



Matters of the mind: analysing the depictions of mental health issues in three contemporary African novels

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Declaration

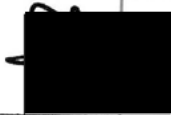
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Abstract

This dissertation is a literary analysis, and the selected texts have been examined through the theoretical lenses of postcolonialism, spiritual realism, and liminality. Although issues such as identity, race, and culture are examined in postcolonial literature, not many texts focus on the mental health effects of these issues from an African viewpoint. To better understand the postcolonial experience in terms of mental health, it is important to not use a Western model as a universal measure for mental disorders (Nwoye, 2015). This is because different worldviews influence how mental health is viewed. For example, in the West, mental health issues are largely examined through a “bio-psycho-social” approach (Nwoye, 2015:306), with a distinct focus on the self, whereas the African approach also includes a spiritual element (Laher, 2014; Nwoye, 2015). This spiritual element can be seen in Akwaeke Emezi’s debut novel, *Freshwater*, which incorporates Igbo cosmology, thus adding a supernatural element to the novel. Irenosen Okojie’s debut novel, *Butterfly Fish*, also encompasses the supernatural, and this brings up the concept of spiritual realism. The mental health struggles of the characters in these novels are interpreted from both a literal African viewpoint as well as a metaphorical lens which sees the spiritual elements in the novels as representations of the mental health issues faced by the characters. Although Yaa Gyasi’s *Transcendent Kingdom* does not comprise a mystical element, it does examine mental health struggles that stem from postcolonial issues like identity and racism. All three novels therefore offer an explanation of mental health that is relevant not only to Africans living in the West but also to other Neocolonial populations, including those in Africa.

Introduction

Owing to the influence of colonialism, the discipline of modern psychology is largely made up of Western and Eurocentric theories (Mkhize, 2014; Pillay & Tushini, 2016; Ratele, 2019). However, though Western conceptualisations of psychopathology are popular throughout the world, it is important to acknowledge that different cultures possess their own understandings of mental health. Cultural understandings of the mind and body existed long before the theorisation of psychology; “our thoughts, behaviour and feelings was well known by tribal villages in Africa” among other societies (Pillay & Tushini, 2016:577; Bojuwoye, 2021). These indigenous worldviews were often dismissed and seen as nonsensical by the West (Pillay & Tushini, 2016). This was especially seen during colonialism and in apartheid South Africa, where human beings of colour were often dehumanised, and Western psychology itself was used as a weapon in doing so (Dommissie, 1985; Pillay & Tushini, 2016; Cohen, 2021). To this day, indigenous psychologies are marginalised (Mkhize, 2014), and therefore, a culturally integrative psychology is important to better understand and address the challenges faced by the African population (Pillay & Tushini, 2016).

Although some scholars argue that it is better to exclude Western and Eurocentric theories from indigenous psychologies (Mkhize, 2014; Ratele, 2019), many advocate for the inclusion of such theories as influences of the West are found in all parts of the world. Omitting such worldviews will prove a disservice to postcolonial populations and migrants. A holistic psychology would need to include different cultural and religious belief systems for these influence individuals’ views on “themselves, others and the world, and the meaning of health and illness, and how their problems ought to be properly solved” (Pillay and Tushini, 2016:578). For example, in the West, human beings are largely viewed as individualistic (Mkhize, 2014), whereas in Africa, emphasis is placed on the “interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings; the spiritual nature of human beings; the communal self; the validity of affective knowledge; the oneness of mind, body, and spirit; and the value of interpersonal relationships” (Pillay & Tushini, 2016:581). These world views influence one’s understanding of mental health; in Europe and the West, mental health issues are largely examined through a bio-psycho-social approach, with a distinct focus on the self (Laher, 2014; Nwoye, 2015; Nwoye, 2017), whereas African understandings include an additional category, the spiritual (Laher, 2014; Nwoye, 2015). This spiritual element of African psychology

includes “spiritual understanding of causation, upsetting the ancestors, witchcraft and neglecting to perform rituals” (Pretorius & Moonsamy, 2021:473). African psychology therefore incorporates theories of the West as well as African indigenous theories, and thus spiritual illnesses are acknowledged to exist together with Western diagnoses (Laher, 2014; Pillay and Tushini, 2016). For example, in Africa, psychopathology does not only include mental illnesses such as dissociative identity disorder and psychosis (Nwoye, 2015), but also “irregular or strange behavioural presentations that often arise from mysterious origins”, and can be better explained by spiritual forces (Nwoye, 2015:309). It is for this reason that the Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual model is suitable for African explanations of mental health issues (2015).

Although there are postcolonial novels that deal with mental health in Africa, this theme is often overlooked in critical works, which generally focus on themes such as gender, identity, and migration. This dissertation, however, looks at such issues relative to mental health in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater*, Irenosen Okojie’s *Butterfly Fish*, and Yaa Gyasi’s *Transcendent Kingdom*. Cultural and social contexts are thus important for this study as the theme of mental health is looked at in the African context. This section begins with a brief background explaining the rationale behind the topic of this dissertation, after which the aims and objectives of the analysis are introduced. Thereafter, an explanation of the theoretical perspectives as well as the research methodology used for the analysis of the novels is provided. Lastly, a review of the available literature and an outline of the subsequent chapters are presented.

1. Brief Background

After majoring in English and Psychology during my undergraduate studies, I found myself intrigued by the link between the two subjects, specifically in an African context. Both English literature and Psychology often look at the human condition and explore it through the issues that plague our societies. Mental health issues are a growing concern globally, and through my studies in Psychology, I learnt that Western models and methods of treatment often fall short in non-Western countries. This is often because experiences and worldviews differ between countries. For example, some non-Western countries believe in the spiritual or the supernatural, which is not commonly found in the West. After reading *Period Pain*, I was inspired by how Kopano Matlwa incorporated the theme of mental health into her work so powerfully. I then

realised that there must be other works that include this theme and that researching them would allow me to delve further into my passion while examining an important issue that is often overlooked.

2. *Aims and Objectives*

This project aims to use the theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism and spiritual realism to explore how issues of mental health are presented in three contemporary African novels: *Freshwater*, *Transcendent Kingdom*, and *Butterfly Fish*. Texts by black, African women were chosen for this project as they are a large part of previously marginalised voices. Moreover, Okojie (Moore, 2016; Scafe, 2021), and Emezi (Whitehouse, 2018) have also alluded to writing about people who are underrepresented in some way. The chosen texts for this project offer unique perspectives on mental health issues in Africa and are some of the few texts by black women with a direct focus on this theme.

The objectives of this dissertation include the following:

- a) To explore the different mental health issues and disorders depicted in the novels.
- b) To explore the causes and origins of mental health issues faced by characters in the novels.
- c) To examine how the authors present issues and disorders of mental health in the novels.

3. *Methodology*

The chosen research method for this dissertation is qualitative as it is a text-based study. The interpretive method of textual analysis is a suitable method of analysis for the novels as it involves a close reading of the texts from a cultural standpoint (Belsey, 2013; Jeyaraj, 2015). According to Elfriede Fürsich, “it is not the goal of a textual analysis to uncover the one ‘true’ or even ‘hidden’ meaning of a text but to offer a variety of possible readings of the examined material” (2014:3). Thus, although there are various themes in the novel, a textual analysis will prove useful in analysing the theme of mental health in *Freshwater*, *Transcendent Kingdom*, and *Butterfly Fish*, as well as the motifs associated with it. Linked to textual analysis is discourse analysis which deals with “patterns of and in language use” (Griffin, 2013:108).

Discourse analysis is used to investigate the author's deployment of language in each novel, and how the use of certain discourses relates to the mental health issues in the novel.

In addition to the above two methods of analysis, thematic analysis is applied to the supporting texts that are relevant to the interpretation of the novels. This type of analysis allows for the linking of different concepts to form a more thorough analysis (Alhojailan, 2012). For the interpretation of specific psychological concepts in the novels, a comparative analysis using a multiple/collective case study approach is used in choosing and analysing scholarly material for the study. This approach is especially useful to explore and support both the themes of African mythology and mental health in the novels as case studies “[ensure] that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter & Jack, 2010:544). Furthermore, case studies often assist in generating an “in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context” (Crowe et al., 2011:1). Both thematic analysis and comparative analysis are thus useful in analysing the qualitative and quantitative journal articles that are used to explore and examine the supernatural and mental health issues in the novels.

The depictions of mental health in the novels are analysed holistically by examining the plot, characters, symbolism and imagery. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the theme of mental health is interpreted literally; however, in *Freshwater* and *Butterfly Fish*, it is interpreted both literally and metaphorically. The motifs of culture, spirituality, migration and identity are also explored, specifically in relation to the theme of mental health in the novels. In addition, similarities and differences between the texts are noted.

4. Theoretical Perspectives

The aim of this dissertation is not to ‘diagnose’ the characters who are directly and indirectly affected by mental health issues, but rather to explore the evidence provided by the author in line with other research on mental health in Africa. For this reason, postcolonialism and related theories are more suitable than psychological theories for the overarching analysis of the texts. However, specific psychological theories are also used where applicable to explain the mental health issues faced by some of the characters. These include Attachment Theory,

Psychodynamic Theory, Theory of Psychosocial Development, and Personality Theory, all of which are briefly described in the relevant chapters.

Postcolonialism.

The term “postcolonial theory” is often used synonymously with the term “postcolonialism” and therefore, this dissertation will use both terms interchangeably. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, postcolonial theory “emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing” (2002:11). Postcolonialism thus seeks to examine issues related to previously colonised societies, such as the socio-political effects of colonialism, culture, migration, and identity (Arora, 2007; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007). The latter three concepts are some of the postcolonial issues found in *Freshwater*, *Butterfly Fish*, and *Transcendent Kingdom*, which are novels written by women from previously colonised countries. In addition, spiritual realism, liminality, and hybridity are concepts found in the texts that emerge out of postcolonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007), making postcolonial theory suitable for analysing the cultural implications of mental health issues that prevail in the novels.

Spiritual Realism.

Postcolonial writers commonly deploy magical realism in their work as it allows for the incorporation of cultural elements (Naidoo, 1998; O’Brien-Udry, 2014; Sharma, 2021). The concept of spiritual realism was derived from magical realism which can be traced to South American writers (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007). In 1992, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggested the term “spiritual realism” in order to “distinguish African authors’ combination of the visionary and the realistic from their South American counterparts’ works of magic realism” (Stobie, 2003:128). Although both concepts are embedded in the historical and the supernatural, they differ in their manner of conveying the supernatural. Where the word “magical” implies mythology, and thus a separation from the natural world, spiritual realism depicts the supernatural as a part of nature. The latter is thus in line with the African belief of spirituality where the natural and supernatural are “inextricably linked” (Petrus & Bogopa, 2007:2). Two of the novels used in this dissertation incorporate themes of the spiritual or supernatural: In *Freshwater*, the protagonist is inhabited by various ogbanje (a type of spirit according to the Igbo), and in *Butterfly Fish*, the main character appears to be affected by a curse. Using spiritual realism instead of magical realism proved useful for analysing Emezi’s

novelas she does not view her novel as fantastical, but as reality (Akbar, 2018; Whitehouse, 2018). Spiritual realism can be seen as a hybrid mode of storytelling as it creates a third space where the natural and the supernatural are not opposed but exist together (Stobie, 2003). The supernatural in both Emezi's and Okojie's novels thus brings about the concept of liminality and hybridity (Lemus, 2021; Ogundare, 2021), two more theories that will be used for this analysis.

Liminality, Hybridity and the Third Space.

Homi Karshedji Bhabha, a popular theorist and critic in the field of postcolonial studies, refers to liminality as a “transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change” (Chakraborty, 2016:146). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin make the point that “The importance of the liminal for post-colonial theory is precisely its usefulness for describing [...] the transcultural space [...] in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states” (2007:117). In a general sense, a liminal space can be “physical, psychological, or conceptual” (Halliday, Boughton & Kerridge, 2015:8). All three texts incorporate psychological and conceptual liminality. For example, both *Freshwater* and *Butterfly Fish* focus on female, “African bodies that exist outside the categories constructed by universal humanism and its idea of the human” (McFaul, 2021:50), thus situating these characters in an alternative space that does not conform to Western norms. In addition, the ogbanjes or spiritual beings in Emezi's *Freshwater* are “liminal both spiritually and in terms of gender” (Smith, 2021:153). The liminality found in *Transcendent Kingdom* does not incorporate spiritual realism or the supernatural, rather, the novel portrays the transition of a migrant and the straddling of African and American identities. In addition to these conceptual liminal spaces, the mental health struggles faced by the characters in all three novels also place them in a liminal psychological state. Through their occupation of these liminal spaces, they can be said to be hybrid characters. For Homi K. Bhabha, “liminality and hybridity go hand-in-hand” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007). In simple terms, both hybridity and liminality are antibinarist concepts and create a “transcultural” or “in-between” space (2007:108, 109, 117); a space theorised by Bhabha as “The Third Space of Enunciation” (1994:37). The Third Space

goes against norms, dualities, and the “limited focus of colonial binary thinking” (Chakraborty, 2016:149); rather than “exclusion and rejection, the new space, thus, has the capacity and tendency to include and accept” (2016:149).

5. Literature Review

Freshwater encompasses “psychological and spiritual dimensions” (McFaul, 2021:54), as it deals with the mental health issues faced by the protagonist, Ada, through the ogbanjes that inhabit her as well as the traumatic experiences she faces (Newgas, 2019; Lemus, 2021; ten Kortenaar, 2021). According to Emezi, ogbanjes are Igbo spirits that are “born into a human body, a kind of malevolent trickster” (Emezi, 2018:4). Through the inhabitation of these spirit beings, Ada develops “separate” or “multiple” selves (Hewett, 2018:15; Whitehouse, 2018:1; Smith, 2021:139), which may be perceived as dissociative identity disorder in the Western world (Whitehouse, 2018; de León, 2019; Ossana, 2021). This is not an unreasonable perception as symptoms of spirit inhabitation are at times confused with symptoms of mental illness, especially dissociative identity disorder (Laher, 2014). However, Emezi describes Ada as a “singular collective and plural individual” (Akbar, 2018), and she rejects the idea of the spirits being a metaphor for dissociative identity disorder (de León, 2019). Although Emezi admits that the main character experiences depression, for her, interpreting Ada’s state solely as a mental health disorder conceptualised in the West can be seen as a result of colonialism, a system that casts doubt on the validity of the invisible world (Emezi, 2018; Whitehouse, 2018; de León, 2019). Ada’s mental health issues may thus be seen as a “struggle between different entities with the individual as the battleground” (Albano, 2018:1); she is “the centre of a non-human, spiritual lifeworld with significant connections to particular landscapes and histories” (McFaul, 2021:53). The novel thus reframes the Western view of psychosis by presenting the reader with an apparent mental health disorder fused with spirit beings from Igbo Cosmology (Bahuguna, 2018; Hewett, 2018; van Klinken, 2020).

Through the supernatural beings or ogbanjes that inhabit Ada, the theme of trauma arises (Crystal, 2019; Zlamalova, 2020; Lemus, 2021). Linked to the notion of trauma are the concepts of loss and grief which are explored in *Butterfly Fish*, *Freshwater*, and *Transcendent Kingdom*. Like Ada (Crystal, 2019; Zlamalova, 2020), the main character in *Butterfly Fish*, Joy, engages in self-destructive behaviour to deal with her loss (Uchendu, 2015). Although

Ada does experience physical loss, it is her loss of self that impacts her greatly as she attempts to find her identity and agency through the supernatural (Crystal, 2019; Lemus, 2021; Smith, 2021). By contrast, Joy together with *Transcendent Kingdom*'s Gifty and Fante experience grief from the loss of a loved one (Uchendu, 2015; Davis, 2020; Snow, 2022).

Culture plays a prominent role in *Freshwater* and *Butterfly Fish*, with an important theme in the former being “[the] role of culture in identifying, understanding, and dealing with a mental dysfunction” (Ogundare, 2021:1). The concept of culture emerges through the novels’ incorporation of the supernatural. Both Ada and Joy (Newgas, 2019; Lemus, 2021), through their link with the spiritual world, can be seen as hybrid characters who occupy a liminal space and subvert the normative structure of linear time (McFaul, 2021). This subversion can also be seen through the narrative sequence in *Transcendent Kingdom* (Zapata, 2021), *Butterfly Fish*, and *Freshwater*. *Freshwater* subverts the Western view of culture (Crystal, 2019; Smith, 2021; Ossana, 2021), just as all three novels subvert the Westernised concept of mental disorders (Zlamalova, 2020). Furthermore, Okojie “challenges readers to see words and worlds differently” (Scafe, 2021:1).

There are numerous similarities between *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater*; the novels “embody a sibling intertextuality that draws on continental epistemologies to ground narratives of non-humanness, inheritance, and spiritual emergence” (McFaul, 2021:48). Both Okojie and Emezie partly present the mental health issues of their main characters through spiritual realism: Okojie makes use of “material and spiritual geographies to unsettle the inheritances of past knowledge formations, traumas, and their effects” (2021:52). This can be seen in Joy’s depression which is presented as a result of a “curse” or a “childhood incident” (Uchendu, 2015:1; Mattheis, 2021; McFaul, 2021). In Emezi’s *Freshwater*, Ada’s initial connection with spiritual beings may be perceived as one of the causes of her mental health issues (Hewett, 2017; Newgas, 2019). Another possible factor adding to Ada’s and Joy’s mental health issues is the assault and abuse by their significant others (Bahuguna, 2018; Ogundare, 2021), as well as Ada’s abuse as a child (Ogundare, 2021; Ossana, 2021). Childhood abuse (Webermann, Brand & Chasson, 2014; Powers et al., 2015), and intimate partner violence, are known to sometimes precipitate or exacerbate mental health issues like depression (Webermann, Brand & Chasson, 2014), and this is witnessed in the character of Ada (Ossana, 2021).

Butterfly Fish provides a “multi-scaled city image” (Mattheis, 2021:327), and is largely set in two countries, England and Benin (Uchendu, 2015; Thomas, 2017; Mattheis, 2021). Similar to *Transcendent Kingdom* and *Freshwater*, Okojie’s novel depicts migration from Africa to Europe (Feldner, 2019). All three novels may thus be said to “revolve around the experiences of children of African parents who have to negotiate their hybrid identities” (Feldner, 2019). The texts thus explore postcolonial issues of identity, belonging, and migration (Dyer, 2021; McFaul, 2021; Newson-Horst, 2021), which are linked to disturbances in mental health (Hickling & Hutchinson, 2000; Marchetti-Mercer & Roos, 2006; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). All three novels deal with some type of grief and/or loss from the perspective of the individuals who migrated from colonised countries. According to Beatriz Pérez Zapata, the process of grief is more complex for individuals from postcolonial and oppressed countries (2021). This is because these individuals “must confront the disenfranchisement and suffocation of their grief and thus must deal with increasing multiple layers of suffering and subjection” (321:2021).

Unlike *Freshwater* and *Butterfly Fish*, the main character in *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty, does not have an overt mental health issue, but rather, the reader witnesses how a family member of someone who has a mental disorder navigates through life (Yerima, 2021). The novel revolves around the life of Gifty, “whose life begins in a family of four but dwindles through absence and traumatic loss to three, then two finally one, herself” (Dyer, 2021:3). The novel also explores the difficulties and hardships surrounding displacement and abandonment (Davis, 2020; Yerima, 2021; Snow, 2022) as well as the “shame” that accompanies them (Davis, 2020:5). The effects of an individual’s addiction and substance abuse often extend to the family of the addict (McArdle & Stull, 2018), and this is seen in *Transcendent Kingdom* when Gifty’s mother falls into a “crippling depression” after Gifty’s brother, Nana, dies from a drug overdose (Davis, 2020:4). Gifty has to take care of her mother whose depression is severe and characterised by ‘anhedonia’ which can be regarded as “the feeling of nothing” (2020:4).

As a Ph.D. student, Gifty chooses to research “the neural circuits of reward-seeking behavior” (Gyasi, 2020:24), possibly due to her brother’s addiction after being prescribed OxyContin for a basketball injury (Davis, 2020), as well as her mother’s inability to feel pleasure. Although Gifty denies choosing to study neuroscience because of her brother, “her devotion to a career

that draws from the well of her own pain” suggests otherwise (Collins, 2021:2). Gifty feels as though her work will help to find a possible cure for mental disorders/illnesses like depression and addiction (Wilson, 2020; Collins, 2021). Gyasi’s *Transcendent Kingdom* also explores the conflict between religion and science (Davis, 2020; Price, 2020; Snow, 2022), and the manner in which Gifty uses both as a coping mechanism at different stages in her life (Davis, 2020; Wilson, 2020); she “moves between Christian teaching and scientific enquiry/methodology in her struggle for frameworks to language her grief and loss” (Dyer, 2021:3).

Although the above mentioned novels differ in their exploration of mental health issues, they also share many similarities. The critical works that have appeared on the novels are scarce and mainly consists of book reviews and interviews. The lack of critical reception therefore opens a gap for further exploration of the novels to add to the already existing literature.

6. *Outline of Chapters*

There are two sections and three chapters in this dissertation. The first section is the introduction of the dissertation under which this outline falls, and the second section is the conclusion. The three chapters are made up of the selected novels; each chapter analyses one of the selected texts and begins with a summary of the respective novel.

Chapter One.

The first chapter of the dissertation focuses on Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater*. The mental health struggles of the protagonist, Ada, are evaluated in relation to her childhood trauma, the difficulties she faces during adolescence, and the ogbanjes that inhabit her. Ada’s symptoms are examined through both a Western-psychological lens as well as an African spiritual lens. Various possibilities regarding her mental state are put forward: Ada may be experiencing a fragmented psyche due to her being inhabited by the ogbanjes, due to her having a mental health disorder, or due to both of the aforementioned reasons. The disorders relevant to Ada’s symptoms are Dissociative Identity Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, Post-Traumatic

Stress Disorder, and Major Depressive Disorder, all of which are briefly discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Two.

Chapter two of this dissertation explores the mental health of characters from four time periods in *Butterfly Fish* by Irenosen Okojie. The first character is the King of Benin, Oba Odion, who ruled during the 1900s. From a Western perspective, Oba Odion's childhood difficulties are depicted to have led to him developing a superiority complex which influences his tyrannical rule. The brass head he fashions in the resemblance to his murder victim holds a curse that continues for years to come. This curse allows the novel to be interpreted from an African spiritualist perspective. The second and third time periods are Lagos and London in the 1950s–1980s. The negative effects of guilt are examined through an army general, Peter Lowon, who is gifted the same cursed brass head for committing a murder. Eventually, Peter rapes his daughter, Queen, while he is in a drunken state. The effects of her father's rape and the trauma of her childhood are discussed as some of the reasons for Queen's vulnerable mental health. Queen inherits the brass head from her father and following her demise, bequeaths it to her daughter, Joy. In modern-day London, Joy is affected by her mother's death and the trauma she faced during her childhood. Her symptoms suggest that she may have Brief Psychotic Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, or Major Depressive Disorder with psychotic features. From an African spiritualist perspective, Joy's symptoms are accounted for by the curse of the brass head.

Chapter Three.

The final chapter examines the mental health issues faced by three characters in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*. After sustaining a basketball injury, Nana is prescribed OxyContin, to which he becomes addicted. The cause of a Substance Use Disorder is not always isolated, and thus, the additional causes of Nana's substance abuse are explored, including the abandonment by his father. The mental and emotional strain of Nana's addiction on his mother, Fante, as well as his sister, Gifty, are discussed. After Nana overdoses, Fante is diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder with anhedonia. Apart from Nana's death, other possible reasons for her diagnosis are examined, such as the hardships that she experiences as a single mother and a female, African migrant. The mental health effects of Gifty's difficulties and her grief are

explored thereafter.

Chapter One: *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi

There are various ways through which the mental health aspect of Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* can be interpreted. The first and perhaps most common manner of interpretation is through a metaphorical or Western lens. When interpreting the novel in this way, one sees the spirits that inhabit the main character as a metaphor for a mental disorder, specifically Dissociative Identity Disorder. However, Emezi rejects this view of the novel as she perceives her work as a semi-autobiographical novel (Akbar, 2018; Whitehouse, 2018; de León, 2019; Newgas, 2020; van Klinken, 2020; Zlámalová, 2020; Lemus, 2021; Smith, 2021). The second reading of the novel is through a literal or African cultural lens, where Ada's mental illness stems from her trying to navigate being an ogbanje. The third view of the novel is one that is more holistic, incorporating both an African and Western lens. This manner of interpretation takes into account the protagonist's mental health issues by arguing that they stem from Ada being an ogbanje and diagnosing them from the traumatic experiences she faces. This dissertation utilises both an African and Western lens in interpreting the text to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the novel. The novel takes place partly in Africa and partly in America, and given that the author herself is a Nigerian living in the West, the use of Western and African conceptualisations provide a more accurate analysis of the migrant experiences highlighted in *Freshwater*. Furthermore, the unification ties in with the chosen theoretical framework of spiritual realism, which unites the natural world and the supernatural world.

1. *Summary of the Novel*

The novel follows the character Ada, who is inhabited by various Igbo spirits, or more specifically, ogbanjes. Like the fragmented nature of the protagonist's mind, the book is divided into various chapters and sections, each of which is voiced by either Ada or an ogbanje. Although Ada is conceived by a human being, she is actually mothered by the Igbo Goddess, Ala. Ada grows up in Nigeria with her Igbo father, Saul; her Malaysian mother, Saachi; and her siblings, Chima and Añuli. After Añuli is hit by a truck, Saachi takes her to Malaysia for skin grafts. In Malaysia, Saachi is offered a job, which she accepts. This leaves Ada alone with her brother, who becomes physically abusive, and her emotionally and physically absent father. It is at this point that the spirits begin to emerge in Ada's mind, causing her to self-harm in order to appease them. As a child, Ada is also sexually and physically abused, which leads to her dissociating as a defence mechanism. She also struggles with her body image at various points in the novel, and she restricts her eating. The ogbanjes have little to no regard for Ada's body, taking joy in her self-harming behaviour.

After Ada completes school, Saachi flies her to the United States of America to pursue her tertiary studies. Migrating to another country during adolescence presents Ada with various difficulties while she is at university; she has to deal with migration and acculturation, and she feels isolated. However, the worst of these difficulties is the trauma she faces at the hands of her boyfriend who rapes her. After the rape, two prominent ogbanjes, Asughara and Saint Vincent, emerge. Both spirits use Ada's body to fulfil their desires, leaving Ada confused about her identity. In order to accommodate the masculine spirit, Saint Vincent, Ada undertakes breast removal surgery, and she wears feminine clothing to appease the female spirit, Asughara. As she comes to terms with being inhabited by various spirits, Ada also removes her womb, as she believes that an individual with "gods" inside him/her should not possess human qualities, like the ability to give birth. Ada thus takes on a genderless identity in an attempt to make sense of the spirits within her.

At the end of the novel, Ada is still trying to attain inner peace. She does so by travelling to Nigeria where she meets a priest who provides Ada with insight into her inhabitation. Eventually, Ada returns to America, where, through a spiritual connection with her close friend, and through prayer, she attempts to connect with the ogbanjes within her, and her spiritual mother, Ala.

2. *Trauma and the Ogbanjes*

The issue of mental health arises in *Freshwater* through the ogbanjes that inhabit the protagonist, Ada, as well as the traumatic experiences she faces (Newgas, 2019; Lemus, 2021; ten Kortenaar, 2021). The novel thus encompasses "psychological and spiritual dimensions" (McFaul, 2021:54). According to Mbaegbu Chukwuemeka, in Igbo belief, ogbanjes are "humanspirits" who have not been "accepted in the spirit world because they are condemned as miscreants while alive and cannot become ancestors at death" (1997:185). They are the "wandering spirits" of deceased children who repeatedly inhabit human children only to fulfil their desires and die (1997:185). However, they are rarely content and feel the need to return to the spirit world after a short period of time (Bastian, 1997). In the spirit world, ogbanjes have brother-sisters with whom they make a pact or oath if they decide to incarnate as humans (1997). In *Freshwater*, this pact is referred to as the "oath":

The oath says that we will come back, that we will not stay in this world, that we are loyal to the other side. When spirits like us are put inside flesh, this oath becomes a real object, one that functions as a bridge. It is usually buried or hidden because it is the way

back, if you understand that the doorway is death. (Emezi, 2019:14)

Thus, a part of this agreement is that the ogbanjes will return home after they are satisfied (Bastian, 1997). If this pact is broken, the ogbanje child is tormented either as a way to appease the brother-sisters, or to drive the human host to death (1997). Ogbanjes are thus evil spirits (1997), and they are also perceived as controlling and apathetic as they use their human hosts to fulfil their desires (Crystal, 2019).

The ogbanjes in *Freshwater* play a significant role; their voices make up eighteen of the twenty-two chapters in the novel, with Ada narrating only four chapters. Therefore, though the ogbanjes inhabit the main character, they can be seen as characters in their own right. The first ogbanje introduced to the reader is dual in nature, and when Ada is around twelve years of age, she gives it the names “Smoke” and “Shadow” (Emezi, 2019:42). However, it is only referred to as “We” (2019:1), and it speaks as a collective. The second two ogbanjes, Asughara and Saint Vincent, emerge after Ada is sexually assaulted by her partner in university. The name “Saint Vincent” is ironic for just like Asughara, who uses Ada’s body as a means of sexual gratification, so too does Saint Vincent. The ogbanjes are initially dormant within Ada’s body, and only take over mind and body once she names them. They not only use her to fulfil their desires, but also attempt to “break” her for two reasons (Emezi, 2019:21,22): to appease their brother-sisters while they remain in the human realm, and to drive her to the point of taking her own life so that they may return ‘home’ (Newgas, 2019). The ogbanjes therefore create difficulties for Ada as she progresses through life, which in turn take a toll on her mental health.

One of the first ordeals faced by Ada is witnessing a truck knock down her little sister, Añuli (Newgas, 2019), leaving her leg “dug open from knee to ankle to bone, warm and red and gushing with shocks of white” (Emezi, 2019:24). The accident is caused by the ogbanjes as a “baptism in the best liquid” (2019:27), and it is one of the first blood offerings caused by the ogbanjes. Ada is left feeling guilty about not being able to protect her sister, and although her mother, Saachi, reassures Ada that it is not her fault, she “didn’t believe her” (26). The accident affects her to the extent that she “[relives] the blood of the backseat over and over again till the red [is] painted all inside” (27). Añuli’s accident leaves her with scars, and the ogbanjes take this opportunity to isolate Ada, causing further damage to her psyche. They do this by sending Saachi to Malaysia to consult with doctors regarding Añuli’s scars. For the ogbanjes, in order to “break a child”, they would have to “make the human mother leave”

(Emezi, 2019:22). This statement is repeated, portraying that sending Saachi away is critical to the ogbanje's plan of making Ada's mental state fragile; "And this is how you break a child, you know. Step one, take the mother away" (2019:32). Therefore, for the ogbanjes, distressing Ada by "breaking" her family is a way to satisfy the brother-sisters while they still occupy Ada's body (24). This separation of mother and daughter is the second traumatic experience faced by Ada who cries herself to sleep nightly after her mother leaves: Ada, "rooted like she'd lost her face, snuffling in the particular heartbreak of a little child, crying for her mother to come back, come back, please just come back" (36). Moreover, she "reeled" and "retreated deeper into her head" which consequently brings her closer to the ogbanjes within her (36). The ogbanjes then emerge for Ada as she "she was looking for anyone, because she was pursued by space, gray and malignant, cold as chalk" (36). Ada is thus lonely without her mother and in search of comfort.

As the ogbanjes "wake up" within Ada's mind, their "hunger rises" and she is forced to make sacrifices to "feed" and appease them (Emezi, 2019:40). After Añuli's accident, the ogbanjes choose blood as the "currency" with which Ada would pay them (2019:41), and at the tender age of twelve, Ada "broke skin without fully knowing why" (42):

She raised the blade that she had taken from Saul's shaving supplies, that double-edged song wrapped in wax paper, and she dropped it on the skin of the back of her hand, in a stroke that whimpered. The skin sighed apart and there was a thin line of white before it blushed into furious red wetness. (Emezi, 2019:40–41)

Ada's act is described as though it was a matter of urgency. It is almost as if the blood has been waiting to escape her body for her skin "sighed apart". The word "sighed" depicts relief, and this is contrasted with the blood that "blushed into furious red wetness", implying that the blood rushes out of her body. Ada continues to cut open her skin "for another twelve years" (Emezi, 2019:124):

At sixteen, breaking a mirror to dig into her flesh with the glass. At twenty, when she was in veterinary school, after spending long hours separating skin from cadaver muscle and lifting delicate sheets of fascia, she would return to her room and use a fresh scalpel

on her scarred left arm. Anything, you see, that would make that pale secret flesh sing that bright mother color. (Emezi, 2019:41)

Ada's left arm is described as being "scarred", emphasising the number of 'sacrifices' she made. The blade she uses to cut herself is described as a "song", causing her flesh to "sing" as it bleeds. The imagery evoked is that of music; sharp objects are the instruments which cause her blood to be let out in "song". Music is typically associated with joy and expression; therefore, Ada's self-injury is perceived by the ogbanjes as a kind of celebratory relief. The joy experienced by the ogbanjes at Ada's physical trauma and her shedding of blood is thus sadistic. The word "trauma" comes from the Greek word meaning "wound" (Groenewald, 2018:89). Interestingly, it also alludes to "a wound with a laceration" (Perrotta, 2019:1), a direct cause of Ada's mental trauma.

Ada's initial naïveté at why she was cutting herself indicates that she was not fully in control of her body. Her self-harming can therefore be perceived as both mental and physical abuse by the ogbanjes, for it is not something she wanted to do, but rather, something they forced her to commit. This coercion is proven through Asughara; in reference to Ada, she says: "Even when she couldn't cut her skin anymore, I was sharp enough to do it from the inside because we both knew the sacrifices could never stop" (Emezi, 2019:136). The lack of control by Ada brings her agency, or rather lack thereof, into question (Hewett, 2018). Agency can be defined as a "positive and desirable aspect of human functioning" (Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020:70) whereby an individual is "self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting" (Bandura, 2006:164). Simply put, it is the feeling of being in direct control of one's actions (Haggard & Chambon, 2012; Moore, 2016), and not merely being an "[onlooker]" on one's behaviour (Bandura, 2006:164). Self-agency is strongly related to self-efficacy, which is "the belief of being capable of accomplishing a goal" (Alper, 2019:1). Individuals with a high sense of self-efficacy often possess a strong sense of agency for they see themselves as active agents who are able to steer a path in their lives (2019). It has been found that both self-agency and self-efficacy drive motivation (Alper, 2019; Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020), with research also indicating that a strong sense of self-efficacy is linked to "increased [...] resilience" (Alper, 2019:1). A lack of sense of agency may "lead to adverse consequences" (2019:1), resulting in an individual feeling as if he/she is not in control of his/her actions (Ataria, 2013). This loss of a sense of control may result in feelings of helplessness (2013). A reduced sense of agency can be seen in Ada as the ogbanjes take control of her and force her to injure herself. The ogbanjes thus strip Ada of her agency,

resulting in a negative effect on her mental health.

Asughara is aware of Ada's fragile psyche, she states: "It was always easier to push my agenda when she was hurting, and to be fair, she was always hurting" (Emezi, 2019:150). This statement also implies that Asughara is always "pushing her agenda" with Ada due to the fact that she is "always hurting". Moreover, Ada's constant pain provides insight into the issues of her mental health, which can clearly be seen through one of her self-injury incidents:

Ada owned a bokken, a wooden Japanese sword, and one night she used it to smash the mirror in her dorm room, screaming tears as glass flew across the hardwood floor. The shards glinted in her fingers as she drew them down the inside of her arm, watching the bright red bubble through brown skin. (Emezi, 2019:113)

The phrase "screaming tears" shows the forcefulness of Ada's crying, and consequently the pain that she is in. Ada's intense emotion can be seen through her use of multiple "shards" of glass to cut her skin, and her blood which "[bubbles]". The implication of the word "bubble" is twofold; it depicts the manner in which Ada's blood emerges out of her flesh, and it suggests that the temperature of her blood is increasing and reaching "boiling point". The latter brings to mind the idiom of "making one's blood boil" which connotes intense frustration or anger. The bubbling of Ada's blood therefore signifies a deep, internal frustration within Ada. This idea of her blood bubbling and boiling brings to mind the image of a liquid at high temperature which rises vigorously as it boils appearing as though it is trying to escape. Therefore, once again, Ada's blood is depicted as wanting to break free from her body.

Although Asughara blames the above incident on the contraceptive injection taken by Ada, Ada's internal frustration is apparent as she goes to the extent of smashing her mirror into pieces in order to injure herself. According to Asughara, the side effects of the injection "threw off the fragile balance" she and Ada maintain in Ada's mind (Emezi, 2019:113). This implies that Ada's mind is an unstable place to begin with, for there is a balance to be maintained. Furthermore, this balance is one which is "fragile", portraying the vulnerable state of Ada's mental health. Therefore, the injection merely exacerbated, or perhaps brought to the fore, her

already existing mental health issues; due to the shot, Ada experiences “terrible mood swings” and “a gutting depression” (Emezi, 2019:113).

The instances of self-harm are described in detail, pointing to the importance of the blood Ada sheds, and bringing to the fore the motif of blood in the novel. Blood is closely associated with life, for human beings would cease to live without it. Similarly, it is a general belief in some African cultures that “Blood is not only conceived as a natural symbol life, but it is life itself” (Nabofa, 1985:390). Owing to this, these cultures believe that blood holds a “mysterious power”, and it is thus something sanctified that is to be treated with respect (1985:390). Owing to its sacredness, blood is capable of “restoring harmony between man and the divine” (404). This aspect relates to the ogbanjes having “subsided” and being “temporarily sated” when Ada sheds blood (Emezi, 2019:41). Her self-harm makes “existence bearable” for her as an individual inhabited by various conflicting spirits (2019:124). The quality of blood being able to satisfy the ogbanjes implies that it is a link between the natural and the supernatural.

Death is the only way for the ogbanjes to return home and thus another trauma inflicted unto Ada by the ogbanjes is her suicide attempt. The ogbanjes try to use the difficulties Ada faces in her life to get her to take her own life: “It’s not easy to persuade a human to end their life—they’re very attached to it, even when it makes them miserable, and Ada was no different” (Emezi, 2019:150). Asughara, one of the ogbanjes, admits to exploiting Ada to end her life when she was in a particularly vulnerable state; “In the middle of Ada’s pain, I kept looking for a window I could use to take her home” (Emezi, 2019: 153). Asughara clearly takes advantage of Ada’s pain since Ada “didn’t have the strength to fight [her]” (2019:53), portraying the disregard that the ogbanjes have toward Ada’s mental and emotional health.

The section above presents the view that Ada’s sense of agency is diminished as the ogbanjes influence her and the events in her life. However, Ada also experiences other traumatic events that may have not been directly caused by the ogbanjes. This indicates that Ada herself uses self-injury as a coping mechanism. Therefore, although Ada’s self-harm is influenced in part by the ogbanjes, she too, be it consciously or subconsciously, chooses to cut herself at certain points in her life. Moreover, her diminished agency and resultant sense of helplessness may add to her need to self-harm.

3. Other Childhood Trauma and the Hardships of Adolescence

Ada begins to self-mutilate around the same age that she is physically and sexually abused. Individuals who self-injure are often overwhelmed by emotions like “frustration, anger, contempt, anxiety, shame or guilt” (Pretorius, 2011:34). Some may engage in self-harm as it prevents them from committing suicide (Brown & Kimball, 2013), while others may self-harm as it “reduces psychological pain and results in relief” from the negative emotions they experience (Pretorius, 2011:34). The physical pain from self-harm thus assists in dealing with the emotional pain experienced by an individual; it causes “temporary relief against emotional pain” (Hodge & Baker, 2021:1966). Furthermore, since finding and dealing with the root cause of emotional pain often proves difficult, self-injury is able “to act as a way of validating suffering by creating a physical manifestation of inner pain” (Adams, Rodham & Gavin, 2005:1294). Therefore, self-harm allows emotional pain to be converted into “a more tangible, physical pain” (2005:1294), providing one with a sense of control over one’s pain (2005). Ada’s self-injury can thus be deduced as one of the ways she is able to feel in control of her body and emotions, as the ogbanjes have significantly reduced her agency. Self-harm may also assist to “temporarily escape from exhausting feelings” (Lindgren et al., 2021:6); it can provide an escape from “intolerable or painful feelings” as well as “intrusive thoughts and aversive emotional states” (Simpson, 2001:1; Smith, Kouros & Meuret, 2014:41). With the ogbanjes being lodged within Ada’s mind, she has no way of escaping them. Hence, her self-injury could be her way of escaping the voices within her that are constantly trying to seize her mind and body. However, it is not only the ogbanjes that Ada tries to escape, but also the emotional pain from the memories of her childhood trauma.

Various studies have found a strong correlation between self-harm and sexual abuse (Romans et al., 1995; Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2001; Quarshie, Waterman & House, 2020), with some studies depicting a link between sexual abuse during childhood specifically, and self-harm (Low et al., 2000; Noll et al., 2003; Hoyos et al., 2019). Like her incidents of self-harm, Ada’s abuse is also depicted explicitly, pointing to the link between her abuse and self-harm, which further emphasises the impact that the abuse had on her. Ada is first sexually violated by her brother’s friend:

When the Ada was a child and the neighbor’s son came into the room she shared with Añuli, when he reached his hand between the Ada’s legs, under the cartoon nightgown she wore, we decided that she did not need to remember the exact ripples of his fingers. Not that time, or the time after, or the time after that. It continued until the Ada wrote Chima a letter and asked him to stop inviting the neighbor’s son over late at night, which was when

it stopped. We sectioned off the image of his silhouette bending over her bed, of his arm reaching. (Emezi, 2019:208)

The abuse that Ada faces is not a single occurrence, for it continues to happen until Ada is able to put a stop to it. However, Ada is not only abused by the neighbour's son, but the neighbour himself, who "groped the Ada when he had her alone in his living room" (Emezi, 2019:208). In an attempt to protect Ada from her trauma, the ogbanjes "decided that she did not need to remember" the abuse. They thus "sectioned off" the memory of the sexual violation. This act of sectioning Ada's traumatic memories is comparable to the psychological concept of dissociation. Dissociation can be interpreted as the subconscious process that causes "depersonalisation (experiences of the self as unreal or unfamiliar), derealisation (experiences of the external environment as unreal or unfamiliar)" and/or "emotional numbing (experience of affect as dulled or absent)" (Černis, Chan & Cooper, 2018: 328–329). A specific form of dissociation relevant to the sectioning of Ada's memories is "compartmentalisation" (Békés, Fersternberg & Perry, 2020: 785). Compartmentalisation is defined as an "unconscious process" whereby "the ego segregates segments of essentially conflictual psychological contents into separate compartments or components" (Békés, Fersternberg & Perry, 2020: 785). It is therefore evident that the ogbanjes compartmentalize Ada's memories as they state that "Sectioning the Ada gave her isolated pockets of memory" (Emezi, 2019:209).

Compartmentalisation at times occurs together with other defence mechanisms like "suppression", "isolation of affect", "splitting", and "repression" (Békés, Fersternberg & Perry, 2020:785). The term "repression" is also at times used interchangeably with the term "dissociation" (Goodyear-Smith, Laidlaw & Large, 1997; Spiegel et al., 2011), both of which are defences used in "traumatic and/or overwhelming experiences" (Spiegel et al., 2011:826). Stemming from psychoanalysis, repression is the process whereby "unpleasure-provoking mental processes, such as morally disagreeable impulses and painful memories" are "[inhibited]" (Garssen, 2007:472; Boag, 2020:4425), "removed" (Goodyear-Smith, Laidlaw & Large, 1997:100), or "actively prevented from entering conscious awareness" (Boag, 2020:4425). It is thus another process which shares similarities with how the ogbanjes section Ada's memories, for "When she reached back for the memory", it was as though "it belonged to someone else, not her" (Emezi, 2019:208).

Apart from her self-harm, Ada's dissociation and repression of her memories can also be seen as an escape for her. Although both dissociation and self-harm are ways of coping with

memories of abuse, self-harm is also used to cope with the “fragmentation” caused by dissociation (Low et al., 2000:276), and to “end dissociation and periods of numbness” (Smith, Kouros & Meuret, 2014:41). On the other hand, self-harm can also “initialize dissociation to cease negative affect and escape traumatic memories” (Polskaya & Melnikova, 2020:29). There are therefore two ways of looking at Ada’s self-harm and dissociation: It could be that the dissociation is her coping mechanism which causes her to self-harm, or that self-harm is her coping mechanism, which triggers her dissociation. However, with both perspectives, the root cause is her trauma. Ada may harm herself in order to dissociate and escape the “voices” in her head trying to control her as well as the emotions of the hardships and trauma she remembers. Alternatively, her trauma causes Ada to dissociate, and she thus self-harms to regain her agency and to deal with the gaps in her memories due to her dissociation and repression. The latter, however, may be more applicable.

Apart from being sexually abused, Ada was also physically abused by her brother who “raised a belt to her” and “beat her often because he could” (Emezi, 2019:208). Chima felt that “he was the first son and the firstborn, and she was his responsibility” since their mother worked overseas (2019:208), and their father was emotionally absent. Therefore, Ada eventually realised that crying for her mother “made no difference” as “no one would stay long enough to protect her” (209). The lack of parental love in her life is another cause of distress for Ada. John Bowlby, a notable psychologist in the field of child development, theorised that in order to “thrive emotionally, children need a close and continuous caregiving relationship” (Bretherton, 1992:8). In their Attachment Theory, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth explain that a close, healthy and continuous relationship with the mother must be maintained for a child to grow up with optimal mental and emotional functioning (1992). Various studies have shown that a child may experience emotional and mental difficulties when he/she is separated from his/her mother (Howard et al., 2011; Debiec, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018; Chen & Zhou, 2021). Additionally, parent-child separation has consistent negative effects on a child’s “social-emotional development, well-being, and mental health” (Waddoups, Yoshikawa & Strouf, 2019:387). These effects manifest in a variety of ways such as “anxiety, unhappiness, tendency to feel depressed, lack of motivation, apathy [...] low self-esteem, antisocial behaviours (i.e., violence, substance abuse), and suicidal behaviour” (Valtolina & Colombo, 2012:906), some of which can be witnessed in Ada’s character.

It is thus evident that Ada is rather isolated as a child, for not only is she not close to her family, but she also does not have many friends. Although she begins self-harming at a young age, it appears that none of her family members notice or even intervene. Ada's numerous hardships lead her to becoming a "precocious but easily bruised child, constantly pierced by the world" and "by words" like "the taunts of Chima and his friends as they mocked her body for being soft and rounded" (Emezi, 2019:27). Ada is clearly deeply affected by the insults of her age-mates for even when she is described as "busty" by one of her classmates, she "decided it was not real. It felt like he was talking about someone else" (2019:124). Notably, "bodily isolation" and "social isolation" are possible risk factors for self-injury (Pretorius, 2011:34), both of which are apparent in Ada's character. Ada begins to feel guilty about her maturing body, an unnecessary guilt brought upon by the ogbanjes who perceive it as an "abomination" (Emezi, 2019:124). For them, Ada's changing body is "an unnatural maturing" and a "cruel reminder" that they are housed within a human being (2019:123). Therefore, "as if in apology for her bleeding and bulging body" (124), Ada tries to make the ogbanjes "comfortable" by wearing her father's old and baggy clothing (124). Ada also begins restricting her eating, an act which seems to continue throughout college.

Ada's isolation continues as she navigates through college in America, and being in a foreign country presents Ada with the challenge of dealing with migration and acculturation which consequently affects her identity as an adolescent. Erik Erikson, an acclaimed development psychologist, devised the Psychosocial Development theory which posits that there are various stages of psychosocial development which one must pass through in order to establish one's self-esteem and a "stable adult identity" (Carr, 2016:778). During adolescence, individuals begin to find and solidify their identity, and are thus susceptible to social and environmental influences (Carr, 2016). Research has further shown that an "achieved identity" is associated with better mental health in adolescents (Ragelienė, 2016). The migrant adolescent "may be influenced strongly by the cultural confusion and culture shock" (Bhugra, 2004:245), and the added stressors of migration may thus increase his/her risk of developing a mental health issue (Bhugra, 2004). Studies have reported that many youths who migrate find it difficult to maintain their "mental health and well-being" (Wu et al., 2018:4); the stress from acculturation may cause issues like anxiety, depression, and somatisation (Balidemaj & Small, 2019). Therefore, an adolescent who has migrated may face issues with the formulation of his/her identity and he/she may be likely to experience issues with his/her mental health.

Ada has to juggle being a young, female, African migrant of mixed race in a Western society, while straddling the spiritual and natural worlds. Together with balancing her various identities, Ada has to also cope with the trauma she faces as a young girl, and the difficulties she continues to face:

To be carried away like cargo, to be deposited in the land of the corrupters, inside this child simmering with emotions, searching for us because she was uprooted and alone, and we, always we, having to fix it, well, you miss your father—why we don't know, the man was just a man, and you miss the amen and that yellow girl you used to run around with, and you have work to do, work to do, and no time to shatter any further, and you hide in a lecture hall and cry and cry as if you have something to cry about? (Emezi, 2019:47)

Ada is only sixteen years old when she starts college, and naturally, being alone in an unfamiliar place leaves her “simmering with emotions”. A “simmering” liquid or substance is often at a temperature just below boiling point; the use of this word indicates the intensity of Ada's emotions, and the possibility that her emotions could ‘boil over’ at any point. In addition, Ada's studies are described as preventing her from “[shattering] any further”, once again portraying that she is nearing a mental collapse. It is Ada's work that does not permit her from breaking any further for perhaps she throws herself into her work in order to cope with her sadness. Although it is suggested that Ada is already “insane” before the rape (Emezi, 2019:6), her vulnerable state of mind is further highlighted through the word “shatter”, which is often associated with fragility. Ada is described as being “uprooted and alone”. When something is uprooted, it is pulled out in its entirety from its natural habitat. The word “uprooted” thus depicts Ada's complete removal from what is familiar to her, such as her family, her friend, and her neighbourhood. Even though she does not have a close relationship with her father, Ada still misses him, emphasising the loneliness she feels. The words “uprooted” and “cargo” objectify Ada, portraying her reduced agency yet again and alluding to the possibility that her parents—particularly her absent father—are indifferent when sending her to university. Ada's isolation leads to her delving deeper within her mind, “searching for” the ogbanjes to help her get through.

In order to stop Ada's continuous tears, the ogbanjes provide her with realistic memories; however, Ada still feels hollow or empty inside:

Very well, we will do you this one thing, because it was always you and us together [...] so here is the place where you miss that man and the girls and the road you used to run down, it is soft and fleshy, a bulb of feeling, and here we are like a useful edge and here is the cut, here is the fall, here is the empty that follows it all.

Here is the empty that follows it all. (Emezi, 2019:48)

It appears that after the ogbanjes ‘comfort’ Ada with these memories, she cuts herself. Interestingly, after “the cut”, the “empty” follows, implying that once again, Ada dissociates to deal with the intense pain of missing her home, and after self-harming, she comes back to reality. It is important to bear in mind that it is the ogbanjes who describe Ada’s state, and they do so in an apathetic manner, asking rhetorical questions and reducing Ada to something unimportant. They do not understand what it is like to be a human being and therefore, Ada’s constant cries seem almost senseless to them. However, for the reader, the apathetic attitude of the ogbanjes evokes emotion and sympathy for Ada’s character. Ironically, the ogbanjes describe Ada’s pain and hardship, but they are unable to see it themselves. The statement “it was always you and us together” once again reinforces Ada’s isolation. Although the ogbanjes are lodged within Ada, she is still alone. Hence, Ada’s support, to a great extent, is only herself.

At around eighteen years of age, Ada is raped by her boyfriend, Soren. The rape is one of the most significant traumas faced by Ada for it is immediately after this ordeal that the spirit Asughara emerges:

She started to scream. She screamed and screamed and screamed. Her vision was numb. There was a window in front of her but it opened into a nothingness like the one yawning from her mouth. Somewhere she could hear a building sound, a wind, huge and wide, rushing out of the void, rushing toward her. The walls, the veils in her head, they tore, they ripped, they collapsed. The wind rushed over his empty voice and the Ada thought with a sudden final clarity—

She has come. She has come for me at last. (Emezi, 2019:58)

One of the ways that victims react to being raped is through “expressive” emotional reactions such as shaking, crying, screaming, laughing, and restlessness (Chaudhury et al., 2017; Gomes, 2020), which is witnessed through Ada’s continuous screaming. According to Asughara, it is after the rape that Ada went “completely mad” and “lost her mind” (Emezi, 2019:71); Asughara emerges from an Ada who is “bawling and broken” (2019:71). It can thus be inferred that the rape was the final straw in the breaking of Ada’s psyche.

Ada becomes disoriented and incredulous as she tries to make sense of the rape:

But she couldn’t remember any of it and she couldn’t remember saying yes because she couldn’t remember being asked. She was confused. There had been so many refusals in the weeks before, piled up like small red bricks, the weight of an apartment building that got torn down, things she thought would be heavy enough to hold him away

because he knew, he knew, he knew she didn't want to. She couldn't remember anything, like was this the first time, was it the fifth, oh god, how long had he been moving unwanted parts of himself in her? The rush of unknowns propelled the Ada out of the bed and she slid her feet into sneakers and laced them up as fast as she could [...] thinking only of the door, of away [...] The Ada opened her mouth and all that poured out were large shapes of pain that flooded the air as her legs gave out. She crumpled to the floor and he dropped down with her. (Emezi, 2019:57–58)

Ada is doubtful about whether this was “the first time” Soren raped her, or “the fifth”, suggesting the possibility that he could have been repeatedly raping her. Her feelings of pain are merged with disconcertment for her cries are described as “shapes of pain that flooded the air”. The word “flooded” is associated with drowning, depicting Ada's overwhelmed state and reinforcing the motif of water in the novel. She has no recollection of the assault/s suggesting that either Soren had drugged her, or that she had dissociated. Dissociation is a common, natural and physical response during traumatic experiences like sexual assaults (Boyd, 2011; Spiegel et al., 2011; Chaudhury et al., 2017; Haskell & Randall, 2019); it acts as a defence against the fear and helplessness associated with the traumatic event (Spiegel, 1986). According to David Spiegel, “The process of dissociation becomes part of the patient's identity, to be remobilized in the face of subsequent stress or even imagined situations reminiscent of this stress” (1986:125). Therefore, it is probable that Ada did dissociate during the rape for she first dissociated when she was sexually assaulted as a child.

After Ada is raped, Asughara “[experiments]” with her “to see how close to the bone [she] could get Ada down to” (Emezi, 2019:69):

The point is once I was there, I took her to new weightless places. 118 pounds. She ran every day for an hour. I had her eat only salads. Hunger grabbed her from the inside, intimately. It felt like it had a purpose, like it was doing something. Ada lifted dumbbells and continued running. One day, just like that, she dropped down to 114 pounds of human flesh. Let me tell you, I've never almost flown that well since. Ada's shoulders became knives in her back, and her legs looked even longer than when she took ballet in her first semester and the instructor told her she'd need XL tights because her legs were that long. But yes, no, she was not eating. It wasn't important anymore, what happened to her body, not since I was there. (Emezi, 2019:69)

Once again, the reader witnesses the disregard for Ada by the ogbanjes. For the ogbanjes, Ada's body and the fact that she is not eating are not “important”. Although Asughara states that she is controlling Ada's eating, there is once again the factor of whether Ada herself partakes in the self-harming behaviour, for at one stage, she had chosen to starve herself. Furthermore, the worsening of Ada's restrictive eating after being raped points to the possibility that it is not merely Asughara who is influencing the reduction of Ada's weight,

but Ada herself, for sexualtrauma may lead to the maintenance and/or development of eating disorders (Boyd, 2011; Madowitz, Matheson & Liang, 2015; Chaudhury et al., 2017). Moreover, some individuals see their bodies as the site of the abuse, causing them to harm themselves in various ways including self-injury and starvation (Madowitz, Matheson & Liang, 2015; Hodge & Baker, 2021). This is due to their feelings of shame and self-blame, and the false perception of being deserving of punishment (Madowitz, Matheson & Liang, 2015; Hodge & Baker, 2021). For Ada, the pangs of hunger feel like “a purpose, like it was doing something”, and thus it is possible that she feels a sense of agency through the starvation, for even when she was younger, her restricted eating (according to the ogbanjes) was an attempt to “control her body since she couldn’t control her mind” (Emezi, 2019:69). This sense of control is a shared concept between self-injury and eating disorders as both constitute self-harm and are used as coping mechanisms (Hodge & Baker, 2021).

Ada’s starvation and thinness resemble an eating disorder, specifically Anorexia Nervosa, or Atypical Anorexia Nervosa, both of which are characterised by restrictive eating, a fear of weight gain, and a distorted body image (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Ralph-Nearman et al., 2021). There exists a correlation between Anorexia and a lack of attunement with one’s emotional self and identity (Oldershaw, Startup & Lavender, 2019); individuals who suffer from Anorexia “do not feel and act as if they had an identity”, and some feel as if they do not “even [own] their own bodies (Bruch, 1975:160–161). Therefore, for such individuals, Anorexia “is a search for a congruent self” (Oldershaw, Startup & Lavender, 2019:13) and an attempt to “establish a sense of control and identity” (Bruch, 1975:160). This is apparent in Ada who attempts to find her agency and identity whilst being inhabited by ogbanjes (Crystal, 2019; Lemus, 2021; Smith, 2021). The disfunction of identity may also be seen in individuals who dissociate, for through dissociation, one “comes to feel that there is an inauthentic self which carries on the everyday functions of life but with the sense of numbing” (Spiegel, 1986:124).

A number of studies have found a connection between eating disorders and emotional and/or physical neglect (Hodge & Baker, 2021), as well as eating disorders and sexual abuse during childhood (Chaudhury et al., 2017; Hodge & Baker, 2021; Malet-Karas et al., 2021). Furthermore, childhood abuse and self-harm (specifically cutting) have been found to correlate with dissociation (Low et al., 2000; Hoyos et al., 2019), and this is witnessed in Ada’s

memories being “sectioned” (Emezi, 2019:208). The ogbanjes describe the sectioning of Ada’s memories as “a brutal exercise” (2018:209), and both dissociation and repression have negative effects on one’s psyche (Krause-Utz et al., 2017; Rofé, 2008). Repression in particular “increases harmful tension” that “may facilitate the development of psychophysiological diseases or behavioural dysfunctions” (Rofé, 2008:67). Two disorders relevant to Ada’s characterisation and associated with dissociation and/or repression as well as self-harm are Borderline Personality Disorder (Polskaya & Melnikova, 2020), and Dissociative Identity Disorder. These disorders will be discussed in the following section.

4. *Embodiment or Mental Disorder?*

One of the causes of mental health issues in Africa is spirit possession as the inhabitation by evil spirits often affects one’s psyche (Okonkwo, 2012). The mental health effects of spirit possession often share similarities with the Western diagnoses of Dissociative Identity Disorder and psychosis (Achebe, 1986; Laher, 2014). However, the holistic view of the self in countries like Africa means that Dissociative Identity Disorder may be perceived as “pathological possession experiences” (Dorahy et al., 2014:19). Thus, fragmentation of the personality or self is “expressed in the idiom of external malicious forces that disrupt identity and consciousness” in African contexts (2014:19). However, in the West, an individual inhabited by a spirit may be given a differential diagnosis of Dissociative Identity Disorder or psychosis (Achebe, 1986; Ilechukwu, 2007; Laher, 2014). In dealing with the mental health influence of the ogbanjes and Ada’s childhood trauma (Newgas, 2019; Lemus, 2021; ten Kortenaar, 2021), *Freshwater* fuses “psychological and spiritual dimensions” (McFaul, 2021:54). Thus far, this dissertation has largely dealt with a literal interpretation of the spirits in *Freshwater* in line with Igbo mythology. However, from a Western medical point of view, the ogbanjes within Ada can also be perceived as a manifestation of a mental health disorder, specifically Dissociative Identity Disorder (Ossana, 2021).

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder (Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2001; Dorahy et al., 2014), or Split Personality Disorder (Ashraf et al., 2016), can be defined simply as: a disorder whereby an individual described as a single being, possesses two or more alternate identities or selves, each separate from one another and having “relative psychological autonomy” (International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation [ISSTD], 2011:120). Each of these identities or personalities may at times take

control over the individual's body and influence his/her behaviour and actions (ISSTD, 2011:120). In a non-Western context, these separate selves may be attributed to "external entities that take control of the individual's consciousness and identity" (Dorahy et al., 2014:21), while in mainstream Western cultures, they are perceived as "a fragmentation of internal identities" (Dorahy et al., 2014:21). For the DID patient, these various, separate identities form his/her self (ISSTD, 2011), and often, one identity or self is dominant (Patrichi et al., 2021). However, in other cases, the different selves "take control in turns, for different periods" (2021:208), and often, the various selves know and communicate with each other (2021). This is evident in Ada as the ogbanjes, Asughara and Saint Vincent, use Ada's body at different times. Moreover, Asughara and Saint Vincent also converse with each other and with Ada within Ada's mind.

According to Junaid Hassim (2012), the symptoms that often occur from being inhabited by ogbanjes imply that "there is a lack of awareness with regard to emotional and cognitive processes" which results in a separation of behaviour from "psychological processes" (226). This separation is indicative of a disembodied psyche (Ilechukwu, 2007), similar to the detachment or disruption of self in DID (Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014; Pal, 2020). Being inhabited by ogbanjes may also result in the manifestation of psychological or psychiatric symptoms like "aggressive behaviour, visual hallucinations, histrionic personality traits, dreams about water, conversion disorder symptoms, and dissociative disorders" (Hassim, 2012:150). Therefore, from a Western viewpoint, the ogbanjes that inhabit Ada can be perceived as "separate" or "multiple" selves (Hewett, 2018:15; Whitehouse, 2018:1; Smith, 2021:139). This interpretation lends support to viewing Ada as having DID, for the ogbanjes are also constantly competing for control over Ada's mind and body (Albano, 2018; Crystal, 2019; Lemus, 2021). Furthermore, as Ada grows up, the ogbanjes within Ada's body emerge in her mind as material constituents of her identity (Ossana, 2021). The ogbanjes themselves assert that "to be named is to gain power", portraying the further development of their agency after being named (Emezi, 2019:126). This is similar to the personality-states of a DID patient that develop and agentify as time progresses (Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014). Furthermore, existing research shows that the formation of DID is a culmination of factors including "traumatic experiences, dissociative processes, psychosocial mediators and socially constructed understandings of self" (Dorahy et al., 2014:22), most of which are applicable to Ada's character.

Individuals suffering from DID may experience dissociative amnesia; a disruption or poor integration of autobiographical memory (Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014; Patrichi et al., 2021). Such symptoms may be seen as “intruding on and/or deleting aspects of conscious experience, thought, or action” by causing gaps or difficulties in the “recall of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events” (Spiegel et al., 2011:826; Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014:496). The ogbanjes admit that they “[played] fast with [Ada’s] memories” (Emezi, 2019:28), and they perceive the erasure of “a complete remembering” as a “mercy” to Ada for the memories would have perhaps been too painful for her to bear (Emezi, 2019:209). Studies have consistently found a link between DID and continuous trauma, especially physical and sexual abuse during childhood (Herman, 2015; Ashraf et al., 2016; Ossana, 2021). When faced with trauma, a child may be overwhelmed by “intense conflicting needs and emotions” (Dorahy et al., 2014), thus inhibiting his/her ability to integrate and develop a stable sense of identity (Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014; Dorahy et al., 2014):

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness. Unable to care for or protect herself, she must compensate for the failures of adult care and protection with the only means at her disposal, an immature system of psychological defences. (Herman, 2015:96)

Furthermore, the repetition of early trauma causes “discrete behavioural states” that allow the individual to deal with trauma and “compartmentalise overwhelming and conflicting feelings” (Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014:497; Dorahy et al., 2014:21), thereby disrupting the “unification of identity” and leading to the formation of DID (Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014:497).

Another possible disorder that Ada may have is Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) which shares symptom similarities with DID (Reinders & Veltman, 2021). BPD is a mental health disorder characterised by a “pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity” (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013:663). One particular form of trauma often observed in patients with BPD is childhood sexual abuse (Cailhol, Gicquel & Raynaud, 2014; Bozzatello et al., 2021). BPD begins in early adulthood or adolescence (APA, 2013), with one of the risk factors being maladaptive parenting, such as prolonged separation, a lack of warmth, neglect, “disrupted maternal communication”, and “maternal inconsistency” (Leichsenring et al., 2011; Cailhol, Gicquel &

Raynaud, 2014; Bozzatello et al., 2021:9). The contribution of physical abuse and bullying to BPD may also be applicable to Ada's possible diagnosis of BPD (Bozzatello et al., 2021).

Dissociation itself is also a common symptom of BPD and it is often related to disturbances in identity and emotional dysregulation (Brand & Lanius, 2014; Frewen et al., 2014; Krause-Utz et al., 2021); individuals with DID experience "multiple selves in conflict" whereas BPD patients experience "a consistent narrative self with [fluctuating] self-concepts" (Marmer & Fink, 1994:758). Although identity disturbances are common in DID and BPD (Marmer & Fink, 1994), the latter are "less stable and more subtle than in DID" (Krause-Utz et al., 2021:3). Identity is linked to a sense of self, and often, individuals with BPD do not have a "clear sense of self-definition" (Marmer & Fink, 1994:757). Instead, their sense of self is distorted and/or unstable and it is characterised by a chronic feeling of emptiness (1994). BPD patients with disrupted identities may experience "rapid changes in identity, which is often experienced as incoherent, inconsistent, vague, or fragmented, accompanied by objective incoherencies in thought, feeling, and behaviour" (Krause-Utz et al., 2021:3). They have little self-knowledge and awareness and they may "'try on' various roles in search for a more well-defined self" (Marmer & Fink, 1994:758). Ada's taking on of the ogbanje's different identities is in line with this search for a stable self.

There are also various childhood and adolescent temperamental characteristics and personality traits that may be predisposing factors for BPD (Bozzatello et al., 2021). These include "affective instability, negative emotionality, inappropriate anger, poor emotional control, impulsivity and aggression" (Bozzatello et al., 2021:12), and they can be seen in Ada's volatile behaviour:

She lost her temper frequently, slamming doors and fighting with Chima and Añuli, the increased weight of her body ricocheting off the walls of their house. Her anger would mutate hotly into bouts of uncontrolled weeping, until her lungs got tired. She was violent, and years later, it made even her human mother afraid. (Emezi, 2019:22)

Furthermore, when she is overseas at college, "She threw lamps and cafeteria cups across the small room she shared with a white girl on the honors floor, shattered glass following her like a lost dog" (Emezi, 2019:48). Self-harm is particularly prevalent in individuals with BPD as it is a criterion for diagnosis (APA, 2013; Reichl & Kaess, 2020). In BPD, childhood abuse is also one of the main contributors to self-mutilating behaviour and a distorted body perception (Paris, 2005; Krause-Utz et al., 2021), the latter of which is often the basis of an eating disorder.

Self-harm has been associated with eating disorders (Ebrinc et al., 2008), and both issues may be deduced from Ada's behaviour. Anorexia Nervosa is often found in individuals with BPD (Miller, Racine & Klonsky, 2019; Khosravi, 2020), and when BPD comorbid with an eating disorder, the individual may experience "higher levels of distress, psychological disturbance, and non-suicidal and suicidal behaviour" (Miller, Racine & Klonsky, 2019).

Other than self-harm, self-destructive behaviours like reckless sexual behaviours and substance abuse are commonly found in individuals with BPD (Gunderson, 2011; Cailhol, Gicquel & Raynaud, 2014; Bozzatello et al., 2021), DID (Marmer & Fink, 1994; McAllister, 2003; Ebrinc et al., 2008), as well as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Dixon-Gordon, Tull & Gratz, 2014), which is another possible disorder that Ada may have. The trauma model of dissociation links DID and PTSD for it states that DID "is a severe form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) originating in severe and chronic (childhood) traumatisations" (Reinders & Veltman, 2021:413). Just as Ada's self-harm is explicit in the novel, so too is her sexual behaviour. The ogbanjes often use Ada's body as a vessel through which they can fulfil their desires. For example, the spirit Saint Vincent is described to have "kissed women with Ada's mouth" (Emezi, 2019:164) and after Ada's rape, Asughara takes over her body before copulation:

Except Ada wasn't there anymore. At all, at all. She wasn't even a small thing curled up in the corner of her marble. There was only me. I expanded against the walls, filling it up and blocking her out completely. She was gone. She might as well have been dead. I was powerful and I was mad, he could not touch me no matter how hard he pushed into her body, he could definitely never touch her. I was here. I was everything. I was everywhere. And so I smiled at him, using only Ada's mouth and teeth. (Emezi, 2019:64)

The separation of identities between the ogbanjes and Ada may also be viewed as a method of coping employed by Ada, suggesting the possibility that she may have PTSD. PTSD occurs at times with dissociative symptoms (APA, 2013), and/or psychotic symptoms (Dubovsky et al., 2021). This is seen in Asughara's arrival after Ada's rape; Asughara's emergence at this time conveys the possibility that she is like an "alter ego" formed as a result of PTSD (Zlamalova, 2020:55). After the rape, Asughara takes over Ada's body before engaging in sexual intercourse and she "allows Ada to go away to safety and not to be present, disengaging from her physical body" (2020:55). This separation between Ada's individual personality and the ogbanjes supports the view of Ada having either DID, BPD and/or PTSD.

Ada faces sexual abuse at different stages in her life, and both childhood and adult sexual violence may lead to PTSD (Kendall-Tackett, 2002; Chaudhury et al., 2017). Furthermore, like the development of DID, other types of early trauma have also been found to be a possible risk factor in the development of PTSD (Compean & Hamner, 2019), and BPD (Leichsenring et al., 2011; Cailhol, Giquel & Raynaud, 2014; Bozzatello et al., 2021). Childhood trauma puts children at risk for the development of psychopathology like PTSD, partly due to “the relative plasticity of children’s brains” (Kendall-Tackett, 2002:8; Ensink et al., 2021). The addition of a disturbed or disorganised parent-child attachment is also a contributing factor to the diagnosis of DID (Brand, Loewenstein & Lanius, 2014; Dorahy et al., 2014), and PTSD (Ensink et al., 2021), and it is witnessed in Ada’s relationships with her parents: “Traumatized children with insecure attachment may be more vulnerable to developing PTSD” (Ensink et al., 2021). Moreover, when an individual is abused as a child and faces further life stressors, the risk of developing PTSD and BPD increases (Kendall-Tackett, 2002; Schäfer & Fisher, 2011; Frías & Palma, 2013). PTSD often comorbid with other disorders like anxiety, Major Depressive Disorder (Kendall-Tackett, 2002), and at times an eating disorder like Anorexia Nervosa (Ross, n.d.; Reyes- Rodríguez et al., 2011). A specific form of depression applicable to Ada that may comorbid with PTSD is Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) with psychotic features, commonly known as Major Psychotic Depression (Gottlieb et al., 2011; Dubovsky et al., 2021). Individuals with Major Psychotic Depression often suffer from symptoms like fatigue, insomnia, appetite disturbance and weight loss (Gottlieb et al., 2011), the last two of which can be seen in Ada. Ada may thus have PTSD with Major Psychotic Depression, or PTSD with psychotic features, both of which often include dissociation (Frewen et al., 2014; Compean & Hamner, 2019; Dubovksy et al., 2021), and/or hallucinations and delusions (Lindley, Carlson & Sheikh, 2000; Hamner, 2011; Dubovsky et al., 2021).

It is possible that Ada may have more than one of the disorders discussed above as individuals with dissociative disorders specifically may have other mental health issues and comorbidities (Richardson et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies have observed that patients with BPD often have other psychiatric comorbidities, like depressive disorders (e.g. MDD) (Kendall-Tackett, 2002), anxiety disorders (Leichsenring et al., 2011), trauma- and stressor-related disorders (e.g. PTSD) (Frewen et al., 2014), and dissociative disorders (e.g. DID) (Ross, Ferrell & Schroeder, 2013; Reichl & Kaess, 2020; Bozzatello et al. 2021). Ada herself researches symptoms for what appears to be personality disorders, making greater the probability of Ada having a mental

health disorder, especially BPD:

Ada wanted a reason, a better explanation. We were not enough. We were too strange. She had been raised by humans, medical ones at that. So instead she read lists of diagnostic criteria, things like disruption of identity, self-damaging impulsivity, emotional instability and mood swings, self-mutilating behaviour and recurrent suicidal behaviour. I could have told her it was all me, even that last one. (Emezi, 2019:140)

Asughara narrates Ada's concern over the symptoms she is experiencing. She insists that Ada does not have a disorder, but rather, it is she who is the cause of Ada's distressing symptoms. It is not uncommon for individuals suffering from a mental health disorder to be in denial of their symptoms. Hence, Asughara taking over Ada to relay Ada's concerns is suggestive of Ada's denial and dissociation.

In summary, the most influential factors that give rise to the possibility of Ada having a mental health disorder are the trauma she faces as both a child and an adult, as well as her absent parents, dissociation, eating disorder, and her self-destructive and self-mutilating behaviour. The perception of Ada having one or more of the above-discussed mental health disorders lends to a metaphorical interpretation of the ogbanjes. However, interpreted literally, Ada may be inhabited by the ogbanjes into whom she dissociates. In contrast, a combined interpretation will imply that Ada is inhabited and simultaneously suffers from a mental disorder like BPD. In the latter case, the ogbanjes may be contributing to her struggles with her mental health, and therefore, Ada's mental disorder may stem from bio-psycho-social factors alone or these factors in combination with the "competition for possession of her by ogbanje and other spirits" (ten Kortenaar, 2021:330).

Although Emeki admits that Ada experiences depression, for her, interpreting Ada's state solely as a mental health disorder conceptualised in the West can be seen as a result of colonialism, a system that casts doubt on the validity of the invisible world (Emeki, 2018; Whitehouse, 2018, de León, 2019). Emeki also states that "if you're the child of a deity, and you put a deity into a human mind, of course the mind is going to break because it's not designed to accommodate that" (Whitehouse, 2018:2), indicating that Ada very possibly has a mental health disorder. Ada's mental health issues may be seen as a "struggle between different entities with the individual as the battleground" (Albano, 2018:1). She is "the centre of a non-human, spiritual lifeworld with significant connections to particular landscapes and histories" (McFaul, 2021:53).

5. *Blood, Water, and the Womb*

The motif of blood becomes apparent through the various traumatic experiences faced by Ada, such as her sister's accident, and the self-harm she commits as sacrificial acts. Blood is described as the "best liquid" by the ogbanjes (Emezi, 2019:27), and due to its liquid-like consistency, blood is commonly associated with water. A link between the motif of blood and water in the novel thus arises for just as blood is related to life, so too is water, for human beings cannot survive without it. A large part of the human body consists of water which is necessary to perform bodily functions like blood circulation and temperature regulation which are crucial to our survival (Eom, 2014). This quality of giving and sustaining life is also closely related to motherhood, for it is in the mother's womb that an embryo is brought to life. Adding to this, the lining of the womb, or endometrium, is largely made up of blood, and the amniotic fluid that surrounds a foetus in a womb is made up of approximately ninety-eight percent water (Magann, Sandlin & Ounpraseuth, 2011; Fitzsimmons & Bajaj, 2021). Blood is referred to as the "mother color" in the novel (Emezi, 2019:41,48,113,142,145), making more explicit the link between blood and motherhood. The "mother color" can be further explained as an allusion to the Igbo God, Ala, who is the "earth-goddess" (Chukwuemeka, 1997:25; Kanu, 2018:129), and a symbol of fertility (Otubah, 2015).

Just as a woman can only conceive after being inseminated, the Igbo believe that Ala is "fertilised" by her husband, Igwe, the sky-god, through the rain he sends down (Chukwuemeka, 1997:236). It is part of Igbo belief that land and the earth are sacred for "from [them] God produces all living things, including human beings" and "It is also through this earth that human beings rejoin their maker" (Kanu, 2018:129). The close link between the earth and the womb is discerned from the personification of nature as "Mother Nature" (Jelinski, 2010). The Igbo goddess Ala may thus be seen as the supernatural form of "Mother Nature" among the Igbo, for she is perceived as "the earth herself" (Emezi, 2019:9), "the mother" (2019:9), "the great mother goddess" (Ezebuiro, Ojimba & Ihesiaba, 2021:6), and "mother earth" (Anyanwu, 1984:92). The holiness of the earth relates to the sacredness of blood, and consequently brings to mind the Catholic belief in 'holy water'.

Ada's mother, Saachi, is Catholic, and there are three notable Catholic symbols that arise through the tropes of blood and water. The first is an allusion to John 19:34, where a soldier pierces Jesus with a spear after he is crucified and "blood and water" flow out of his body

(Wilkinson, 1975:153). The second is the Catholic belief that Jesus's blood possessed "the power of washing away, wiping out, covering, or bleaching one's sin", and similarly, the water used in baptism "eradicates the 'Original Sin'" (Garraud & Lefrère, 2014:15). The third symbol of blood and water is found in Exodus 7:17, where Moses turned the water of the River Nile into blood (Van der Walt, 2016). Through this incident, the title of the novel is brought to mind for rivers are known as freshwater bodies. The word "freshwater" can be found in the first and last chapters of the novel: The first is a reference to the Igbo goddess Ala, whose "flesh-form" is a python (Emezi, 2019:9). Francois Peter Retief and Louise Cilliers state that "Since time immemorial the snake has been venerated as an enigmatic creature with supernatural powers" (2010:1). The snake has also been seen as a "symbol of mother earth and eternity" (2010), and the Igbo goddess Ala is similarly represented. In describing the flesh-form of Ala, the ogbanjes in *Freshwater* state that "All water is connected" and "All freshwater comes out of the mouth of a python" (Emezi, 2019:9). This implies that just as the Igbo believe that Ala gave rise to the earth, so too does water emanate from her flesh-form, the python. The python is thus "sacred, beyond reptile" and is "the source of the stream" (Emezi, 2019:9). The second mention of the book's title is a reference to Ada, who is consequently the child of Ala, since the Igbo goddess is the mother of the ogbanjes. Ada's name was given to her because it means "the egg of the python" (Emezi, 2019:9); a direct connection between her and the flesh-form of Ala. Interestingly, one of the largest snakes found in the River Nile is the python (Thornton-O'Connell, 2015). Thus, the Igbo deity Ala (who represents motherhood and the python) can be linked to an incident found in Exodus 7:17 which deals with blood and water. There is also a direct mention of a snake in Exodus 7:8–12 when Aaron's rod miraculously turns into a serpent (Retief & Cilliers, 2010).

George Olusola Ajibade (2021) makes an interesting observation about the similarity between water and snakes. He notes that water "flows/crawls like snake" and compares the movement of waves and ripples in water to the slithering movement of a snake (2021:115). The connection between a python and water may also be seen in the way a python kills: Pythons suffocate their prey, and similarly, if one is engulfed by water, one will drown; a form of suffocation. This correlation between death and a python is further observed through Ala who is believed to "[hold] the underworld replete in her womb, the dead flexing and flattening her belly" (Emezi, 2019:9). In keeping with the various religious allusions found in the novel, the word "blood" has been interpreted by some as a symbol of death in the Bible (Stibbs, 1947).

6. Conclusion

The final chapter of *Freshwater* is narrated by Ada, suggesting that she knows herself better by the end of the novel. She acknowledges that she is an ogbanje, and begins to pray to the Igbo deity, Ala, who is the mother of ogbanjes. Ada stops self-harming and gets tattoos to cover the scars:

So the Ada started marking her skin in new ways, to remind herself of her past versions, tattooing her arms and wrists and legs [...] We accepted this because it was a worthy sacrifice; there is little difference between using a blade and this alternative, this ripping through the skin with multiple needles, injecting ink until the flesh swells and leaks and bleeds. She had a thick sleeve of black ink tattooed down her left forearm, where she usually did the blood offerings, and she never cut herself again after that. We had all evolved. (Emezi, 2019:210)

The ogbanjes within Ada still see the tattoos as a “sacrifice”; however, Ada’s cessation of self-injury suggests that her mental health has improved and that cutting herself was not only sacrificial but also due to issues with her mental health. Despite this, Ada is still “living in multiple realities at once, floating loosely between them, forgetting what each one felt like as soon as she moved to a new one” (Emezi, 2019:209). When interpreted metaphorically, this may imply that Ada is still not completely in tune with herself and that she still possibly dissociates. Therefore, it appears that Ada is still healing and finding herself.

Through the character of Ada, Emezi’s *Freshwater* reframes the Western view of psychological issues by presenting the reader with an apparent mental health disorder fused with spirit beings from Igbo Cosmology (Bahuguna, 2018; Hewett, 2018; van Klinken, 2020). The multiple spirits that inhabit Ada may be perceived from an African perspective as actual spirit beings, or from a Western perspective, as a symptom of Ada having a mental health disorder. The reason for the latter interpretation is the various difficulties that Ada faces as she grows up which may contribute to the development of a mental illness. Other than the trauma she faces at the hands of the ogbanjes, Ada is separated from her mother, neglected by her parents, abused sexually and physically as a child, bullied, and raped, and she has to deal with the challenges of migration and acculturation. Childhood abuse can cause several psychiatric and psychological conditions (Powers et al., 2015), and trauma in general can affect both the mind and body (Kendall-Tackett, 2002). Ada self-harms, dissociates, deprives herself of food, and engages in risky sexual behaviour. These behaviours depict the toll that Ada’s negative experiences have on her, and therefore, it is likely that Ada has a mental health disorder like DID, BPD, PTSD and/or MDD while being inhabited by the ogbanjes.

This chapter has presented a holistic and inclusive interpretation of Ada's character; it has taken cultural differences into account and acknowledged the various challenges that Ada faces growing up. Through this combined outlook, Ada has both a mental disorder as well as the ogbanjes within her. *Freshwater* is thus "a reminder that the mind is an apparatus viewed differently in different cultures" (Bahuguna, 2018:4). Through Ada's character, the reader is presented with "an alternative perspective on mental illness based on Igbo spirituality" (2018:5).

Chapter Two: *Butterfly Fish* by Irenosen Okojie

As in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*, the motif of mental health in Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* can be interpreted through both an African and a Western lens. However, where *Freshwater* centres on one character and roughly one time period, *Butterfly Fish* is comprised of four time periods, and it revolves around several characters. This chapter briefly examines the main characters who face issues with their mental health. The characters who are focused on in this dissertation are Oba Odion, a ruthless king from 19th century Benin, who forges a brass head in the form of his best friend after he murders him; Peter Lowon, an army lieutenant, who receives the brass head as a gift from his army general after murdering his colleague; Queen Lowon, Peter's daughter, who takes possession of the brass head after her father abandons her, and Joy Lowon, the daughter of Queen who inherits the brass head from her mother. The brass head thus strings together each character's story. Through it, the concepts of spiritual realism and postcolonialism emerge, for it carries a mystical curse that forms a part of African cultural belief systems.

1. *Summary of the Novel*

Butterfly Fish centres on various characters in different time periods throughout the 19th and 20th century. While the earliest time period deals with the King of Benin and his numerous wives, the latter time periods follow three different familial generations. Owing to the non-chronological nature of the novel, a brief summary of each time period is provided with a focus on the characters that are included in this analysis.

1900s Benin. Oba Odion.

As he grows up, Odion, the son of Oba Anuje, is constantly belittled by his father. Eventually, he finds out that he is not really the son of his father; however, he remains firm in the belief that he is entitled to the kingship. Odion finds out that his best friend, Ogiso, is the King's real son and he grows to resent him. Odion's greed for power and malice against his father leads to him committing patricide. As a result, Odion becomes king, marries seven women, and begins his search for an eighth wife. A young Adesua is readied by her parents as a potential bride for the King. Adesua is unlike most of the other women in Benin, she is not eager to be a queen and she possesses an adventurous spirit. Nonetheless, Odion chooses Adesua as his new bride. Oba Odion is indifferent to all his wives, except his third wife Omotole, whom he favours. When Ogiso vows to return to Benin as the rightful heir to the throne, Oba Odion murders him.

As a show of power, Oba Odion crafts a brass head in the likeness of Ogiso. Shortly after, he begins feeling haunted by it and he gifts it to his eighth and youngest wife, Adesua, as a way of getting rid of the head. Adesua grows close to the brass head and possesses a deep admiration for it. She and Oba Odion's fifth wife, Filo, bond over the power that the brass head seems to contain. Filo is mistreated by both the King and his wives (except Adesua) as she had lost many babies. The brass head pushes Filo to stand up for herself and she eventually leaves the palace in search of freedom. One day, a European named Sully Morier is found by the palace guards. The palace nurses him and he and Adesua end up having an affair. When Oba Odion discovers this, he buries Adesua and Sully alive. Under the weight of his guilt for murdering his father and Ogiso, Oba Odion's health begins to decline, leaving the palace vulnerable to invasion.

Lagos 1950s and 1960s. Peter Lowon.

Peter Lowon, a young army lieutenant is offered wealth and status by his army general, General Akhtar, in exchange for murdering a fellow soldier, Mohamed Fahim. Together with two other soldiers, he agrees to commit the murder. General Akhtar gives Peter a brass head as a gift for committing the murder, seemingly the same brass head made under Oba Odion's rule. Peter is hesitant about accepting the gift as he feels guilty about his actions. Nonetheless, he accepts it and continues to climb the ranks within the army. Peter meets a young woman, Felicia, with whom he falls in love. They marry and Felicia gives birth to a baby girl, Queen, whom Peter loves dearly. Although Peter is now wealthy, his guilt plagues him. He withdraws from Felicia as he is afraid to tell her the truth about his crime. This causes a strain on their marriage, but Peter remains a loving father to Queen. Time passes by and one day, a journalist, Ben Okafor, shows up asking questions about the murder of Mohamed Fahim. It seems that one of the other soldiers who partook in the murder told Ben about their crime, and he is now determined to get the truth. A terrified Peter takes on a new identity and leaves Lagos, abandoning his family. Peter decides that this is best for if he stays, he will be unable to face his family once the truth emerges or he may be murdered because of crime. Peter documents the events of his life in a diary, which he leaves behind for Queen, together with the brass head. Felicia and Queen struggle after Peter leaves and once she reaches the age of twenty, Queen leaves for London.

London 1970s and 1980s. Queen Lowon.

Although she initially struggles to adapt to London, Queen eventually gets a job at a charity

shop and befriends the owner, Ella. Queen does not earn much but she is content. At a homeless banquet, she meets a man named Mervyn with whom she grows close; they eventually become lovers. Mervyn and Queen remain friends until her death and she appoints him as the lawyer to handle her estate. One day, Queen recognises a downtrodden Peter in the streets of London. She approaches him and after hesitation, he invites her to his apartment. When she arrives, a drunken and delusional Peter confesses his crime thinking that Queen is Felicia, and he rapes her. A traumatised Queen falls pregnant and struggles with the decision of whether or not to keep the baby. Although a toll has been taken on her mental health, she chooses to have the baby. After giving birth to Joy, an unemployed Queen has financial issues. She grapples with the fact that Joy is a product of a rape by her father and she tries to kill Joy by drowning her in the bathtub. Queen is prevented from doing so, presumably by Mervyn, who pulls Queen off Joy.

Modern London. Joy Lowon.

Joy, now an adult, tries to call Queen several times on her cell phone. When Queen does not answer, Joy rushes over to find her mother's body on the couch. The unexpected, sudden death of Queen leaves Joy in denial. On the way to the hospital, she is unable to process that her mother has passed away. Joy eventually becomes depressed and lonely and she attempts suicide. However, she is found in time by her neighbour, Mrs Harris, who becomes her close friend thereafter. As time passes, Joy recalls cheerful memories of her mother; however, she still has questions about her mother and the identity of her father. Queen leaves Joy money, her grandfather's diary, and the brass head in her will. Joy begins to see a strange woman on the street and eventually in her apartment. Her apparitions of this woman increase and a worried Joy attends Church and sprinkles holy water in her apartment. Nonetheless, the apparition remains and Joy becomes accustomed to her, naming her "Anon". Joy struggles with anxiety and insomnia. She sees a psychologist, Dr Krull, who prescribes antidepressants to assist with her issues. Joy remains without relief; she instead swallows stones and engages in theft at funerals to help her cope. Joy meets her boyfriend, Rangi, at a random funeral where he too steals from the coats of mourners. Rangi appears to have anger issues and his relationship with Joy is abusive. One morning, following a violent fight with Rangi, Joy wakes up on the train

tracks with her right arm severely broken. At the hospital, she recalls that after sleepwalking to the train station, Anon had instructed her to place her arm on the train tracks. Consequently, part of Joy's arm is left amputated. She approaches Mervyn regarding who her father is and he confesses that her father is her grandfather. In order to gain closure, once again directed by Anon, Joy leaves for Lagos to bury the brass head and finally read her grandfather's diary. Unexpectedly, she gets a job and she remains in Lagos to find and make peace with her past.

2. 19th Century Benin and the Origin of the Brass Head

Although the different time periods in *Butterfly Fish* are overtly strung together by a supernatural element, the concept of mental health can also be observed throughout the novel. In 19th century Benin, the treatment of Odion by his father, King or Oba Anuje, depicts one of the possible mental health consequences of constantly belittling one's child. Oba Anuje's continual degrading of Odion leads to Odion developing what seems to be a Superiority Complex. This unconscious defence mechanism is derived from the personality theory of the notable medical doctor and psychotherapist, Alfred Adler. According to Adler, a child may develop a superiority complex due to certain experiences during childhood, often when he/she is made to feel weak or inferior (Efoghe, 2009; Bradley, 2022). This can happen in several ways, two of which can be witnessed in the relationship between Odion and his father, Oba Anuje. The first is when a parent demands more than a child is able to accomplish, leaving the child feeling helpless (Adler, 1927). A scenario that depicts this behaviour toward Odion is when Oba Anuje sets riddles for Odion to solve:

In fact, as a boy he had been laughed out of several challenges set by his father Oba Anuje. Oba Anuje would create a riddle for him to solve and then summon him back later in the day when the hum of the palace had died down to a buzz trapped in his ear [...] Inevitably, when he failed, Oba Anuje would stroke his strong, jutting jaw and nod his head as if confirming what he already knew. (Okojie, 2015:125)

Oba Anuje not only belittles Odion, but mocks him, for he is "laughed out of" the riddles that he is unable to solve. Moreover, it is as though Oba Anuje has no confidence in his son, for when Odion is unable to accomplish the challenge, Oba Anuje's body language would "[confirm]" his scepticism in his son's abilities. Odion also fears his father for he would stand before him sweating and "trembling, pressing his thumbs against the other forlorn fingers desperately trying to settle himself" (Okojie, 2015:125).

According to Adler, the second possible cause of a child adopting a Superiority Complex is when the child is made to feel helpless and useless (Adler, 1927). This is first seen when Odion is born:

Anuje had sowed the first seeds of inadequacy in Odion when on picking him up as a newborn he had wrinkled his nose as if the child smelled rotten. When the baby curled its lips and let out a wail as most babies do when born, Anuje seemed to take it as a personal affront and declared, “This child is useless,” then handed the baby back to its perplexed mother. (Okojie, 2015:45)

Oba Anuje “hated” his son, possibly because he knew that Odion was not his biological son. He refers to his son as “useless” and continues to make him feel “[inadequate]” as he grows up. Despite this, Odion still constantly tries to please his father:

When Odion was a boy he did everything he could to gain his father’s approval. He won wrestling matches, attempted to squash any signs of rebellion from villagers who didn’t want to pay their annual tributes, he solved riddles Anuje liked to set to amuse himself. All to no avail, Odion was not even a crumb on his father’s plate. Through the years, he longed for his father’s approval. (Okojie, 2015:45)

It is evident, however, that Odion’s attempts are all in vain, for to his father, his insignificance was not even that of a “crumb”, but less.

Eventually, when Oba Anuje would shame Odion, he would form a “boiling, yellow thought” with a “heat so strong, it spread from Oba Odion’s head to every part of his body” (Okojie, 2015:125). Heat is often likened to anger, and one of the connotations of the colour yellow is confidence; therefore, it is as though Odion begins to fill with a rage that gives him some self-assurance. Odion’s hot, yellow thoughts “lit him up” and become a “protective gold light” for him (Okojie, 2015:125). Thus, it is as though he begins to adopt the defence mechanism of a Superiority Complex to protect himself from his growing feelings of inadequacy (Rokvic, 2020). However, his feelings of confidence are short-lived for when his father notices it, he “would roar, ‘Get out of my sight’” which “shrank” Odion’s “protective”light into a “dot in the air” (Okojie, 2015:125).

Oba Anuje’s contemptuous treatment of Odion occurs so often that it becomes a “ritual humiliation” (Okojie, 2015:125). The “danger” of this is explained by Adler (1927:28), who

states that when children feel like nothing they do is ever good enough, they will begin to strive for a “balance of power, but will strive for an extra-compensation and will aim at overbalancing the scales” (1927:28). Simply put, affected individuals will feel like there is much owed to them and that they are more deserving than anybody else. Such individuals will strive for dominance or power (Adler, 1927; Efoghe, 2009; Bradley, 2022), often in a hasty, selfish and impatient manner (Adler, 1927). Furthermore, they may act aggressively and out of frustration (Amir, 2015; Rokvic, 2020). These dangers are reflected in Odion, for Oba Anuje’s constant disapproval leads him to hate and resent his father to the point that he murders him:

It wasn’t until he came upon Oba Anuje poisoned and broken, when in that searing moment their eyes bore into one another’s, Anuje’s hands desperately reaching out to him for help, that Odion finally felt vindicated. In those last moments before he slipped away, Anuje knew what Odion had done. Never had a moment been so sweet for Odion, the song of death had served a dish of revenge and served it well. (Okojie, 2015:178)

At that moment, he is the only person able to assist his father; however, Odion finally feels superior for he “stood rooted to the spot, basking in his father’s weakness” (Okojie, 2015:46). Odion feels that he is unable to outsmart his father in any way and therefore taking revenge on Oba Anuje by poisoning him is the only way he feels “vindicated”. In this way, for Odion, the scales are now balanced. According to Adler (1927), when one is made to feel inferior or inadequate, these feelings determine one’s life goals. Similarly, Odion’s insecurities may be the drive behind why he feels like “Benin was his to take” and that “he had earned it” (Okojie, 2015:178).

For some individuals with a superiority complex, the drive for power may become “exaggerated and intensified to a degree that will entitle it to be called pathological” (Adler, 1927:28). Similarly, once Odion becomes King, he is never satisfied and tries to constantly prove his superiority over his now deceased father. He makes decisions “based on avoiding his father’s haunting disapproval” and finds himself “vehemently deciding to do the opposite” of what his father would have done in certain situations (Okojie, 2015:126). In addition, when he decides to take an eighth wife, “Odion could no more explain his choice of a new bride as he could the desire that drove him to be king” (2015:46). It becomes more evident that Oba Anuje’s treatment of Odion impacts on him significantly for even after murdering his father, Odion is still haunted by Anuje’s rejection:

Despite this, Odion continued to suffer under his father's hand haunted by one dream; a human heart swelling, then shrinking on a copper plate engraved in a foreign language and his father eating the heart with his bare hands before releasing his bloody mouth to the kingdom's sky. He never asked Anuje to whom that heart belonged. (Okojie, 2015:46)

The heart is one of the most vital organs in the human body and thus Oba Odion's dream of his father eating a human heart may signify Odion's feelings of inadequacy; his father remains more powerful and superior. Furthermore, the image of eating a heart evokes the idiom "eat your heart out". The meaning of this phrase is twofold: it is used to imply that another individual may feel jealous or regretful or it may imply a longing for the unattainable ("eat your heart out", n.d.). Both connotations are applicable in Oba Odion's case as he is somewhat regretful of his actions and he yearns to be superior to his father. However, true dominance is unattainable for Oba Odion due to his pathological feelings of inferiority, for "even as king he heard the mocking laughter of his father's ghost sneaking through the gaps in the palace gates and laying claim to the Oba's chair" (Okojie, 2015:46). Both Oba Odion's dream about his father as well as his "hallucinations" depict that his feelings of inadequacy are rooted in his unconscious mind; "sometimes he thought he heard the walls laughing at him and whispering to the bronze masks that decorated them" (2015:125).

Oba Odion not only murders his father, but he eventually murders his father's real son, Ogiso, who is also Oba Odion's childhood friend. When Ogiso returns to reclaim the throne, Oba Odion hangs him for treason. He chooses death as a punishment as he is advised that if he chooses otherwise, he will look like "a weak king" (Okojie, 2015:54). To further prove himself as a powerful king, Oba Odion hires a craftsman to make a brass head of Ogiso for his collection. It is this brass head that carries the curse of Oba Odion's father and Ogiso for generations to come. Soon after it is crafted, Oba Odion begins to feel like the head has "an unsettling power about it" (Okojie, 2015:58). He is intensely disturbed by it; "At night, he began to sweat thinking of the head" and "His heart rate increased whenever he passed it, a feeling of suffocation overtook his body. He couldn't breathe looking at it" (2015: 59). Oba Odion's fear of the head prompts him to gift the head to his new bride, Adesua, as a way of getting rid of it. At the same time, "Ogiso left his body at last to find a new home" implying that the brass head attracted the spirit of Ogiso (Okojie, 2015:59). Adesua deeply admires the brass head and likewise, Oba Odion's fifth wife, Filo, is drawn to it. Filo is another victim of Oba Odion's. Her "womb had apologetically born three dead babies", implying that she

either had three stillbirths or three miscarriages (Okojie, 2015:64). Due to her inability to provide a child for Oba Odion and because she is “a wife [he] had never wanted” (2015:217), he treats her as if she is an outcast: “When the Oba had important guests visiting, she was kept hidden as if she were dirt sullyng the Oba’s name” (64). With the exception of Adesua, the rest of the Oba’s wives also judge and mistreat Filo; not only do they laugh “behind her back” and cast “pitiful glances” toward her (153), but they “assault” her with their words which are “knives to her skin, driving her to check her body for cuts” (153).

Filo is described as a “lost, vulnerable woman” (Okojie, 2015:122) who “mourned the loss of her children, child after child and suffered all the heartbreak that came with it” (2015:153). She “could be found wandering the grounds harassing whoever she encountered to return her children” (64), and it is evident therefore that she is psychologically affected by her miscarriages/stillbirths. Mental health disorders like anxiety and/or depression are commonly found in women who suffer perinatal loss (Cacciatore, 2012; Malik et al., 2020; Westby et al., 2021). These adverse psychological effects can be immediate or long-term (Cacciatore, 2012; Hogue et al., 2015; Westby et al., 2021), and vary in intensity depending on factors like mental health history, socioeconomic status and social support (Cacciatore, 2012; Westby et al., 2021). In addition, parents who experience perinatal loss “may end up feeling socially isolated, riven by the painful emotions which are often concomitant in perinatal death, particularly absent social support” (Cacciatore, 2012:2). This is witnessed in Filo as she is alienated by Oba Odion and she has no support structure. Oba Odion does “nothing to help his forgotten wife” (Okojie, 2015:153). Filo’s isolation is possibly the reason that she is able to empathise with Adesua’s feelings of not fitting in; Filo “knew how it was to feel out of place. She understood. She too was walking around with a big hole inside her” (2015:67–68). This “big hole” implies that Filo feels empty, a common feeling associated with depression (Didonna & Gonzalez, 2009).

Women who experience more than one perinatal loss are at a higher risk of developing one of the above-mentioned mental health disorders (Ordóñez et al., 2018), with depression being most common in women who have recurrent miscarriages (Carvalho et al., 2016; Tavoli et al., 2018). The term “depression” is commonly used to refer to Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) which is characterised by a number of symptoms including a depressed mood, diminished interest in activities and a disturbed

appetite (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The latter two symptoms are observed in Filo through the description of her bedroom:

Of the darkness of Filo's bedchamber, from the brown cloth she'd hung over the window to stop light flooding through. The wooden platter of days old half-eaten cassava and stew rotting in the far corner and the pungent, rotten smell that filled the room loitering just beneath their nostrils. Of the garments strewn across the floor, leaving a rainbow-coloured mess of materials you navigated your feet through to find a space. Next to the window, a once beautiful, wooden chair sat, chipped and worn. Bits of its top layer had been scraped off, leaving an awkward, bruised thing. It looked lonely, in a jumbled room where the mouth of the green bed mat grazed the terracotta walls. (Okojie, 2015:123)

Filo's living environment reflects her depression. She prefers the darkness and it is evident that she has no motivation to keep her room neat. The food lying in her room is "days old" and rotting implying that she does not eat regularly. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a depressed mood may include feelings of sadness, emptiness and/or hopelessness (APA, 2013), all of which can be found in Filo who "wore her sadness on her wrists like haphazard bracelets that wounded her skin" (Okojie, 2015:64). Even her smile is described as "sad" and "sombre" (2015:218).

Prior to taking a liking to the brass head, Filo becomes fond of Adesua. She sneaks into Adesua's room as she is drawn to her "sweet energy" and because Adesua "seemed as out of place as Filo herself felt" (Okojie, 2015:68). Thus, in addition to her depression, Filo feels like an outcast; she is in search of a friend or a companion who will be able to understand her. Adesua similarly feels a bond with Filo as she can perceive her pain and her strength: "You looked into her eyes and saw the shadow of things you couldn't put a name to as she flitted about the kingdom injured but still breathing" (Okojie, 2015:79). Filo's pain is further likened to a "pungent aroma"; it is so severe that Adesua can almost smell it as it "emanated off her skin" (2015:79). Upon seeing the brass head in Adesua's room, Filo is instantly taken aback:

She had not really intended to take anything, but once inside her eyes alighted on the brass head and it seemed to call to her. Once she had seen it, she could not un-see it. She picked it up and touched it tentatively at first before boldly rubbing her hands on it[...] It was difficult to keep thinking of ways to fill a hole that was too big for your chest. (Okojie, 2015:68)

The above incident emphasises Filo's depression; she feels so isolated that she finds comfort and hope in a brass sculpture. Filo is attracted to the brass head just as she is to Adesua for she "liked new things" as "they possessed an air of invincibility, of endless possibilities"

(Okojie, 2015:67). This implies that Filo yearns for hope and a new beginning, which is one of the reasons she takes the head—she wishes to “fill [the] hole” in her chest. Moreover, when Adesua goes to Filo’s room in search of the missing brass head, “Filo only looked up at Adesua briefly and then turned away, as if she had been expecting her for some time” (Okojie, 2015:109–110). Filo, therefore, suspects that she will get caught; however, this is not concerning to her as she sees the brass head as something that “held the answer to her problems” (2015:122).

To Filo, the brass head “seemed to call to her [...] It seemed to know her sorrow, to offer itself as her saviour” (Okojie. 2015:68). She is thus deeply moved by it:

Filo was gripping the brass head as if she would never let it go. Tears trickled onto her raised knuckles and onto the head [...] She continued to sob, gut wrenching cries that wandered all the way back to the entrance of a palace darker than the first scowl of night. She heaved, as if emptying her insides out. (Okojie, 2015:109)

The mournful behaviour displayed by Filo is a reflection of her internal suffering and feelings of hopelessness. The brass head is, for her, a source of healing. Adesua comforts Filo and the two women bond in silence. The brass head thus unites Filo and Adesua in an unusual manner. Although already acquainted, the women now form an intimate bond; they find “temporary relief” and a “comfortable peace” in their silent encounter (Okojie, 2015:123), and “Somehow, silently a common ground was discovered” (2015:154).

After encountering the brass head, “Filo decided to stop crumbling beneath her desperation (Okojie, 2015:154):

Her skin began to thicken into impenetrable layers of shame and loss [...] She resented the role she occupied in the palace of the damaged, troubled wife. Even the Oba had completely lost interest [...] So her heart had hardened, lodged within her chest, a fortress trapped within a fortress. (Okojie, 2015:153)

Filo resolves to no longer be vulnerable and instead, her “anger grew” to the point that she casts a curse on Oba Odion and the palace (Okojie, 2015:154). With the help of the medicine man, Kalu, whom she had once nursed back to health, Filo calls upon “the spirits of the previous kings” and “sent her babies to cause the very thing her Oba had mocked her for” (2015:340). It is not only Filo’s curse that causes the “slow destruction” of the palace, for Oba Anuje “cursed” Odion with his last breath (46). Together with his father’s curse and the unjust killing of Ogiso, Oba Odion is eventually haunted by his actions:

Now even within the grip of self-pity Oba Odion knew that far from being rewarded,

he was being punished. Walking aimlessly about the palace he admitted that he deserved it. His guilt was now fully mauling his conscience. But that was the price you paid and even in death, he knew Anuje and Ogiso would haunt him for the rest of his days. (Okojie, 2015:178)

Despite his guilt, Oba Odion still goes on to commit two more unjust murders—those of Adesua and her lover, Sully. Just before Adesua is murdered, “the spirit of Oba Anuje looked on and the ghost of his lost son Ogiso settled into the brass head, rattling it against the floor of Adesua’s quarters” (Okojie, 2015:221). Adesua’s spirit also finds its way into the brass head for it is her spirit which manifests when Joy receives the head from her mother’s estate decades later. Adesua’s spiritual connection with the brass head begins after she receives it from Oba Odion and it had thus “seen the slow blossoming of Adesua” (Okojie, 2015:78):

Adesua was convinced the brass head was stealing her dreams. That it waited for her body to be loosened by slumber before it helped itself to a large selection of past and present dreams. Stripping her till she woke up empty-headed and feeling bereft. She wanted dreams that tasted like pink watermelon juice, sunshine in her mouth. But theseshe believed were being snapped up by cold, hard brass. Even though a short arrow of fear hovered at her chest, she did not want to give the brass head back to theOba [...] She knew it had stolen the words of her dreams, which meant she could not express those lost dreams to anybody. As if the head had sewn invisible stitching inareas of hertongue. (Okojie, 2015:90)

It is thus evident that the brass head becomes intertwined with Adesua’s mind for it took over and took away her dreams. Without words, often, a concept cannot be explained, and therefore, by “[stealing]” the “words of her dreams”, the brass head had taken away the veryessence of some of Adesua’s dreams. According to the famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, dreams are products of our unconscious minds and at times a means of communicating withus through our unconscious (Jung, 1969a). By making its way into her dreams, the brass head thus implants itself deeply within Adesua’s mind—her unconscious psyche. Moreover, it is possible that the head is communicating a bond with Adesua. This deep bondmay thus be the reason that her spirit finds its way into the brass head when she is unjustly buried alive.

3. 1950s-1980s. Lagos and London

The second time period in *Butterfly Fish* revolves around Peter Lowon, Joy’s grandfather and Queen’s father. The reader learns about Peter through his personal accounts in his journal. A young army lieutenant in 1950s Lagos, Peter sees himself as “a man of potential” and he “yearns for more” (Okojie, 2015:129):

I can tell you that power is an aphrodisiac. It is an infection difficult to describe but you know you want to catch it, you like the reception it commands. (Okojie, 2015:128)

In many ways, Peter's drive for power mirrors that of Oba Odion's. Peter describes it as an "infection", which is typically something that spreads, implying that the lust for power is contagious. In addition, although the word "infection" has negative connotations, Peter adds that it is something "you want to catch", implying that although power can be detrimental, he is still drawn to it. The harmful aspect of power is seen through the means by which Peter attains his recognition. Like Oba Odion who kills his father to become king, Peter jointly commits a murder to attain "rewards and advancement through the army" (Okojie, 2015:148). In addition, just as Oba Odion 'gifts' himself the brass head as a token of his murder of Ogiso, Peter too receives the brass head as a gift from his army general, General Akhtar, for committing the murder. The brass head is thus once again a 'witness' to an unjust murder, possibly reinforcing the curse that it carries.

Peter's self-perception is similar to the character of Oba Odion, "a self-centred opportunist willing to do whatever it takes" (Okojie, 2015:201). However, unlike the Oba, Peter's guilt for his murderous action sets in immediately and it becomes a "burden" to him (2015:152):

I do not know about Emmanuel and Obi but I have been stashing the guilt I feel in my uniform pockets, inside the soles of my boots and under my bed in my squashed green bag with its sturdy, reliable strap. (Okojie, 2015:148)

Peter's guilt surrounds him and it is evident that his army apparel serves as a constant reminder for his criminal actions. Although he tries to repress his guilt, it continues to plague him for he mentions the murder in every diary entry that he makes. Furthermore, the brass head is a constant reminder of his crime; however, instead of disposing of the head, he keeps it to avoid having to explain to his family why he would want to get rid of a valuable gift.

Like Oba Odion, Peter tries to build a life from the murder of his colleague, but his internalised guilt leaves him in a constant state of uneasiness. Regardless, Peter is unable to face the consequences of the murder; when a journalist threatens to reveal the murder committed by Peter and his fellow army veterans, Peter leaves Nigeria fearful that he will be killed, and afraid of facing disappointment from his family once the truth emerges. He describes how he feels in his final journal entry addressed to his daughter, Queen:

Wherever I am I will be running from myself. Imagine no day without night, night

without the day; there is no end to this. It is an empty well running through the homes of underground creatures we never see, a tunnel through the chests of farmers toiling the land, it is the hidden void where our dreams pile up like dead bodies. (Okojie, 2015:335)

It is evident that Peter tries to resist his feelings of guilt as he feels as though he will always be “running from [himself]”. Guilt is frequently classified as a negative emotion and often (Sullivan, 2014; Tao et al., 2021), negative emotions lead to the formation of a mental health disorder. The resistance to guilt may often lead to the feelings and memories associated with the guilt being repressed (Freed, 1972). This may in turn cause one to feel shame. Both guilt and shame are related to depressive symptoms (Nowill 2009; Cesare et al., 2018; Smith, 2021), as well as anxiety (Smith, 2021), psychoticism (Nowill, 2009), and psychosis (Smith, 2021). Besides the guilt he feels, Peter has to keep his crime a secret from the person he wants to share it with most, his wife, Felicia. Numerous studies have found that keeping secrets is correlated with anxiety, depression, and poorer physical health as they often deal with negative self-information (Slepian, Kirby & Kalokerinos, 2020). Owing to the lack of insight given into Peter’s well-being after he leaves Nigeria, it is not possible to determine whether Peter does possibly have a mental disorder. However, it is apparent that his mental health declines for when Queen stumbles across him in London, she observes him as being “vulnerable and ashamed ready to collapse under the weight of it all, bits of him lost in the very rubble he’d created with his own hands” (Okojie, 2015:320). In addition, when Queen goes to meet Peter, she finds him drunk and deluded. He therefore mistakes his daughter for his wife, Felicia, and as a result, he confesses his long-kept secret to Queen. When Queen does not console Peter, he becomes infuriated and he rapes her:

Queen never saw that first blow coming. It knocked her clean off her feet. Fist connected with bone resulting in a crunching sound. Blood spurted from her nose. Her head rang as she landed on the bed. She was vaguely aware of falling into the red mist of his eyes [...] Rapid words like bullets. “You’re my wife, shut up. Shut up.” The bed creaked in a heart-crushing rhythm; hot breath marked her skin, his other face floated in the mirror and then, ultimately, the terrible weight of him, body twitching, emptying into her own. (Okojie, 2015:321)

Like most victims of rape (Salo et al., 2008; Boyd, 2011), Queen contemplates suicide following her ordeal: “For a moment, she considered stopping at the station, sticking a nozzle in her mouth, filling her insides with petrol before setting herself alight” (Okojie, 2015:322).

It is evident that Queen goes through various traumatic experiences during her childhood and adult life, the first being when her father left her and her mother. Queen is left emotionally

scarred by this; “The void left had been so big, she and her mother took turns hurtling their bodies in, filling the spare rooms in the house with all their bad landings” (Okojie, 2015:313). In addition, as a child, “she would blame herself and her mother for a long time” for her father leaving (2015:250). Therefore, not only does she grow up feeling abandoned by her father, but when she finally gets the chance to gain closure, he brutally rapes her. In order to deal with the horror of the assault, Queen eventually represses parts of it:

Years later, she would block these details out; the feeling of being above herself watching the whole scene unfold as though it were someone else, one hand squeezing her throat, pinning her down, the other moving roughly between her legs. (Okojie, 2015:321)

Repression serves as a defence mechanism to save one from the pain of a traumatic experience (Rofé, 2008). Although Queen “[blocks]” out certain details, she still suffers when the baby is born. She sees Joy as a “mistake” (Okojie, 2015:314), and she feels “scared, lonely and miserable” (2015:312). After giving birth, Queen attempts to flee from the hospital leaving a newborn Joy on the bed:

You left your baby on the bed! You can’t do that. What if she rolled over and fell to the floor? Oh dear, you must be very tired.” The nurse remarked, searching her face worriedly. Queen looked through the nurse, her mouth curving up in a half smile, half grimace. (Okojie, 2015:312)

Apart from wanting to end their own lives, some victims of rape may resort to giving their babies away or killing them as the baby serves as a constant reminder of their trauma (Salo et al., 2008). This may be the case for Queen; it is almost as if Queen wanted to kill Joy for she reacts with a “half smile, half grimace” upon hearing that Joy could have fallen from the bed. When Joy gets older, Queen once again tries to end Joy’s life by attempting to drown her. This mirrors the murder committed by Queen’s father who partook in the killing of a fellow soldier through drowning.

The rape and circumstances of her life leave Queen feeling like an inadequate mother:

Joy stretched her tiny hand, reaching for her mother’s breast. Her expression was delicate; Queen felt the weight of responsibility. What would she learn from a mother who’d already made so many mistakes?

What can I offer you but the disappointment that’s found a home in me? (Okojie, 2015:313)

Queen does not merely see herself as a “disappointment”, but she sees “disappointment” as having “found a home in [her]”. She thus feels as though she cannot offer Joy anything but

sorrow for that is all she is. Raped women may develop psychiatric disturbances like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and/or depression (Salo et al., 2008; Butterby & Butterby, 2022). Queen's mental health is most likely affected by the rape as Joy describes her mother as always being "melancholy" (Okojie, 2015:326). Although not much insight is given into her mental state following the birth of Joy, she is most likely suffering from depression and PTSD. Joy remembers her mother's hopelessness before she tried to drown her:

"There's an empty bottle of medication beside the tap, white pills in the sink" [...] "She's sitting on the toilet seat, crying and watching me in the bath, mumbling something. Sorry, sorry she's saying". (Okojie, 2015:325)

Queen is unable to cope with the trauma surrounding her child: drowning Joy "is a desperate attempt to erase the evidence of Queen's rape by her own father" (McFaul, 2021:52). She evidently feels bad about wanting to take her child's life, and she either takes a bunch of "pills" to help her go through with it or to end her life concurrently. Although she is apologetic, Queen still tries to drown Joy and may have succeeded if she was not stopped by her friend and lover, Mervyn.

The devastating rape of Queen by her father may have been a result of the brass head. In his journal, Peter asks Queen to urgently "get rid of" the brass head; "Give it to a beggar man to sell, throw it in a river or gutter. I should never have brought it into my house" (Okojie, 2015:335). He explains that if she keeps it, she "will bear the burden of the cursed and pay in a currency not found on earth" (2015:335). It is unclear at what point Queen reads her father's diary, for she chooses to keep the head. In addition, she leaves the brass head and her father's diary to Joy, and perhaps because of this, Joy is affected by the curse of the brass head.

4. *Modern London*

The first three time periods in *Butterfly Fish* build up to Joy's character and therefore, she can be seen as the main protagonist in the novel. Apart from the flashbacks she experiences as an adult, there is little known about Joy's childhood. Thus, most of her mental health issues can be accounted for by the difficulties she faces during adulthood. This can be explained by two reasons, the first is a largely Western psychological explanation, whereas the second reason fuses both a Western and African spiritualist viewpoint. Therefore, Joy's mental health issues may be largely explained by the grief and shock of Queen's death (in addition to her childhood

trauma), or with the inclusion of a curse that mimics symptoms of a mental health disorder. The differing factor between the two perspectives is Joy's hallucinations which can be accounted for either by the curse of the brass head or by a psychotic disorder. From a solely Western viewpoint, Joy's symptoms are suggestive of either Borderline Personality Disorder with Brief Psychotic Disorder as a comorbidity, or Major Depressive Disorder with Psychotic Symptoms (also known as Psychotic Depression). However, from a combined perspective, Joy perhaps has either Borderline Personality Disorder or Major Depressive Disorder with her hallucinations being spiritual or supernatural in nature.

When Joy first notices that her mother is not moving, she begins "shaking her body as hard as [she] could" naturally hoping that Queen is still alive (Okojie, 2015:17). Joy's denial and shock suggest that she had a fairly close relationship with her mother. In addition, she had known what her mother would be making for dinner on the Sunday that she passed away, and the unanswered calls had worried Joy to the extent that she "sped down" to Queen's home to check on her (Okojie, 2015:16). The sudden death of Joy's mother thus leaves her devastated:

I don't recall phoning the ambulance, but I must have done.

When they came, I was clinging to her, holding on so tightly, it took two of the crew to pry me away. (Okojie, 2015:17)

While in the ambulance, Joy struggles to process that her mother is dead. She momentarily thinks that Queen is still alive and that she is merely on route to the hospital for an admission:

I wanted to touch her face again. They let me hold her hand. Her skin felt cool. Why hadn't they let me pack an overnight bag? She'd want to get out of those clothes in the morning. I made a note to myself to bring her some fresh underwear, her Shea butter cream, her comb and house slippers.

I said to her, "You know how much you hate hospitals." The silence seemed to concur.

"We'll be there soon," I murmured, watching for any sign of movement. "I'll make sure you're put in a nice ward, I'll speak to the doctor." (Okojie, 2015:17-18)

Joy only grasps that her mother is no longer alive once they arrive at the hospital and one of the ambulance crew members tells Joy that she has to let go of her mother's hand:

Weighing in, heavier than the rest is the last thought, the moment when I first arrived at the hospital when I was convinced mum would rouse, groggy but still fighting. I really did, right up to the point where she disappeared behind the large shrieking double doors with the NHS regulation blue and white paint peeling off. But she didn't. She became in that moment an imaginary being even, as evidenced by the thumping of my heart, she existed as still real through me. I saw myself clearly caught between life as I once knew it and life never being the same again. (Okojie, 2015:20)

Joy recalls the difficulty of accepting that her mother is not going to wake up. The loss of Queen impacts on her as she realises that her life will never be “the same” without her mother.

Joy recalls the last day that she had spent with her mother:

We were barefoot on the park grass, she, casually sipping from a box of Mr Juicy orange juice, while I chased the ice cream van, my hat falling off in the process. Later we took turns to push each other on the swings, even though she didn't want to, kept on about being too grown for that and then once on the swing, she forcefully gripped the metal chain-link arms that anchored her to the weathered wooden seat and there had been something so childlike about the way she'd kicked her legs in the air as I pushed her as hard as I could so she could fly, her voice flailing high above, full of laughter and happy fear. Then, the rain came down like a curtain on a final act, and we walked arm in arm in quiet contentment while raindrops kissed our noses and the wet ground tickled our bare feet. (Okojie, 2015:18–19)

The final meeting between Joy and her mother is evidently a cheerful one, and it is apparent that Joy and her mother had loved each other. However, this specific meeting between Joy and her mother had been different: “It had been a rare day off for us, both from our jobs and our roles even, as mother and daughter” (Okojie, 2015:18). Their roles as mother and daughter had thus dissolved and they had spent time together as equals or friends, an unusual occurrence for Joy. This suggests that the closeness Joy had with her mother was a traditional mother-daughter relationship, and not necessarily friend-like and affable. Joy describes this time spent with her mother as being “etched deep in [her] memory” (Okojie, 2015:18), suggesting that this is possibly the best memory she has of her mother and that it had a positive and lasting impact on her. Joy is therefore afraid of forgetting this memory for she felt close to her mother in a way she had not before:

I hold this memory gingerly, frightened in case any part of it should fall and scatter over the ground. If it did, how could I rebuild the dripping ice cream, or her mouth widening in shock at the coolness of it against her teeth and us walking around with our shoes off as if we didn't have a care in the world. (Okojie, 2015:18)

The state of Joy's mental health is hinted at when she claims that the last meeting between her mother and herself had made her feel “human again” (Okojie, 2015:18). This implies that Joy's mental well-being had been in a vulnerable state before her mother's passing and that it is not merely Queen's demise that negatively impacts Joy's mental health.

Queen bequeaths to Joy her house, Peter's brass head, his diary, and a large sum of money. Joy

is shocked as she had been unaware that these items were in her mother's possession. This confusion further adds to her uncertainty about her identity as she also has questions about who her father is. She thus sees her inheritance as a "puzzle" to be solved:

I had no idea why my mother had left me these gifts. A brass head I'd never seen, the diary of a grandfather I'd never met. I didn't even know if he was alive or dead. Did she want me to find him? To give the diary back? Then there were the properties I never knew she'd owned. It was odd she didn't mention any of this to her only child. There had been her phone calls back home, muted conversations with my grandmother, her mouth curling anxiously. Maybe dead people left behind puzzles for their loved ones all the time. (Okojie, 2015:74)

Joy feels "resentment" and "a twinge of jealousy" that Mervyn had been aware of the contents of Queen's will while she had not (Okojie, 2015:36), making Joy question the happenings of her mother's life. Moreover, Joy possibly grows up with a seed of doubt planted in her mind for she recalls the "muted conversations" Queen had with her mother (2015:74).

On her way to collect her inheritance from Mervyn, Joy encounters a peculiar young lady dressed in "a yellowy brown African wrapper" (Okojie, 2015:33). This woman is likely an apparition of Adesua, the eighth wife of Oba Odion who had bonded to the brass head and was unjustly murdered by the Oba. She thereafter sees this same lady in the background of some of the photographs she takes for a work project with her camera (named "Marpessa"); the woman appears wearing "heavy, pink traditional jewellery" (Okojie, 2015:76). Not only does Joy perceive this woman as a "mysterious entity" (2015:94), but the woman's appearances reinforce this perception:

One night she appeared on my bedroom ceiling, sleeping with her back against it as if it had sprung from her spine. She sat curled in the chair next to my TV with a forlorn expression on her face. She planted herself in the big copper pot growing my cactus, sitting in the soil and openly absorbing its sustenance as if for a resurrection. Plucking the plant's bristles, she waited to throw them in my path. She surfaced in miniature form in Marpessa's lens. Coming up for air with blue hands and things she'd fished from Marpessa: a damaged, old crown, a thick masculine neck with markings, torn bits of traditional cloth, a worn copper key. She pressed her eyes to the lens when it hardened into glass again, pressed her tinted gaze against mine. (Okojie, 2015:94-95)

Joy then finds things out of place in her apartment owing to the presence of the woman whom she sees as an "intruder" (Okojie, 2015:94), a "defiant squatter" (2015:94), and an "uninvited guest" (112). However, despite this, she feels as though she may have some link to this apparition: "Perhaps she'd fallen through a wormhole from the past. Maybe she'd come to collect something that would reveal itself on the expanses of my skin. Maybe, maybe,

maybe...” (94).

As the mysterious woman begins to appear more, Joy’s fear and concern increase. She becomes paranoid and sets “traps” around her house hoping to “catch” the apparition:

I left the bath full hoping she’d fall in, and that I’d find her submerged under water, unplug the plughole’s mouth of dead skin and watch her get sucked under. I opened the loft entrance, wishing she’d rummage through the old clothes, photos, paintings, roller skates, and maybe slip. I doodled on sketchpads, drawing trap doors and a slim woman falling through. I breathed over these drawings willing them to come to life. (Okojie, 2015:95–96)

Strangely, Joy wonders whether she sets the traps for the apparition or for herself, implying that she is also concerned about her mental state.

The traps that Joy sets to catch the apparition prove useless:

My bedroom ceiling bore splatters of purple paint from attempting to capture her body using colour. Traps I’d set failed. Buckets of water placed in corners of my living room so she could fall inside her own image and drown. Instead, the water rippled from her breath and sometimes her wet mirror images left the buckets so there were four of her wandering through the flat. Water versions of Anon eventually collapsed into puddles I mopped dry with shaky hands. (Okojie, 2015:112)

Joy becomes desperate to get rid of the mysterious woman. She purchases chalk and a blackboard to document the sightings of the apparition. The blackboard becomes “full of sightings” and Joy also uses the chalk to “[cordon] off” areas in the kitchen where the apparition had appeared (Okojie, 2015:112). Additionally, Joy obtains holy water from the church even though she has not been for many years. She is hopeful that by sprinkling the holy water around her apartment, the strange woman will disappear; however, this also fails. Eventually, Joy begins to “[adjust] to having another presence in the house” and even names the apparition “Anon” (Okojie, 2015:112). Joy is guided by Anon into a vision of the Benin palace where she encounters a guilt-ridden Oba Odion. This vision reenforces the idea that Anon is Adesua. Furthermore, at the end of the novel, Joy visits Benin to bury the brass head, and Anon reveals that she is Adesua: “Anon sat quietly, scrawling the name Adesua in the dust on the window” (Okojie, 2015:338).

From a literal and/or Western point of view, Joy’s visions of Adesua can be interpreted as hallucinations, which are a symptom of many psychotic disorders. One such disorder relevant

to Joy is Brief Psychotic Disorder as one may develop it as a result of a stressful or traumatic event (Şar, 2017; Stephen & Lui, 2022), like loss. Besides the trauma of losing her mother suddenly and finding her mother's body, there are other factors that add to Joy's shock and trauma. Soon after her mother's death, Joy finds out that her mother was having an affair with her long-time friend, Mervyn, who is also Queen's lawyer and a father figure to Joy. In addition, Mervyn reveals that he had found Queen's body and called the ambulance, but his shock and confusion led him to flee. Joy also feels like she never knew her mother as well as she thought as she had been unaware of the belongings left to her by her mother. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Brief Psychotic Disorder is the sudden onset of psychotic behaviour characterised by at least one of the following symptoms: hallucinations, delusions, disorganised speech, disorganised delusions (APA, 2013). To be diagnosed with Brief Psychotic Disorder, one must present with symptoms for no less than one day and no more than one month (APA, 2013). This matches Joy's symptomology for after she buries the brass head, she no longer experiences hallucinations. The burial can thus be seen as a symbolic source of closure for Joy following the demise of her mother and the resultant trauma.

Joy's symptoms also match those of a personality disorder, namely, Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). BPD is caused by an interaction of genetic, social, and psychological factors, and it can be triggered by interpersonal stress and/or traumatic memories (Salters-Pedneault, 2020). Some individuals with personality disorders, like BPD, may have a comorbid psychotic disorder (Slotema et al., 2018; Dubovsky et al., 2021), like Brief Psychotic Disorder (Şar, 2017), or, they may experience psychotic symptoms (Cavelti et al., 2021; Minarikova et al., 2022). The resolution of her psychotic symptoms suggests that Joy does have either BPD with psychotic symptoms or both BPD with Brief Psychotic Disorder. Although psychotic symptoms in patients with BPD are often short-lived (Slotema et al., 2018), such patients also experience a higher level of distress (2018). The most common type of psychotic symptom in BPD patients is hallucinations (Cavelti et al., 2021; Minarikova et al., 2022), and some studies found that hallucinations in individuals with BPD are linked to stress, loneliness, and childhood trauma (Minarikiova et al., 2022). Furthermore, BPD itself is associated with childhood trauma and neglect (Leichsenring et al., 2011). It is thus likely that the trauma Joy had experienced as a child leads to her developing BPD; however, it remains undiagnosed. Moreover, the hallucinations she experiences possibly occur as a result of her unresolved childhood trauma,

her mother's demise, and the loneliness that she feels.

The loss of her mother leaves Joy feeling as if she is alone:

Jagged pangs of longing unexpectedly hit me like mouths beneath the skin cutting across organs. I longed to be in love, to have a lover. I felt sad, inadequate and lonely. (Okojie, 2015:19)

Joy's longing is likened to "jagged pangs"; it is so severe that it feels like a rough, sharp pain "cutting" through her body. Not only does she miss her mother, but she also longs for the comfort of a lover, indicating her desire to feel loved. The lack of love in her life also leaves Joy feeling "sad" and "inadequate". Linked to loneliness is the feeling of emptiness and difficulty with one's sense of self, both of which are criteria for the diagnosis of BPD. Similarly, Joy feels "no sense of belonging" (Okojie, 2015:250), and she wishes that she "could be someone else" (2015:289). In a desperate attempt to feel something, she leaves town with her new boyfriend, Rangi:

There I was running off with a stranger to get to know myself, convinced the limestones in my pocket had left damp stains. They glimmered in those small openings, moist and full of slow promise. If I got really anxious, I could always nibble on them. (Okojie, 2015:276)

Joy and Rangi first meet at a funeral where they are both engaging in theft. In addition, they abuse drugs and alcohol. However, Joy also engages in impulsive behaviours by herself. When her psychologist/psychiatrist, Dr. Krull, momentarily leaves the room during their appointment, she steals money and a credit card from the wallet in his jacket packet. In addition, Joy becomes dependent on marijuana, which she also consumes with alcohol; "I knew the weed probably made me more paranoid but I couldn't do without it for long spells" (Okojie, 2015:288). Joy's relationship with Rangi is toxic and abusive. After she discovers photographs of prostitutes in his vehicle, he violently assaults her, verbally and physically, leaving her bleeding on the ground and "struggling to breathe" (2015:327).

In addition to her impulsivity, Joy also self-harms by swallowing stones, and both of these harmful behaviours are found in individuals with BPD. The intentional ingestion of stones or other non-nutritive objects is a type of self-injury known as Deliberate Foreign Body Ingestion (DFBI) (Bangash, Megna & Leontieva, 2021). It is common in patients with personality disorders (Atluri et al., 2012; Alli-Balogun, Singh & Korenis, 2023), more specifically BPD (Bangash, Megna & Leontieva, 2021). DFBI is also associated with childhood trauma, and Dr

Krull uncovers that Joy's stone swallowing is related to the repressed memory of her mother's attempt to drown her:

My body began to shake. "I'm singing in the bath. My eyes are closed. I open them. She's standing over me. She's pushing my shoulders down. She's shoving my head under water. Her hands are holding my head down. I can't breathe! I can feel the water up my nose, my arms flailing. My legs are kicking but she's strong. Oh God, I can't breathe. I can't scream. Everything's shrinking, becoming tiny, like I'm falling through static. I can't hear the water anymore. I can't hear anything. Something, somebody pulls her off me, my body is slack, I try to lift my legs but I fall from the bath. I don't feel the landing. The pebbles are scattered all over the floor, rolling into my eyes. How could I know they would follow me into the future?" (Okojie, 2015:325)

From a psychodynamic approach, trauma, especially in childhood, is often not "mentalised" but is instead repressed (Yakeley & Burbridge-James, 2018). Therefore, such memories become a part of one's unconscious mind, and when one self-harms, it may be an unconscious attempt to deal with these memories and eventually (Yakeley & Burbridge-James, 2018), other stressful situations. In Joy's case, both the pebbles in the bathroom and the choking feeling of drowning are associated with the attempted drowning by her mother. Joy explains to Dr Krull about how the stones provide her with a sense of control: *"I like the taste of stones Dr. I like that you can measure their entirety with your tongue; they're definable"* (Okojie, 2015:262). Joy, therefore, swallows stones as a coping mechanism for *"It pushes that choked up feeling in [her] throat down, right down to the bottom"* (2015:262).

DFBI may also relate to anxiety (Bangash, Megna & Leontieva, 2021), which Joy experiences in addition to her other symptoms. Joy suffers from both anxiety attacks and panic attacks which at times feel like she is having a "heart attack" (Okojie, 2015:182). During her attacks, Joy has "heart palpitations" (2015:10), and she is overcome by a "sense of doom" (10), both of which are common symptoms of a panic attack (APA, 2013). Joy is prescribed anti-anxiety medication by Dr. Krull, and while her anxiety stems from several factors, her hallucinations are shown to be one of them. She is unable to understand why she is seeing an apparition and whether or not it is real, thus becoming compulsive: *"I check the kitchen cupboards, the wardrobe, make sure the windows are locked... About six or seven times, sometimes more if I'm feeling really anxious"* (Okojie, 2015:261). The reason for her compulsive behaviour is that she feels anxious about being alone in her apartment: *"I live alone and I don't want anything to have... access"* (2015:262).

In addition to her anti-anxiety medication, Joy is also on anti-depressants, indicating that she has possibly been diagnosed with depression. Therefore, an alternative mental health disorder that matches Joy's symptoms is Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) with psychotic features. MDD is common in individuals who are unable to cope with the trauma that they undergo, and it is apparent that Joy is depressed after her mother's death:

After the reality cracks you in two, you tell yourself that things will be okay. That time will erode the numbness away; you glue the split inside together by forcing yourself out of bed in the mornings, eating cereal with hot milk and leaving the radio on at every opportunity, scared of your own thoughts. (Okojie, 2015:19)

A depressed mood or loss of interest in life is one of the necessary symptoms for the diagnosis of MDD, both of which Joy exhibits. She feels "sluggish and depressed" (Okojie, 2015:6), and finds great difficulty in carrying out her daily tasks:

Abruptly, a wave of fatigue swept over me. The thought of facing the day stripped any strength I had left. The stack of unopened letters I'd let build up on top of the DVD cabinet, upstairs the pile of dirty clothes overflowing from the laundry basket, the new battery I still needed to buy for the car, the call to the electricity company to stop them cutting me off. All the mundane dots we connect to keep going. (Okojie, 2015:8)

Joy's grief extends beyond the norm as the loneliness she feels consumes her to the point that she is unable to be alone with her thoughts. Joy's loneliness thus stems in part from her grief, and she wonders whether "becoming increasingly isolated" has led to her seeing "things in a distorted way" (Okojie, 2015:182). Her hallucinations may thus be psychotic features of MDD. As Joy's hallucinations become more frequent, she admits to not taking the anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication prescribed by Dr Krull: "All the while I was aware of the medication in my bathroom cabinet, suffocating inside the sickly brown glaze of its round-headed container (2015:96). Joy's admission implies that she is also of the opinion that her visions may be hallucinations, possibly somewhat due to her not taking the medication she requires.

In an attempt to cope with her grief, Joy begins to attend the funerals of people whom she does not know where she would commit larceny and "[scan] small crowds" in search of her "mother's face" (Okojie, 2015:291). When she comes across a photograph of a mother and a daughter in a museum, Joy initially imagines that it is a photo of her and Queen. However, upon realising that it is just an expression of her grief, she feels "foolish, cheated and sad all at once" (Okojie, 2015:142), and she is overcome by anguish: "A pain tore through my chest, a sneaky stroke from someone using a heated, metal spoke to poke from the inside" (2015:142).

As Joy goes through old pictures of her mother, she becomes emotional, further revealing the pain she feels from the loss of her mother:

As we rifled through the pictures, the rough, thick scab inside me began to peel. The wound beneath was red and angry, snarling against bones in my chest. And there was my mother, leaving footprints on my organs, removing the lines on her palms to make one long thread that dangled hauntingly. Each picture showed versions of her plotting to keep growing in the damp soil of memory. (Okojie, 2015:187)

Dealing with memories of her mother is painful for Joy, and as Queen's memory grows within Joy, the "thread" of it "dangled hauntingly" within her. Joy compares the loss of her mother to a wound. Generally, as a wound heals, a scab forms to protect the wound from germs and infection so that the actual wound can heal (Radhakrishnan, 2021). Going through her mother's pictures thus seems to set back Joy's healing for the "scab" within her "began to peel" revealing a fresh wound.

Another negative emotion Joy feels is guilt in relation to her mother's passing. She feels as though she let down her mother: "All I knew was that when she really needed me, I wasn't there" (Okojie, 2015:18). As time passes, a voice within Joy further reveals her feelings of guilt and worthlessness. She feels like "a big, pathetic ball of nerves and anxiety" and she thinks of herself as a failure (Okojie, 2015:303); "*You are nothing. Nothing good will ever happen in your life. You ruin everything. Why do you even exist?*" (2015:286). When Joy goes on a trip with Rangi, she packs plimsolls instead of shoes suitable for rainy weather. She then feels self-condemnation, thinking to herself, "*Typical of me to wear the wrong footwear, you can't even get that right*" (Okojie, 2015:275). Joy also feels like she is a burden: "*Why are you a burden Joy? A female voice declared sweetly. Don't be such a burden!*" (2015:261).

In addition to feelings of worthlessness and unnecessary guilt, insomnia is also common in individuals with MDD. Joy is unsure as to why she has been depriving herself of sleep to the extent that her "nerves were frayed" and her "body clock" has become disrupted (Okojie, 2015:82). At one point she suffers "Seventy-two hours of insomnia and counting" (2015:226). Joy describes herself as "a no-man's land where the gutted earth harboured versions of me growing, injured. Wild eyed" (226). This suggests that Joy feels lost within her pain and she is desperate to escape her suffering. She describes her well-being as "trying to breathe" (Okojie, 2015:82), suggesting that being alive is a struggle for her. Joy thus finds herself "drawn to death" and tries to take her own life (2015:291). Another sleep disturbance faced by Joy is

sleepwalking, which becomes a danger to her as she loses her arm in an accident by sleepwalking onto the train tracks. After the accident, Mervyn reveals that Joy would sleepwalk as a child—he hints that it was after her mother tried to drown her. Therefore, the repression of this memory could be the reason that Joy sleepwalks. Before Dr Krull uncovers Joy’s repressed memory, she has a flashback of her mother’s funeral where both memories converge:

I pressed my head against her chest, listening to the sound of taps running, of warm bath water spilling. The casket was damp; I began to feel around for a leak. Then I patted my body down for leakage. (Okojie, 2015:272–273)

This suggests that Joy’s sleepwalking, her mother’s death, and the drowning incident are all linked. Dr Krull seems to think that Joy’s accident has something to do with the loss of her mother, especially since Joy is unable to remember what really happened:

I looked up at the faint shadows on the ceiling crossing white space. “I don’t remember the moments before it happened. I think I was sleepwalking.”

[...]

“Try to remember,” he urged. “Don’t you think it’s odd that your mother’s been dead for months but we haven’t talked about her? It’s important you remember.” (Okojie, 2015:299)

Joy finds it difficult to speak about Queen after her passing, portraying the effect of her mother’s death. Despite the drowning incident, Joy has mostly pleasant memories of her mother. Hence, she misses Queen greatly and tries to “fill the silences with... anything” (Okojie, 2015:8). Although Joy and her mother would speak often, she describes their phone calls as being “held together by an invisible current” suggesting that there was some emotional distance between them (2015:8). She also describes Queen and herself as “two creased people who needed steam ironing” (8), a comparison that speaks to their mental well-being. Joy’s struggle with her sense of self following her mother’s death suggests that her identity was attached to her mother and therefore without Queen, she does not know who she is. She feels like “a lost cause” (Okojie, 2015:308), not merely because of her sorrow, but also because she has lost the one person who would have been able to give her answers about her past. Joy is left with more questions after her mother’s demise as Queen leaves Joy with the brass head and Peter Lowon’s journal without instructions on what she is required to do with them. The question of who her father is remains with Joy as she grows up. She remembers her family feeling “uneven” without a father (Okojie, 2015:281), and “filled with absences [she] tried to measure using hands that hadn’t grown wide enough to do so” (2015:281).

Although BPD and MDD have been discussed separately above, they also share

commonalities, like depressed affect, anxiety, feelings of guilt, poor sleep, and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness (Rao & Broadbear, 2019). These symptoms are witnessed in Joy, and thus, on the one hand, Joy may have BPD with either psychotic symptoms or Brief Psychotic Disorder, or MDD with psychotic features. On the other hand, it is possible that Joy has MDD with BPD for these disorders are known to be comorbid at times (Beatson & Rao, 2012; Ceresa, Esposito & Buoli, 2021). In this case, her hallucinations would be accounted for by psychotic features. A combined interpretation of Joy's mental health, however, encompasses both the Western/literal as well as the African/spiritual. While most of her symptoms still match MDD and/or BPD, her hallucinations of Adesua are spiritual in nature.

Joy's accident can also be partly explained from a spiritual viewpoint, rather than it being the sole consequence of her sleepwalking. When she sleepwalks onto the train tracks, she is transported to the past by Anon/Adesua and she is thus in a liminal space. Although she is physically on the train tracks, Joy finds herself "caught in a procession of some sort" where "Men dressed in traditional African clothing were dragging a bound man and woman through a trail" (Okojie, 2015:488). This "vision" is reminiscent of when Oba Odion murders Adesua and Sully, another indication that Anon is actually Adesua. Adesua is thus a part of the curse carried in the brass head seeking justice for what was done to her. This is further evidenced when Joy sees Adesua in the photographs she takes for work; Adesua bears "white markings on her face, a blackboard on which past and present were rewritten" (Okojie, 2015:76). She is thus the link between the past and the present, between the curse and Joy.

After losing her arm, Mervyn tells Joy that her father is actually her grandfather. With some answers about her past, Joy visits Benin, Nigeria, to seek closure. Adesua's apparition guides Joy to her grave where Joy buries the brass head, after which she no longer hallucinates and is able to sleep: "For the first few weeks, I slept like a baby" (Okojie, 2015:342). Joy's arm can therefore be interpreted as her "hidden family history" (Uchendu, 2015:1). After she loses her arm, she is able to "confront things long buried" and free herself from her past (2015:1). The loss of her arm thus frees her to some extent, for she "slowly begins to see herself differently" (1). In addition, visiting the country where her mother and father/grandfather were born is cathartic for Joy as she ends up feeling "human again" (Okojie, 2015:342).

5. Symbolism

As in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*, water is a prominent symbol in *Butterfly Fish*. The title of the novel itself conveys the image of water as fish are naturally associated with the ocean and other expanses of water. Various connotations of water can be linked to the different time periods in the text. In a number of African ontologies, the spirits are known to inhabit the "mountains, trees, the ground, the sky, the water" (Kanu, 2018:139), and in Benin, Togo and Nigeria specifically, water is seen as the "realm of the spirits" (Tounouga & Brock, 2003:283). This belief is seen when Adesua's parents offer sacrifices to their gods for guidance on whether marrying off Adesua to the king is the right decision: "They swam in the river with painted faces. And when the gods summoned those faces underwater, their heads broke through the rippling surface in acceptance" (Okojie, 2015:14–15). King Odion also imagines that the water deity known as the "Mammy Water" would remove the faults that his father saw in him (2015:45). Furthermore, when the brass head of Ogiso is being crafted, the children of the village "ran to the rivers' edges crying quietly into the waters" (56). In many African cultures, the gods may send misfortunes like drought, sickness, and floods onto a society as a consequence of an individual's unjust or immoral behaviours (Chukwuemeka, 1997). Therefore, it is as though the village children's cries in the novel were heard by their gods, for after shedding tears into both the river and the soil of the King's garden, "the clouds coughed raindrops that dampened not just the land but the spirit of people" (Okojie, 2015:57). The rain was so severe that it left Benin looking like "a kingdom that had risen from under water and was drying itself off" (2015:57). Thus, tears are another representation of water in the novel.

According to the psychiatrist Carl Jung, water, specifically in one's dreams, symbolises the unconscious mind (Jung, 1969b). This concept of water and the unconscious mind is seen through Joy who represses the traumatic memory of her mother's attempt to drown her as a child. Joy's repressed memory could be interpreted as one of the causes of her mental health issues. Okojie uses the element of water to highlight the impact of childhood trauma as Joy tries to take her life in the bath after her mother's demise:

I remember opening the bathroom cabinet and inside seeing the razor that had called me by my name.

I ran myself a bath longing for the peace the water held out for me. (Okojie, 2015:8–9)

The above scene brings forth the connection between blood and water which is also seen in Emezi's *Freshwater*. In different contexts, blood and water often symbolise life and/or death

(Eom, 2014; Garraud & Lefrère, 2014). For Joy, the water signifies a serene end. She intends on using a razor to take her life while lying in the bathtub. However, her suicide attempt fails, suggesting that the water is a type of “rebirth” for Joy. The joint image of blood and water appears when Joy describes her menstrual blood in the bath water as “Bloody ribbons from between [her] legs disintegrated in lukewarm water” (Okojie, 2015:265). Both water and blood are thus strongly associated with Joy’s character and her past. She sees the blood from the bathtub “[become] bloody baby footprints on the hardwood floor” (Okojie, 2015:268); a hallucination suggestive of the repressed childhood memory of her mother attempting to drown her in their bathtub.

The motifs of blood and water in the novel arise again through Joy’s apparition of King Odion. Joy sees King Odion washing his hands vigorously in a manner akin to Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (Act 5, Scene 1): “Out, damned spot! out, I say!/What, will these hands ne’er be clean?/ Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1, Line 39, 41, 50). Just as Lady Macbeth tries to wash the figurative blood off her hands, so too does King Odion: “He washed his hands in a metallic bowl, feverishly muttering to himself [...] “Iz not clean, never clean again” (Okojie, 2015:115). This hallucination of King Odion’s is a reflection of his guilt for he is trying to wash off the “blood” of his childhood friend and his father, both of whom he murdered.

The connection between water and Joy is further highlighted when Joy finds a butterfly fish in the local swimming pool. This is also a reference to the title of the novel. Joy describes the fish as “silver with purple fins” that were like “sewing needles stuck together” (Okojie, 2015:23). The description of the fish suggests that it is an African butterfly fish for they are typically “silvery” in colour and their ventral fins “have the appearance of thread-like extensions” (Ibim & Ike, 2019:1274). Adding to its mysterious appearance in the swimming pool, the butterfly fish that Joy catches is “roughly two feet long” (Okojie, 2015:23). This suggests that it is otherworldly for African butterfly fish generally grow up to six inches (Ibim & Ike, 2019). In addition, the butterfly fish appears as though its “skin was made of light” (Okojie, 2015:23), and it regurgitates a brass key which Joy eventually uses to leave the palace in her vision of Oba Odion:

At the palace gates I remembered the key in my pocket, an invisible hand guided me again. Relief surged in my chest as I inserted it into the lock and turned. It opened. I thanked the dead fish that brought it to me and shrouded it in luck. (Okojie, 2015:116)

Joy had encountered the butterfly fish in the swimming pool prior to obtaining the brass head from her mother's estate. Therefore, although she uses the brass key in her vision, it is also possible that the key is a forewarning that the brass head is the "key" to Joy reconciling her life. When Joy is given the brass head from her mother's lawyer and friend, Mervyn, she sees a photo frame in his office change from a fish on a hook to "a woman's jaw straining against the hook, threatening to leap out through the glass" (Okojie, 2015:37). The link between the brass head and Adesua being Joy's apparition thus becomes apparent. Upon finding the key, Joy likens it to "a finger, a slender, tapered brown feminine finger" (Okojie, 2015:25). This is a possible resemblance to Joy's apparition of Adesua, for Joy later notices "tapered handprints" on her mirror belonging to her apparition (2015:81). Furthermore, since the brass head was moulded in the form of Oba Odion's childhood friend, the brass key could be an indicator that the source of the curse is Oba Odion and the brass head.

A further link to the butterfly fish in the text is the occurrences of butterflies in the novel. At a museum, Joy attempts to liken herself to one of the rare butterflies on display: "I couldn't decide which one I was but they made me think of things in flight and how devastating it was to fly with one broken wing" (Okojie, 2015:144). Joy's impression of flight with a broken wing could be an unconscious reflection of her mental health struggles, for she feels like she herself "flaps her right arm like a broken wing" (2015:74). Moreover, it is Joy's right arm that gets amputated before her catharsis. This suggests that her right arm was a "broken wing"; the symbolic subconscious weight that she was carrying or her repressed trauma. Just as Joy views herself as a butterfly, so too does Mrs. Harris, who perceives Joy as a "butterfly" in the "pupa stage" (Okojie, 2015:144). She explains what transpires during this stage:

"It feels as though nothing's taking place because you feel suspended, but major things are happening internally and externally. Things buried inside you forming eyes and wings." (Okojie, 2015:144)

The word "suspended" alludes to Joy's liminal mental state as she is stuck between grieving her mother and trying to seek answers for the things left for her by her mother. Moreover, she is trying to make sense of her hallucinations and/or visions, almost as if she is "suspended" between two realities. Mrs Harris alludes to Joy as having "Things buried inside" her, a possible metaphor for Joy's repressed and unresolved pain. However, these "things" are

“forming eyes and wings” further suggesting that Joy’s difficulties will lead to her ability to find the answers that she is looking for. Mrs Harris adds to her explanation of a butterfly’s growth, again almost as if she is talking about Joy directly: “She pulled me closer secretly [...] ‘Flawed, mad butterflies grow extra wings,’ she said. ‘Even after they die, they come back reborn’” (Okojie, 2015:144). The word “mad” could be suggestive of Joy’s peculiarity and mental health issues; these seemingly “flawed” characteristics could be the reasons that she is able to “grow extra wings” or to find the strength to deal with the issues she is facing. Thus, although Joy feels like she has one “broken wing”, it will not inhibit her from finding other ways to move forward. Furthermore, instead of saying that a mad, flawed butterfly is reborn after death, Mrs Harris adds that they “come back reborn”, signifying the butterfly’s strength: It does not merely come back to life, but it emerges as new. Therefore, Joy too will rise above her difficulties. The notion of reincarnation also links back to Joy’s attempted suicide in the bathtub being a type of rebirth for her.

Just as Joy is perceived as a butterfly, so too is Adesua by Oba Odion’s fifth wife, Filo, who sees Adesua as “a rare butterfly” (Okojie, 2015:67). The butterfly is thus another connection between Joy and Adesua. It is apparent that butterflies are an important symbol in the text, for when Joy considers donating the brass head to a museum, she “heard the butterflies in the museum breathing, waiting” (Okojie, 2015:140). However, Joy eventually feels like the museum is not the right fit for the head, and as she leaves, she “saw butterflies being fed on [her] tears, growing taller, wider, like plants until in the thousands they smashed through their glass cabinets destroying them entirely” (2015:146). Joy was also fond of butterflies in her childhood; they “fascinated [her]” (140). She recalls a “blue butterfly” from her childhood that landed upon her wounded knee: “Since then, I’ve never forgotten how a butterfly could flutter down and change the shape of a moment or the line of a body” (140). It is therefore apparent that Joy not only resonates with butterflies, but she sees them as “magical” creatures that can turn an unpleasant experience into something wondrous. When she begins having visions and/or hallucinations, Joy’s apparition of Adesua drops a bunch of azaleas which turn into blue butterflies:

The azaleas she’d dropped were no longer flowers but crushed blue butterflies near death. Some had wings shorn, some were partially squashed. A few attempting to unstick themselves, fluttered pathetically. I tasted their desperation for one last broken flight. (Okojie, 2015:34)

Joy is able to empathise with the butterflies so much so that she “tasted their desperation” to

fly even though they were “broken”. She resonates with their yearning, not merely for life, but for flight, an action that often symbolises freedom. Joy similarly longs for freedom despite her struggles. The blue butterflies also link back to the symbol of water in the novel as the colour blue is often associated with water. When Joy remembers that she was nearly drowned by her mother as a child, she recalls that the bathroom had a “blue floor the colour of the sea” (Okojie, 2015:324). Furthermore, according to Antonakou and Triarhou (2016), the formal word for “butterfly” in Greek is “psyche” (177), and the word “psyche” is often used to refer to the mind (including the subconscious or unconscious mind) or the soul of an individual (Siegfried, 2014; Antonakou & Triarhou, 2016). The blue butterflies can thus be seen as another reference to Joy’s repressed trauma.

Another connection to the blue butterflies in the text is the blue flowers that grew in Oba Odion’s garden. The flowers grew from “strange seeds” left in Oba Odion’s room (Okojie, 2015:136), and although the farmers of Benin tried planting them, they sprouted nowhere except the palace gardens:

They were above knee length now, and still shedding their leaves, their round, bulbous bluish heads still rotating watchfully over the palace. Their long green stems were a little bent, as though they leaned into each other to exchange conversations. But the plants were still bleeding; the soil beneath them tinged bluish green. They were moaning, low-pained groans that you could only hear if you bent your ear to the ground. But the Oba did not notice any of this. Nobody had. (Okojie, 2015:136)

The blue flowers seem to be somewhat sentient, further adding to their mysterious or mystical nature; they let out “low-pained groans” almost as if they can sense and predict the injustices of the King. Shortly after the flowers had grown, Oba Odion’s third wife, Omotele, finds out that she is pregnant, and “blue petals” form under her tongue (Okojie, 2015:137). This instance parallels the blue petals that Joy “sees” twice after losing her arm: once in the ambulance immediately after her accident, and again in the hospital lobby after she is discharged. The latter vision, however, is a more direct connection to the past as Joy sees “a brown-skinned woman swimming in a river, kicking hard against a tide. The blue petal in her mouth floated like a rootless tongue” (Okojie, 2015:307). It is possible that this woman is Omotole, for during her pregnancy, she would relax in the river while “thin blue veined streams escaped from her nostrils merging with the ripples” (2015:176). These blue excretions were a result of the blue petals from her mouth which formed to such an extent that not only was her spittle blue, but “every morning she had to rinse her mouth out several times so it wouldn’t stain her teeth” (175). However, these blue petals disappear after she gives birth to a baby with a “completely

flattened” face, “covered in an unusual blue gunk” (205). The implication, therefore, is that the blue flowers are a curse that afflicts the two people responsible for the injustices committed by the palace, Omotole and Oba Odion. Omotole is described as a “wily” woman who manipulates Oba Odion to her own advantage (Okojie, 2015:51):

It was Omotole who had devised the plan to snare more villages outside Benin to increase the kingdom and Omotole who whispered the idea of a fresh bride to confuse the greedy noblemen who resided in the royal court. (Okojie, 2015:51)

Omotole’s scheming ways make her the Oba’s “favourite wife” and even though he treated her better than his other seven wives (Okojie, 2015:64), to her, “there was still more to be done and she knew that for her the Oba possessed an easily bent ear” (2015:52). Her main goal is to have a son as doing so would “firmly seal her position in the Oba’s life and the palace” (136), but instead, she gives birth to a “disfigured baby” (219), the Oba becomes haunted by his regret, and Benin begins to “collapse” (219).

6. Conclusion

Although the difficulties faced by the characters in *Butterfly Fish* differ, they are tied together by the brass head. It is thus “a unifying symbol in the novel” (Scafe, 2021:256), connecting Oba Odion’s murders to Peter’s homicidal drowning of his colleague; “to Lowon’s incestuous act with his daughter, Queenie, Joy’s mother” (2021:256); and finally, to Joy, who is almost drowned by Queen as a child. Both the brass head itself as well as its effects thereof can be interpreted through a Western and/or African lens. Due to its non-corrosive quality, “brass represents the permanence and continuity of kingship” (Reid, 2005:45), and therefore, the brass head may similarly contain a continued and lasting curse that impacts those in possession of it. For example, Joy is affected by apparitions of Adesua until she returns the head to Benin and buries it. On the other hand, from a Western lens, the brass head can be seen as a symbolic representation of the trauma that the characters face: for Peter, it is the murder he commits which haunts him and results in the abandoning of his family, for Queen, it is being raped by the father she longs for, and for Joy, it is the loss of her mother and the trauma attached to her childhood. In the case of Joy, it can be that she is affected by the curse whilst also experiencing the impact of her trauma. It is only when Joy deals with the issues from her past that she is able to free herself from her childhood trauma and the curse, thereby improving her mental health.

Chapter Three: *Transcendent Kingdom* by Yaa Gyasi

Transcendent Kingdom centres on a migrant family of four, with a specific focus on the mother, Fante, and her two children, Nana and Gifty. As a single, migrant mother, Fante experiences many hardships throughout her life. However, it is only after her son's addiction that she is diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder. Nana's addiction and eventual death greatly impact both Fante and Gifty, and although Gifty is not diagnosed with a mental disorder, her mental health is vulnerable. Nana becomes addicted to opioids after he is prescribed OxyContin for a basketball injury, and it can be argued that a number of factors lead to his addiction. Drug addiction is a universal issue, and prescription opioids are sometimes referred to as a "gateway" to opioid abuse (Ekhtiari et al., 2020). The negative impact of addiction may affect both the physical and mental health of the addict's family and/or friends (Gruber & Taylor, 2006; Groenewald & Bhana, 2016; McArdle & Stull, 2018), and may lead to family members developing mental health disorders like anxiety and depression (McArdle & Stull, 2018). *Transcendent Kingdom* thus examines addiction as well as the impact of an addict's life on his/her family members. While *Freshwater* and *Butterfly Fish* contains a supernatural element, *Transcendent Kingdom* instead explores the themes of faith and spirituality as Fante and Gifty attempt to cope with their difficulties through religion and science. This chapter aims to examine the hardships that Nana, Fante and Gifty go through as well the impact of these hardships on their mental health.

1. *Summary of the Novel*

Transcendent Kingdom revolves around a Ghanaian family of four who migrate to America in search of a better life. The story is told by the protagonist, Gifty, who relates the events of her life in a series of flashbacks.

After conceiving her son, Nana, Fante decides to move to America to secure a better future for him. Although her husband, the Chin Chin Man, is initially hesitant, he eventually agrees. Fante leaves with Nana, and after a while, the Chin Chin Man joins them. Several years later, Fante gives birth to Gifty. Fante is forced to work long hours as her husband is unable to find a well-paying job. As a result, he spends more time at home with Gifty and Nana. Faced with employment difficulties and discrimination, the Chin Chin Man deserts his family. He leaves America under the guise that he is merely going to visit Ghana as he misses his home and family; however, he does not return. Although the children long for their father, Nana and Gifty

eventually realise that he has left them.

When the memory of his father attending his soccer matches becomes too much for Nana to bear, he begins playing basketball and he excels at it. Following a basketball injury, Nana is prescribed OxyContin and he becomes addicted. Fante and Gifty try to help Nana, but he succumbs to his addiction and eventually dies from an overdose. A distraught Fante begins to self-medicate to help her sleep, and a week later, she ends up trying to take her life. After Gifty finds her mother unconscious, Fante realises that she needs help and she books herself into a psychiatric hospital. She is discharged two weeks later, but her resistance to Western psychiatry leaves Fante needing more time to heal, and as a result, she sends Gifty to Ghana for the summer. While in Ghana, Gifty meets her father and she confronts him about his lack of support for his family. After returning to America, Gifty finds that although Fante is much better, she is not the same person she was prior to Nana's death. Owing to her diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder and anhedonia, Fante experiences ongoing depressive episodes.

Years later, Gifty leaves for college. She chooses to study reward-seeking behaviour for her Ph.D., during which her mother has a depressive episode and moves in with Gifty. Gifty yearns for a close relationship with her mother, but eventually, she makes peace with her past and learns to cope better with Fante's depression. She completes her Ph.D., and moves in with her lab mate, Han, together with her mother, who eventually passes away peacefully.

2. *Nana.*

Addiction is a complex disorder that does not have one single etiology, but rather, it is precipitated by a number of interplaying factors (Rich, Londt & Holtman, 2023). This is realised by Gifty through her postgraduate study on addictive behaviour:

If Nana were alive, if I entered him into a study, it would be hard to isolate his drug use as the cause of this particular portion of his pain. It would be hard even to isolate the cause of the drug use. (Gyasi, 2020:194-195)

Therefore, although Nana's substance abuse only begins when he is prescribed OxyContin for his basketball injury, there are other determinants that influence his addiction. Psychological stress (Farahmand, Arshed & Bradley, 2020), emotional distress, and low self-esteem have all been linked to substance use disorders (Swaim, 1991; Sahu & Sahu, 2012). Nana experiences a number of stressful events throughout his life, some of which also affect his self-esteem.

Since Gifty is the sole narrator of the novel, the reader is not given a first-person account of how Nana feels and what he goes through emotionally. Gifty herself admits that she can never really know what her brother went through: “I can never know the inside of my brother’s mind, what it felt like to move through the world in his body, in his final days” (Gyasi, 2020:164). Nonetheless, she tries to write about Nana’s addiction in her journals as though she is “inside it” (2020:164), thus providing the reader with various observations about Nana that allow the reader to deduce the hardships and difficulties that he had faced. Gifty focuses on two aspects that seem to impact on Nana most: the racism he faces, and their father’s abandonment.

Although there is a possibility that he had not remembered, Nana had been subjected to racism as a toddler. When Fante first arrives in America, her husband does not accompany her. For lack of supervision, she takes young Nana to work with her at night. However, the old man for whom she works as a caregiver calls Nana “the little monkey” (Gyasi, 2020:24), which prompts Fante to leave Nana alone at home when she works her night shifts. It is thus probable that Nana had been of an understanding age and that Fante did not want a young Nana to be subjected to racism. However, despite her efforts, Nana is confronted with racism as he grows older. Not only has it been found that racism is “deeply embedded in American culture” (Williams, 2018:11), but studies have also revealed that when ethnic minorities form a small portion of a community, they are more at risk of developing a mental illness (Chakraborty & McKenzie, 2002). Having moved to Alabama, a predominantly white area, it is possible that Nana and his family are subjected to more racism than people of colour in areas with a larger proportion of ethnic minority groups. In addition, young people are more susceptible to the negative effects of racism (Priest et al., 2014). This suggests that Gifty and Nana are more vulnerable to the impact of the discrimination they face as children.

The first racist incident that Nana faces directly is at a soccer match when he is around ten years old. A parent from the opposition’s team is unhappy with the score and yells, “Don’t you let them niggers win” (Gyasi, 2020:54). With Nana and his family being the only black people on the field, the racist slur has a greater impact on Nana. He becomes filled with “A fury that would come to define and consume him” which he channels on the football pitch and uses to win the game (Gyasi, 2020:55). On that day, Nana learns a lesson that Gifty would come to learn in the future: “that [she] would always have something to prove and that nothing but blazing brilliance would be enough to prove it” (2020:55). Therefore, just as the

memory remains with Gifty, it likely remains with Nana and becomes an added internal pressure for him. The racism that Nana faces becomes frequent, especially because he is the best player on the team, and it is only after another black child and two Koreans join the soccer team, that “Nana didn’t have to worry as much about bearing the full brunt of taunts from angry, racist parents” (Gyasi, 2020:68). Even though the racist slurs did not stop, having other children of colour on the team was a “comfort” to Nana “to not feel so alone” (2020:68).

Nana also faces racism at the Church he attends. At only thirteen years old, he recognises that the Church preaches “an exclusionary God” (Gyasi, 2020:88). Nana decides to dispute this with the youth pastor, P.T.:

“So what if there’s a tiny village somewhere in Africa that is so incredibly remote that no one has found it yet, which means no Christians have been able to go there as missionaries and spread the Gospel, right? Are all of those villagers going to Hell, even though there’s no way that they could have heard about Jesus?”

P.T.’s smirk set in and his eyes narrowed at Nana a bit. “God would have made a way for them to hear the good news,” he said.

“Okay, but hypothetically.”

“Hypothetically, dude? Yeah, they’re going to Hell.” (Gyasi, 2020:88)

Gifty is “shocked “at both P.T.’s reaction and answer to Nana’s question (Gyasi, 2020:88), and Nana too is impacted by it for he hardly attends youth services thereafter. Nana becomes “conflicted about God” (2020:86), another stressor that possibly affects his mental health. Apart from Gifty sharing the racism that Nana endures, she also faces racism at the hands of her classmates. Not only do they call her things like “charcoal” and “monkey” (Gyasi, 2020:62), but her name is also made fun of. It is thus likely that Nana experienced something similar.

People of colour have been found to experience higher levels of stress and lower self-esteem when they are subjected to racism and discrimination (Farahman, Arshed & Bradley, 2020; Salami et al., 2022), and generally, people who experience higher levels of stress are at greater risk of addiction (Hassanbeigi et al., 2013). This is especially the case when help is not easily available, for individuals then resort to using unhealthy coping mechanisms like substances (Hassanbeigi et al., 2013; Farahman, Arshed, & Bradley, 2020). Through finding temporary

relief from substances, substance dependence may form (Farahman, Areshed, & Breadley, 2020). Therefore, owing to the additional challenges that they face, people of colour may be at greater risk of substance abuse (Farahman, Arshed & Bradley, 2020). To Gifty, the “stressors” of being a “black male immigrant from a single-parent, lower-middle-class household” may have been enough to influence Nana’s “anhedonia” (Gyasi, 2020:194-195). “Anhedonia” is a term used to describe the inability or lack of ability to experience pleasure (Hatzigiakoumis et al., 2011), and it has been posited as one of the causes of drug addiction (2011). Therefore, although he is filled with anger, Nana possibly also becomes emotionally numb from his experiences. This further drives his addiction as individuals who abuse substances often yearn to feel some sort of pleasure (Destoop et al., 2019).

Like racism, absent fathers have been found to have an impact on a child’s mental well-being (Tau, 2020). This occurs especially when, due to financial constraints and consequently the need to work more, a single mother is unable to provide sufficient attention or love to her child/children (Tau, 2020; Rich, Londt & Holtman, 2023). Nana’s family is similar as the Chin-Chin man leaves his family under the guise that he is visiting his home country, but he does not return. This leaves Fante as the sole breadwinner of their family. She is forced to work twelve-hour shifts in order to provide for herself and her children and therefore she has little to no time to spend with Nana and Gifty:

My mother certainly wanted us to be successful, to live in such a way that we wouldn’t end up having to work tiring, demanding jobs like she did. But that same tiring, low-paying work meant that she was often too busy to know if we were making good grades and too broke to get us help if we weren’t. (Gyasi, 2020:99)

Although she begins working more after the Chin Chin Man leaves, Fante also works long hours prior to his absence as he had struggled to find a good job. The Chin Chin Man is thus able to spend more time with Nana, and their close relationship makes Fante “jealous” (Gyasi, 2020:36). Therefore, when the Chin Chin Man leaves, Nana is greatly affected by his father abandoning them.

When Nana had been in kindergarten, he would walk home daily with his father, telling him “every tiny, boring, magical thing they had done in school that day” (Gyasi, 2020:36). The Chin Chin Man would react with such great interest that even Fante had been unable to comprehend, and when he would tuck Nana into bed, the Chin Chin Man would tell him a

mythical story about him being a “living-man” tree (2020:36). Before the Chin Chin abandons them, Nana tells Gifty the story with great delight:

“I believed it, Gifty,” he said. I don’t remember how old I was, just that I was young and in a phase where I never ate but was always hungry. “I actually believed the man was a tree.” (Gyasi, 2020:36)

As a young boy, Nana thus holds his father in high regard. They share a love for soccer, and the Chin Chin Man would attend “every single one” of Nana’s games (Gyasi, 2020:53). When the Chin Chin Man leaves, Nana “started playing even more soccer” and he even makes it into the “advanced league” (2020:67). It is possible that he pushes himself in this way to make his father proud, for when the Chin Chin Man does not return, Nana quits playing soccer:

“Come on, Nana,” some of the kids said as they made their way out, but Nana didn’t get up from the seat. He lightly banged his head against that red bar, over and over and over, until everyone left, and it was, finally, just the three of us. My mother, Nana, and me.

My mother squeezed into the seat beside Nana and pulled me up onto her lap. She took his chin in her hand and turned him to face her. “Nana, what’s bothering you?” she said in Twi.

Nana had tears in the corners of his eyes that were threatening to spill [...]

Nana blinked his tears back. He sat up a little straighter, gently lifted our mother’s hand from his face, and returned it to her lap. “I don’t want to play soccer anymore,” he said. (Gyasi, 2020:69)

It is therefore apparent that soccer reminds Nana of his father, and he is unable to bear the pain of playing a sport that he once enjoyed with the Chin Chin Man. It is after this incident that Nana decides to play basketball, a sport that his father dislikes. However, it is unclear whether this is coincidental, or if Nana deliberately chooses to play a sport that his father does not like due to the frustration he feels towards him. The latter, however, is possible for although they did not “[admit]” it to themselves “or to each other” (Gyasi, 2020:98), at one point, Nana, Fante, and Gifty “all felt like a change in sport would be an insult to the Chin Chin Man” (2020:98).

After he realises that his father has no intention of returning, Nana tries to convince himself that he no longer cares for the Chin Chin Man:

“Do you think the Chin Chin Man would have liked basketball if he’d grown up playing it?” I asked.

[...]

“Who?” Nana said.

“Daddy,” I said, the word sounding strange to my ears. [...]

“I don’t give a fuck what he thinks,” Nana said. (Gyasi, 2020:100)

It is apparent that Nana tries to forget his father; he either pretends that he does not recognise his father’s nickname, or he does actually forget it. Gifty is surprised at Nana’s use of vulgar language as it was “forbidden” to use such language in their home (Gyasi, 2020:100), and his response thus conveys the disgust he feels towards the Chin Chin Man. Nana becomes emotional at Gifty bringing up their father. However, although he tries to hide it, Gifty is able to perceive Nana’s pain; when Nana says: “‘I don’t give a fuck what he thinks,’ he said it in such a way that it was abundantly clear to [her] that this was precisely what he cared most deeply about” (Gyasi, 2020:102).

It seems as though the best way Nana is able to cope with the absence of his father is by trying to feel indifferent toward him:

He hadn’t answered my question, but it didn’t really matter. He was answering his own question, one whose large, looming presence must have been something of a burden to him, and so he lied to try to get out from under its weight. *I don’t care*, he told himself every time he spoke to the Chin Chin Man on the phone. *I don’t care*, when he scored twenty points in a game, looked up to the stands to find his bored sister and mother and no one else. *I don’t care*. (Gyasi, 2020:100-101)

The absence of the Chin Chin Man makes Nana question whether or not his father loves him, and this question becomes a “large, looming presence” in Nana’s life. In order to deal with this “burden”, Nana tries to convince himself that he neither cares for his father nor his father’s opinion. This “[lie]” that he tells himself is the only way that Nana can “get out from under” the “weight” of his father’s desertion of him and their family.

Studies have found a significant relationship between a father’s absence, low self-esteem (Liu et al., 2023), and negative self-perceptions (Tau, 2020), such as feelings of inadequacy (Leibman, 1992). Gifty observes that Nana struggles with these types of feelings:

My guess is that it wasn’t just Nana’s body that couldn’t sit still. He had a mind that was always thrumming. He was curious, intense, often quiet, and when he asked a question there were a hundred more lurking behind it. This constant striving for exactness, the right position for his legs, the right thing to say, was what made him someone who could shoot free throws for hours on end, but it also made him someone who had a harder time changing the narrative—getting from a negative self-statement

to a positive one. (Gyasi, 2020:102)

Although he does not seem to show it, Nana possesses a sensitive nature and thus “cared deeply” and “thought deeply” (Gyasi, 2020:102). In addition, his continuous striving for perfection leads to him having a “thrumming” mind or a mind that is always active. Therefore, a negative experience, such as the abandonment by his father, leads to Nana being plagued by negative thoughts and emotions that ultimately “hurt him” (Gyasi, 2020:102). When a parent leaves a child, the child may see this as deliberate abandonment resulting in the child feeling frustration (Leibman, 1992). Thus, Nana begins to “hate” his father (Gyasi, 2020:63). He is undoubtedly fuelled by rage, not only because of the abandonment by the Chin Chin Man, but also because of the racism and unjust social dynamics perpetuated by society. It has been found that the absence of a father increases the risk of substance abuse in boys specifically (Mandara & Murray, 2006), while parental abandonment and unstable or emotionally distant parent-child relationships are precipitants for the development of substance abuse in children (Swaim, 1991; Mandara & Murray, 2006; Rich, Londt & Holtman, 2023). This is because children often develop feelings of anger and loneliness and may turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms, like substance abuse, to deal with the neglect and rejection that they feel (Tau, 2020; Ndegwa & Waiyaki, 2021). Nana’s inner turmoil may have been further worsened by their family dynamic as they were not “the kind of family who spoke about [their] feelings” (Gyasi, 2020:102). Therefore, he is also not able to express his emotions as a method of coping and instead becomes dependent on substances.

Nana also seems to use basketball and keeping busy as coping mechanisms. The effect of his injury is thus twofold: he is unable to play basketball for a few months, leading to him feeling demotivated, and he finds that the pain medication that the doctor prescribes provides him with both physical and emotional relief. Substances can either lead to physical/physiological dependence, psychological dependence, or both (Sahu & Sahu, 2012). Physical dependence is a state whereby the body becomes dependent on the drug and requires it to function, whereas psychological dependence occurs when the user enjoys the feeling that the drug induces thereby resulting in he/she mentally and/or emotionally craving the drug because of the feeling associated with it (Sahu & Sahu, 2012). Nana therefore not only develops a physical or physiological dependence, but also an emotional one due to the relief that he feels from the medication. Gifty describes how opioid addiction works:

Opioids work on the reward circuits of the brain. The first time you take them, your

brain is so flooded with dopamine that you are left thinking that, like food, like sex, opioids are good for you, necessary for the very survival of your species. “Do it again! Do it again!” your brain tells you, but every time you listen, the drugs work a little less and demand a little more, until finally you give them everything and get nothing in return—no rush, no surge of pleasure, just a momentary relief from the misery of withdrawal. (Gyasi, 2020:154)

The above captures the psychological dependence that drugs like opioids induce, and the “high” that Nana feels from the Oxycodone depicts that he similarly becomes psychologically dependant on drugs: ““It feels amazing, like everything inside my head just empties out and then there’s nothing left—in a good way”” (Gyasi, 2020:132).

In the absence of a parent, children sometimes have to take on a parenting role (Tau, 2020). This is seen in Nana who takes on the role of an adult after his father leaves. He is only around ten years old, but he is forced to try to be a “man” for his mother and his sister:

[...] and he was making a face that I’ve only ever seen in young boys, a face that is the façade of a man, hiding a boy who has had to grow up far too fast. I have seen that faux tough look on boys as they pushed shopping carts, walked siblings to school, bought cigarettes for their parents who waited in their cars. It breaks my heart now, to see that face, to recognize the lie of masculinity sitting atop the shoulders of a young child. (Gyasi, 2020:69-70)

It is as though a young Nana not only takes on a more masculine role, but also a somewhat parent-like role. This concept of a child taking on parental characteristics is known as “parentification” (Engelhardt, 2012), and it often occurs in dysfunctional family systems (Engelhardt, 2012). Parentification has been divided into two types, instrumental parentification, and emotional parentification. Instrumental parentification occurs when a child is given functional responsibilities like tending to the household, shopping, and physically taking care of family members (Hooper, 2007; Engelhardt, 2012), whereas emotional parentification is when a child is required to emotionally support his/her caregiver even though the caregiver is often emotionally unavailable (Hooper, 2007; Engelhardt, 2012). It is not apparent in the novel whether or not Nana is instrumentally parentified; however, his emotional parentification is suggested as he has to take on a more fatherly role after the Chin-Chin Man abandons them. Furthermore, before the Chin-Chin Man leaves, he and Fante have many arguments regarding their financial state. This results in Nana having to comfort Gifty:

And so it went. Gently, gently, Nana took my hand and led me out of the room. We went to his bedroom and he closed the door. He pulled a coloring book from his bookshelf and grabbed me the crayons. Before long I wasn’t listening anymore.

“Good job, Gifty,” he said as I showed him my work. “Good job,” and outside the sound

of chaos swirled on. (Gyasi, 2020:57)

Often, a parentified child's mental health is affected, and Nana carries the burden of his parents' arguments as well as trying to be reassuring to Gifty. The adult-like role that he plays thus adds to Nana's emotional stress, and just as racism possibly affects one's self-esteem, so too does parentification (Fitzgerald, 2005; Hooper, 2007; Hooper, 2011). This may therefore increase his risk of substance abuse, for at times, children who become parentified may turn to self-harming behaviours like substance abuse or self-injury (Hooper, 2007; Engelhardt, 2012).

Both neglect and parentification can be characterised as traumatic (Hooper, 2007), and Nana is faced with both. He is abandoned by his father and subsequently, he has to try to fill the Chin-Chin Man's shoes. Therefore, although the Oxycontin is prescribed for his basketball injury, the drug "consumes Nana, filling a void created by the emptiness left by his father" (Snow, 2022:119), his experiences with racism, his parentification, and possibly other difficulties he faces. This thus leads to Nana becoming addicted to other drugs, like heroin, from which he dies of an overdose.

3. *Fante.*

Although the experience of loss is universal, how it affects an individual depends on his/her current circumstances, personal history, and life experiences (Department of Social Development, 2009). Therefore, Fante's depression following Nana's demise could be seen as a culmination of factors, with his death being her breaking point. Fante is subjected to racism, tasked with raising two young children as a single mother in a foreign country, and she has to deal with her son's addiction. Even before the abandonment by her husband, Fante is the sole provider of her family as the Chin Chin Man is unable to find a reasonably lucrative job. She thus faces various hardships throughout her life as a female African migrant.

It has been found that the process of migration and acculturation may increase mental and psychological stress (Bhugra, 2004; Marcetti-Mercer & Roos, 2006), thereby affecting the mental health of a migrant (Balidemaj & Small, 2019). This is especially seen in the case of minority groups (Balidemaj & Small, 2019). Fante arrives in America alone with baby Nana, and although she stays with her cousin, she has to "navigate a difficult country, a punishing state" (Gyasi, 2020:63). She relates to a young Gifty and Nana that she had been haunted by a

ghost in her cousin's apartment. However, Gifty seems to allude to the possibility that the ghost was a result of Fante's isolation, as Fante began to see it after she had no contact with her husband:

She spent most of those days at home alone with baby Nana. She was bored. She missed the Chin Chin Man and ran up her cousin's phone bill making calls to him, until her cousin threatened to kick her out. Her house rules: don't cost me money and don't have any more babies. My mother stopped phoning Ghana, leaving her sex life an ocean away. This was around the time she started seeing the ghost. Whenever she told the two of us stories about the ghost, she spoke about him fondly. Though he frustrated her with his little tricks, she liked that broom-brushed feeling on her back; she liked the company. (Gyasi, 2020:110)

Although the ghost may be real, it is also possibly a hallucination resulting from Fante's isolation, as some studies have revealed a link between loneliness and hallucinations (da Rocha et al., 2017). In addition to the stress of acculturation and loneliness, Fante also struggles to find a job, and eventually, she is forced to work "tiring, low-paying" yet "demanding" jobs (Gyasi, 2020:99).

Before the Chin Chin Man joins her in America, Fante works as a health aide for a racist old man, Mr Thomas, who "had never called [her] anything other than 'that nigger'" (Gyasi, 2020:24). Mr Thomas would taunt Fante and yell "'DO. YOU. SPEAK. ENGLISH?'" every time she "brought him the heart-healthy meals his children paid for instead of the bacon he'd asked for" (2020:24). Although Fante gets home with her "ears stinging with Mr Thomas's abuse", she sees him as a "confused old man" (24). As she had been unable to find a job for a long time, and with her desperate need to provide for her family, Fante's perception of Mr Thomas is possibly how she deals with the discrimination that she is forced to face on a daily basis. Fante also witnesses the racism that Nana endures as a member of the soccer team, and she is privy to the discrimination that the Chin Chin Man faces:

But walking around with my father, she'd seen how America changed around big black men. She saw him try to shrink to size, his long, proud back hunched as he walked with my mother through the Walmart, where he was accused of stealing three times in four months. Each time, they took him to a little room off the exit of the store. They leaned him against the wall and patted him down, their hands drifting up one pant leg and down the other. Homesick, humiliated, he stopped leaving the house. (Gyasi, 2020:24)

The dehumanisation that the Chin Chin Man is subjected to is one of the reasons that he leaves America. Fante, however, "almost never admitted to racism" (Gyasi, 2020:24), and instead, she chooses to seek solace through prayer:

She knelt down before the Lord and prayed and prayed and prayed. When she lifted her head, her face wet with tears, she thought she might get used to living in America. (Gyasi, 2020:25)

Gifty explains that her mother's religiosity had made her oblivious to the racism that existed within their church:

We were the only black people at the First Assemblies of God Church; my mother didn't know any better. She thought the God of America must be the same as the God of Ghana, that the Jehovah of the white church could not possibly be different from the one of the black church. (Gyasi, 2020:160)

When she is unable to fall pregnant, Fante prays and fasts for a baby, and throughout Nana's addiction, she prays for his healing. God has always been a huge part of her life and thus prayer becomes a type of coping mechanism for Fante. Although she is aware of the racism that her family endures, Fante does not recognise it within the church, possibly because she is in denial; if prayer too is tainted by unfair social dynamics, then she loses one of the most important things to her, and consequently her ability to survive the harsh reality of America.

The absence of a father does not only impact the children but also the mother (Tau, 2020). Therefore, when the Chin Chin Man does not return, it presumably takes a toll on Fante although she does not outwardly show it. Gifty assumes that after a while, Fante knows that the Chin Chin Man had been making excuses and that he had no intention of returning to America:

If my mother knew that soon, soon, soon was a lie, she didn't let on. I suppose if it was a lie, it was one she wanted to believe. She spent most of her mornings on the phone with him, speaking in hushed tones as I prattled on to my favorite doll. I was four, oblivious to the lurch my father had left us in and to the deep pain my mother must have been feeling. (Gyasi, 2020:62–63)

It seems that Fante would try to convince the Chin Chin Man to return to America for she would speak in "hushed tones" on the phone so as to not alarm the children. Gifty admires her mother, for although Fante was left in a difficult and unjust situation, she was "always so tender" on the phone calls (Gyasi, 2020:63), "drawing from a wellspring of patience" (2020:63). It is possible that Fante had tried to remain calm to avoid worrying her children. Furthermore, she did not want Nana and Gifty to lose respect for their father, for even after he had abandoned them, she "never spoke an ill word about him" (Gyasi, 2020:63). Thus, Fante had to carry the stress of knowing that her children were going to become fatherless and being unable to do anything about it. Moreover, after Nana's addiction begins, Fante and the Chin Chin Man would have fights over the phone about his neglect:

“You can give up if you want to,” my mother would sometimes hiss at the Chin Chin Man over the phone, “but I will never give up. I will never give up.”

[...]

“Where were you?” my mother once said to him over the phone. “Where have you been?” (Gyasi, 2020:164–165)

In addition to the stress that Fante experiences as a result of Nana’s addiction, she faces this difficulty alone (with the exception of her support from Gifty, who is only a child). Fante likely faces further emotional and financial difficulty when Nana begins to steal from her during his addiction. Some addicts end up stealing from their family members, causing further stress (Groenewald & Bhana, 2016; Mathibela & Skosana, 2019), and Nana too “started stealing from [his] mother. Small things at first, her wallet, her checkbook, but soon the car was gone and so was the dining room table” (Gyasi, 2020:164). Thus, further to being a single mother and the sole breadwinner, Fante faces the difficulty of trying to support and rehabilitate her son without the support of her husband and family.

An older Gifty realises that her mother had become somewhat cold-hearted due to the “deep pain” she must have felt after the abandonment by the Chin Chin Man (Gyasi, 2020:63):

If I’ve thought of my mother as callous, and many times I have, then it is important to remind myself what a callus is: the hardened tissue that forms over a wound. And what a wound my father leaving was. (Gyasi, 2020:63)

Although Fante is deeply hurt by her husband, she is possibly unable to deal with her pain as she becomes the sole caretaker of her children and has to work long hours. Being a single mother can be very stressful, and this stress may lead to developing a mental health disorder (Nahar et al., 2020). Furthermore, there has been a larger prevalence of mental health disorders among single mothers compared to partnered mothers (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2006; Lam, Collins & Wong, 2020). This could be due to various factors including financial constraints, a lack of social support, being the sole caregiver of one’s children, socio-economic disadvantage, and consequences of the separation (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2006; Nahar et al., 2020). Studies have revealed that in Western countries, single mothers are “considered among the most economically and socially disadvantaged groups” (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2006:7). Migrant women of colour may therefore be at a greater disadvantage for they have to deal with further stressors like the difficulty of adjusting to a new socio-cultural environment as well as racism (Lan, Collins & Wong, 2020). Racism too has a negative impact on mental health (Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Williams, 2018), and therefore,

people who are subjected to racism and discrimination are at risk of developing mental health issues (Salami et al., 2022). Some of these mental health issues include the formation of disorders like anxiety and Major Depressive Disorder (Salami et al., 2022; Truong & Moore, 2023), which are also common disorders among single mothers (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2006; Lam, Collins & Wong, 2020).

Fante works “twelve-hour shifts every day but Sunday” and thus she has little to no time to spend with her children (Gyasi, 2020:29). Nonetheless, she tries her best to be there for her family. For example, Fante takes the day off to chaperone her children to Nana’s football match, and even though Nana only decides that he no longer wants to play soccer after they reach Nashville, Fante does not get upset and is instead supportive of her son’s decision:

She could have told Nana that she’d lost a day’s paycheck to chaperone this trip, that she was already on thin ice with the Reynoldses for missing work two weeks before when I wouldn’t stop vomiting and had to be taken to the emergency room. She could have told him how that emergency room bill was higher than she’d expected, even though we had insurance, that the night she’d opened that envelope she sat there at our dining room table crying into her scrubs so that we wouldn’t be able to hear her. She could have told him that she had already had to take on some extra work cleaning houses to afford the fees for the advanced soccer league, and that those fees were nonrefundable and she couldn’t get her time back either. All that time she’d spent working to afford a trip on a bus with a loud daughter and son who’d somehow realized in the two-hour-long bus ride that his father wasn’t coming back. (Gyasi, 2020:70)

It is therefore evident that Fante cares deeply for her children as she makes a number of sacrifices for them. The loss of Nana to addiction and eventual death thus affects Fante greatly, more so because she had difficulty with conception. For Fante, Nana was her “true miracle” (Gyasi, 2020:41).

Gifty is taken aback by her mother’s hysteria after they find out that Nana has overdosed, for she had not witnessed Fante so emotional before:

What weeping, what gnashing of teeth. My mother was nearly unrecognizable to me [...] she fell to the ground, rocking, clawing at her arms and legs until she drew blood, crying out the Lord’s name, “*Awurade, Awurade, Awurade.*” (Gyasi, 2020:170)

Fante had been so affected by her son’s death that “She had not stopped crying” until the day of the funeral (Gyasi, 2020:170):

My mother, a woman who hardly ever cried, cried so much that first week she fainted from dehydration. I stood over her body, fanning her with the closest thing I could

find—her Bible. When she came to and figured out what had happened, she apologized. She promised me that she wouldn't cry anymore, a promise she wasn't yet capable of keeping. (Gyasi, 2020:170)

After Nana's funeral, Fante begins to take a sedative, Ambien, and she sleeps every day for over a week. This may have likely been her attempt to deal with the painful feelings associated with the death of her son:

After my brother died, she refused to name her illness depression. "Americans get depressed on TV and they cry," she said. My mother rarely cried. She fought the feeling for a while, but then one day [...] she got into her bed, got under the covers, and wouldn't get back up. (Gyasi, 2020:32)

Owing to her belief that mental illness "was an invention of the West" (Gyasi, 2020:32), Fante "fought" her depressive feelings. Eventually, the only way she is able to cope with them is by trying to remain in denial through sleep. It is only after she tries to take her own life that Fante is admitted to a psychiatric hospital where she is diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and Anhedonia (Gyasi, 2020).

Anhedonia is a common symptom of Major Depressive Disorder (Tate, 2019), and it can be defined as the "Lack of enjoyment from, engagement in, or energy for life's experiences" (APA, 2013:766), or "deficits in the capacity to feel pleasure or take interest in things" (2013:766). Fante's loss of interest in life is evidenced by her sleeping for the entire day, her indifference towards Gifty and her job, as well as her attempted suicide. After she is released from the psychiatric hospital, Fante acknowledges that she is "sick" and she sends Gifty to Ghana so that she can "'focus on [her] healing'" (Gyasi, 2020:188):

Her anhedonia was as severe as ever, but her time in the UAB psych ward seemed to have alleviated some of her symptoms. She had stopped going to therapy, but she was at least going to church again. (Gyasi, 2020:197)

According to Gifty, "[her] mother had hated therapy" (Gyasi, 2020:32). Owing to her lack of belief in Western psychiatry, Fante stops taking her medication and attending therapy:

"Yes, I took them while I was in the hospital and then I kept taking them for a while when you were in Ghana, but they didn't help so then I stopped."

"Did you tell them the medicine wasn't helping? You're supposed to tell them when the medication doesn't work so that they can adjust it. The medication doesn't always work in the beginning. It's about finding the right combinations of things in the right doses. [...]"

"I didn't want to keep talking to them. I didn't want to tell them that it wasn't working because I didn't want them to shock me." (Gyasi, 2020:198)

Although Fante states that she had stopped taking the medication due to their inefficacy, she also admits that she did not want to take them. This is due in part to her distrust of Western psychiatry, for “She was distrustful of psychiatrists and she didn’t believe in mental illness” (Gyasi, 2020:32). Furthermore, she is afraid to communicate freely with her doctors for fear that the hospital would administer electroconvulsive therapy. However, Gifty explains that her mother’s impression of electroconvulsive therapy is that of the 1940s and 1950s when it was used “not as a treatment for mental illness, but as a kind of mind control” (Gyasi, 2020:199). Although Fante does recover to some extent, she continues to experience depressive episodes, possibly owing in part to her not being on any treatment.

Gifty describes her mother’s battle with depression:

My mother crawled out of her deep, dark tunnel, but perhaps this phrasing is too imprecise, the image of crawling too forceful to encapsulate the relentless but quiet work of fighting depression. Perhaps it is more correct to say that her darkness lifted, the tunnel shallowed, so that it felt as though her problems were on the surface of the Earth again, not down in its molten core. (Gyasi, 2020:200)

Fante’s depression is likened to a “deep, dark tunnel” portraying the severity of her mental illness. She experiences several different losses throughout her life. The first is the dwindling of the love between herself and the Chin Chin Man, for after they reach America, they often disagree about whether or not to stay in the U.S. She then loses her husband physically, as he abandons his family. The second loved one that Fante loses is Nana, first to addiction, and then to death, and although she had already been diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder by the time Gifty leaves for college, Gifty realises that her mother had lost her too, albeit a “slower, more natural” loss (Gyasi, 2020:38). The “complex shades” of Fante’s loss and difficulties cumulatively impact on her mental health thereby leading to her diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder (2020:38).

4. Gifty and Fante.

Loss can be defined as the “real or perceived” deprivation of, separation, or detachment from something or someone deemed “meaningful” or valuable (Brand, Fox & Bosch, 2008; Humphrey, 2009:5). It can therefore be physical or abstract, death or non-death. Loss can negatively impact on one’s mental health (Smith, Robinson & Segal, 2018), and it may sometimes lead to depression (Zara, 2019). Gifty relates her mother’s pain from her loss:

Whenever I looked at her, a castaway on the island of my queen-sized bed, it was hard

for me to look past the suffering. It was hard for me not to take inventory of all that she had lost—her home country, her husband, her son. The losses just kept piling up. It was hard for me to see her there, hear her ragged breath, and think of how she had persevered, but she had. Just lying there in my bed was a testament to her perseverance, to the fact that she survived, even when she wasn't sure she wanted to. (Gyasi, 2020:226)

Fante experiences various types of loss, all of which may have negatively impacted her on mental health, and like Fante, Gifty too experiences loss. In addition to her father abandoning their family and her brother succumbing to drug abuse and eventual death, Gifty also endures the figurative loss of her mother. Fante's diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder following Nana's death leaves her hollow and numb to everything and everyone around her, including her daughter. Just as Fante rejected psychiatric doctors and medication, Gifty feels like Fante had also "refused [...] her own daughter" (Gyasi, 2020:46). Often, the young siblings of youth who abuse substances may find that their needs are ignored or neglected as parents have to constantly deal with the substance abuser (Mathibela & Skhosana, 2019). This holds true for Gifty as not only is her father absent, but she also has to assist her mother with Nana during his addiction. Even after Nana's death, Gifty is still neglected as she has to tend to her mother and take care of herself.

Addiction is often referred to as a "family disease" as its effects extend beyond the individual user (McArdle & Strull, 2018:3). Some studies have found that it is commonly the women of the family, especially the mother, who may experience stress and worry as a result of her child's addiction (Jesuraj, 2012; McArdle & Stull, 2018). This is apparent in the cases of Fante and Gifty who both endure the effects of Nana's addiction:

We both stared at the clock, and then the door, the clock and then the door. He didn't come in. We had developed a routine, an unspoken rule. Nana got two days before we hopped in the car and searched for him. He got four days before we called the police, but it had only come to that once, and that night was day one. We weren't there yet. (Gyasi, 2020:166)

Nana goes missing for "days and weeks at a time" (Gyasi, 2020:164), and although she is only around ten years old, Gifty accompanies Fante to look for an intoxicated Nana. They would go "driving all over Huntsville for hours searching for Nana" so often that Gifty eventually "knew the names of every receptionist and every cleaning lady of every motel in Huntsville" (2020:164). It is almost as though Gifty is forced to be an adult at a young age, for at times, she also cooks for her mother and herself: "I had made myself dinner and I offered some to my mother" (166).

Following Nana's demise, Gifty forces herself to take care of Fante: "I was going to nurse her back to health through the sheer force of my eleven-year-old will. I would not lose her" (Gyasi, 2020:178). Gifty is left alone to tend to her mother with no support from friends or family members. At only eleven years old, she resolves to take care of her mother despite her own grief. When Fante's depression sets in, Gifty takes on a mother-like role:

I made her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and when, hours later, I found them untouched, I threw them out and washed the plates. I cleaned everything I could think to clean—the bathroom, the garage, her bedroom and mine. (Gyasi, 2020:179)

For one and a half weeks, Gifty walks to and from school and keeps the house in order by herself so that when Fante "finally woke up" she would not be "upset" with Gifty "for letting the place turn to filth" (Gyasi, 2020:32). It is thus apparent that Gifty becomes both emotionally and instrumentally parentified for not only is she a support structure for her mother, but she also takes on numerous household chores that are "typically considered to be adult responsibilities" (Engelhardt, 2012:45). Despite her efforts to keep their home in order, Gifty eventually finds Fante "sinking in the bathtub, the faucet running, the floor flooded" and she sees "an empty bottle of Ambien resting on the counter" (Gyasi, 2020:185). Gifty initially "felt betrayed" by her mother's suicide attempt (2020:32). This is possible for two reasons: She may have felt like her mother did not care about her enough to get well, or, that she had been doing so much to keep the household running yet her mother did not even bother. When Gifty finds her mother, it is probable that she does not know whether Fante is dead or alive. Suddenly finding a loved one dead may be traumatic (Latkin et al., 2012), more so for a child. In addition, when a parent attempts suicide, it may lead to mental health issues in his/her offspring (O'Brien et al., 2015), including the development of "internalising behaviours" (Ortin-Peralta et al., 2023).

"Internalising behaviours" refer to inwardly directed or "overcontrolled" behaviours such as worry, fear, and anxiety (Hansen & Jordan, 2017:1), and they may be influenced by biopsychosocial factors like trauma during childhood or genetics (Huberty, 2009). These behaviours may lead to an "internalising disorder" such as depression and/or anxiety (Hansen & Jordan, 2017:1). However, internalising disorders often go undetected and undiagnosed for the affected individual conceals his/her symptoms by 'bottling' his/her problems or attempting to deal with them internally (Merrell, 2008; Hansen & Jordan, 2017). After Nana's demise,

Gifty has the opportunity to confide in her school's librarian, but she chooses not to do so:

In fact, if there was anyone at school that year who would have honestly cared about my problems at home, who would have listened to my worries and found a way to help, it would have been Mrs. Greer.

"I'm fine," I told her, and as soon as the lie left my lips I knew that I was going to take care of my mother myself. (Gyasi, 2020:178)

Gifty may thus have an internalising disorder for she does not speak to anybody about her problems, rather, she chooses to deal with them by herself. Her fear of addiction in high school may also be perceived as an "overcontrolled behaviour" as a result of her internalising behaviour:

Throughout high school, I never touched a drop of alcohol because I lived in fear that addiction was like a man in a dark trench coat, stalking me, waiting for me to get off the well-lit sidewalk and step into an alley. I had seen the alley. I had watched Nana walk into the alley and I had watched my mother go in after him, and I was so angry at them for not being strong enough to stay in the light. (Gyasi, 2020:33)

Like parentification (Engelhardt, 2012), internalising disorders can also cause withdrawal and social difficulties (Hansel & Jordan, 2017), as seen in Gifty who struggles to make friends and hold a relationship when she gets older. However, this is also possibly because of her unresolved grief for Nana as she is unable to speak about him. The only person she wishes she could speak to is her mother; however, she chooses not to cause her mother further pain. This is another sign of Gifty's emotional parentification:

All of the self-help literature I've read says that you have to talk about your pain to move through it, but the only person I ever felt like I wanted to talk to about Nana was my mother and I knew she couldn't handle it. It felt unfair, to pile my pain on top of hers, and so I swallowed it instead. (Gyasi, 2020:157)

Even during his addiction, Fante wanted to "keep Nana's addiction close to the chest" and this secret "ate away" at Gifty like "moths in cloth" (Gyasi, 2020:146).

Children who are parentified often have trouble with the formation of their identity and/or personality (Engelhardt, 2012), and similarly, Gifty struggles to find her identity outside of the shadow of her brother's and mother's ailments:

"I decided then and there that I would build a new Gifty from scratch. She would be the person I took along with me to Cambridge—confident, poised, smart. She would be strong and unafraid. I opened up to a blank page and wrote a new entry that began with these words: *I will figure out a way to be myself, whatever that means, and I won't talk about Nana or my mom all the time. It's too depressing.*" (Gyasi, 2020:236)

Both “addiction, and the avoidance of it” had been running Gifty’s life to the point that she began to feel “undone” and like she “couldn’t proceed” (Gyasi, 2020:236). Thus, when she leaves for college, she decides to find herself outside of the influence of her mother and her brother.

Being a family member of an addict may not only have a personal impact but also a social impact. Studies have found that parents of addicts are often judged and/or alienated by their community members (McArdle & Stull, 2018; Mathibela & Skosana, 2019). This is worse still in the case of Fante, Gifty and Nana, for being the only black members of their church, they are scrutinised more closely. Gifty recalls how Nana’s addiction had revealed racist generalisations in their Church: ““their kind does seem to have a taste for drugs. I mean, they are *always* on drugs. That’s why there’s so much crime”” (Gyasi, 2020:158). In addition to the racism she faces at church, Gifty is told by her classmate that ““Black people can’t be princesses”” (2020:22). At the time, she had been too young to understand racism and societal injustices: “I didn’t know what to make of the world that I was in back then. I didn’t know how to reconcile it” (160). However, it takes a profound toll on her and it becomes a “spiritual wound—so deep and so hidden” that it had taken her “years to find and address it” (160).

Unlike Nana who has a close relationship with the Chin Chin Man, and to whom Fante shows love, Gifty does not experience a bond with both her parents. Instead, Fante is somewhat indifferent to Gifty as she had not intended to fall pregnant with her:

Nana was the first miracle, the true miracle, and the glory of his birth cast a long shadow. I was born into the darkness that shadow left behind. I understood that, even as a child. My mother made certain of it. (Gyasi, 2020:41)

Gifty is perceived as a pesky child by her mother, for even when she asks Fante about her father, she tells Gifty to “to keep quiet and stop bothering her with questions” (Gyasi, 2020:22). Fante makes it known to Gifty throughout her childhood that she had been a troublesome baby:

“You weren’t a very good baby,” she told me all my life. “In my stomach, you were very unpleasant, but coming out you were a nightmare. Thirty-four hours of misery. I thought, Lord, what have I done to deserve this torment?” (Gyasi, 2020:41)

It is therefore possible that Gifty feels somewhat unwanted as a child; however, she longs for a relationship with her mother:

My first thought, the year my brother died and my mother took to bed, was that I needed

her to be mine again, a mother as I understood it. And when she didn't get up, when she lay there day in and day out, wasting away, I was reminded that I didn't know her, not wholly and completely. I would never know her. (Gyasi, 2020:205)

Even a mere smile from Fante was enough for Gifty: "She offered me a smile, and I took it hungrily. I wanted whatever it was she was ready to give" (Gyasi, 2020:201). Gifty's longing for a relationship with Fante continues even as an adult. In the sixth year of her PhD, Fante has a depressive episode and she goes to stay with her daughter. Gifty would look at her mother and think: "*Please don't go*, I thought when I drove her home from the lab and she got back into bed. *Don't leave me, not yet*" (Gyasi, 2020:206).

Gifty sees Nana as her "hero" (Gyasi, 2020:16), to the extent that his presence makes her mother's taunts bearable:

She was a matter-of-fact kind of woman, not a cruel woman, exactly, but something quite close to cruel. When I was young, I prided myself on being able to tell the difference. Nana was still around, and so I could stand being told I was a horrible baby. I could stand it because I understood the context; Nana was the context. When he died, every matter-of-fact thing became cruel.

When I was very little, my mother took to calling me asaa, the miracle berry that, when eaten first, turns sour things sweet. Asaa in context is a miracle berry. Without context, it is nothing, does nothing. The sour fruit remains. In those early years of our family of four, sour fruit was everywhere, but I was asaa and Nana was context, and so we had sweetness in abundance. (Gyasi, 2020:41–42)

Thus, it is evident that Gifty has a close bond with Nana, for her mother's unkind words only begin to impact Gifty after his demise. When she begins taking sleeping tablets after Nana's demise, Fante tells Gifty that she "'didn't want another child after Nana'" (Gyasi, 2020:176): "'I only wanted Nana,' she said, 'and now I only have you'" (2020:176). Although Gifty was "hurt" by her mother's words, she "understood and [she] forgave" for she "only wanted Nana, too, but [she] only had [her] mother" (176).

Gifty's close relationship with Nana is further seen in her early journal entries wherein she nicknames him "Buzz":

Dear God,

Buzz ran after the ice cream truck today. He bought a firecracker popsicle for himself and a Flintstones pushpop for me.

Or:

Dear God,

At the rec center today, none of the other kids wanted to be my partner for the three-legged race because they said I was too little, but then Buzz came over and he said that he would do it! And guess what? We won and I got a trophy. (Gyasi, 2020:16–17)

Gifty has many pleasant childhood memories of Nana, and years after his overdose, she still sees him in a positive light:

What I can say for certain is that there is no case study in the world that could capture the whole animal of my brother, that could show how smart and kind and generous he was, how much he wanted to get better, how much he wanted to live. Forget for a moment what he looked like on paper, and instead see him as he was in all of his glory, in all of his beauty. (Gyasi, 2020:195)

Often, an individual who dies from substance abuse is remembered for his/her addiction. However, Gifty does not want Nana to be remembered in this way, for he had been a brilliant individual, and despite his overdose and several relapses before that, he did want to get better.

Nana's addiction and death have a profound impact on Gifty. She recalls how he "plunged a needle into the crook of his elbow, and then he slipped away somewhere, oblivious to [her] and to everything else around him" (Gyasi, 2020:165). This memory remains with her:

I have never seen a needle since without thinking of him. I have preferred the flesh of mice to that of humans because I never want to put a needle into an elbow. I cannot see a median cubital vein and not see my brother nodding off and away on our couch. (Gyasi, 2020:165)

Gifty has many memories of Nana during his addiction, especially the times he had been intoxicated. She remembers how "she didn't understand what [she] was seeing" when she had witnessed Nana high for the first time (Gyasi, 2020:131). Although she is only around nine or ten years old, she is desperate to understand her brother's condition:

I didn't really understand what was going on yet [...] His head was always nodding, chin to chest, before rolling or bouncing violently back up. I would see him on our couch with this dreamy look on his face and wonder how an ankle injury had knocked him so flat. He, who had always been in motion, how could he now be so still? (Gyasi, 2020:140)

In her innocence and desperation to make her brother better, Gifty thinks that Nana needs coffee because he is "always sleepy or sleeping" and she sets out to buy him some (Gyasi, 2020:131). However, eventually she "figured it out" and his addiction had "become the sun around which all" of their lives had revolved (2020:131). In her innocence, Gifty had "exercised a 'don't dare mention it' kind of policy" hoping that if she "avoided any talk of drugs or addiction, then the

problem would go away on its own” (131).

When Nana had been intoxicated or experiencing withdrawal effects, Fante and Gifty were forced to “hide from him” (Gyasi, 2020:165):

Those were the days of the broken things. Nana punched a hole through the wall. He smashed the television down onto the floor, and shattered every picture frame and lightbulb in the house [...] We blocked the door to my bedroom with a chair, but soon he was pounding against it. “Fuck you both,” he said, and we could hear the sound of his shoulder smashing against the door, and we could see the way the door wanted to give from its hinges, wanted to let him in. And my mother answered, loud in prayer, “Lord, protect my son. Lord, protect my son.” I was afraid and I was angry. Who would protect us? (Gyasi, 2020:165)

Nana’s violent behaviour thus leads to Fante and Gifty becoming afraid, and this is often seen in family members of addicts (Groenewald & Bhana, 2016; Mathibela & Skhosana, 2019). At this point, Gifty is only around ten years old; however, both she and Fante endure this trauma with little to no help from others.

Just as Fante uses prayer as a coping mechanism, so too does Gifty, who, as a child, “studied [her] Bible and kept a journal with letters to God” (Gyasi, 2020:16). However, after witnessing Nana’s addiction, she begins to doubt that there is a higher power, and after his overdose, Gifty replaces God with science: “I had traded the Pentecostalism of my childhood for this new religion, this new quest, knowing that I would never fully know” (2020:18). For her Ph.D., Gifty chooses to study the “neural circuits of reward-seeking behavior” (18). She initially states that her chosen field of study is not because of her brother, but rather because she “wanted to flay any mental weakness off [her] body like fascia from muscle” (33). However, she disproves this statement when she wonders whether her experiment could help people suffering from Addictive and Depressive Disorders, like Nana and Fante:

In other words, many, many years down the line, once we’ve figured out a way to identify and isolate the parts of the brain that are involved in these illnesses, once we’ve jumped all the necessary hurdles to making this research useful to animals other than mice, could this science work on the people who need it the most?

Could it get a brother to set down a needle? Could it get a mother out of bed? (Gyasi, 2020:40)

She further mentions that her brother is the reason behind her chosen research:

Nana is the reason I began this work, but not in a wholesome, made-for-TED Talk kind

of way. Instead, this science was a way for me to challenge myself, to do something truly hard, and in so doing to work through all of my misunderstandings about his addiction and all of my shame. (Gyasi, 2020:147)

Gifty therefore uses science to understand the cause of Nana's addiction and the reason he was unable to get better, especially why he "relapsed just fourteen hours after leaving rehab" (Gyasi, 2020:153).

The title of the novel emerges when Gifty begins to realise that although the human being feels like he has "transcended his Kingdom" (Gyasi, 2020:18), even science is inadequate when it comes to the complexities of the human mind:

To know that if I could only understand this little organ inside this one tiny mouse, that understanding still wouldn't speak to the full intricacy of the comparable organ inside my own head. And yet I had to try to understand, to extrapolate from that limited understanding in order to apply it to those of us who made up the species *Homo sapiens*, the most complex animal [...] That belief, that transcendence, was held within this organ itself. Infinite, unknowable, soulful, perhaps even magical. (Gyasi, 2020:18)

Both religion and science become "valuable ways of seeing" for Gifty. However, eventually she finds that "both have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning" (Gyasi, 2020:183–184). Although she begins to understand that addiction alters the brain, Gifty still finds it difficult to accept Nana's addiction.

Because I still have so much shame. I'm full to the brim with it; I'm spilling over [...] I can look at scan after scan of drug-addicted brains shot through with holes, Swiss-cheesed, atrophied, irreparable. I can watch that blue light flash through the brain of a mouse and note the behavioral changes that take place because of it, and know how many years of difficult, arduous science went into those tiny changes, and still, *still*, think, *Why didn't Nana stop? Why didn't he get better for us? For me?* (Gyasi, 2020:147)

Like many family members of addicts, she feels disappointment and shame (Schultz & Alpaslan, 2016), especially for how she perceived Nana during his time as an addict:

It's true that for years before he died, I would look at his face and think, *What a pity, what a waste*. But the waste was my own, the waste was what I missed out on whenever I looked at him and saw just his addiction. (Gyasi, 2020:195)

Family members of addicts may at times feel guilt (Jesuraj, 2012), and this is seen in Fante who "blamed herself" for not doing more the day she realised that Nana was abusing OxyContin:

I should have comforted her, told her it wasn't her fault, but somewhere, just below the surface of me, I blamed her. I blamed myself too. Guilt and doubt and fear had already

settled into my young body like ghosts haunting a house. I trembled, and in the one second it took for the tremble to move through my body, I stopped believing in God. (Gyasi, 2020:28)

Even though she is merely eleven years old, Gifty also feels guilt about Nana, which further contributes to her becoming atheistic.

Although there is insufficient evidence to deduce whether Gifty develops a mental health disorder, it is apparent that she experiences various difficulties that most likely affect her mental health. She recalls how she “had nightmares that woke [her] up in a cold sweat” (Gyasi, 2020:218):

I couldn’t remember what happened in them, but every time I woke from one, soaked in my own fear, I would grab a notebook and try to coax the dream out onto the page. When that didn’t work, I started avoiding sleep. (Gyasi, 2020:218)

Gifty waits for her mother to fall asleep and tries to watch television to fight her slumber. However, she would “doze off [...] and the nightmare would shoot [her] upright, awake with panic” (Gyasi, 2020:218). After she finds no solace in prayer, Gifty begins to talk to Nana:

“I miss you,” I whispered into the dark of my living room, the sound of my mother’s snoring the only sound that could be heard.

“It’s been hard here,” I told him.

I asked him all kinds of things, like “What should we watch on TV tonight?” or “What should I eat?” [...] I knew it was Nana that I was talking to, but also, I knew that it wasn’t him at all, and to acknowledge that, to say his name and not have him appear before me, my fully embodied, fully alive brother, would ruin the spell. And so, I left his name out of it. (Gyasi, 2020:219)

As a young girl, Gifty is thus faced with the burden of having to deal with the loss of her brother by herself in addition to trying to protect her mother from her grief. She does not tell her mother about her nightmares or that she has been talking to Nana so as to protect Fante from “worry” and from being a “burden” to her (Gyasi, 2020:218, 219). Gifty had “promised” herself that she would only ever be a source of “goodness and peace, calm and respect” for her mother (2020:219). These actions portray both Gifty’s emotional parentification and internalising behaviour.

Gifty likens her pain during her childhood to a wound: “my whole body felt raw, all of the time like if you touched me the open wound of my flesh would throb” (Gyasi, 2020:28). This pain remains as an adult, but instead, she is now “scabbed over, hardened” (2020:28), suggesting

that her wound only healed because she became a “hardened” person who tried to avoid or repress her emotions. Gifty notes how she has changed since childhood:

It would have been kinder to lie, but I wasn’t kind anymore. Maybe I never had been. I vaguely remembered a childhood kindness, but maybe I was conflating innocence and kindness. I felt so little continuity between who I was as a young child and who I was now that it seemed pointless to even consider showing my mother something like mercy. Would I have been merciful when I was a child? (Gyasi, 2020:15–16)

Although Gifty faces similar hardships to Nana, she is much younger and it is possible that they do not affect her as a child. Furthermore, she is not as close to her father as Nana had been and therefore the Chin Chin Man’s absence has a lesser impact on her. However, the physical loss of her brother and losing Fante to her depression take a toll on her.

5. Conclusion

As the narrator of the novel, Gifty relates her struggles as well as those of Nana and Fante. It is thus possible that there had been other issues that plagued Nana and Fante which Gifty had been unaware of as she was the youngest member of their family. Furthermore, as a character who is withdrawn and who tries to deal with her issues by herself, it is probable that Gifty withholds some of her own struggles. This is further suggested by her contradictions: she initially states that her studies were not based on Nana’s hardship, but she eventually clarifies that it was, and she states that her nightmares only lasted a week, but thereafter rectifies that she experienced a “month of bad dreams” (Gyasi, 2020:219). During this time, Gifty would pray for God to “at least allow [her] to remember” her dreams as she “couldn’t stand not knowing” what “[she] was afraid of” (2020:218). In addition, when she speaks to Nana as a coping mechanism, she avoids saying his name because she felt like it would make her “crazy” (219). She therefore did not want to be seen as weak or mentally vulnerable.

Yaa Gyasi depicts the hardships of Gifty and her family through both an African and a Western lens. Where *Freshwater* and *Butterfly Fish* use the African-related concepts of spiritual realism and postcolonialism to depict the mental health issues faced by the characters in the novel, *Transcendent Kingdom* only uses the latter. Through postcolonial theory, Gyasi depicts how a black, migrant mother has to juggle the abandonment by her husband and raising two children, one of whom becomes an addict. A Western lens allows us to interpret how these struggles affect the mental health of both Fante and her children. From the analysis provided, it is evident that there are a number of factors that lead to Nana’s addiction as well as Fante’s diagnosis of

Major Depressive Disorder. Although it cannot be said whether or not Gifty suffers from a mental health disorder, her memories suggest that she has been significantly affected by her past. When she fails to find answers through religion, she uses science in a desperate attempt to understand the clinical issues faced by her mother and her brother.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine the depictions of mental health in *Freshwater*, *Butterfly Fish* and *Transcendent Kingdom*. All three novels show that mental health issues are not exclusive to the West nor to specific groups of people, be it kings, adult males, mothers or adolescents. Although the texts do not portray the specific aetiologies of the mental health issues faced by the characters, their trauma and hardships can be interpreted as potential contributors to the vulnerable and/or impaired states of their mental health. It is important to note that the objective of this study was not to diagnose the characters, but rather, to use the information provided in the texts to present various possibilities and ideas relevant not only to literature but also to psychology in Africa. We find that although mental health awareness is growing in Africa, there are not many African representations of mental health in literature. Each of the aforementioned novels offers a unique view into the mental health issues faced by African characters, and therefore they have been useful in gaining insight into the types of mental and psychological struggles faced by individuals from Africa.

Although most of the key characters in the texts undergo problems with their mental health abroad, it is important to keep in mind that their experiences are still relevant to the contemporary African context which is largely influenced by the West. Furthermore, many postcolonial issues, like racism, identity, and migration, are shared across various urban African populations. One postcolonial issue that is found in all three novels is that of absent fathers. Although the absence of fathers is a global concern, and not unique to the African context (Inclan, 2023), the advent of colonialism played a large part in increasing the rate of fatherlessness. This is due to issues like poverty and migratory labour practices (Nyanjaya & Masongo, 2012; Ramatsetse & Ross, 2023). In South Africa specifically, “the country’s multifaceted historical, social, economic, and political processes have contributed towards father absenteeism” (Ramatsetse & Ross, 2023:200). Ada’s father, Saul, is described as an “impatient man” who had “turned his back” on the interests of his family (Emezi, 2019:44). Saul banishes his wife from their home when she experiences mental health issues, and when Ada is left to live alone with her father, he is emotionally absent. The ogbanjes see Saul as someone who “cared more about himself” and therefore, “he was never going to protect the Ada” (Emezi, 2019:29). Under his watch, Ada is physically abused by her brother and sexually abused by the neighbour and his son. This forms part of Ada’s trauma which affects her mental health. In *Butterfly Fish*, Queen’s father is physically absent. Although he deeply loves his

family, especially his daughter, he deserts them out of fear that he would have to face the consequences of the murder that he had committed in his past. After finding her father, Queen is raped by an inebriated Peter who mistakes her for her mother. As a result of the rape, Joy's father is also her grandfather and like her mother, she lives her life without a father. *Transcendent Kingdom* differs as Gifty's and Nana's father is initially present and loving; however, the racism he faces in America leads to him abandoning his family to return to Ghana. As Gifty had been young when her father had left, the Chin Chin Man's absence affects Nana more as he becomes addicted to drugs. Thus, just as academic studies have found that fatherless children are at a higher risk of developing psychopathological behaviours and disorders (Inclan, 2023), it is evident in *Freshwater's* Ada, *Butterfly Fish's* Joy and *Transcendent Kingdom's* Nana.

Other common issues relevant to the neocolonial African context are migration and identity (Wagner, 2016). Although the characters in the novels migrate for different reasons, they all face issues regarding their identities owing in part to their migration or the migration of their parents. Both Ada's and Joy's identity formations are influenced by their attempts to come to terms with their native spirituality while navigating through the challenges they face in a Western society. Their dual identities raise the postcolonial concepts of hybridity and liminality. Not only do they straddle African and Western worldviews, but they are also confronted with spiritual and/or supernatural phenomena. Thus, by occupying an in-between or "third" space, Ada and Joy can be seen as hybrid characters with liminal identities. Both migration and racism have been examined in this dissertation as two of the contributing factors to the mental health disturbances of some of the characters. In addition, the elements of African spirituality in both *Freshwater* and *Transcendent Kingdom* have been interpreted through both Western and African lenses. Through the former, they can be viewed as causes of Ada's and Joy's vulnerable psychological states, while through the latter, they have been interpreted literally, for what may be deemed a mental health disorder in the West can be viewed as a spiritual phenomenon in other cultures.

Like migrants, marginalised individuals can also be seen as occupying a liminal space. In keeping with the postcolonial experience of liminality, the chosen texts are written by contemporary, female, African authors. African people, females, and African females specifically have been historically marginalised. Similarly, issues of mental well-being have

been stereotyped and/or given little attention for a long period of time, especially in some marginalised African societies that experience barriers to mental health care today (Nicholas & Joshua, 2022).

The difference between mental health conceptions in the West and other indigenous cultures, like those in Africa, is also evidenced through how some Western therapeutic methods were not effective for Joy and Fante, possibly due to a lack of understanding of their experiences. Joy is unable to explain her visions/hallucinations to her psychologist, who prescribes an antidepressant. While it is unclear whether Joy begins to see her psychologist before the death of her mother or after, she finds it difficult to explain her visions/hallucinations to Dr. Krull. Dr. Krull prescribes an antidepressant for Joy, who seems to find both therapy and the medication ineffective:

Dr: How are you doing with the Sertraline tablets I prescribed?

In my mind's eye, I saw the tablets dancing down a fat neck of toilet water, or melting in a sink full of bleach, taking their numbness down a plughole better equipped to manage the sluggish silhouettes, unable to cry out quickly their tongues having been weighed down by chemical solutions.

I nodded emphatically: *Yes, I'm still taking them but I don't know if they're actually helping.*

Dr: You have to give these medications time to properly take effect. Take them consistently. (Gyasi, 2020:260–261)

Similarly, Fante resists psychiatric medication and therapy. Thus, when she is discharged after her suicide attempt, she sends Gifty to Ghana so that she can “[heal]” in her own way (Gyasi, 2020:188), that is, through prayer. Although she had been diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, Fante “refused to name her illness depression” (2020:32). Her view of depression had been that ““Americans get depressed on TV and they cry”” (32).

The opening of *Transcendent Kingdom* depicts how psychological ailments are misunderstood in some parts of Africa:

The first time, I was sent to Ghana to wait her out. While there, I was walking through Kejetia Market with my aunt when she grabbed my arm and pointed. “Look, a crazy person,” she said in Twi. “Do you see? A crazy person.”

I was mortified. My aunt was speaking so loudly, and the man, tall with dust caked into his dreadlocks, was within earshot. “I see. I see,” I answered in a low hiss. The man continued past us, mumbling to himself as he waved his hands about in gestures that

only he could understand [...] Even now, I don't completely understand why my aunt singled the man out to me. Maybe she thought there were no crazy people in America, that I had never seen one before [...] My aunt was saying, "*That*. That is what crazy looks like." But instead what I heard was my mother's name. What I saw was my mother's face, still as lake water, the pastor's hand resting gently on her forehead, his prayer a light hum that made the room buzz. (Gyasi, 2020:3–4)

Seeing someone as 'mad' or "crazy" because he/she has a psychological disorder is a stigma that emerged from a view in the Middle Ages that individuals develop mental illness because they possess a "character flaw" and/or are not "morally strong" (Overton & Medina, 2008:142, 143). These individuals were thus seen as examples of the "weakness of humankind" (Overton & Medina, 2008: 143). Such stigmas are still common today (Overton & Medina, 2008), and even Gifty is afraid of seeing herself as having a "mental weakness" and being "crazy" (Gyasi, 2020:33, 219). The lack of understanding of mental health issues by individuals in Non-Western countries may be owing in part to the classification of mental illnesses being largely embedded in Euro-Western conceptualisations. On the one hand, eating disorders in rural or poverty-stricken areas in Africa may be seen as nonsensical. However, on the other hand, mental health issues of a spiritual nature are not recognised in the West.

This dissertation has presented a holistic and inclusive interpretation of the characters in the novels that are afflicted by psychological issues by taking into account cultural differences and acknowledging the various challenges faced by the characters. The symbolism examined in *Freshwater* and *Butterfly Fish* has assisted in providing a further dimension of understanding of the texts. The use of postcolonialism and spiritual realism has aided in depicting an alternative perspective of mental health and that such issues can stem from both Western reasons as well as African spiritual and/or cultural phenomena. In addition, through the character of Ada, it can be seen that spiritual afflictions may at times share similarities with the symptoms of mental health disorders. Thus, the use of postcolonial concepts like hybridity and liminality have proven useful in presenting a non-binary view of mental illness. In addition, the texts portray "hybrid identities as resilient because of their non-binary nature rather than despite it" (Newgas, 2020:1).

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