

Identity, Erasure and Social Repression: Non-Heterosexual Expression and Liminality in Akwaeke Emezi's

The Death of Vivek Oji

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Abstract

The study traces the representation of non-heterosexual, non-heteronormative expression and liminality in the contemporary African literature focusing on themes of identity, erasure and societal resistance. The research selects Akwaeke Emezi's novel, 'The Death of Vivek Oji' to evaluate the sociocultural values distinctly impacting Vivek Oji, the protagonist of the novel and the attempt made by his family to erase his non-normative thoughts and identity even after his death. Their denial of his fluidity compels them to reject his true identity and push him to isolation. Non-heteronormativity is resisted by society, and the novel discusses the significant struggle of individuals deviating from societal norms leading to an intense conflict between the

need to preserve their identity and social conventions. Compelling non-heteronormative individuals find it challenging to fit themselves in a society that opposes gender fluidity. The paper studies the emotional isolation Vivek undergoes due to societal resistance and cultural rigidity.

Keywords: Non-heteronormativity; liminality; homophobia; non-heterosexuality; queer; Homophobia

Introduction

“I think that there are multiple realities, and we might be centered in our own, but that doesn't invalidate a reality that someone else is centered in.” – Akwaeki Emezi

The novel, ‘Death of Vivek Oji’ starts with a sentence, “They burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died.” (Emezi, 2020, p.1). Vivek’s body is found at the doorstep of his house indicating that someone had left it there deliberately. It is not a natural death. Something has happened and the family is unaware. It is metaphorical as his true identity has been a secret and now his death too has been a mystery. The novel then proceeds with his mother trying to find out about the cause of Vivek’s death. The entire novel runs into the struggle that Vivek goes through as a non-heterosexual individual. It is the coming of age, and the lived experiences of Vivek, the eponymous character narrated through various voices. His intense urge to come out of the closet and rebuttal of the existing societal and religious beliefs is a representation of the turmoil that individuals of non-heterosexual orientation undergo. He goes through isolation and restricts his expression amongst his friends who support and accept his identity, that has not been categorized. Akwaeke Emezi is careful in not categorizing Vivek’s sexual orientation. The author has maintained fluidity, which allows the freedom of expressing one’s sexuality.

The void of lacking a home that accepts his non-heterosexual orientation adds to his compelling desire to be accepted. Vivek is confounded in his own home and escapes to his friend’s home to dress up like a girl and wear makeup. Vivek’s cousin Osita and friends Juju,

Elizebeth and others offer a space with a comfort of being at home, and understanding outside the confines of heteropatriarchal expectations.

Vivek's agitation against *heteronormativity* is evident in the way he begins growing his hair, which is not acceptable by the orthodox society. His father despises Vivek's behavior. The extreme criticism of non-heteronormative expression of Vivek, and the desperation to erase his identity at home makes it restrictive and rejects fluidity. Vivek's mother vehemently tries to cover up by saying that Vivek was sick when she looks at his photographs after his death. Opposing her normative beliefs Vivek's friends explain that he was happy in expressing and dressing up like a girl.

Another reflection of the *heteronormativity* and religious beliefs in society is Vivek's aunt Mary's attempt to take him to the Church, where he is whipped as they believe that a demon has captured Vivek. Religious beliefs do not confirm to non-heterosexual expressions. Non-heterosexual characters experience a state of liminality as they reject conformity with society, state and church.

Finally, the novel represents individuals terrified of being overtly expressive about their *non-heterosexuality*. Osita, Vivek's cousin expresses his affection towards Vivek but is always in the closet. He too is never categorized and is in liminality. He is attracted towards Elizabeth and has sexual feelings for Vivek as well. The paper studies of all these aspects that reflect on the lived experiences of non-heterosexual individuals who stand in opposition of the *homophobia* and *heteronormativity* forced upon in the Nigerian society.

Societal resistance of non-heterosexual behaviour

We live in a world that keeps striving for progress and inclusivity where the rights and experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals remain an important parameter of society's commitment to equality. It is true in the case of Africa, a continent that grapples with complex mix of cultural, religious and legal challenges about queerness. Western African countries have

passed laws that are homophobic to prosecute individuals who perform homosexual acts. The laws passed have been under the guise of preserving ‘national identities’ and ‘cultural customs’. It has been reiterated that these laws were necessary to prevent the society from western influence and ideas on sexuality. (Ogbe, 2013). But research reveals that they have been used to marginalize individuals or communities that don’t fit into the hegemonic framework. (Richardson 1996; as cited in Ogbe, 2013). In recent decades, a discourse has emerged that believes *homosexuality* as antithetical to African culture. This approach has been agreed and showcased by prominent African leaders. May it be Robert Mugabe, the former president of Zimbabwe (1987-2017), who quite derogatively described homosexuals as “worse than pigs and dogs” and as “a scourge planted by the white man on a pure continent.” (Rani, 2024).

Nigeria is an important example, where the struggle of LGBTQIA+ rights is intricately intertwined with deeply rooted societal norms and the impression of colonial legacies. Across Africa, the LGBTQIA+ community has to face many legal and social hurdles. These challenges are often connected to the colonial era laws and cultural conservatism. This reflects a global pattern, where queerness combines with historical prejudices, biases in the society, and a significant lack of understanding. It’s true that some African nations have taken significant steps to recognize and protect LGBTQIA+ rights. But Nigeria is affected by a deeply polarized society. Nigeria’s legal system is against the LGBTQIA+ community and has introduced anti-gay laws that have intensified the problems faced by the queer community. The Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, was enacted in 2014, is a legislation that has encouraged discrimination and created an environment of fear and hostility in the queer community. Under this law same sex relationships are criminalized, along with penalties ranging from imprisonment to public ostracism.

The novel is set in a Nigerian town where the society itself is homophobic and violently opposes non-normative behaviour Vivek’s beliefs as a non-heterosexual individual are well

defined; he has accepted himself the way he is and has embraced his queerness. Vivek knows that the Nigerian society vehemently opposes queer behavior and doesn't accept liminal identities. This becomes evident in the novel where Vivek is saying,

“I know what they say about men who allow other men to penetrate them. Ugly things; ugly words. Calling them women, as if that's supposed to be ugly, too. I'd heard it since secondary school, and I knew what that night was supposed to make me. Less than a man—something disgusting, something weak and shameful. But if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. They could have it.” (Emezi, 2020, p. 131)

This is like a monologue by Vivek in which he expresses his despise and unacceptance towards the approach of heterosexual society that considers non-heterosexual behavior as disgusting, weak and shameful. But he was determined to oppose the society's view despite knowing the consequences. Thus, Vivek on the day he dies ventures out of the house to the market dressed up as a girl with makeup on his face. Osita follows him and warns him not to go to the market like that. To which Vivek says, “You're ashamed of me,” she said, her voice surprised. “That's why you don't like me going out like this. It's like you're always ashamed, Osita. First of yourself, then of us, now of me.” (Emezi, 2020, p. 235).

Here the author uses different pronouns for Vivek while narrating the story. It reflects upon the author's preference to reveal the queerness of Vivek in a novel manner – subtle but impactful. Thus, Vivek refuses to accept societal norms and rebels. Vivek doesn't identify to be a man. The bold lines in the novel makes it evident. “I'd take the blinding light of his touch, the blessed peace of having him so close, and I would stop being a man. I was never one to begin with, anyway.” (Emezi, 2020, p.131)

Queer, Non-Heteronormativity, Non-Heterosexual

In queer identity, fluidity is distinct and through the novel the author is penning Queer narratives, which challenges gender binary. Emezi depicts the lived experiences of individuals subverting traditional gender roles and expectations. Emezi explores gender fluidity and non-binary identities through Vivek, Ostia, Elizabeth and other characters. Through the narrative they convey diverse sexual orientations that go beyond the socially ‘acceptable’ *heteronormativity*. Queer Theory which developed in 1990s aimed at deconstructing sexuality and gender. Queer theorists view sexuality as fluid and plural. They do not consider it to be fixed with a core identity.

The Italian-American feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis, coined the term ‘queer theory’ in 1990. Generally used for lesbians and gay, queer also included cross dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. It questions the terms like ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and mentions the impossibility of ‘natural’ sexuality. Queer theory debunks the stable sexes, genders and sexualities. Queer theorists did not believe in conventional categories like bisexuals, transvestites, transgendered people, and transsexuals. The book, ‘Fascination of Queer’ edited by Stefano Ramello mentions that ‘Queer’ was commonly referred as ‘strange’, ‘unusual’, ‘sick’ or ‘abnormal’. It was referred in the case of lesbians and gay men as an abusive term. (Monroe University Libraries, n.d.).

Heteronormativity is “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged” (University of Windsor, n.d.). It possesses the power to apply social and economic pressure on straight and gay individuals, by way of defined social norms by using institutions (Monroe University Libraries, n.d.).

The term ‘*Heterosexuality*’ was originally coined in the mid-19th century. But the term has undergone many subtle altercations to its implicit and explicit meaning. It was not accepted as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ sexuality and was rather defined as “an abnormal or perverted

appetite towards the opposite sex” in Dorland’s medical dictionary of 1901. In the 1930s, there was a change in definitions that represented a familiar view of *heterosexuality* and its societal role, where the origin of the word was forgotten and obscured. Only in the latter part of the century there was a rise of queer theory, that investigated the phenomenon. It made distinctions between sex and sexuality, that represented a ‘cultural production’ and it was possible to change in line with societal attitudes. (Ruiz-Cecilia, Guijarro-Ojeda et al. 2021).

Omotetobore (2022) examined, along with the society being resistant of the queer, non-heterosexual behavior, religion also opposes it. Nigerian literature also has come a long way in representing the queer community. The Nigerian scholarship went through a literary renaissance in the 21st century, in the continent and in the diaspora. This period was peculiar in exploring the themes that the previous generations circumvented and it was regarded as the ‘third generation’. Conversations and discourses about African queer started rising.

Biswas (2023) states, in the beginning of the 21st century there was a bold flourishing of queer literature like Chris Abani’s *Graceland* in 2004 and Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* in 2005, whose protagonists are queer individuals struggling to come to terms with queerness and radicalize orthodox views about gender and sexuality. Then the new generation African writers began to debunk the premise that ‘*homosexuality* is un-African’ on which the repressive SSMPA had been introduced. In 2015 Chinelo Okparanta published ‘*Under the Udala Trees*’, which reinvents the bildungsroman by introducing a queer African girl as the central character or hero of the story. Later on, 2020 marked the publishing of Akwaeke Emezi’s ‘*The Death of Vivek Oji*’ that explores liminalities of gender and sexuality. It marks the representation and prediction of the fate of self-identified queer people in a society that is hostile to sexual diversity (Mohan, 2017)

Conflict with Religion and Social Values

Vivek's parents are committed to their religious beliefs and the Nigerian society is extremely conservative thus completely denying the rights of non-heterosexual individuals. Osita's mother Mary tells Vivek's mother Kavitha: "You should allow him to come to Owerri, so I can take him to my own church. They fight these things with holy fire." (Emezi, 2020, p.70). Mary believes that her Church will be able to fix Vivek. Primarily the premise that Vivek has to 'be fixed' indicates that it is unacceptable by the Church for any male individual to grow hair like a woman or start looking like a woman. They say that Vivek is sick and needs to be treated. Mary takes Vivek to her Church where the pastor claims that Vivek is being possessed by a demon, evident in these lines from the novel,

The demon inside him," Mary repeated. "Yes o, that's what Pastor said. The boy is possessed by a very, very wicked spirit, a strong demon. It's what has been causing all of this, the long-hair thing, the wasting away of his physical body. Supernatural forces are feeding on him—on your child! Pastor said we must cut his hair because they are drawing their power from it, like the locks of Samson. This is one of the sources of their strength. But when one of the deacons approached him with scissors, the demon started to fight back! (Emezi, 2020, pp.76-77)

When Vivek fights back, he is whipped by the priest. Mary says while all this was happening, she was praying for his deliverance. She says, "for his spirit to be purged of the evil overtaking it" (Emezi, 2020, p. 77). Vivek escapes through all this and goes home. The Church denies that queer behavior is normal – it claims non-heterosexual behavior to be abnormal and a sickness that needs to be cured. Judith Butler in her book, 'Who's Afraid of Gender' says, "For some Christians, natural law and divine will are the same: God made the sexes in a binary way, and it is not the prerogative of humans to remake them outside those terms." (Butler, p.15)

In the paper, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’ by Gayle S. Rubin it is mentioned that Western cultures consider sex to be dangerous, destructive, negative force. They consider sex to be inherently sinful. It is acceptable and redeemable when performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if pleasurable aspects are restricted. Erotic behavior is considered bad and only some reasons are exempt. Some of these exemptions are marriage, reproduction and love. “But the exercise of erotic capacity, intelligence, curiosity, or creativity all require pretexts that are unnecessary for other pleasures, such as the enjoyment of food, fiction, or astronomy.” (University of Houston. nd). Thus, the restricted view of the religious authorities makes it even more difficult for queer individuals to express their sexuality.

Ukonu. M , et al. (2021) examines, that in Nigeria *homosexuality* and same sex marriages are opposed by the government as well. This strong and deep-rooted orthodoxy is evident in their approach. Among the African countries, Nigeria is where the LGBTQI+ community is not protected by law and ideology. The pre-existing beliefs have denied any critical inquiry into the public view on *homosexuality*. The majority of Nigerian society is of the opinion that *homosexuality* is against the culture and religion of many African countries, thus it is unacceptable. Studies have revealed that LGBTQI+ students face *homophobia* (self-hate), stress and rejection in the educational institutes and homes due to bullying, victimization, harsh rules from parents, school administration and heterosexual students and staff. *Homophobia* along with oppressing, harming or adversely affecting LGBTQI+ individuals also harms heterosexuals too. In the book ‘*Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price*’ penned by Warren J. Blumenfeld it is mentioned how *homophobia* harms heterosexuals too.

It restricts the capacity of heterosexuals to form close and intimate relationships with people of their own gender. It forcibly categorizes people in fixed gender-based roles that restrict creativity and self-expression. When combined with sex-phobia it results in invisibility

or erasure of LGBT lives and sexuality taught in school-based sex education discussions. This keeps students away from vital information. This kind of erasure can prevent LGBT young individuals from gaining knowledge about sexually transmitted infections. Young individuals of all sexual identities, get pressurized to become heterosexually active to justify to themselves and others that they are “normal” as accepted and defined by the society. It discourages and prevents LGBT people from developing an authentic self-identity, exerting a harmful pressure to get married. This creates undue stress turning into trauma on themselves and heterosexual spouses and their children. It leads to lack of appreciation of other types of diversity, which makes everyone unsafe. (Case Western Region University, 1992).

Considering specific reference regarding these points from Emezi’s coming of age novel where Osita’s mother Mary tries to warn Kavita about Vivek’s change in behavior and appearance, it becomes clear about how Nigerian society is homophobic. Her view of the Nigerian society is unfavorable, which becomes evident when she expresses her view to Vivek’s mother Kavita, “You think it matters? You don’t know Nigeria. People have killed their neighbors and burned down their houses. He’s not safe, I’m telling you.” (Emezi, 2020, p.71) This quote is a reflection of the Nigerian society that stigmatizes *homosexuality*. Same-sex marriage (Prohibition) Bill was signed into law on January 7, 2014, by President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria. This law criminalizes public displays of affection between similar sex couples. It also puts restrictions on organizations that work for the rights of gay people. The law imposes a sentence of 14-year prison on any individual enters into a same-sex marriage contract or civil union. Also, it imposes a 10-year sentence on individuals or groups, which includes religious leaders who “witness, abet, and aid the solemnization of a same-sex marriage or union.” (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

This law and attitude towards same sex marriage was severely criticized by global leaders who warned about withholding aid from countries not recognizing gay rights. But the

Nigerian government didn't bog down to this pressure and continued with homophobic rules and laws. The senators believed that same sex marriage cannot be allowed on moral and religious grounds. In 2004 Bisi Alimi, the gay rights activists became the first Nigerian to publicly declare his *homosexuality* on Nigerian Television Authority's (NTA) Funmi Iyanda show – New Dawn. NTA took swift action and the show's live format was cancelled. In Nigeria the society is homophobic and the government supports this attitude (Ukonu. M O, et al. 2021). There are clear references about the same in the novel. Mary questions Kavita about Vivek's homosexual behavior where it becomes evident that in Nigeria homosexual behavior is gravely condemned.

Has he cut that hair?"

"I don't think that's important—"

"Ahn! Kavita. You know how things are here. It's not safe for him to be walking around Ngwa looking that . . . feminine. If someone misunderstands, if they think he's a homosexual, what do you think is going to happen to him? (Emezi, 2020, p. 71)

Amidst the background of staunch orthodox beliefs each queer individual opposing *heteronormativity* goes through inner struggle which is called 'coming out' or 'coming out of the closet', which is also touched upon by the author in the novel.

Shame in the Process of Coming out

Sexual identity disclosure is a process by which an individual internally and externally expresses and communicates with one's same sex attraction. This is often called "coming out" or "coming out of the closet". But the entire process of coming out doesn't have to be a one-time action, for many it is continuous and a lifelong element (Emetu, R. E; Rivera, G, 2018)

Coming out is a continuous, multifaceted process of learning to understand and accept the true self while grappling with the expectations imposed by the society. This process of coming out where individuals identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or

queer (LGBTQIA+) is deeply personal and filled with challenges. Some of the current stigma associated with LGBTQIA+ identities has origins in religious beliefs. Although each religion, sect and place of worship may vary in its beliefs around LGBTQIA+ issues, and there are a growing number of LGBTQIA+-affirming denominations and congregations, there are still many religious individuals and communities that believe and promote the idea that being LGBTQIA+ is unnatural, a sin or goes against God.

Repression

In order to avoid societal stigma or discrimination, an LGBTQIA+ person may choose to not acknowledge their sexual orientation or gender identity. They may choose to seek out heterosexual relationships or to live as the gender they were assigned at birth despite knowing that these identities are not truly right for them. Some people may choose celibacy in order to avoid awkward sexual encounters, or to only have sexual or romantic relationships in secret (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.).

Shame is a pivotal theme. Osita grapples with his internalized biases and fears about his desires, and Vivek confronts feelings of abandonment and self-acceptance. For Osita, shame prevents him from fully embracing his feelings for Vivek and acknowledging his true self. Vivek, on the other hand, channels his shame into anger towards Osita for his past rejection. In the process of coming out, Vivek finds a home, a comforting space with his friends while his actual or real home is filled with restrictions and repression. His friend's support creates a home that is away from his home where he faces despise and opposition.

Home away from Home

In the powerful book of Akwaeke Emezi the author meditates on identity and belonging. The concept of home is layered both in traditional, emotional and physical way. Vivek's biological home is a place of subversion. His mother Kavita and father, De Chika make it a place of constraint, where the parents love him but they are restricted with traditional values

and rigid expectations. It is a space where he cannot express his identity, where his parents are denying his sexual orientation. He is pressurized to follow *heteronormativity* and binary gender roles making the home an emotionally and physically insecure, where his identity is denied. He perceives his home to be a cage where he has no freedom to express his desires and be himself. His anger and isolation get reflected in his statement, “You’re keeping me in a cage!” he shouted. “You think I want to stay in this house every night like a prisoner? Is that why you brought me back?” (Emezi, 2020, p.92)

In the night Vivek escapes from home and spends night on the plumeria trees. It is an act of defiance and a desperate escape from the confines of the home. It symbolizes his longing for freedom and self-discovery amidst extreme emotional chaos. Within his body he is facing a battle. His body is also his home and a battleground. His gender non-conformity and eventual acceptance of his fluidity is a journey of his relationship with his body. The idea of home is not fixed in the novel – it rather not an external space but an internal one. Vivek feels at home with his own body and makes a radical move in the end to transgress from social norms to refuse confirming to the *heteronormativity*. Initially he is in battle with his body where he denies his fluidity. Gradually he becomes bold to come out of the closet and feels home with his body.

Vivek has a chosen home that is provided by his friends, who accept him and give a home to express his gender identity, and a home for self-expression. He finds acceptance, love and freedom as against refrain, restrictions and unacceptance of his fluidity, and queerness. This home is established due to understanding, acceptance and appreciation. Even after Vivek’s death when his mother Kavita is in denial and desperately tries to cover up for Vivek’s *non-normative* behavior by saying he was sick, his friends protect him. Vivek’s friends maintain their loyalty to him amidst Kavita’s grief ridden anger.

When Vivek’s mother is handed the photographs of her son dressed in girl’s clothes with makeup, she is furious. As she goes through the photographs one by one, she can’t believe

her eyes. The images in photographs play strongly on her mind because she doesn't wish to accept the reality of her son's non-binary, non-heterosexual preferences. The images are vivid and play a strong role in making her grief stricken and angry.

“Bas!” Kavita raised her hand for silence. “It’s enough. You people will not sit here and tell me my son wanted you to call him she. It’s . . . it’s unnatural.”

“But it’s true,” said Elizabeth. “That’s just who he was.”

“That is not who my son was!” shouted Kavita, throwing the pictures to the floor.”

(Emezi, 2020, p. 217)

Thus, when Kavita is in denial to accept her son the way he was, Vivek's friends on the other hand are upset by Kavita's reaction. Smoto then steps in and says that he never belonged to you (Kavita). And because Kavita was not accepting Vivek's non-heterosexual personality, he never shared it with her. That is why he kept it a secret in the last months of his life. He never trusted his parents. Infact his parents never knew what was going on in his life. Vivek's friends then tell Kavita that they were trying to protect Vivek and ensured that nothing happened to him. This is how family and society oppresses liminality and despises non-heterosexual individuals, denying their identity. Even after death Vivek's family tried to erase his real identity of being queer. His home is not a place where he gets acceptance but faces humiliation. The concluding part of the book reflects the fact that Vivek's family wishes to erase the queer identity of their revered son.

Identity erasure even after Vivek's death

Every individual has a particular identity and when it is tried to be fitted within the structure of a society it leads to erasing some part of the individual's identity. Though in the outset it can be perceived as something simple, it is complex. At times the society or some people try to erase a part of an individual's identity for their benefit. In Vivek's case his desire to grow his hair was condemned and criticized by his father De Chika and his aunty Mary, who

feared that he might be instigated and mocked by the people for growing his hair. Kavita (Vivek's mother) made every possible effort to neatly comb and tie it to not make it obvious that it has grown too long. But the fact that Vivek grows his hair is his desire to look like a woman. And the desperate attempt by his family to hide it is a part of his identity erasure.

Vivek dies in mysterious circumstances; he is seen fallen at the doorstep with girl's clothes and make up on his face. At his funeral he is dressed in male clothes which is an attempt to hide from the society his queer identity. Vivek's parents erase his identity even after his death. As mentioned before Vivek's mother is in complete denial of her own son's queerness when she sees the photographs where he is dressed in girl's clothes with make up on his face. She shouts to his friends and says that he was sick and they should have informed her about it if they knew.

Infact Osita does everything to discourage Vivek from projecting and dressing up like a woman. He is queer but hides it and tries to erase Vivek's queer identity in the beginning. Osita pushes Vivek away from him and warns him never to come close to him despite the fact he loves Vivek. Even on the day Vivek dies he attempts to leave their friend's home dressed like a girl with makeup adorning his face. Osita stops Vivek and that is a desperate attempt to erase his identity and discourage him from coming out of the closet. Throughout the book Vivek's family, relatives and Osita make attempts to hide his true queer identity as its unacceptable in Nigerian homophobic society.

Conclusion

The novel, 'The Death of Vivek Oji' represents the repression by *heteronormative* society of *non-heterosexuality* and queerness. Akwaeke Emezi through the life experiences of Vivek, Osita, family and friends reflect on the oppressive homophobic Nigerian society where queer individuals are denied freedom to express their identity. They feel suffocated since they have to hide their sexuality and cannot epress themselves openly.

Heteronormativity harms everyone, even heterosexual individuals, but the laws, religion and society in Nigeria are repressive and orthodox, which lead to isolation and frustration among queer individuals. Their voice and identity are erased to never be heard. In fact the law in Nigeria too criminalizes same sex relationships leaving no respite for the non-heterosexual individuals denying a rightful place in the society. The novel penned by Akwaeke Emezi narrates incidents that throw light on the process of coming out of Vivek and Osita.

Vivek has accepted their sexuality and wishes to assert it publicly, while Osita seems to be ashamed about it. Vivek finds it comfortable to be at a friend's home and feels free to dress as a girl, something that cannot be done at home, where the environment is repressive and regressive. Amidst so much of refrain, Vivek becomes a symbol of rebellion in the novel, which reflects upon the present position of the queer community in Nigeria. Legal rights are denied making the process of coming out painful. In this homophobic society it becomes vital that literature and art voice the opinion of the queer community.

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