THE DISCOURSE OF IMPOSED IDENTITY IN UZODINMA IWEALA'S *SPEAK NO EVIL*

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Abstract

Identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that plays a significant role in African literature. African writers explore the intricate connection between individual and collective identity and the impact of race, culture, history, and colonisation on the African experience through their literary works. The crux of the discussion had before now dealt with the representation of identity in African literature by examining the power and importance of reclaiming and redefining identity in the African context and highlighting the need to reconcile with the past while forging a new identity rooted in African values and traditions. Identity in African literature has always been explored from a position of colonial othering rather than sexual orientation. This paper uses psychoanalytic theory as a critical framework to explore the inner psychological conflicts and trauma faced by the protagonist of Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil*. The novel presents the story of Niru, a Nigerian-American teenager whose struggle with his sexual identity is exacerbated by cultural, religious, and familial pressures. Through Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic lenses, the paper analyses the internal dissonance between Niru's desires and the identities imposed upon him by his environment. Drawing also on Frantz Fanon's postcolonial psychoanalysis, the paper underscores how the convergence of race, sexuality, and immigrant expectations leads to profound psychological fragmentation and unresolved trauma. The conclusion highlights the deadly consequences of identity imposition and the necessity of cultural and emotional spaces for authentic self-expression.

Keywords: Discourse, Identity, African Identity,

Introduction

Identity, according to Bamberg's *Identity and Narration*, "designates the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory" (67-68). The complexity of the term is evident from this definition. Identity concerns have been the subject of numerous narratives, ranging from the classical Bildungsroman, which describes the protagonist's growth and education from childhood to adulthood, through postmodern examinations of the fractured self in literature and life experiences.

Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* recently addressed the continuity/change conundrum. In it, he states, "Let me recall the terms of the confrontation: on the one side, identity as sameness; on the other, identity as selfhood" (116). Thus, he refers to the dual nature of individual identity in this passage. Sameness denotes the constancy of the self, whereas selfhood refers to the dynamic aspect of the person. Conceptions of self and identity are likewise undergoing ongoing change. For instance, Klages described the *self* as "a conscious being who had the power of logic and rationality to discover the truth about the workings of the world, and who was able to act and think for himself or herself, independently of external influences, and also was able to think reflexively about the status of his or her own being" (89). In contrast, the concept of identity or selfhood is no longer regarded as being natural or innate but rather as socially produced in poststructuralist theory. The notion that identity is built through the tales we tell ourselves and one another about who we believe we are and that narrative constructions give meaning to the ambiguity of reality appears to cross disciplinary boundaries.

According to Ricoeur, self-understanding is an interpretation that makes meaning of our lives, and our sense of selfhood entails arranging the events in our lives (235). We come to terms with our identities by developing our life stories. However, any sense of identity stability is an illusion. As Ricoeur has noted, as long as one is still alive, one's life story will always be unfinished as identity processes are, therefore, dynamic. Kermode notes that they are the outcome of discussions and social interactions. According to him, identity refers to activities through which people establish, maintain, and change their identities (465). There will, however, always be interactions with other people or novel circumstances that question a person's rank and role, resulting in incongruence. Then, the self-image must be renegotiated. Because we are a part of a society and a culture, identity is not established once and for all but is constantly being revised.

The Nature of African Identity

For decades, writers have attempted to assert African identity, with each writer considering this identity from the perspective of his field of study. However, the idea of what constitutes identity for the African is complex and sometimes ambiguous in nature. Several methods have been adopted in attempts to define African identity. These include the anthropological, philosophical, sociological, linguistic/hermeneutic, historical, scientific, humanistic, psychological, geographical, religious, and statistical interpretative methods of inquiry. The

anthropological dimension is one of the most dominant approaches to examining African identity. As Diop puts it, an anthropological method engages a more comparative and historical dimension towards understanding what counts as a people's identity (235). The idea of a common history in African identity is usually seen from the angle of particular historical trajectories. This is said to be making Africans bond together anywhere. This may be a history of slavery, inter-tribal wars, common ancestry, etc. By this, Africans are construed as prosecuting common ideals and goals and fostering brotherhood relations. This idea of a common history is also seen as influencing that of a common language. Though African languages are not uniform, Africans accept as part of their one who descends from Africa and shares languages of the continent. Cultural factor is considered in this identity. This talks of cultural elements and traits such as cultural artefacts, modes of greetings and trades. Even in the diaspora, considering their points of convergence and divergence, what binds African communities and African settler communities in other nations outside Africa together seems to have a lot to do with their common history.

Imposing Identities in African Society

Part of what makes the thought of an objective African identity complex is the internalist versus externalist conflict in perceiving Africans. The way Africans view themselves is different from the way outsiders view them. In recent times, what is responsible for this is our moral identity. The moral identity crisis affects all other areas of consideration of African identity, whether political, historical, or psychological. Before colonialism, Africans' perception of themselves was based more on internal viewpoints. By this, they were able to form world views that directed the affairs of the continent. During and after colonialism, their perceptions became increasingly external in outlook. This latter status of Africans' perception of themselves is dominated by colonial influence. This shapes how Africans define identity as being different from how the outsiders define them.

Modern African literature depicts the struggle of African writers to reverse the European colonial discourse of representation in an attempt to reconstruct a postcolonial national African identity. Some would argue that the literature has successfully portrayed the concept of identity. This is a false notion because while African literature has successfully established the ecosystem of identity, it has yet to pay adequate attention to the question of sexual identity and its implications in the African social schemata. The sexuality debate is closely linked to the already existing field or subfield of queer and gender studies in literature. It is, however, still a struggle to explain the nuances of homosexuality as it deviates from the African social and culturally acceptable heterosexual norms. The paper examines how imposed identity affects the protagonist's psyche and the consequences of such imposition.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Freud Sigmund's psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud showed an interest in traumatic events during two periods: the years between 1892 and 1896, when he examined the causes of hysterical attacks. His original theory postulated actual sexual experiences during infancy and early childhood as the cause of trauma and the basis for neurosis. In his later work with war veterans, Freud acknowledged the role of actual experiences in the development of neuroses (mental disorders) and distinguished between traumatic neuroses and anxiety

neuroses based on whether a neurosis was caused by a real occurrence or an imaginary experience, experiences such as accidents, death and combat. In contrast, anxiety neuroses were the result of sexual and aggressive fantasies based on early witnessing of the primal scene.

In his short paper, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915/1957), Freud recognised not only that "in the unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality" but that in the death of another, even when it is someone we love, there is something of a triumph for the survivor. Added to the impact of the traumatic event is the task of mourning for others and the self – for the person's lost world, pre-trauma life and identity, as well as guilt feelings. Freud also compared the fear of losing one's own life with the fear of taking someone else's life. This suggested that a person might also be traumatised by the violence he inflicts on others. With this observation, a place is opened for traumatic guilt alongside traumatic fear.

Freud believed that the pathogenic agency is invested in the patient's memory of the trauma. When the attached effect of traumatic experiences is discharged, memories of the events become ordinary recollections accessible to the conscious mind. However, Freud notes that reaction discharge is not always possible, and undischarged memories are said to enter a "second consciousness" where they become secrets, either isolated from the conscious personality or available to it in a highly summarised form.

Developments and shifts in classical psychoanalytic thought and the emphasis on the role of fantasy in the development of trauma are well documented by scholars. These scholars note that Freud's underestimation of the role of actual traumatic experiences in the development of adult psychopathology was challenged in the writings of many classical psychoanalysts all of whom emphasise the reality of early childhood traumatic experiences. According to Scharff (2014), the experience of trauma, therefore, results in a regression to what is referred to as "the most fundamental trauma", which is "that the child cannot count on being held securely and with respect for the body, the mind, the emotions, and the essence of the child."

Greenacre (1952) added to the theory of trauma in her proposal that trauma is an "inevitable part of psychological development" which every individual is likely to experience and that it is the "timing, type and intensity" of the trauma that are the crucial factors in the psycho-genesis of symptoms. He also proposed that the "primary trauma-toxigenic event" of witnessing the primal scene renders the individual susceptible to the development of pathology later in life when traumas are imbued with meaning based on early traumatic events. His work is valuable in that she linked the concept of regression to early experiences of trauma in her understanding of later experiences of trauma. A range of experiences may be traumatic. On the one hand, these may be violent and unexpected incidents.

Through his exploration of the inner world of trauma, Kalsched (2013) found that the traumatised psyche is self-traumatising: "Trauma does not end with the cessation of outer violation, but continues unabated in the inner world of the trauma victim, whose dreams are often haunted by persecutory inner figures." His second finding is the seemingly perverse fact that victims of psychological trauma continually find themselves in life situations where they

are re-traumatised: "It is as though the persecutory inner world somehow finds its outer mirror in repeated self-defeating 'reenactments'- almost as if the individual were possessed by some diabolical power or pursued by a malignant fate" (Kalsched; 2013). This theoretical framework fits this study as it will help analyse the protagonist's inner struggles and how his ordeal re-enacts and traumatises him.

Identity in African Literature

Modern African literature depicts the struggle of African writers to reverse the European colonial discourse of representation in an attempt to reconstruct a postcolonial national African identity. As their countries gain independence, many writers stress cultural nationalism as a moral duty and call for an authentic presentation of African history, heritage, and culture. This study examines this presentation and the consequent construction of the African national identity in significant works of modern African literature. Identity has always been a prevalent staple in Modern African Literature. The idea of identity has always been key, even in the spirit behind the birth of literature. The concept of this literature is tied to the need to re-portray the concept of the African identity, leading to the colonialist–anti-colonial literary schism which conditioned the literature in those early days. The literature was born out of a desire to reaffirm and, in some cases, defend the African culture, tradition and norms. Closely tied to the concept of identity is a need to defend the literature and, by extension, the people from the colonialist theory and literary culture, which portrayed Africa as backward, savage and daft. This new literary itineration was born out of a need to counteract the prejudice and alien encroachment of Western ideas and literary devices.

The literature, therefore, in its defence of identity, has portrayed the continent, its land, mystical life, social order and justice, its culture and tradition, time and space and even its folklore in the most positive and pleasing morally acceptable light. This was achieved by casting the plethora of Indigenous African cultural identity in a favourable literary light, which has been possible due to the litany of literary and creative African representations that have emanated, sprouted from the African continent and influenced by African nuance over time. Therefore, the overarching statement of fact is that African writers have managed to entrench the concept of the African identity and its nuances in several aspects throughout the history of the literature. Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* crafts a poignant narrative that interweaves themes of race, sexuality, family, and silence. The text grapples with the question of identity – more precisely, the imposition of identity - and its traumatic effects on the psyche of a young Nigerian-American boy, Niru, who is torn between the expectations of his conservative Christian Nigerian parents and his emerging homosexual identity, This paper employs Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, alongside insights from Frantz Fanon's postcolonial psychoanalysis, to examine how the imposed identities Niru faces result in deep internal conflicts, psychological repression, and eventual trauma. The novel's psychological terrain offers a harrowing look at the emotional toll of living inauthentically in a world that punishes deviation from imposed norms.

Analysis

Freud's model of the psyche, which comprises the id, ego, and superego, provides a valuable framework for understanding Niru's internal conflict. The id represents the reservoir of

instinctual drives and desires, particularly those related to sexuality and aggression. It operates according to the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification of desires without regard for social norms or consequences (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*). In Niru's case, his homosexual impulses, which he recognises as early as adolescence, reside in this domain. These desires are natural and spontaneous, yet they are viewed as morally wrong within his cultural and religious background. His id manifests in his homosexual desires, which naturally seek expression and love.

Niru realises that he developed a sexual attraction towards fellow men and little or no attraction to women. As the narrative exposes:

> "At home I would watch women with women and men with women on my phone, trying only to focus on women as I touched myself. But those men, their bodies, their sounds. I wanted to gauge out my eyes." (17).

Niru tries all these because he is in conflict with himself, defeating himself from within. The superego functions as the internalised moral authority derived from parental, cultural, and religious injunctions. It operates according to the morality principle, striving for perfection and imposing guilt and shame when its standards are not met. Niru's superego, constructed by religious orthodoxy, cultural expectations, and patriarchal authority, all of which condemn homosexuality, tries to love women as his mother has urged but realises he has no attraction to them. For Niru, the superego has been shaped by his father's stern Christian beliefs, the church's condemnation of homosexuality, and traditional Nigerian expectations of masculinity. These values are so deeply internalised that even in private, Niru experiences profound guilt and anxiety about his sexual orientation.

Early on, the reader is presented with the imbalance and disruption that can occur if a person of African descent with conservative and religious family leanings like Niru is socialised into the more Liberal and expressive American culture. Niru, therefore, faces a paradigm of imposed identity as he struggles to fit in.

The dominant cause of Niru's struggle is the backlash that comes with his sexual identity. The revelation of his homosexual orientation sets him on a collision course with his Nigerian parents. However, in his teenage years, Niru started to realise the difference between sexualities. This leads to a conflicted ego that attempts to repress his desires to maintain familial acceptance. The repression, in turn, leads to neurosis, guilt, and emotional fragmentation. Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage also illuminates Niru's plight. He is caught between the 'ideal-I', the image projected by family and society of what he should be, and his fragmented self that cannot align with this illusion.

Caught between these opposing forces, the ego emerges as the mediating structure tasked with balancing the unrealistic demands of the id and superego within the constraints of reality. It functions according to the reality principle, using defence mechanisms such as repression, denial, and projection to manage internal conflict (Freud, "Repression"). In *Speak No Evil*, Niru's ego is under intense pressure. It tries to reconcile his desire for emotional intimacy with men (id) and the shame imposed by religious and cultural standards (superego). He attempts

to suppress his sexual identity, avoid confrontation, and remain silent about his struggles. This psychic balancing act gradually breaks down, leading to increasing emotional distress, alienation, and, eventually, tragic consequences.

Forced Identity and the dynamics of contrast

Iweala's *Speak No Evil* is a contemporary novel written in the first person. This narrative allows the reader to forge a close bond with the protagonist, Niru Ikemadu, an intelligent 18-year-old Nigerian American high school senior residing in Washington, DC, with his migrant family. The emotions engendered by Iweala represent confusion, instability and a great deal of discomfort. Thus, Niru experiences Homi Bhabha's sense of *unhomeliness* (1994). The *home* is generally perceived as a security, belonging, clarity, and stability space. The *unhomeliness* begins when the *home* is shifted away from the familiar, emanating a sense of terror, hence uncanniness (124).

In *Speak No Evil,* the landscapes of the protagonist's Nigerian roots and the landscapes of Washington create the first scale of identity clash that will precipitate the discourse of forced identity from a geographical space. This clash creates an overlap as Niru cannot fit in correctly as a Nigerian yet does not fully belong to America. Niru's Nigerian roots are critical in intensifying a state of forced identity precipitated by the clash resulting from his family's Nigerian background and American residency. Niru's struggle is worsened by the lack of a symbolic framework to articulate his sexuality within his cultural and religious community. He becomes a subject in crisis, unable to reconcile his symbolic and imaginary selves.

The narrative exposes Niru's admiration for other men on different occasions, such as in their dressing rooms. When they changed to go for sports, Niru would watch fellow boys' bodies with sexual admiration. Niru had, however, learned from his mother that "boys aren't supposed to like other boys" (16). His mother had also urged that God say man is for woman and woman is for man. That is how it is supposed to be. So Niru decided to love girls even though he did not feel for them. "I decided I would only like girls even if I could feel that I liked looking at them less than I should" (Iweala, 2018, p.16).

Again, the reality of being displaced from an African setting onto a new land robs Niru from experiencing the needed stability that enhances growth. Iweala explores the uncanny nature of the spaces around Niru, taking into consideration the confusion Niru experiences when balancing the two different "worlds" he is a part of. The inability of Niru to combine these alternating realities leads to the complex destabilisation the protagonist experiences.

This alienation is apt in the relationship Niru has with his father. To Mr. Ikemadu, Niru's identity due to his homosexual leaning has reduced to dehumanising aspects of his rigid and conventional identity. This causes him to draw parallels with Niru's elder brother, OJ, who is more in tune with the father's expectations. The first example of this imbalance is seen on Page 32, where Mr. Ikemadu violates Niru's physical space in the kitchen. This irrefutable hostility is confirmed when Niru is consequently slammed on the kitchen table and slapped multiple times before his mother terminates the abuse (32). The abuse is also verbal, as recorded as in this instance, he berates Niru and yells:

You want to go and do gay marriages? Is that what you want? You want to go and carry man, put your thing for his nyashi?" Abomination! You want to go and do all sorts of despicable, filthy, unnatural and unclean things? (32).

Mr Ikemadu's response to the queer identity Niru attempts to identify with is reflective of the violence meted out to queer Africans by members of the community as well as family in some instances, which has shown the African cultural representation, especially in the twenty-first century. Though progress has been made towards improving the experiences of sexual minorities in places throughout Africa where homosexual acts are condemnable by law, "the risk inherent in pursuing those rights range from financial costs to stigma to a negative political reaction and possible exile, injury, or death" (Akanji and Epprecht 35). This passage shows how the queer identity has come to be treated as a threat to the family's existence. As such, persons who identify as queer are forced to change their identity in order to fit into the family and communal system that does not make provision or allow for homosexual tendencies. This is why Mr. Ikemadu sees Niru as a threat to both him and the family unit in the collective. His father becomes a symbol of the African collective as his reaction to Niru's orientation establishes his position that the queer is Anti-African. This position leads to Niru being seen as a contradiction (being queer and African).

The imbalance is also explored in Niru's inability to come to terms with the desires of his id and superego and the realities they engender. He is left without a proper immersion into the family space, as his sexuality is almost always used as a barrier to drive him away. It becomes evident when he no longer recognises himself in his family pictures and stares blankly at the "family that owns me" (116). He also highlights the extent of alienation when he refers to his house as "this beautiful prison my parents have built" (116). For Niru, the house is no longer a home where he is warm and accepted but a prison that traps him from expression. The home becomes a place where he also puts on a different identity, furthering the notion of an imposed identity.

In this passage, we also see the effects of these alienating sides as even Niru's thoughts seem almost always to be caught in this space where he longs for the best of both worlds. Initially, he starts accepting himself more in the American views of homosexual practices. This makes him wish he was 'white' and that he could abide by the laws of the country he calls home. This statement is followed by him looking down at Reverend Olumide's Bible Verses Cards and hoping "there is still a chance to change my ways" (116), proving the persistent instability of thought. Iweala provides his readers with the imbalance caused by the merging of two cultures through the instability presented in the conflicting identities occupying Niru physically and mentally.

One of the significant ways Iweala presents the identity crisis Niru experiences is the use of contrast. As the text progresses, Niru contrasts Meredith with his brother OJ. After Meredith's advances are rejected, and she leaves Niru alone to wander her home, Niru stumbles on his words and finds it hard to think of something suitable to say to Meredith. He is then overwhelmed by memories of OJ and his confidence, wishing he could be more like him in this specific moment so that he wouldn't find himself in such a mess to begin with (15). Here,

Iweala makes it clear that OJ was summoned in Niru's mind as a way to escape the reality of having to tell Meredith that he was not attracted to her for reasons other than her not being pretty enough. The clash between "coming out" in the American world and OJ's capability of escaping any uncomfortable situation proves the discomfort Niru feels.

Despite Niru's persistent attempts to defy everything Meredith says by remembering OJ, he can never entirely resist her. Meredith represents one side of Niru's life, while OJ illustrates the other. Indeed, much of Niru's time spent with Meredith is subconsciously followed by a recollection of a series of choices that OJ would have taken as opposed to Niru's, leading to the depiction of a more positive outcome than the one Niru would currently be experiencing. In a sense, Niru believes that embracing his Nigerian culture would lead to acceptance and validation in his father's eyes, like OJ's. In contrast, his American culture would enable him to come out and identify with his sexuality.

Although Niru is forced to lean towards his American side as it is the side that best appeals to his superego (sexuality), it does not necessarily offer him a safe space. This is because although Niru does not want to travel to Nigeria, he turns down Meredith's offer to come to live with her as "the thought of perpetual self-consciousness, of walking from an unfamiliar bedroom to an unfamiliar bathroom in the mornings, of eating salmon and steak tartar instead of jollof rice and egusi soup with okporopo didn't feel like home either" (56). This imbalance in thoughts is evident in the contrast between Niru's different mental spaces, in which he is in a constant state of confusion and is incapable of settling on one cultural identity. The tangibility of his choices anchors him to a reality which ultimately renders him muddled and in a constant state of soul-searching. Iweala denies Niru the ability to pick between these two completely different spaces in an attempt to portray the discourse of forced identity that plagues his protagonist.

Niru's psychological journey is marked by silence, repression, and withdrawal. Niru's parents, influenced by the homophobic interpretations of their Nigerian and religious upbringing, see his sexual orientation as being enforced by satanic sources. Hence, it can only be cured through strong prayers and spiritual intervention. His father subjects Niru to physical violence and religious exorcism. Niru is escorted to Nigeria for strong and powerful prayers and spiritual revival sessions aimed to cast out the 'demon' of homosexuality in a bid to "correct" his identity. These experiences are traumatic re-enactments of symbolic and physical violence aimed at erasing his authentic self.

According to De Souza (2016, p.29), in religious circles, it is usually those people believed to be possessed by evil spirits that require deliverance. This entails that Reverend Olumide's declaration that Niru needs deliverance suggests that evil spirits possess Niru. His growing silence and emotional shutdown reflect the psychoanalytic concept of the return of the repressed. Unable to voice his truth, Niru internalises the hate and shame projected onto him. Niru has no choice but to accept to go to Nigeria:

> I wonder if my father and reverend Olumide are right, maybe there is something truly abominable about me that only purifying fire of constant prayer can purge. Maybe I have spent too much time in the United States soaking up ungodly

values and satanic sentiments as my father has said and that has created confusion that only the motherland can cure. (32)

As the text progresses, the futile nature of these spiritual interventions is exposed. They do not have the desired effect. Niru also attempts to suppress his sexual leanings in an attempt to please his father. This is also short-lived, as his inner identity does not reconcile with the invented sexuality he is forced to live with. Instead of the identity being accepted, a new one is forced on him as Pastor Olumide chalks off his sexuality to the work of demons:

This demon of homosexuality has become so entrenched in America that you can't really fight it there, some churches are preaching that love of any kind is good while some of them have lost their way and are appointing gays as their clergy" (72).

The above quote gives the impression that homosexuality is a behaviour that is embraced well in the United States, even by churches. Niru cannot speak out for himself and explain his feelings and thoughts. In essence, he is stripped of a voice due to the sexually intolerant and abhorrent cultures that determine the social world he inhabits. He is constantly silenced despite his attempt to explain himself "Daddy let me tell you..." When Niru and his father discuss the decision to go to Nigeria, his father enforces the idea that Niru is a child, which assumes a conflation of adolescence with childhood, and, as a result, Niru is not old or mature enough to speak for himself. The father tells Niru, "You're still a child and you don't know what you are doing to your life...Look at the shame on us now because you are deciding for yourself" (48). Not only does he claim that Niru's naiveté, a consequence of his age, misguides him, but that his acting on childhood instinct has a negative impact on the family as a whole. For Mr. Ikemadu, Niru's orientation can be explained by an association with childhood.

Imposed Identity and the Antagonist of Racism

Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* is divided into two parts. The first is narrated by its protagonist, Niru, and the second by his white friend Meredith, whose feelings for Niru teeter between friendship and romance. Part two shifts the narrative to Meredith's perspective and revolves around her long-term emotional response to Niru's death. She tells us a few pages in that she and Niru get into an argument while they are out drinking at a bar; the police arrive as the fight moves outside and escalates into a yelling match, and they shoot and kill Niru because, as Meredith assumes, all they see is a tall disgruntled black man standing over a smaller white woman. This part is also poignant in the thrust of the analysis of this section. Iweala cleverly switches antagonists. While the first part chronicles the struggle between Mr Ikemadu as a representation of the African values, belief system and ideological leanings, the white cop who guns down Niru represents the colonial polity. Mr Ikemadu is bent on imposing a heterosexual identity on his son, while the colonial racist-driven cop has already imposed one on him. This imposed identity leads to his eventual shooting as he is mistaken for an assailant as he towers over Meredith in the throes of an argument.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* offers additional insight. Niru's experience of being Black, African, and gay in a predominantly white American society enforces a double

consciousness and internalised self-alienation. He must perform an identity palatable to white America while suppressing his sexuality to satisfy his Nigerian heritage. This postcolonial lens highlights the psychic trauma that results from being overdetermined by multiple conflicting identities.

Niru's Inner Struggles and Trauma

Niru's demise adds nuance to the representation of his identity as imposed and not determined by what he was but either what people wanted him to be (Mr Ikemadu) or what he was perceived to be. His life terminates at an intersection of race and sexuality. His sexuality makes it difficult to identify as black in the space Mr. Ikemadu creates. This is sad because his black body assumes a significant meaning in his charged racial surroundings. His death becomes a result of the white supremacist ideology that continues to condition the Eurocentric mind and stunts the portrayal of blackness. It becomes symbolic of the unlivable burden of imposed identity.

Niru's perception is a result of centuries of a white supremacist ideology that continues to condition the minds of mainstream Americans that black children are potentially dangerous. This leaning further increases their proximity to death. As the African American studies scholar Christina Sharpe reminds us in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,* "Black people become the carriers of terror, terror's embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror's multiple enactments; the ground of terror's possibility globally" (15). This is evident in the moments that lead to the death of Niru. Meredith speculates how bystanders are likely processing the circumstances of their argument. She states:

> "There is a half-moon of bystanders around us now, waiting for something to happen so they can tell each other, remember that time when—he was like six four—dude, he looked like he just got out of prison—total thug—complete felon—yeah" (160).

Through this imagining, which reflects itself onto the reader's perception of the police officers who shoot and kill Niru, Meredith, a white female narrator, admits to knowing the stakes of their public argument. Iweala's text explores the consequences of racism and sexual intolerance and bases the two at an intersection in Niru's life. The organisation of the text's second part dissects the issue of cultural appropriation. In order to interpret the larger system at work in the second part of the novel, we must understand Meredith's narrative not just as a consequence of the racial injustice that leads to Niru's death but also how it disallows the possibilities for reconciliation and understanding between his family and most importantly, his father. His death becomes a tragedy as his identity is never truly resolved. Iweala hints at this loss in the last sentences of part one before switching to Meredith's perspective in part two. "I clutch the door handle and bounce on my toes," Niru states:

> My calves burn. Get in the car now, [his father] shouts. I can feel his anger vibrate against the closed window. What's wrong with you? Our eyes lock through the glass. He checks the rearview mirror again. It will never stop, I say. Carpe diem, I say. My phone buzzes. Niru just get in, get in and let's talk about

> this...Then I turn and run through the cars to the shoulder lane. My legs are so tired. My chest burns, but I don't stop. Just keep breathing, I tell myself. It gets better. Niru, my father shouts, please come back, talk to me. But there is nothing left to say. (140-41)

Up until this point, Niru's father appears as the primary antagonist as his inability to accept Niru's sexual identity, as well as his attempts to force a heterosexual identity on Niru, constitutes the thrust of the text. These issues cause the insecurities that result in the decision to leave home. When he discusses his insecurities with Damien, Damien's response alludes to his need to leave his family behind. He tells Niru, "You're new at this... don't worry, it gets better...It did for me, once I left home" (115). Niru's argument with and running away from his father, then, symbolises the idea of leaving for sexual freedom as well as a well-deserved break from the imposed identity which his family forces on him. The decision to leave home later results in his death, which is also a result of the same concept of mistaken identity. Niru's death at the hands of the police ultimately eliminates the opportunity for his and his father's reconciliation. As such, "America" replaces Niru's father as the novel's antagonist because it disallows a fully realised exploration of queer African possibility via the child.

Conclusion

Iweala's *Speak no Evil* emphasises how the mixture of Niru's race, sexuality, Nigerian Culture and American citizenship informs our understanding of the text and gives a clearer understanding of the space where Niru is shoehorned into. The evaluation of his family's homophobia forces him to attempt to change his sexuality, and the reality of racial violence in the United States instigates the forced identity, which later culminates in his death. The text breaks down the historically rendered dichotomy between Western racism and African barbarity that comes with homophobia. It is in this dichotomy that Niru lives and eventually dies. This paper uses psychoanalysis to reveal the devastating effects of identity imposition *in Iweala's Speak No Evil*. The protagonist struggles to be his authentic self in a world that denies his right to self-definition, resulting in psychological fragmentation and trauma. Freudian repression, Lacanian alienation, Homi Bhabha's unhomeliness and Fanonian double consciousness all converge in his experience, making his death a tragic but telling commentary on the violence of cultural, religious, and racial expectations. The text ultimately calls for empathetic spaces that affirm diverse identities and allow for emotional and psychological healing. Iweala's work underscores the urgency of dismantling systems of silence and repression so that individuals may live and speak their truths freely. It advocates the awareness of the idea of tolerance, especially in a society like Africa, where sexual neutrality or homosexual-oriented leanings are seriously frowned upon.

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