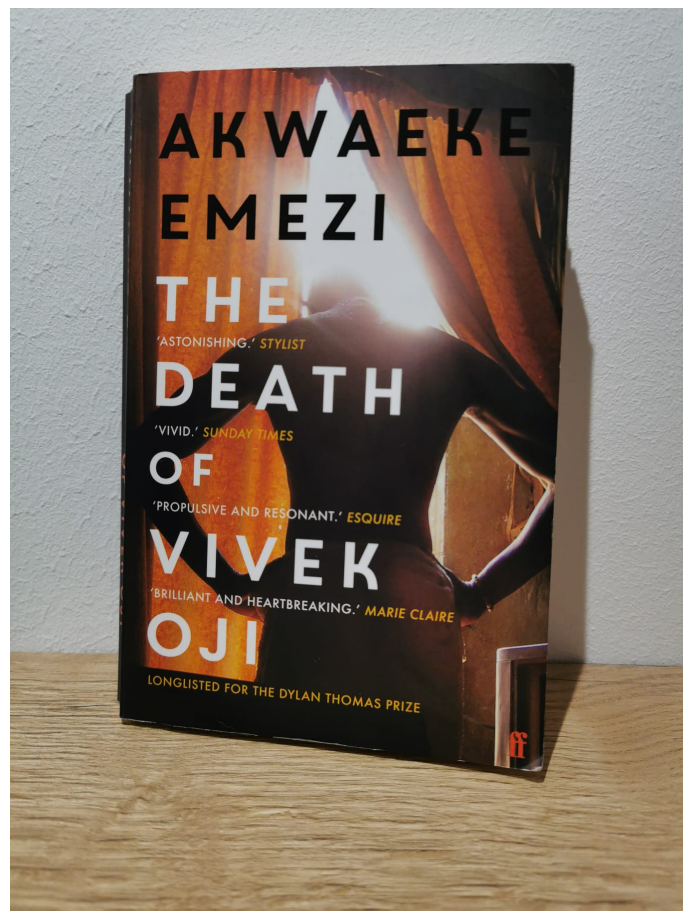


REVIEW

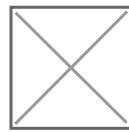
The Cost of Conformity — A Review of “The Death of Vivek Oji” by Akwaeke Emezi

by Dolores Hunsky



***The Death of Vivek Oji* (Riverhead Books, 2020) is a captivating novel that focuses on family, friends, identity, and belonging. It explores the difficulties of growing up, (not) having the need to fit into a box, and finding your own voice in a pandemonium of expectations and unrealistic criteria. Akwaeke Emezi, the ingenious mind behind this remarkable story, will have even the most open-minded readers questioning their sympathy, testing their patience, and by the end of the story, reflecting on their own behaviour. Anyone who dares to read this novel will end it with a fresh perspective on various aspects of life, such as love, death, or rebellion.**

The Death of Vivek Oji falls into the category of books that one picks up and does not put down before finishing it. Published in 2020, it instantly became a *New York Times* bestseller. It is everything that the reviews claim it to be: astonishing (*Stylist*), vivid (*Sunday Times*), brilliant and heartbreaking (*Marie Claire*) ... It is meticulously written, profoundly composed, and curiously alluring. The story seduces the reader and takes them to a world that seems so far away, yet so close and familiar. The reader does not stand a chance — the novel is bound to engulf them, take them for a ride they could never have seen coming, and as they read the last page, they will be spat out, exhausted and bare, lost in emotions that the fictional world had shoved down their throat and made them process.



“The Death of Vivek Oji” by Akwaeke Emezi ©
Dolores Hunskey

This is how Vivek was born, after death and into grief. It marked him. (p. 14)

The fragmented narrative and the carefully structured chapters that slowly unravel the story keep the reader constantly on their toes. In the first few sections, every other sentence seems to be a tease, a Chekhov’s gun just waiting to be fired. Until the very last chapter, the reader

is left with assumptions, guesses, and deductions, eagerly awaiting the answers they have craved since the very first chapter, which is, intriguingly, a single sentence:

They burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died. (p. 1)

Who is Vivek Oji? Why did they die? What does the market have to do with it? Countless more questions are raised before any answers are given. As curiosity killed the cat — the reader wants answers. Luckily, satisfaction brought it back — the book delivers all of them at its own pace, eventually coming full circle.

The novel takes place in Nigeria, where it follows the life of Vivek and his family and friends. Through ordinary people and everyday situations, Emezi weaves an extraordinary story that transcends family, friendships, and life itself. The challenges of growing up, loving and being loved, the expectations and the unforeseen scenarios that life has the pleasure of supplying. All of these are addressed in the story, along with (self-)identity exploration, prejudice, and the cost of conformity. As the *Los Angeles Times* already wrote: “[It] is a relatively slim book that contains as wide a range of experience as any saga” ([source](#)).

I don’t know how long it had been happening before I noticed. (p. 22)

Emezi’s masterpiece is a classic trauma narrative veiled in gothic elements that will make every reader sympathize with the characters. It shows various ways of dealing with grief, addressing mental states such as depression, dissociation, and PTSD. For gothic lovers, the story does not lack supernatural elements, sexuality, and the chaos that gothic literature usually provides, along with the “Otherness”. A feeling that both divides and unites people — for who has not felt othered before? Who has not found themselves scared, curious of, or perhaps even bothered by the “Other”? Every coming-of-age story has its challenges,

deviances, and peculiarities; however, not many are told as honestly as this one.

As a child I was light [...] I wanted to stay empty [...] I couldn't figure out if something was wrong with me or if this was just my life — if this was just how people felt. (pp. 89–90)

The Death of Vivek Oji is not just about grief and growing up. It is about love, patience, and acceptance. It is a fierce reminder of why feminism is still needed, why the annual pride parades must continue, and how empathy can make all the difference. Emezi's portrayal of sexism and misogyny, rape and domestic violence, the coming out and homophobia is commendable and incredibly well thought through. Although not in the centre of the story, these are crucial elements that drive it. They remind the reader of the cruel world that surrounds them outside of these pages, and unapologetically demonstrate the effects of bigotry and fear in contrast to kindness and acceptance.

She was too angry to cry, too young to save her mother and take her away from this country and the man who had trapped her here.
(p.135)



Emezi in 2018, made available by National Book Foundation, CC BY-SA 4.0

Moreover, the novel offers an insight into life in Nigeria; the cultural aspects of living there as a woman, a queer person, or an immigrant. Inevitably, Emezi addresses the injustice that conservative societies fester, and how easily various

kinds of discrimination seep into one's subconscious as well as their everyday actions. Homosexuality in Nigeria is a criminal offence — the stigma and fear reflected in the story

are unvarnished. Nobody with a shred of compassion will remain unmoved by Vivek's story and the stories of others in the book. It also serves as a warning — a not so gentle nudge — that actions have consequences; sometimes irreversible ones. It poses a question of what kind of person one will end up choosing to be — the kind who puts their pride and reputation before someone's wellbeing, or the kind that becomes a chosen family to those who are confined by the unrealistic expectations of the community that is supposed to protect them.

Some people can't see softness without wanting to hurt it. (p. 113)

The addition of Igbo and Indian words, as the native languages of Vivek's parents, gives the narrative another dimension. It opens the gate to a foreign culture that aches to be explored, heard, and recognized. It gives the characters their rightful heritage and enriches the story — it is a thread that connects and grounds them. As for the reader, those willing to explore the words will learn about a fascinating culture, explore a foreign cuisine, and discover new layers and meanings of the story.

So ask yourself if it feels right, and somewhere, deep inside of you, there's a compass that will tell you whether or not you're right or wrong. (p. 161)

The Death of Vivek Oji won the 2021 Nommo Award for Best Novel and the Audie Award for Literary Fiction or Classics. It was longlisted for the 2021 Aspen Words Literary Prize and nominated for the Goodreads Choice Awards. It is an outstanding and thought-provoking example of contemporary fiction that not only engages the reader but also encourages them to reflect on their values and the cis-heteronormative expectations of the world that we live in. *The Death of Vivek Oji* will touch anyone willing to open their heart to it. It carries a voice that inspires and teaches us love, empathy, and mutual respect.