks were placed over their parted mouths, boring through the top lip and closing at the bottom. Miranda could see their tongues writhing.

(147)

It appears the house still has quite a hold on the bodies of all the Silver women even beyond death. The imagery alone is enough to conjure up stereotypical images of witches the audience encounters frequently in pop culture. It is important to note that while Miranda often denies and rejects her soucouyant identity, the dinner scene concludes with Miranda putting a padlock onto her mouth like the women before her.

What complicates this reading of the dinner scene is Oyèwùmí's theoretical framework. Her social relations are supposed to be what comprises Miranda's gender, yet in this instance, the social relations here are so intimate and personal that it almost feels as if these relationships cannot possibly reinforce Miranda's predetermined gender norms. However, the submissiveness of the Silver women buying into the house's xenophobia, only when the matriarchal power is transferred down the line, is one that poses a problem. The house is using the Silver women to force Miranda into eventually adapting to its xenophobia. It is from this acute social relation, that of the house with the Silver women, Miranda included, that challenges the usage of Miranda as a weapon of white nationalism. So, it is the opposition of the social relations that then helps Miranda form her identity. Her

subversion of the traditional ways of the house builds deep into her core that she knows that this desired xenophobia is demonstrative to the society she resides. While this subversion is unique, it is not the only destabilization the audience will encounter when diagnostically discussing this novel.

At this point, it is important to discuss the fact that Oyeyemi conceived the idea for this novel while reading *Dracula* and traveling abroad. This would lead readers to the notion that Miranda is truly a vampiric figure, versus the witch that this research attributes her to. However, the fact that Oyeyemi is attempting to recalibrate the story of the soucouyant and queer it means that readers are forced to discern Miranda's identity separate from vampire. With this recalibration, it allows scholars the chance to critically dissect the ways in which this body, Miranda's, is tied to its social status as Oyèwùmí truly intends researches to do. Additionally, while Miranda is a phenotypically white woman, the character is imagined by Oyeyemi who was born and raised in Nigeria, which highlights the need to look at Miranda's body through both a feminist Nigerian lens and a Western European one.

Helen Oyeyemi's depiction of the body becomes a site of colonization when readers are given the nuanced relationship with Miranda and her father, Luc. Since Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's theoretical framework affords scholars the opportunity to look at the critical intersection of gender roles and social relation, the topic of witchcraft being inherently political is extend when looking at the body the alleged witch resides in; because of this, the social interactions Miranda takes part in work as an additional piece to the politics of the novel. The first time the social aspect of gender appears is within the dialogue Miranda has with her father and their subsequent relationship; it reaches its climax when Miranda meets Ore and their subsequent relationship. At this moment social relations become

critical to the ways in which people perceive Miranda and Ore, but most importantly, the ways in which 29 Barton Road asserts Ore's social relation with others. However, the first pressing matter of social relations, one that is perhaps more fraught than Ore and 29 Barton Road, is the relationship between Miranda and her father; a father figure who very much enjoys enforcing his patriarchal thumb on his only daughter.

The moment Luc Dufrese takes Miranda shopping for new clothes, after having finally "recovered" at a local hospital, readers should be quick to notice the ways in which his complicity in the patriarchy manifests. The audience is susceptible to the fact that Miranda still does not fully feel like herself when she admits to her father and brother that "nothing fits me anymore...I'll need some new clothes" (43). What follows this exchange is a strange portrait of the ways in which Luc has become the all-powerful patriarchal figure since Miranda's mother passed away. The way in which Oyeyemi writes this scene is worth including in its entirety:

They moved with increasing disheartenment from shop to shop, hands in their coat pockets, looking at the floor more than they looked at the clothes, and finally, knowing that her only condition was that her dresses be black, he swiftly selected dresses off the racks for her to try, with the reasoning that he was more likely to approve an outfit if he'd chosen it. (44)

While some readers will take Luc to be a traditional father figure in this instance, arguing that he is merely trying to find clothes that he feels appropriate for his daughter, something much more insidious is at work here. Anita Satkunanathan, senior lecturer for the National University of Malaysia, points out that Miranda and Luc's relationship is anything but typical. She writes, "the relationship between Miranda and her father is an example of the dyad of male patriarch and unvoiced, almost doll-like feminized victim within a



patriarchal gothic setting” (46). And Luc’s continued treatment of his daughter as a doll-like figure is a trend that repeats throughout the book.

When it comes time for Miranda to begin applying to colleges, Luc again steps in the way of Miri accomplishing the goals she has in mind. Miranda desperately wants to apply to Cambridge, and Luc is determined to keep her grounded, closely, in Dover; a decision he claims to have been made because of her pica. Yet, as Satkunanathan points out again, “her father seems to take Miranda’s madness, or pica, as his excuse to in many instances overrule her: determining what she eats, and her choices of attire...” (47). Indeed, she echoes at the closing of that same paragraph that “it is an exercise in cruelty disguised as kindness, since he decides not to let her have a single dress” (47). While Luc’s stubbornness to police the way Miranda’s body is dressed, the most dangerous ways in which he polices his daughter surrounds the conversation of consumption, complicated by the matter that Luc is a food critic.

At several points in the novel, readers encounter Luc trying to coax his daughter into eating food. During one particular example, on New Year’s Eve, Oyeyemi writes that Miranda avoids Luc and his dinner by locking herself in her room and refusing to eat (88). This refusal to partake in communion with her family is not an isolated incident, as it is a frequently recurring theme throughout. However, Miri, after everyone has fallen asleep for the evening, sneaks down into the kitchen and eats all the food her father prepared. At this point Miranda shifts from a female character who was complicit in the oppression of her father, to a female character who defies Luc’s inherent patriarchy that she faces day-to-day. Miranda’s father has the most difficult time with her defiance when, as Satkunanathan explains, “as a response to this” Miranda’s issues with clothing and her father, “Miranda makes her own clothing, and gets admitted to Cambridge against her father’s wishes...”

(47). Yet, her relationship with her father serves as the antithesis to one of the only other male characters readers encounter, Miri's twin brother Eliot, who can be viewed as a direct foil to Luc.

Instead of her brother trying to oppress her like their father, Eliot is given an insider's perspective with his sister. This perspective affords Miranda the chance to finally be heard by someone within her close circle. In an interesting moment, after Eliot has taken some form of hallucinogen, Miri openly consumes chalk in front of him. Instead of chastising her for her pica, he embraces her struggles: "she took some chalk out of the pocket of her dress. When she offered him a stick of it he looked surprised, but took it and stuck it in his mouth, pretended to smoke it like a cigar while she ate" (58). While some may deem this problematic, in the sense that Eliot is complicit in allowing her to consume non-food items that will inevitably cause her to be sick, it gives readers hope that Miranda is not truly alone after all, and together the two of them can challenge the systemic patriarchy that has taken hold within the house.

If scholars are to believe that Oyèwùmí's theory works as a tool to drive meaning making, then it would hold true that the social relationship that Miranda has with her father does indeed complicate how she operates. Miri, as a female character, has to constantly reassert herself when she is seen with her father, as his overbearing patriarchal demeanor tends to push her into a specific category of what he believes Miranda should be. Additionally, readers see that her femininity is not challenged or questioned by her brother, and that he in fact allows her to be her most authentic self, even if that means allowing her to consume nonfood items. It can be argued that Eliot does not force his patriarchy on his sister, as they view each other as equals. So, Oyèwùmí's theory allows for scholars to better understand the reasons for which Luc and Eliot operate so differently with the same

person. Luc wants to consume Miranda, to force her into somebody she is not meant to be, whereas Luc wants her to live as authentically as possible. Since Miranda is a phenotypically white female character, perhaps Oyeyemi uses her as a stand in for more accessibility with the white audience that is drawn to this book. Yet, even though this aspect of consumption seems to be one devoid of the racial issues within the book, consumption and race take center stage when discussing the house.

The house at 29 Barton Road should undoubtedly be viewed as an individual character within the novel. The house, which is starkly white on the outside, becomes the xenophobic character from which the political aspect of the witchcraft comes forth. As aforementioned, when witchcraft is at play within literature, movies, or even television, politics are at play. To contextualize the xenophobia of this house, the novel is set during a time in which there was a very divisive attitude towards immigrants, with most of the conversation in the book surrounding an incident with an Immigrant Removal Center. And while most of the xenophobic actions of the house, which is directly attributed to the Goodlady (Anna Good) and her xenophobia, readers are clued into the house's xenophobia in several ways, the notable ones being the apples that surround the house and its interactions with people of color.

From the moment Miranda takes the readers to the house, something feels off about the whole situation even to Miri, which by extension reaches into the audience. In fact, Miranda even feels the strange presence of something in the air around her but is unable to pinpoint it until the Yorùbá woman, Sade, comes to work for the Silver family. Sade stands in as the scribe for all of the strange happenings around the house. She is quick to note the ways in which the house and Miranda seem to be one in the same. Sade asks Miri conspicuously, "They're calling you, aren't they?" (112). Miranda feigns innocence by

responding “Who?” to which Sade is quick to clarify, “Your old ones...I know it’s hard” (112). Yet, due to the house’s xenophobic nature, it does all that it can to try and rid Sade from the grounds. It becomes so extreme that the house attempts to burn her when she puts a kettle on the stove. While Sade’s mistreatment at the hands of the house plays out throughout the entirety of the novel, the issue with other guests get only fleeting conversations.

Readers are told at one point that the house tends to tempt “other” houseguests with apples from the apple trees surrounding the property. While the sheer color of the apples deserves ample critical dissection—one half of the apple is red as blood, while the other half is white as snow—this does not seem a strange occurrence with anyone that comes into contact with the house. Indeed, as Satkunanathan offers, “the house attempts to inject whiteness into them by making them eat poisoned apples, cocooning them, or by stripping the black from their skin” (49). It is from this precise point that the topic of race begins to take the forefront of the novel. Readers are afforded a look into the ways in which Imperial Britain has lasting reverberations from its colonizations throughout the decades. Oyeyemi makes this metaphor even more accessible by putting this historical aspect into one individual that Miranda has a romantic relationship with: Ore.

Studying at Cambridge, Miranda meets another young woman, Ore. Miri and Ore become dormmates, and a budding romantic relationship quickly forms. Ore, a phenotypically Black woman from Nigeria, is revealed to be the narrator at the start of the novel who contextualized the soucouyant for readers. Oddly enough, it appears that Miri is feeding off Ore just like the house. The moment things become interesting is when Miranda and Ore have a strange happening during the midnight hour. Oyeyemi says:

I woke up and Miranda was on top of me, clinging to me, I knew she would be lost. Her head was thrown back, and her mind was gone from her eyes. When I tried to move, she clung tighter, her thighs locked over and around mine. Her head was up; her eyes looked down but didn't follow me. She wasn't awake. I rolled off the bed and she came down with me. I had to pry (sic) her fingers from around my neck one by one. I heard her bones click. That broke the spell, and she came to, weeping. (203)

The women of the house are reaching beyond its physical borders to draw Miranda back to them. This further reinstates the notion that witchcraft is an inherently feminine ability, as it is the women who are attempting to pull her back home, women whom she received her powers from.

Readers have been shown time and time again that the house exhibits xenophobia when people of color enter the grounds. In fact, the houses' xenophobia is so strong that it uses Miri's body to attempt and consume Ore while she is outside of the house. Eventually, the house's powers prove too strong, as Miranda flees from college to come home, with Ore following suit. However, instead of the horrific trope of the Other in this instance being consumed, Oyeyemi subverts this and the climax of the novel shows Miranda being imprisoned within the walls of the house. The house consumes Miranda for her inability to act out the xenophobia that it so desperately seeks to live by, a trope that is so frequently employed that scholars refer to it as "consuming the Other." Indeed, renowned author and activist, bell hooks, even critically ascertains just how frequently the Other is consumed within popular media. She points out that, "the over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (39). Oyeyemi is

subverting the consumption of the other in a crucial way to allow for the process of decolonization to take place.

This process of decolonization, which Oyèwùmí points out is the most crucial piece to her theory, allows for readers to reconceptualize the ways in which African gender roles are perceived. The disruption of the Westernized patriarchal gender roles that play out throughout the entire novel come face to face at the end with Oyeyemi perfectly destroying the notion that the Other need be consumed in order for peace to be reestablished. Oyèwùmí's theory as a tool works exceptionally well with this novel, as it accomplishes the goal that she set out to solve decades ago. By decolonizing the systemic, problematic issues with race and gender within the novel, it appears to be the hope of Oyeyemi that readers will take this beyond the page and begin applying it to the real world, that we can moved past awful stereotypes and Othering. What at first appears as a message that the color white is truly reserved for witches, it shifts at the end. In fact, the titular phrase reads, "white is for witching, a colour to be worn so that all other colours can entre you, so that you may use them" (136). While the house does push this toxic agenda, Miranda decides that the white nationalist power will no longer function in this way.

While the novel is fraught with issues of gender and race and witchcraft, the overall message is clear to discern by the penultimate chapter. When Miranda disappears physically within the house, she leaves no trace of herself for anyone to find her ever again. Miri only leaves behind memories with those she loved, Ore and Eliot. While this novel is wholly rooted in Dover and Oxford, the resounding message speaks beyond cultural borders. If men, such as Luc, become too complicit in the power and safety granted to them within the patriarchy, then women will continue to disappear; this means the female youth too. Readers see this with the continued rise of witch hunting that is taking place

throughout Africa. Additionally, Helen Oyeyemi takes a topic that is seemingly prevalent in Africa and tackles it in a book set within the UK. Her positioning of the novel in Dover, while still having very deep African roots, speaks to the issue that the novel attempts to highlight: the reception of refugees in a city that is deemed the Key to England. Oyeyemi offers this incredibly rich, accessible piece for a white audience to consume, that affords them a look into the ways in which imperial England has repercussions that extend beyond cultural boundaries, and the boundaries of time as well. However, the application of Oyèwùmí's theory to any text is not without its implications.

The most troubling implication in Oyèwùmí's theory is that it does not overtly seem, on the surface, that different from how Westernized gender roles are constructed and formed. In fact, Western notions of gender are constructed and formed via the same methods she describes in her academic work. Yet, her key difference is that social relations determines how one's gender is viewed. While most Westernized forms of gender do not become inherently linked to social order, or relations, it does form the ways in which genders perform within a given society. However, allowing the theory to speak for itself within its application does bring forth the notion of decolonizing preconceived notions about African gender roles, which seems to be more critical to Oyèwùmí than the differences between an African gender norm and a Westernized gender norm.

*White Is for Witching* offers up a way to problematize social and feminist issues. Oyeyemi uses a white character to problematize the complicit nature of so many Eurocentric individuals who view racially diverse groups of individuals as Other. In doing so, she allows the white audience the chance to see the ways in which the remnants of colonization live on in the ancestry of those who colonized, and the struggles faced day-to-day by those who were colonized. This plays out in the novel with the interesting

conversations surrounding the Immigration Removal Center and through the xenophobia that the house exhibits. Additionally, Oyeyemi affords a chance for a critical discussion on the ways in which Western femininity is not wholly different from other countries' versions of femininity. She uses this approach to tackle a relevant topic that is currently plaguing several countries in Africa: pica. In choosing to look critically at pica, she finally allows the bridge to be built between witchcraft and the body.

It has never been more crucial to dissect the ways in which the body operates within witchcraft, as girls across the African continent are being persecuted daily for alleged witchcraft practices. Now that Oyeyemi has shown that the body is not separate from a discussion on witchcraft, and Adebayo has shown how the body is not wholly disparate to voodoo, the next author takes a cosmological approach to the body. Writers have broadened our discussion on witchcraft so greatly that ground-breaking authors after Oyeyemi have been able to critically examine other avenues of conversation surrounding witches. The most prominent discussion entering the discourse currently is the notion of motherhood and witchcraft, an idea that Oyeyemi sprinkled throughout her novel. Only after these authors challenge the patriarchal way in which witches are depicted and discussed can we finally move away from the toxic witch hunts that repeat throughout history.



## Chapter 4

### **Scars and Cosmology: Trauma and How it Shapes Discourse on the Body**

Adebayo's and Oyeyemi's novels show readers two different portrayals of female characters attempting to find their own agency. While Adebayo shows a straight woman being oppressed by society, Oyeyemi shows readers a lesbian-identified young adult facing similar struggles. Yet, the large number of publications coming from Nigerian female writers speak to a bigger social issue that serves as an undercurrent to disrupt the ways in which the world perceives Nigerian female writers. These writers, often times mid-twenties to early thirties, write with an expanse of knowledge that feels like it belongs to an older generation of writers. Recently, Akwaeke Emezi published their first novel, and it is steeped in the cosmology of the ogbanje, a spiritual entity that controls and inhabits, and eventually kills its host.. Emezi uses the idea of the ogbanje but takes liberties with the way in which it is depicted. The ogbanje in this novel is Ada, a young girl who has a family history with the spirit. It would appear that Ada's family has consistently housed the ogbanje throughout the generations, something that Ada is not privy to in the novel. However, Ada is not used as a simple stand-in for the character of the ogbanje; Emezi uses the trauma that Ada experiences to highlight the ways in which society uses the body of girls, and women alike, for their own insidious agendas.

The second chapter of this work began with critically looking at the ways straight, cisgender women's bodies are used by society at large via Yejide. Adebayo complicated this conversation by adding the additional layer of motherhood to confuse and challenge the discourse surrounding the bodies of mothers. Within this chapter we are given a glimpse at the ogbanje that will be discussed here via the seemingly spontaneous deaths of her first two children. After a better understanding of the conversation on motherhood and

body, the third chapter of this work extended the conversation into how the body and consumption are one in the same. The woman discussed in that chapter, Miranda, identifies as lesbian, therefore complicating our understanding of the feminine body once again, as it adds an additional intersectional layer. As a young adult, Miranda offered this research a look at how LGBT feminine bodies are discussed within society. Finally, with this chapter, readers will see how society perceives nonbinary trans individuals via Ada. While Ada begins the novel identifying as female, at the end her identity is starkly contrasted, both with herself and the previous two women discussed. By providing a more holistic picture of the various identities women hold in society, readers will see that no matter what self-identification marker women ascribe themselves, the crux of the problem is that society uses bodies that are not white, straight, and male for their own agendas.

*While Ada self-identifies as female throughout a majority of the novel, her subject positioning necessitates a more sensitive discourse to offer the upmost respect. Because of my subject positioning, white cisgender male, I recognize that I am by all accounts an outsider to this topic. However, I use the feminine pronoun she to describe Ada throughout this work, until we enter the conversation after her transition. From that moment on, I refer to Ada by their name, in order to not offend and be as least problematic as possible.*

What befalls Ada in Emezi's novel is a commentary on the ways in which society uses feminine bodies for their own will. Specifically, in this novel, Ada is taken advantage of via her disability—that of inhabiting a spirit in her body and the trauma she has experienced. Thus, Emezi has allowed for the discourse on the female body to be extended to young women experiences with trauma as it relates to their bodies. *Freshwater* was

published in 2018 by Grove Press, a printing house based in New York that is known for introducing American audiences to international authors. Akwaeke Emezi indeed introduces an American audience to African cosmology as the novel is set in America but rooted historically in Africa. Emezi was born in Nigeria and received their Master of Public Administration from New York University and then earned a degree in creative fiction from Syracuse University. Emezi is currently working on their next novels and has appeared on numerous publications as a promising young writer to watch.

Before providing a summary of the novel, it is imperative to discuss ogbanje in full. Emezi identifies as a nonbinary trans individual, who also views themselves as an ogbanje. Emezi's transition narrative says:

an ogbanje is an Igbo spirit that's born into a human body, a kind of malevolent trickster, whose goal is to torment the human mother by dying unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again. They come and go. (4)

As stated at the onset of this chapter, if the ogbanje sounds familiar, it is because this topic surfaced during the second chapter discussion on *Stay with Me*, in which it is believed that Yejide's children are indeed ogbanje. However, the intricate layer that is added in this chapter is Emezi's identification with the cosmology in real life. Extending this discussion, Emezi points out that the ogbanje are typically genderless, as the spirit manifests in any body. It is primarily at this crossroads that Emezi and Ada are situated. By the end of Ada's story, she does not feel male or female, rather something in between.

Further stressing the connection of protagonist to author, the feeling of being not wholly one specific gender surfaces in Emezi's transition narrative when they inform the doctor of the type of body modification they hope to make. Emezi writes:

“I’ve never heard of anyone like this,” the surgeon told me. He was an old white man who had performed many surgeries on trans patients, from breast augmentations to double mastectomies. “Male to female, female to male, fine. But this in-between thing?” (5)

The rhetorical move of applying the word “thing” to describe Emezi is precisely why this research needs to be undertaken. To grossly dehumanize someone, solely because they cannot understand the body dysmorphia that someone else feels, creates an effect that is akin to Othering. This appears to be the sole reason that Emezi has produced *Freshwater*. They write, “...the surgeries were a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned female to assigning myself as ogbanje; a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature” (6). It would seem that Emezi is taking the groundwork that has been laid by the authors employed in the research thus far and extending the conversation to include bodies that do not conform to societal standards. While Adebayo and Oyeyemi told readers what it looked like when a straight woman and a lesbian woman are treated by society; Emezi shows readers societies unwillingness to understand bodies that identify beyond the binary.

*Freshwater* starts with the birth of Ada. Ada is believed to be an ogbanje, a child who is born in the mortal world, but has one foot planted firmly in the afterlife. The novel follows Ada throughout her life, starting with her time in Nigeria, and ending with her adult life in America where she immigrated for college. While most children who are born ogbanje die at a young age, Ada lives well into adulthood, something immensely rare within this cosmology. Instead of simply being inhabited by one spirit, Ada’s body houses two incredibly vocal spirits: Asughara and St. Vincent. Given the multiple amount of characters placing ownership on Ada’s body, the novel is told from multiple perspectives. Each chapter alternates between the narration of Ada or the two spirits in her body, with most of the

narration occurring through Asughara. It is precisely Ada's relationship with Asughara that is the most fascinating given the fact that Asughara's narration leads readers to believe that she, too, is a woman.

Readers are given background information on Ada's early life at the onset of the novel. It then quickly proceeds into her parents' divorce, and subsequent relocation to Virginia for college. While in college, Ada lives recklessly, both with the influence via the spirits and herself. She drinks heavily, has unprotected sex, and self-harms regularly. After Ada's body is forced to experience the traumatic event of rape, her subconscious wakes Asughara to the point where she begins relying on Asughara to live. The novel quickly turns into Asughara taking control over Ada and using her body to fulfill her carnal desires, while simultaneously keeping people away that Asughara deems unworthy of their friendship. This toxic relationship reaches such a climax that Ada mutilates her body beyond gender recognition and also attempts suicide, which the other spirits stop from reaching fruition. In the end, readers are given a portrait of what happens when ownership of a woman's body is contested so greatly, the outcome of which is rooted in a conversation on the ways in which women use other women's bodies.

Emezi has painted a complex story of a young girl whose body never truly belongs to herself. Throughout the entire novel, others take claim over her body at various points, until it eventually becomes too much, and she is finally granted power over her own body, but not without the absence of the spirits. While the cosmological aspect of the ogbanje is very accurate to African culture, in this novel it is almost used as a metaphor for the larger context of trauma. The argument can be made that Ada suffers from both physical and invisible disabilities; the most convoluted area remains within her invisible disabilities. In fact, these disabilities are so prevalent in her own body, that remnants of the disabilities

trickle down and manifest outwardly. McKenzie and Ohajunwa point out the fact that, in Nigeria, “disability is closely associated with poverty, there would be an expectation that it would be an important part of the global development agenda” (95). Taking it further, they also claim that “this agenda favors the economically productive body...” and that any unproductive bodies are instantly marginalized (95). Thus, Emezi being an individual who felt these pressures of being a productive body to society, uses Ada as a conduit to show how this topic is even further worsened when the disabled body is a woman’s body.

Since the literature on disabilities in Nigeria is quite limited, this research will employ the notions and framework of disability and trauma on the subject. Eskay posits that, in Africa, “one’s disability and culture are central to determine the position or the status that the individual is given in a specific society” (475). Essentially, one’s disability reinforces their status in society, a system which is not wholly isolated from gender norms in Nigeria. According to Eskay, the views on disability in Nigeria vary across culture, but the collective view is the one aforementioned. Problematizing this is the idea that this view on disabilities is not unlike the ways in which other cultures view disability. While there has been a surge of disability studies within the States by academics, society as a whole still seems to think less of individuals with disabilities. Therefore, if disabilities in Africa reinforce one’s status in society, the status of a woman with a disability is placed even lower.

*I have to confess that I could not find more information on Eskay M. and their work. So, unable to determine their gender identification, I resorted to researching the usage of the name throughout Africa. Records show that on average, more men are given the name Eskay than women. While I do not support the usage of a male’s critical theory on disability to academically analyze a female character, the lack of research on disabilities in Nigeria left*

*me no choice. However, it is my hope that supplementing his framework with that of Oyèwùmí's will lessen the rhetorical move of allowing a male to speak for a female character. Anytime Eskay's work is referenced for the remaining of the chapter, I will continually pull in Oyèwùmí to provide a stronger foundation for the claims I am making.*

Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, whose work has been used in the two previous chapters, talks about the ways in which social relations play a key role in the hierarchy of gender roles. She writes, “it has become axiomatic that gender is socially constructed: that the social differences between males and females are located in social practices, and not simply biological facts” (1). Thus, gender has become socially constructed and historically, marrying that notion to the idea of disability in Nigeria, and readers are given the dark depiction that Emezi has provided readers via Ada. While seventy-five percent of the novel chronicles Ada's time in America, her ethnicity being Nigerian means that in order for theoretical framework on disabilities to be used, it needs to be rooted in Nigeria, otherwise we are given a skewed picture as Western influence would seek to overpower. However, while the previous works examined created new meaning with the theoretical framework applied, Emezi subverts all notions of the framework. This speaks to Emezi's agency in their own body autonomy, by not allowing other traditional Nigerian theories on gender to fit the mold that Ada has created.

To understand how disability manifests in the novel, and how it relates to femininity, we need to begin by understanding very critical parts of Ada's story. First, looking at the ways in which the possession affects Ada's body, readers understand just how much authority she holds over herself. Then, moving into the various tenants that claim ownership over her body, that of Asughara and St. Vincent, the readers begin to see how the final aspect

of trauma and self-harm are used as a metaphor for the ways in which society treats women and their bodies. Emezi's novel is not alone in tackling the topic of trauma—in fact, it manifested in *White Is for Witching*, but while Oyeyemi decided to tackle the problem with pica in Africa, Emezi opted to tackle the problem of self-harm that African women also face.

Modern literature increasingly uses trauma as a literary device. Some writers depicting trauma decide to use spirit possession as a way to explain any type of dissociation. However, Dave Gunning posits that “we might also note that the move toward incorporating the possibility of spirit possession into explorations of dissociation can serve also to sever it, at least in part, from its connection with trauma” (124). By using trauma as a literary device, Gunning says that we do “not deny the fact of trauma, or even deplore its current moral weighting...” (126). Because trauma is so frequently used in literature, it has become a new theoretical lens to analyze texts. To supplement this notion, the ideas put forth by Fassin and Rechtman claim that “trauma operates as a screen between the event and its context on one hand, and the subject and meaning he or she gives to the situation on the other” (126-7). If readers are to understand that spirit possession is now being used as a literary device stand-in for trauma, then the audience will be given an unbiased portrayal of the various ways in which trauma can affect one's body. However, trauma fiction contains more than a simple rendering of trauma to a character but has social implications as well.

Moreover, the ultimate goal of trauma theory is one that bridges together various aspects of the human experience. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone write that, “trauma theory is perhaps, at root, an attempt to trace the inexhaustible shapes both of human suffering and of our response to that suffering” (7). Thus, Emezi uses trauma as a conduit to show the various ways in which characters throughout the novel react to Ada's trauma. These characters, often times archetypal, respond to Ada as damaged. Even her own



family members begin to see her as something that has been dramatically altered (Emezi 69). However, before analyzing how trauma is handled in the book, we must first explore what trauma means when it appears in fiction, beyond the literal definition.

Trauma fiction is never solely about trauma. Instead, trauma fiction allows writers to provide social critique on the discourse surrounding trauma. Writers are afforded an opportunity to comment on how we discuss someone's trauma, how the trauma has shaped the victims, and the psychological implications that are then deeply entrenched in an individual. Anne Whitehead, senior lecturer at Newcastle University, claims that trauma operates on many levels in literature. She posits that, "trauma fiction overlaps with and borrows from both postmodern and postcolonial fiction in its self-conscious deployment of stylistic devices as modes of reflection or critique" (3). Emezi is indeed using Ada's trauma as a wider critique, a critique on how men, and women, treat feminine trauma. It would appear, though, that Emezi does not elect to use solely the postmodern approach, or postcolonial approach. Rather, Emezi moves between both, seamlessly, in a way that does not allow the focus to reside only on one or the other. In doing this, Emezi shows that trauma fiction does not have to employ only one approach, but that a dual approach allows readers to see more nuanced areas of the discourse of trauma. This is something we see within Ada after her traumatic experience.

Additionally, pain is a topic that recurs throughout much of Nigerian literature and is closely coupled with trauma. Even considering the previous two novels discussed, pain appears in all three books employed in this research and handles it in varying ways. Zoe Norridge, English lecturer for King's College, claims that pain is not a foreign concept to much of African literature, but that when pain manifests within African literature, it can carry a variety of meanings. However, she does posit that more often than not it is related to the

voice of a character. She writes: "The immediately apparent answer is that pain is often either a result or cause of the denial of another person's voice," and she goes on to provide examples in which pain is enacted on individuals in various cultures (2). She continues: "The child has no say in their own excision ceremony, the civilian casualties of war are literally silenced by violence in death or denied the opportunity to speak their pain" (2). Couple Norridge's perception of pain in African literature with the notion of postcolonial trauma in Nigerian fiction and readers will find the result is Emezi's book *Freshwater*.

While it will undoubtedly be argued that Ada was already possessed before her traumatic experience, and those critics are correct, the spirit never fully takes control of Ada's body until afterwards. Readers are about to be given the description of Ada's traumatic experience in full. It is not gratuitously graphic, but it does contain depictions of date rape. For Ada, the realization begins when Soren informs her that she needs to begin taking birth control pills. To which the omniscient narrator reflects:

The Ada didn't understand. She blinked and there was a pause, a teetering moment. She had no idea what he was talking about. Then slowly, information started filtering through, edged with alarm. Plain details at first, like it was afternoon and the trees outside the window were green in the sunlight. Like he was naked but she had no idea what she was wearing. Like his penis was out and it was brown like his eyes. Like how she didn't remember taking anything off or putting anything on. He pulled on a pair of shorts as she sat in the cheap Wal-Mart sheets, knowledge trickling like warm urine into her head, traveling down to her chilled hands. The words swirled in nausea around her. Birth control pills, because this boy, this boy with the doe eyes and the sad skin, had released clouds into her. But she couldn't

remember any of it and she couldn't remember saying yes because she couldn't remember being asked. (57)

It is upon this horrendous realization that Ada gives birth to the spirit Asughara. From that moment forward, Asughara takes over Ada's body and operates it for them, as Ada is so traumatized that continuing on as if nothing has happened was too much for her to handle. However, Emezi is not the only Nigerian writer to make use of Igbo cosmology to capture a larger social commentary.

It is quite possible that Emezi took the cosmological approach to her novel as way to recapture the narrative of the divine femininity, something Nigerian literature replicates often. Before diving into Emezi's cosmology, foundational information must be conveyed for a better understanding. Madhu Krishnan, senior lecturer in Postcolonial literature, claims that "...colonialism led to a social perspective in which the feminine was demonized and the masculine valorized, leading to the suppression of discourse touched by femininity on the public stage" (5). Because of this, African literature has seen a rise in female writers using the divine femininity to reclaim a narrative that does not disparage women. Krishnan argues that because of this reclamation of narrative that "tradition, displaced and re-configured through its interaction with the competing discourses of colonial imposition, masculinity, and nationalism, is instead transfigured, shifted, and continually (re)appropriated" (14). Thus, Emezi uses this divine femininity as a way to take back ownership of the demoralized feminine, and this trend of taking back ownership manifests within Ada as well.

The cosmology employed in *Freshwater* is rooted in a conversation based upon the ogbanje. However, Emezi takes certain liberties with depicting this dogma and adds a twist of their own. In the novel, Ada is a child who suffers from ogbanje, and by all accounts

should have died from sickle cell disease, or something of the like, before reaching full adulthood. However, seeing the potential that Ada brings to the table, the competing spirits in Ada's body share ownership of Ada from time to time, with the most powerful and commanding spirit being Asughara. It is from the complicated, and often times toxic, relationship between Ada and Asughara that the trauma in question manifests most readily. While quite a large number of academic works have been completed over the ways in which trauma affects masculine bodies in Nigeria, the realm of feminine bodies as it relates to trauma is a chasm that deserves to be equally examined.

*Unlike scholarly examinations of trauma in African literature in the past, this work will not be tainted with the academic voice and prose of the female trauma as it relates to a male character's trauma. Instead, I have elected to base all commentary on trauma as it is defined and explained by female writers of color. In this sense, the male sources used in this research on trauma should be viewed as secondary to what the female writers have to say. Male authors will be used on occasion to help frame a conversation, but the voices of the female scholars selected will always be given the floor to better understand the ways in which trauma affects feminine bodies. As a white male, I can never pretend to understand the ways in which trauma has become so deeply entrenched in the discourse on African bodies. To use the academic voice and prose of male trauma would be insidiously duplicitous to female trauma.*

The topic of trauma as it relates to African women is written into a plethora of fictional pieces. However, the usage of trauma in other well-known Nigerian texts, such as Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, carries with it an undercurrent of neocolonialism. Amy

Novak claims this is, in part, due to the fact that “the traumatic legacy of colonialism is not only evident in the large-scale events of history but also in the daily private lives of the citizens” (34). It would seem that Nigerian writers often use trauma as a way to capture the recurring memories of colonialism, thus the trauma contains physical scars as well as emotional and mental ones. If this is indeed the case, inklings of colonialism appear with Ada’s trauma as well.

Before immigrating to the United States for her education, Ada had not experienced trauma. Once Ada is in America, her body begins to experience the most traumatic events imaginable. Her male friends begin to take ownership of her body. She will often recede into the marble room of her mind and allow men to use her body in ways that she often times does not feel comfortable with. When Ada’s rapist returns, furious that Ada attempted to hide from him, Asughara reflects:

He was angry that Ada had disappeared and furious when he saw the crusted scratches on her forearms. He took her back to his room, and the wounds on her arms didn’t stop him, the memory of her sitting in the sheets and screaming didn’t stop him. No, the boy fucked her body again, that day and every day afterward, over and over. (63)

After her repeated rapes, in a weird twist, the spirits housed within Ada’s body demand blood as nutrients. Ada begins cutting her arms, “feeding” Asughara, and at this point, the trauma that Ada experienced at the hands of men begins to seep over into Asughara’s treatment of her as well.

When Asughara’s ownership takes center stage, readers see Ada’s former and true self start to fade away into the background. Asughara makes Ada cut her hair off, and it is unclear if Asughara is simply being malicious, as she often times is, or if this was a way to

prevent men from further seeking to abuse her body. Yet, “Ada sat in one of the raised chairs and stared at her reflection, all that heavy hair hanging from her scalp. ‘Cut it off,’ she said.... she certainly didn’t know us” (65). Asughara’s ownership is made even more insidious given the fact that it is a female spirit causing deliberate harm to its female host. Asughara’s explanation is simply: “Her body meant more to me than it ever did to her” (83). This dark and demented form of thinking accurately echoes the same mentality that men have when they use women’s bodies for their own personal agenda. Additionally, when Ada’s body becomes something that does not belong to her, others begin to take notice.

Ada’s father, Saachi, becomes immediately suspicious about a change within his daughter. Shortly after she returns home, following the haircutting incident, Asughara thinks, “They had argued about Ada’s haircut when she first got there, and Saachi had left Bible verses in the bathroom on Post-it notes, about how a woman’s hair was her crown” (68). Interestingly enough, Saachi thus far in the novel has appeared to be noticeably absent. It could even be argued that Saachi and Ada do not have the traditional father/daughter relationship as they have spent critical years in her adolescence apart. Nevertheless, her physical transformation is so drastic, even an absent father takes notice. In a cruel remark at the end of this awkward exchange between Ada’s family and her new hairstyle, her body enters the conversation. Saachi wonders if she is eating, and Asughara internally thinks, “This was actually true, but the not eating was just an experiment I was doing, to see how close to the bone I could get Ada down to” (69). In a lot of ways, Ada’s maltreatment at the hands of Asughara is equally nefarious as the trauma she experiences at the hands of men. With neither Asughara or St. Vincent assuming total blame for trauma

inflicted on Ada, Emezi provides double commentary on the abuse that women face by both men and women.

According to Obioma Nnaemeka, African women writers have to take various topics into consideration when creating these characters. One such consideration must be the gaze of a male reader and critique. Nnaemeka claims that African women writers have to consider their analogous condition, the 'nervous condition' that Fanon spoke of and how it correlates with them. She writes, "One of the factors that accounts for these 'nervous conditions' is the African women writers' awareness of the powerful gaze of the reader/critic (usually male) ..." and that this gaze forces them to "'negotiate' the creation of the fictional characters" (142). It would appear that Emezi is precisely aware of this, as they create a female character who is still manipulated and abused by male characters, but Emezi has a female character also enacting this violence onto Ada.

While *Freshwater* is not inherently written for only female audience eyes, Emezi provides an issue that plagues many women, and this issue is so deeply traumatic that they no doubt feel a strong connection to Ada and their female readers. However, Emezi does not only wish to comment on the ways that Ada's rapist traumatized her, but she extends even more trauma at the hands of Asughara. When Asughara grossly oversteps her bounds, St. Vincent is asked to come in and take control over her body. All the trauma considered to this point, what Ada experiences at the hands of St. Vincent is equally as disturbing and tremendously invasive.

Upon St. Vincent's promotion to 'captain' of Ada's body, readers experience physical realities for the internal conflict that Ada has experienced her whole life. Interestingly, when St. Vincent speaks as the narrator, the chapter claims the narrator is 'we,' implying that it is seemingly omnipresent, when in reality, it traditionally showed that

the spirits that inhabited Ada's body would be speaking in unison during these chapters. This rhetorical move highlights, yet again, that men cannot fully own the damage they inflict on other bodies. Instead, Emezi seems to be commenting that men will often push the blame onto others, or share the blame with multiple people, but never singularly.

Feeling out of sync with Ada's body, St. Vincent leads her to the process of transitioning into a body that allows St. Vincent to feel more at home. In a scene that is reminiscent of a crazed scientist crafting a strange creation, St. Vincent reflects Ada's bodily transition. He comments:

He [the doctor] explained how he was going to make incisions in the underneath fold of the breast, slice up the middle, ring the nipple in smooth, round, bloody cut. The fatty tissue would be removed; the dark circle of areolae would be made small, tiny, a bare orbit around the nipple. (191)

St. Vincent takes Ada's traumatic experience one step further by mutilating her body beyond her own point of recognition. But to the spirits in her body this a beautiful process. They reflect, in unison, that "she was scarred, yes, gouged in places even. But she—she has always been—a terrifyingly beautiful thing," and the final comment they make on the new body is "Think of her when the moon is rich, flatulent, bursting with pus and light, repugnant with strength" (216). Clearly, this newly modified body is so much more becoming than the decrepit body Ada left behind. This is the second example of the spirits creating a façade that what they are doing is for Ada's own good. St. Vincent's way of rationalizing this parallels the same way that Asughara thinks what she is doing for Ada is going to help her in the long run.

It would be unfair to not include Asughara's reflections on the damage she is inflicting on Ada's body. Feeling somewhat remorseful, throughout the novel Asughara



explains that she knows she is doing more harm than good to Ada, but it is for her own good. At one point she reflects:

I was selfish back then. You can't really blame me—it was my first time having a body. Human's don't remember the time before they had bodies, so they take things for granted, but I didn't. I remembered not being myself, just being a piece of a cloud. I was careless with her body, sha, not thinking about the responsibilities of having flesh. Consequences were a thing that happened to humans, not me. This was their world. I wasn't even really here. It's no excuse—I know I wasn't fair to Ada—but it was still a reason.

(75)

At intervals like this, Emezi provides humanistic qualities to the spirits in Ada's body. This creates an awkward situation in which the reader feels empathetic towards spirits that have intentionally harmed their host. The subsequent result is one in which readers feel as if individuals enforcing trauma or harm feel neglect and remorse on some subconscious level.

In a small way, Emezi presents readers with characters who intentionally inflict harm on Ada. Yet, by giving miniscule reflections on their actions, it appears that, at times, they do regret the way their abuse. Extending beyond the pages, Emezi seems to be saying that they inherently think people are well-intentioned, but everyone is capable of abusing others to get what they desire, whether it be physical abuse or psychological. The easiest way Eemzi captures this is by showing readers that men and women abuse feminine bodies. Quite literally, at the end of the novel, with Ada being nearly complete in their transition, we cannot separate the echoes of the author's real-life experiences from that of Ada's.

Being a nonbinary trans individual, Emezi projects the ways in which the world tends to view bodies that do not conform to society's standards, more specifically nonbinary bodies. Above all else, society at large mistreats feminine bodies, and as evidenced with the insurmountable homicides of trans and nonbinary individuals, they are no doubt an aspect of this conversation. A recent GLAAD Report noted that twenty-six trans identifying individuals were murdered in 2017 in America. They go even further by splitting those statistics up to show the number for people of color living in America. They write, "24 (92%) of the transgender people murdered this year were people of color: this included 21 Black people, two Latinx people, and one Native American person" (10). Since the novel takes place mostly in America, it seems ever pressing that this conversation must be facilitated because, as Emezi points out, bodies that do not conform to the binary are automatically relegated to the margins, and, therefore, disposable.

With the previous Nigerian feminist writers employed in this research tackling the ways in which society treats heterosexual women (Yejide) and young lesbian women (Miranda), now Emezi shows how society treats nonbinary trans bodies (Ada). It would seem that Emezi is calling attention to an underrepresented aspect of Nigerian feminist writing, and in tandem, she also calls attention to the fact that women are mistreating women as well, and that men cannot hold complete blame. The final argument that Emezi takes in their transition narrative seems to fully capture the agenda of the novel.

Emezi, in the closing of their transition narrative reflects back on the modifications their body has experienced during this transitioning period. They write that "it has been grueling to remake myself each time I learn more about who or what I am – to take the steps that such remaking requires, to bear the cost" (9). They continue to say that sometimes, "it's the body that bears them, in markings and modifications" (9). While the

first two authors commented on the ways in which women's bodies are used and discussed, Emezi posits here that any body that is different from what patriarchal standards deems normal is subject to criticism. This is made doubly worse when women are using other women's bodies for personal gain, as Emezi highlights with Ada and Asughara.

Not only does Asughara attempt to control Ada's body, but her drive to also control Ada's mind operates on a much more insidious level. This is where Emezi's larger argument begins to take shape for the audience. Asughara's control over Ada is doubly worse as it is done by a character who is consistently viewed as feminine. While *Stay with Me* and *White Is for Witching* gave readers a chance to see the ways in which two men fight for ownership over one woman's body, Ada's story is much more complicated given her ogbanje inheritance. Additionally, what makes Ada's story the epitome of malicious, in comparison to the other women analyzed in this study, is the fact that Ada's story is rooted in America. Thus, it seems that Emezi is saying other countries will attempt to use and manipulate your body, but America will want control of the mind as well.

This taking of body and mind carries horrible echoes that makes one think back to a time in which African bodies were enslaved in America. Completely aware of this social connotation, Emezi provides readers with a character who experiences very little control over her own life and is eventually led to self-harm and mutilation of the body. While it will be argued that the mutilation of Ada's body was done to help her transition, readers are not given a massive number of clues that Ada feels disconnected from the gender she openly performs—the idea to remove her breasts only happens when St. Vincent begins dominant control of her body. If we, as a society, do not combat this new form of body and mind control, then America will continue to place stake on African bodies and minds.

By the conclusion of the novel, Ada has visible scars on her body and invisible scars in her mind. The amount of scarring shows just how little worth society perceives of nonbinary trans bodies. Additionally, while European women are deemed lesser than males, black bodies—female Nigerian bodies, are demoted to an even lesser status. This status has lasting ramifications that are strikingly similar to colonization and slavery. Readers are left with the fictional story of one girl, housed within a supernatural body, denied basic essential privileges to the point that she is physically altered beyond recognition. With the large surge in feminist Nigerian writers being published, the trajectory that these novels are currently on gives readers hope that eventually we will be given an arena to have these conversations on the various ways that women's bodies are hijacked and co-opted by their male and female counterparts.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The introduction of this research posed major issues within the discourse of Nigerian feminism and its intersection with the body. Nigerian feminism has a dearth of knowledge and a critical conversation about the body. The inability to address this topic in full, prior to this research, could be, in part, due to the failure in addressing the ways that supernatural elements intersect within this conversation. The marrying of supernatural elements to Nigerian feminism highlighted the fact that the supernatural does not inherently have to be portrayed insidiously within literature. As evidenced with the three novels, aspects of supernatural can be used by female characters to situate their bodies within their own agency. Each protagonist, Yejide, Miranda, and Ada, prove that supernatural elements can be used to remind women that they hold agency within themselves in a world that consistently attempts to deny them. Thus, the issue of Nigerian women being a harbinger of agency rejects the societal pressures put onto women in modern day Nigeria. It is through the coupled conversation on feminism, body, and supernatural that this research proves that women can find agency in a world that relegates their agency to the margins.

Beginning first with feminism, the onset of this research addressed the fact that Western feminism is continually applied to non-Western texts as a way to create meaning. The problem in doing this is that it enforces Western ways of thinking onto subject matter that does not account for Westernized notions of feminism. Therefore, a traditional Western feminist theorist could not be applied to the three source novels, as they are written by women who have ancestry to Nigeria, which would inevitably complicate an understanding of feminism within Nigerian based texts. Before undertaking this research then, a Nigerian feminist had to be found that would then enable a fuller conversation on

feminism within Nigeria to take place. The most frequently cited and consulted scholar in this area is Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. She argues that Nigerian feminism is wildly different from Western feminism.

Oyèwùmí posited that gender within Nigeria is socially and historically constructed via authority. To put it simply, gender is influenced by social connotations, historical connotations, and it is then enforced by the powers of authority. Often times, these powers of authority reside in institutions or a patriarchal hierarchy. Thus, simply applying a Western feminism to three Nigerian novels will not offer an honest understanding as Western feminism tends to focus on the binary and the ways in which men and women are afforded varying degrees of privilege. However, when applying Oyèwùmí's theory, it enables researchers to further consider institutional powers, historical aspects, and social settings as a playground for examples of Nigerian feminism. While this seems to be a better alternative to using Western feminism as a meaning making tool, the authors of the three novels contend that this feminism still have aspects of exclusivity that favors patriarchal women. The first novel in this research, *Stay with Me*, focused very heavily and the historical and social settings to ground its depiction of feminism.

Ayobami Adebayo allowed Nigerian feminism to be broached via the historical aspects of Yejide's complicated past, and the various social interactions she has throughout the novel. With Yejide wanting so desperately to have a child, she consults with voodoo to achieve this goal. Her husband, Akin, is quick to chastise her and her relationship with voodoo as consorting with Satan, therefore promoting the idea that even patriarchal women suffer from patriarchy. Interestingly enough, Yejide's maternal ancestry is unknown, a common characteristic for women who are viewed as supernatural entities. The rationale behind this is supported by the notion that women who do not know their mothers cannot

appropriately raise a child of their own, because in society's eyes, they are seen as inferior because of their lack of two straight, cis-gendered parents.

Helen Oyeyemi showed how Nigerian feminism can be used to promote the acceptance of same-sex couples. While Adebayo focuses heavily on historical and social status, Oyeyemi writes Nigerian feminism solely rooted within the social setting and how it plays out amongst the various individuals that Miranda encounters throughout the novel. While Miranda herself is a phenotypically white British individual, Oyeyemi shows that the Nigerian feminism she believes in is applicable to everyone, not just Nigerians. The inklings that the Silver women are witches allows for a critical discussion on nationalism to be had as the house, 29 Barton Road, gives them their supernatural abilities. With 29 Barton Road being a completely stark white building, and its incessant need to consume racially diverse guests, underscores the fact that Nigerian feminism is one that promotes the equality of all ethnicities. Instead of opting to provide racially diverse guests to the house, Miranda challenges the house and ultimately gets consumed herself for insubordination. While this ending does not rhetorically promote a great message for Nigerian feminism on a surface level read, an investigation of the various ways in which Miranda begins to challenge her subject positioning via the people around her highlights the fact that the Nigerian feminism Oyeyemi is promoting is one that speaks first to the equality of ethnicities, and then to feminine bodies. Miranda thus becomes the case study for a lesbian woman's struggles with finding agency within a society that contains large social issues that extend beyond the self.

The fraught conversation on Nigerian feminism finally comes full circle with the final novel in this research, *Freshwater*. Being the most recently published book of the three, it makes complete sense that Emezi extends the Nigerian feminism that Adebayo and

Oyeyemi have started into an area that has been continually overlooked. Taking the fact that Nigerian feminism must encompass social, historical, or institutional powers, Emezi provides an in-depth look at what happens when all three are employed. Emezi's protagonist, Ada, is shown struggling with her agency via the eclectic group of spirits that reside within her. Because her body is used as a conduit for a higher power, her social life is affected. Her inability to maintain complete control over her body leads to her body being victimized to, arguably, one of the highest traumatic events. While the historical aspect of Nigerian feminism is not investigated to its fullest within the novel, the sheer fact that her affliction, that of being ogbanje, speaks to a large historical issue within many African countries. However, the institutional powers that enforce Nigerian notions of feminism manifests within the novel via her body modification that she is forced to go through. Because society cannot understand Ada's affliction, the spirits force her to go through transitioning surgeries to allow her body to better reflect how she feels internally. With the inclusion of the three major aspects that Oyèwùmí discusses, Emezi points out that Nigerian feminism must be extended to all feminine bodies, even those relegated to the margins. The issue of feminine bodies is the second major issue that is posed within this research.

On the outset of this research, it was described that postmodern notions of the body provide valuable tools to create meaning with how bodies are used within literature. However, this research does not take the traditional object, subject binary that previous theoretical frameworks on the body employ. Rather, this research looks critically at how feminine bodies come to a realization of their agency via supernatural elements and the individuals around them. Agency, sometimes referred to in this research as body autonomy, is the innate control that feminine bodies have to do what they want, when they want, and



how they want without the outsider influence of patriarchy. The first sample of body autonomy within this work is Yejide's inability to have children.

While the main source of conflict in *Stay with Me* is focused on Yejide's relationship with Akin and Dotun, at the heart of the novel is a complex conversation about ownership of one's own body. From the beginning of the novel it is made clear to readers that Yejide's body does not belong to her. Readers are constantly bombarded with viewpoints from her mother-in-law, Akin, and even her coworkers on the type of wife she should be to Akin. The struggles with Yejide having ownership of her own body is worsened when she has her first child. After giving birth, Yejide's body is seen solely as a vessel that is meant to keep her child alive, both by Akin and others. Thus, the issue of not having ownership of her own body drives her to consult with the supernatural elements of voodoo to find agency. Once consulting with voodoo, she starts the journey of learning of her own agency. With the lack of agency women have in Nigeria, Adebayo gives readers an alternative to the current societal standards. Adebayo essentially tells readers that consulting with the supernatural is not inherently wrong, because it can be used to help women discover their agency. Therefore, instead of postmodern notions of body as object and subject, this research shows that we can restructure critical conversations on the body to allow for a more nuanced discussion that highlights the various sociopolitical aspects that drive much of society. Taking the political aspect of the body even further is shown within Oyeyemi's novel.

Miranda's journey to body autonomy is very different from Yejide's, yet she still desires to have complete and final say over her own body. In *White is for Witching*, Miranda's body is positioned as being one that is inferior to others, due to the fact that she suffers from pica. Because of her pica, her body is constantly discussed by her father as

being emaciated and incredibly pale in complexion. However, while her father views her body as something that must be remedied, her twin brother never discusses her body. Eliot, her brother, never once tells her that her body is a disgusting thing that is horrifying to look at. In fact, Eliot even allows her to eat chalk in front of him without making her feel worse about her pica. While her body is placed within a battle between her brother and father, there is one more masculine presence that seeks to own her body: 29 Barton Road. The stark white house attempts to force Miranda into bringing it ethnically diverse bodies to consume. Instead of opting to help the house with the consuming of the Other, Miranda constantly fights back against the house, even brings her girlfriend home to visit who has Nigerian ancestry. Thus, the issue with body autonomy is challenged within Oyeyemi's novel because of Miranda's unwillingness to conform to societal standards that surround her. With a lesbian woman who is placed within the contention of ownership of body, the conversation of body autonomy is extended to include women who identify as LGBTQ, while this allows for more identification with a larger audience of women, Emezi takes it step further by including nonbinary trans bodies.

The conversation on body autonomy tends to belong more closely with female bodies that are a part of the binary, *Freshwater* challenges this by providing a protagonist, who at the end of the novel, identifies as nonbinary trans. Ada's struggle to find her own body agency is the most fraught of the three protagonists. Instead of external forces attempting to mold her body, Ada has two spirits that reside in her that attempt to change her from the inside out. Additionally, while the first two novels in this research underscored the issues with men attempting to control feminine bodies, Emezi opens the conversation to include feminine entities that attempt to control feminine bodies. Asughara, the seemingly female spirit within the novel, works from inside Ada's body to push her

into being something that Ada desires. Complicating this is Ada's own drive to fight back against what Asughara wants, in the hopes that she can one day finally control her own body. When it becomes apparent that Asughara cannot control Ada's body to the full extent that she wishes, she concedes and allows for St. Vincent to control her. For the brief period of time that St. Vincent controls Ada's body, he is able to force her to go through with transitioning surgeries to permanently alter her body. Therefore, the issues with body autonomy in Emezi's novel is finally allowed to extend to bodies that have continually been ignored. With the intersection of the Nigerian feminism the three authors are proposing, and the subsequent manifestations of body autonomy, it becomes clear that the policing of other bodies has gone on for far too long. However, this conversation would not have been possible without the elements of supernatural that all three authors bring to this research.

In the first chapter of this research, the issue of supernatural elements within Africa was presented. While African countries hold differing viewpoints on supernatural elements, they stand in contrast to Westernized opinions in many ways. Consorting with the supernatural, across many geographic spaces, reflects that for the majority of these places, the supernatural is something to not that should be practiced. However, the three authors in this research subvert that by creating a more nuanced conversation about what the supernatural can do for women who lack agency. Adebayo, Oyeyemi, and Emezi proffer up the new idea of welcoming supernatural elements as a way to teach one about themselves and the world around them. However, all three authors do a superb job at also show that partaking in the supernatural will come with benefits, but there will also be problems along the way. Therefore, the problematizing of the audience's beliefs on the supernatural allow

for a more fraught conversation to be conducted beyond the pages of the novel, which will have lasting ramifications in communities by proxy.

*Stay with Me*, provides readers with a very close portrayal of a voodoo ritual. The audience encounters Yejide willingly climb the Mounting of Jaw-Dropping Victory to meet Prophet Josiah, in the hopes that he can help her and Akin get pregnant. While the voodoo ritual proves successful, after the birth of their children they all die spontaneously via sickle cell disease, which is a nod to the cosmology in *Freshwater*. So, while Yejide is able to get pregnant via the ritual, the children do not live to full adulthood thus highlighting the fact that consorting with the supernatural has its consequences. Although, Yejide does discover that she has more agency over her own body than at first, but this knowledge is only garnered via the trials and tribulations of voodoo. Oyeyemi provides a different portrayal of the supernatural in her novel. In *White is for Witching*, the supernatural element is an extended metaphor of the soucouyant. In Oyeyemi's depiction of the soucouyant, she gives it a closer feeling of witchcraft. The Silver women are all given special powers via the family house, yet each woman suffers from pica. It is from this supernatural relationship Miranda has with the house that she learns that nationalism is no way to progress society. Ultimately, Miranda is consumed by the house for her insubordination, which parallels with the final novel in this research too. Emezi's novel relies on the cosmology of the ogbanje to create her conversation on the supernatural. Ada's ability to house multiple spirits allows her to "check-out" or recede into her mind when external situations become too much to process. However, her giving over control to the two spirits does not satiate their desire to become fully human beyond her body, therefore making them desire more out of Ada than necessary. Even though each of these novels approach the supernatural, body, and feminism in differing ways, they all three are

promoting a new type of Nigerian feminism that speaks for all bodies, not just traditional binary bodies.

Instead of adhering to the feminism and gender construction that Oyèrónké proposes, the three authors within this research only slightly conform to her framework. By largely subverting Oyèrónké's notions it creates a disruption that enables readers to have a conversation on the implications in making this rhetorical move. This conversation created by the subversion is home to a new type of Nigerian feminism that Adebayo, Oyeyemi, and Emezi are promoting. Each of their novels addresses this new feminism in a different way, thereby providing a holistic picture of a new Nigerian feminism that is needed to replace the one currently in position. While Western feminism does not appear as the antithesis to Nigerian feminism, the new feminism that the authors are promoting here does align with a more Western idea of feminism. This, arguably, has its implications, but it is important to note that all three authors received a Western education, therefore making it inevitable that Westernized notions of feminism are going to appear in their writings.

Beginning first with *Stay with Me*, the aspect of feminism that Adebayo includes in the discourse that has previously been ignored is the notion that motherhood and success are not synonymous. Several times in the novel it is impressed upon Yejide that the highest honor is to become a mother, the major influencers to this are Akin, Akin's mother, and the society around Yejide. Yet, it is revealed that Yejide does desire to have a child on her own, one would argue that her desire to have a child stems from societal standards that she feels she has to meet. This is supported by the fact that Yejide followed other societal standards before the story (i.e. going to University, making a career, getting married, etc.). Thus, Adebayo shows the nuanced conversation of motherhood as it relates to the new feminism she is promoting. Adebayo calls our attention to the binary and fallacious way of

thinking that is in place; Yejide can either have a career, or have a child, but not both.

Adebayo realizes this is an outdated way of thinking, and we must shift our new feminism to not force women to pick only one role. While Adebayo's contribution to the new feminism is very career and job driven, Oyeyemi offers up the new political aspect of feminism.

In *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi points our attention to the ways that the current feminism in place does not allow for a political self. Oyèrónké points out that historical, institutional powers, and social hierarchies create the gender roles and thereby creating the feminism; yet Oyeyemi introduces the political self into the conversation. Oyeyemi seems to believe that Nigerian feminism, for too long, has ignored the ability to be politically conscious. Not only does she point out that women have the ability to be politically aware, Oyeyemi's biggest contribution is showing that this new Nigerian feminism is applicable to all cultural groups. By making the protagonist, Miranda, a white British individual she highlights the fact that this new feminism she is proposing would also enable women around the globe to have more freedom with themselves. So, Oyeyemi offers up two critical points to add to our new criteria of Nigerian feminism, however, it is not without its limitations. One such limitation thus far with the new feminism is that it does not account for all feminine bodies, which Emezi addresses in their novel.

The final novel in this research extends the new feminism beyond traditional, or patriarchal feminine bodies. Emezi creates a protagonist who, by the end of the novel, feels neither female nor male – nonbinary. In doing so, Emezi offers up one of the most shifting notions of feminism that even some Western feminists exclude in the critical discourse. Emezi seems to be in communication with the two previous authors as they are saying, “we cannot ignore the fact that nonbinary and trans individuals are consistently left out of our

notions of feminism.” Not only does Emezi call our attention to this specific point, they also address the fact that women are policing other women’s bodies and it needs to stop. This is shown via Asughara and Ada’s relationship, one that does not include a pleasant ending as Asughara allows Ada’s body to be raped. Therefore, this new feminism must include nonbinary and trans individuals, while also promoting an aspect of sisterhood. Thus, the new feminism generated by the three authors emphasizes a woman’s right to choose to be both career oriented and a mother; it promotes women’s inherent ability to be politically conscious and active within their communities; and it includes nonbinary and trans individuals and sisterhood. Even though this new feminism emerged via this research, this body of work still has its limitations.

Primarily, the limitations of this research are a lack of resources. Writing specifically over Nigerian authors and Nigerian feminism proved to be a challenge as the databases available do not contain a large number of sources over this topic. It is entirely possible that a better Nigerian feminist scholar exists, yet the lack of resources forced Oyèrónké to be used, and while she has contributed greatly to this topic, the biggest issue with Oyèrónké is that her notions of gender and feminism are not vastly different from Westernized notions of both topics. Additionally, another limitation of this research is finding primary material to analyze and synthesize. Oyeyemi is, by far, the most prolific and published author of the group, and Adebayo and Emezi are relatively new comers to the arena. While there has been a large number of Nigerian writers getting published after Adichie, it is still incredibly difficult to find the works because they are not receiving the same promotion as books written by Western authors for Western audiences. In addition to the limitations with this research, there are also a few implications.

As each of the previous chapters has attempted to do, at large, this research has a few implications. The biggest one is that the new feminism being promoted seems very much like a Westernized feminism. Even though it is clear that the three authors were educated with Westernized countries, they all have Nigerian ancestry and all feature Nigerian characters prominently within their work. Thus, the implication here is that the new framework for feminism is not wholly different from Western feminism, and this rhetorical move seems to not place Nigerian people at the forefront of this conversation. Furthermore, the implications garnered from this research is that it does not include every type of female character imaginable, doing so would be near impossible.

*The last implication that poses the biggest problem for myself, is that I, a phenotypical white cisgender male, offered up a new type of Nigerian feminism. While I recognize my subject positioning in relation to this material, the creation of a new feminism by a male carries heavy Second Wave feminist implication that this research seeks to correct. It is my hope that by recognizing I am a cultural outsider, and including these first-person perspective paragraphs, that I have allowed the Nigerian authors to speak fully with the help of secondary sources that are largely written by women.*

*Lastly, I would like to end this work by making a call for future research. To add to this conversation, we must have more published work by Nigerian authors. I have already pointed out that a large number of Nigerian authors are getting published, but we need to promote them to the same extent that we do for Western texts. This can begin in multiple areas, but the biggest area needs to be education. We need to introduce more Nigerian texts into the classroom, and this does two very powerful things: 1) it introduces Western*



*readers to texts that challenge their way of thinking thereby disrupting the ideologies that have been in power so long and 2) it gives Nigerian students the ability to see themselves reflected back. Rudine Sims-Bishop writes that:*

*Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. (Bishop)*

*It becomes obvious then that being a child or young adult at a time when the world is a chaotic mess, we need mirrors – not windows.*

## Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1978, pp. 1-15. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3818468](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3818468).
- Adebayo, Ayobami. *Stay with Me*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2017.
- Akujobi, Remi. "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1-7. *Directory of Open Access Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1706>.
- Amadiume, Ifi. "The Politics of Motherhood: Women and the Ideology-Making Process," *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, London, 2015, pp. 69-88. *ProQuest eBook Central*, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.vortex3.uco.edu/lib/ucok-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1980708>.
- Association, Press. "Witchcraft Murder Couple Jailed for Life." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Mar. 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/mar/05/witchcraft-couple-jailed-for-life>.
- Bishop, Rudine Sims. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1990, <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>
- Buelens, Gert, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone. *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*. Routledge, New York 2014.
- Christian, Barbara ed. "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*," *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. Pergamon Press, New York 1985, pp. 211-252.

Coleman, Will. "West African Roots of African American Spirituality." *Peace Review*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1997, pp. 533-539. *ProQuest*,

<http://vortex3.uco.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.vortex3.uco.edu/docview/217535729?accountid=14516>.

Dobson, Kit & Chariandy, David John. "Spirits of Elsewhere Past: A Dialogue on Soucouyant." *Callaloo*, vol. 30 no. 3, 2007, pp. 808-817. *Project Muse*, doi:10.1353/cal.2008.0026.

Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. Grove Press, New York, 2018.

---. "Transition: My Surgeries Were a Bridge Across Realities, a Spirit Customizing its Vessel to Reflect its Nature." *The Cut*, The Cut, 19 Jan. 2018, <https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/writer-and-artist-akwaeke-emezi-gender-transition-and-ogbanje.html>.

Eskay, M., et al. "Disability Within the African Culture." *ERIC: Online Submission*, 2012, pp. 473-484, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED533575.pdf>

GLAAD Media Institute. "More Than a Number: Shifting the Media Narrative on Transgender Homicides." *GLAAD*, Mar. 2018 <http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/MTAN/More%20Than%20A%20Number%20-%20GLAAD.pdf>.

Gunning, Dave. "Dissociation, Spirit Possession, and the Languages of Trauma in Some Recent African-British Novels." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2015, pp. 119-132. *ProQuest Central*, [muse.jhu.edu/article/602744](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/602744).

Hirsch, Marianne. "Feminist Discourse/Maternal Discourse: Speaking with Two Voices," *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Indiana Press, Indiana, 1989, pp. 162-199.

- hooks, bell. "Eating the Other," *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge, New York, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2014 pp. 21-39.
- Jenkins, Nina Lyon. "Black Women and the Meaning of Motherhood," *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns*. Second Story Press, Toronto, 1998.
- Kariuki, et al. "Trends and Consequences of Consumption of Food and Non-Food Items (Pica) by Pregnant Women in Western Kenya." *NFS Journal*, vol. 5, 2016, pp. 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nfs.2016.09.001>.
- Krishnan, Madhu. "Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-18. *ProQuest Central*, <http://vortex3.uco.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.vortex3.uco.edu/docview/922949452?accountid=14516>.
- Locke, Liz, et. Al. "Witchcraft, Historical," *Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife*. Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 2009, pp. 704-09.
- McKenzie, Judith, and Chioma Ogochukwu Ohajunwa. "Understanding Disability in Nigeria: A Commentary on 'Country Profile: Intellectual and Developmental Disability in Nigeria.'" *Tizard Learning Disability Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2017, pp. 94-98. *ProQuest Central*, <http://vortex3.uco.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.vortex3.uco.edu/docview/1879637739?accountid=14516>.
- Nnaemeka, Obioma. "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1994, pp. 137-157. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3819872](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819872).
- Norridge, Zoë. *Perceiving Pain in African Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2013.

- Novak, Amy. "Who Speaks? Who Listens?: The Problem of Address in Two Nigerian Trauma Novels." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, no. ½, 2008, pp.31-51. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/29533858](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533858).
- Offion, Daniel A. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic and Social Order: Among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Fourth Dimension Publishers, Enugu, Nigeria 1991.
- Önal, Leyla. "The Discursive Suppression of Women: Female Evils as the Villians of the Motherhood Narrative." *Folklore*, vol. 48, 2011, pp. 85-116. *EBSCOhost*, doi: 10.7592/FEJF2011.48.onal.
- Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, editor. *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005.
- . *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Africa World Press, New Jersey, 2003.
- . "Colonizing Bodies and Minds: Gender and Colonialism," *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pp. 121-157.
- . *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, spaces, Social Institutions, and Identities*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011.
- Oyeyemi, Helen. *White is for Witching*. Riverhead Books, 2014.
- Satkunanathan, Anita Harris. "Textual Transgressions and Consuming the Self in Fiction of Helen Oyeyemi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." *Hecate: A Women's Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2011, pp. 41-69, *ProQuest Gender Watch*, <http://vortex3.uco.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.vortex3.uco.edu/docview/1265806868?accountid=14516>.

- Stephanou, Aspasia. "Helen Oyeyemi's White Is for Witching and the Discourse of Consumption." *Callaloo*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2014, pp. 1245–1259. *Project Muse*, doi:10.1353/cal.2014.0209.
- Stevens, Cristina. "The Body of the Mother in Contemporary Black women Narratives: (Re)writing Immanence Towards Transcendence." *Ilha do Desterro*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2015, pp. 93-101. *ProQuest*, <http://vortex3.uco.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.vortex3.uco.edu/docview/1778765080?accountid=14516>, doi: <http://dx.doi.org.vortex3.uco.edu/10.5007/2175-8026.2015v68n2p93>.
- Suchet, M. "The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Body: Introduction." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2009, pp. 113-118. *ProQuest*, <http://vortex3.uco.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.vortex3.uco.edu/docview/235776395?accountid=14516>.
- Welldon, Estela V. "Female Sexual Perversion," *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*. Guilford Press, New York, 1991.
- Whitehead, Anne. "Introduction to Part I" *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2004. pp. 3 – 11.
- "Witch Doctor." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989. *OED Online*. <http://www.oed.com.vortex3.uco.edu/view/Entry/229581?redirectedFrom=Witch+Doctor#eid>. Accessed 09 January 2019.