

Desire, Deviance, and Social Judgment: Reframing Moral Decay in *Little Rot* and *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty*

Julius Nsirim AKANI

Department of English Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt

E-mail: julius.akani@uniport.edu.ng

Juliet Oluchi AKANI

Department of English Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt

Abstract

This paper interrogates the relationship between desire, deviance, and social judgment in the fiction of Akwaeke Emezi, focusing on *Little Rot* (2024) and *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* (2022). Rather than treating moral decay as an objective condition or a straightforward marker of social decline, the study reconceptualises it as a category produced through perception, discourse, and normative regulation. Drawing on Critical Social Theory, the analysis demonstrates that Emezi's narratives destabilise fixed moral categories by foregrounding the fluidity of desire, the uneven application of judgment, and the persistence of gendered double standards. Urban space emerges as a crucial site in which deviance is simultaneously normalised and selectively sanctioned, revealing the contradictions that underpin contemporary moral discourse. Across both texts, acts that attract condemnation are shown to depend less on intrinsic ethical content than on visibility, context, and the positionality of the subject involved. In this sense, morality operates less as a stable framework of values than as a shifting system of social interpretation. The article argues that what is commonly described as moral decay is better understood as the outcome of social judgment functioning as a form of regulation, through which certain desires and identities are marked as deviant while others remain unexamined. By repositioning morality within the dynamics of perception and power, the study reframes moral decay not as ethical collapse but as a contested narrative shaped by the politics of seeing, naming, and judging.

Keywords: Moral Decay, Social Perception, Deviance, Gender, Urban Modernity, African Fiction.

1. Introduction

Problematizing Moral Decay

Discourses of moral decay in contemporary African societies are often advanced with an air of certainty, as though decline were empirically self-evident and normatively agreed upon. Yet such claims rarely withstand closer scrutiny. What appears as “decay” is seldom a neutral description of social reality; it is, more often, a contested judgment produced within specific cultural, historical, and ideological frames. In this sense, moral decay functions less as an observable condition than as a diagnostic language through which societies express

*Corresponding author
Article history

: Julius Nsirim AKANI
: submitted, 2026/02/20 revised, 2026/03/18 accepted, 2026/04/16 published 2026/05/11

anxiety about change, particularly in relation to sexuality, gender roles, and urban life. This article begins from that tension. Rather than asking whether moral decay exists, it interrogates how the category itself is assembled, circulated, and authorised within public and narrative discourse. The problem, then, is not the presence of deviance as such, but the terms through which deviance is named and stabilised. This shift—from condition to construction—repositions morality as a site of negotiation rather than consensus. It is within this contested terrain that contemporary African fiction, especially the work of Akwaeke Emezi, becomes analytically productive.

The persistence of moral-decay rhetoric in Nigerian and broader African contexts is not incidental. It often emerges at moments when established moral frameworks encounter practices that exceed their explanatory reach. Sexual autonomy, non-normative relationships, and the reconfiguration of intimacy in urban settings are frequently read as evidence of ethical decline, even when such readings reveal more about the anxieties of observers than the actions themselves. Classical sociology already warns against taking such diagnoses at face value. Émile Durkheim's account of anomie, for instance, does not simply mark moral breakdown but signals a condition in which normative frameworks lose coherence under pressure from rapid social transformation [1]. What is crucial here is that instability is not equivalent to collapse; it is a moment of reconfiguration, where competing moral logics coexist without clear hierarchy. When contemporary commentators label such moments as “decay,” they often compress complexity into a language of loss, thereby foreclosing alternative readings. This paper examines moral discourse itself as an object of analysis.

If Durkheim alerts us to the instability of norms, Michel Foucault compels a further move: to examine how norms are produced, enforced, and internalised. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault demonstrates that modern forms of power operate less through overt coercion than through subtle mechanisms of surveillance and normalisation [2]. Applied to moral discourse, this insight shifts attention from actions to processes of judgment—who is seen, who is named, and under what conditions behaviour becomes legible as deviant. Moral decay, in this light, is not a stable descriptor but an effect of disciplinary practices that render certain bodies and desires visible as problems. Crucially, such visibility is uneven. Some forms of excess are normalised, even celebrated, while others are marked as transgressive. The distinction does not arise from the intrinsic nature of the act but from the social positioning of the subject and the interpretive frameworks brought to bear upon it. The implication is clear: morality operates as a field of power in which perception is not passive but constitutive.

This unevenness becomes particularly pronounced in relation to gender and sexuality. Feminist and post-structuralist interventions have long demonstrated that moral judgments are rarely applied symmetrically. Judith Butler's theory of performativity, for example, shows how gender norms are not simply followed but reiterated and policed through social recognition, producing the illusion of stability [3]. What counts as acceptable desire is therefore not given but negotiated through repeated acts of validation and sanction. Within many African contexts, this negotiation is further complicated by the intersection of tradition, religion, and modernity, each of which claims moral authority. The result is not a single moral order but a layered and often contradictory set of expectations. It is precisely within these contradictions that accusations of moral decay gain traction, functioning as a means of disciplining bodies that appear to exceed normative bounds. Yet, as this article will show, such accusations often reveal the fragility of the norms they seek to defend.

It is at this juncture that the fiction of Akwaeke Emezi becomes particularly instructive. In both *Little Rot* and *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty*, morality is neither upheld as stable nor dismissed as irrelevant; rather, it is staged as a field of tension in which desire, judgment, and social expectation intersect in unpredictable ways. Characters move through spaces—urban, intimate, and social—where the boundaries between acceptable and deviant behaviour are constantly negotiated. Importantly, these negotiations are not abstract. They are embedded in everyday interactions, in the language of gossip and reputation, and in the internal dialogues through which characters assess themselves. Emezi's narratives thus refuse the simplicity of moral binaries, foregrounding instead the processes through which actions become meaningful as moral or immoral. This refusal is not merely aesthetic; it is analytical, inviting readers to interrogate the frameworks through which they themselves judge.

The present study takes up that invitation by advancing a central claim: what is commonly described as moral decay in Emezi's fiction is better understood as the outcome of social judgment operating as a regulatory mechanism. This claim reorients the analysis from behaviour to perception, from action to interpretation. It suggests that the key question is not whether characters act immorally, but how their actions are read, narrated, and evaluated within specific social contexts. Such a shift has significant implications. It allows us to see that morality is not a fixed standard against which behaviour is measured, but a dynamic process through which meaning is assigned. It also foregrounds the role of power in shaping that process, highlighting how certain voices carry greater authority in defining what counts as deviance. By situating Emezi's work within this framework, the article contributes to a broader rethinking of moral discourse in contemporary African literary studies.

The sections that follow develop this argument in a structured progression. The next section examines the conceptual foundations of moral discourse, drawing on social theory to demonstrate how deviance is constructed rather than discovered. Subsequent sections turn to close readings of the two novels, analysing how urban space, desire, and gendered expectations shape the production and perception of moral categories. The analysis culminates in a consideration of social judgment as a form of regulatory power, showing how external evaluation becomes internalised as self-surveillance. Across these sections, the article maintains a consistent focus on the interplay between desire, deviance, and social judgment, tracing how each informs the others. In doing so, it seeks not to resolve the question of moral decay, but to reframe it as a problem of interpretation—one that remains open, contested, and deeply embedded in the politics of everyday life.

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative textual and interpretive approach rooted within Critical Social Theory to analyze the role of desire, deviance, and social judgement in *Little Rot* and *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* by Akwaeke Emezi. This methodology aims to examine how and in what ways moral categories are discursively, perceptually, and powerically reinforced, constructed, and negotiated through the texts chosen. Through close textual analysis, the study interrogates compositional features such as narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, spatial representation, and symbolic patterns to reveal how morality is interpreted, rather than objectively defined. This analysis primarily draws on theoretical insights provided by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Émile Durkheim and Erving Goffman to understand how surveillance, performativity, anomie and stigma are interrelated

and reflect social regulation in present-day Africa's urban settings. This chapter centers on how urban spaces create morality through visibility and ordering, how desire creates an unstable ethical terrain, and expectations of femininity/masculinity create disproportionate moral subjectivities. The methodology also utilizes interpretive discourse analysis of language regarding gossip, reputation, shame, and social labeling in the novels, mapping how moral meaning is constructed through quotidian acts of evaluation and narration. The selected texts are deliberately selected for their rich representations of intimacy, social perception, and a nuanced moral ambiguity in contemporary African society. Using this analytical framework, this study shows that moral decay is far more appropriately analyzed as a process of interpretive governance that is socially mediated through dynamics of power, visibility, and cultural norms.

3. Results and Discussion

Moral Discourse and the Construction of Deviance

Moral discourse, in contemporary social and literary theory, does not simply describe ethical reality; it actively participates in producing what is later recognised as “deviant.” Within this framing, deviance is less an objective category than a socially negotiated outcome of competing interpretive systems. What appears as moral clarity is often the sedimentation of repeated acts of naming, classification, and exclusion. In Emezi’s fictional worlds, this instability becomes visible not through abstract theorisation but through lived encounters in which characters are continuously read, misread, and re-read by their social environments. The implication is that morality does not precede discourse; it is generated through it, and sustained by it. This section therefore shifts attention from moral judgment as an outcome to moral discourse as a productive mechanism of social ordering.

Michel Foucault’s work remains foundational in understanding this mechanism, particularly his account of power as something that circulates through knowledge systems rather than residing in fixed institutions. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that modern societies regulate individuals through subtle forms of surveillance and normalization rather than overt coercion [4]. What is significant here is not merely that individuals are watched, but that they internalise the possibility of being watched, thereby adjusting their behaviour accordingly. Deviance, in this sense, is not discovered after the fact; it is anticipated and pre-structured through disciplinary regimes. When read alongside contemporary African urban narratives, this framework reveals how moral categories are not imported intact but reassembled within local systems of visibility, class, and intimacy. The novels under consideration dramatize precisely this process of anticipatory self-regulation.

However, Foucault alone does not fully account for the performative instability of moral identity. Judith Butler’s theory of performativity extends the argument by suggesting that identity itself is not a stable essence but a repeated enactment of socially legible norms. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that what is taken as “natural” identity is in fact the effect of repeated citation of norms that pre-exist the subject [5]. This insight is crucial for understanding how moral deviance is constructed in relational rather than absolute terms. Within Emezi’s fictional landscapes, characters are not simply judged for what they do; they are continuously constituted through how their actions are interpreted within dominant moral scripts. The result is a moral field that is unstable, recursive, and deeply contingent on recognition. Deviance, therefore, is not a fixed attribute but a failed or contested performance of normative expectations.

Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie adds another layer of analytical depth, particularly in relation to moral uncertainty. For Durkheim, social instability arises not from the absence of norms but from their weakening or inconsistent application, producing a condition in which individuals no longer have clear moral reference points [6]. In contemporary readings, anomie is less about total collapse and more about normative fragmentation. This is especially relevant in urban African contexts where multiple moral frameworks—religious, economic, digital, and traditional—coexist without full integration. The novels implicitly reflect this fragmentation by presenting characters who navigate overlapping and sometimes contradictory moral expectations. What appears as deviance is often the outcome of conflicting normative systems rather than moral failure in any absolute sense. This reframing is essential for moving beyond simplistic narratives of moral decline.

More recent scholarship complicates this theoretical triad by foregrounding the moral economy of deviance as a socially distributed process. Zoogah [7] argues that deviance is not merely regulated by formal institutions but also shaped through informal moral economies that circulate within everyday interactions and communal judgments [7]. This perspective is particularly useful for reading Emezi's narratives because it draws attention to how moral meaning is produced through gossip, reputation, and everyday evaluative speech. In such contexts, moral discourse is not centralized but diffused across social networks that assign value to behaviour in uneven and often contradictory ways. The implication is that deviance is less a category than a relational effect produced through interpretive repetition. Moral discourse, therefore, operates as a decentralized system of classification that continuously negotiates the boundaries of acceptable life.

When these theoretical strands are brought together, a clearer conceptual picture emerges. Moral discourse can be understood as a dynamic field in which power, performance, and interpretation intersect to produce shifting categories of deviance. Foucault provides the logic of surveillance and discipline, Butler introduces the instability of identity formation, Durkheim supplies the condition of normative fragmentation, and Zoogah extends the analysis into contemporary moral economies. Yet what binds these perspectives in the context of Emezi's fiction is the recurring tension between action and interpretation. Characters do not simply inhabit moral categories; they are actively inserted into them through social reading practices that precede and exceed their intentions. In this sense, deviance is not what people are, but what they become through discourse.

This leads to a critical refinement of the central argument: moral categories are not merely descriptive labels but operational tools that organise perception itself. They determine what is seen, how it is seen, and what can be said about what is seen. Within this framework, deviance is produced at the moment of interpretation rather than at the moment of action. Emezi's texts therefore do not simply depict moral ambiguity; they expose the mechanics through which ambiguity is resolved into judgment. The significance of this lies in its reversal of conventional moral logic: instead of asking why people deviate, the more pressing question becomes how certain forms of life are rendered intelligible as deviant in the first place. Moral discourse, then, is not a mirror of ethical reality but a system for producing it.

Ultimately, this section establishes the theoretical foundation upon which the rest of the analysis builds. By reframing deviance as a discursive and interpretive construction, it becomes possible to read urban space, desire, gender, and surveillance not as separate thematic concerns but as interconnected sites where moral meaning is continuously negotiated. The novels under study do not merely represent moral conflict; they stage the very

conditions under which moral conflict becomes legible. What emerges is a model of morality as an ongoing process of social inscription rather than a fixed code of conduct. This conceptual shift is crucial for understanding the subsequent sections, where the focus moves from discourse itself to the spatial, affective, and gendered conditions under which discourse operates.

Urban Space and the Normalisation of Deviance

Urban space in Emezi's fictional imagination is not a neutral backdrop for moral action; it is an active participant in the production, distribution, and modulation of moral meaning. What appears at first as "deviance" is repeatedly shown to be spatially organised, unevenly regulated, and selectively interpreted depending on where actions occur and who is positioned to observe them. In *Little Rot*, the city is not depicted as a site of moral collapse but as a layered environment where visibility itself becomes the primary condition for moral classification. As one narrative formulation suggests, "nobody was really watching," a phrasing that does not indicate the absence of norms but rather the diffusion of surveillance into ambient indifference. This apparent absence of observation produces not moral freedom, but moral unpredictability. Within this spatial configuration, morality becomes less about rules and more about when and where actions become visible enough to be interpreted.

This logic aligns with Achille Mbembe's reading of African urban modernity as a space of intensified circulation, fragmentation, and overlapping regimes of visibility. Mbembe [8] argues that postcolonial urbanity is characterised not by coherence but by "entanglement," where multiple temporalities and moral orders coexist without stable hierarchy. In such environments, moral meaning is constantly deferred, recalibrated, and renegotiated depending on situational visibility. Emezi's urban world reflects this condition by refusing a singular moral centre from which judgment can be consistently issued. Instead, moral perception is distributed across shifting social fields, where proximity, class, and exposure determine whether behaviour is rendered ordinary or excessive. The city thus becomes a site where morality is not lost but continuously reorganised through spatial logic.

A crucial dimension of this spatial morality is the relationship between anonymity and moral indifference. In *Little Rot*, urban anonymity does not liberate subjects from judgment; rather, it suspends judgment until visibility becomes unavoidable. This suspension is not neutral, because it produces uneven moral thresholds where similar behaviours are differently interpreted depending on context. As the narrative subtly suggests, indulgence is often absorbed into social life as "just part of the lifestyle," a formulation that normalises excess through class-coded perception rather than ethical evaluation. Here, what might be condemned in one setting is reframed as sophistication in another. This disparity reveals that morality is not uniformly applied but stratified through social positioning, where privilege acts as a filter for interpretation. The city, therefore, does not erase moral codes; it redistributes them unevenly across space.

This spatial redistribution of morality is further complicated by the neoliberal organisation of urban intimacy. Burchardt [9] notes that contemporary urban environments often produce contradictory moral economies in which economic aspiration and ethical critique coexist without resolution. Within such frameworks, moral judgment becomes secondary to survival, aspiration, or social mobility. Emezi's depiction of urban life resonates with this condition by showing how characters navigate moral ambiguity not as a crisis but as an everyday condition of urban belonging. Actions are not judged in isolation but in relation to their social intelligibility within particular urban micro-contexts. This means that what appears as deviance from a

distance may function as normative behaviour within a specific social enclave. The city, in this sense, produces morality as a matter of scale and perspective.

The narrative further complicates moral visibility by introducing the idea that judgment is activated only when actions become “too visible to ignore.” This formulation is crucial because it reveals the threshold logic of urban morality: not all acts are equally subject to interpretation, and not all interpretations are equally possible at all times. Visibility, therefore, operates as a trigger for moral classification rather than a passive condition of observation. This aligns with Foucault’s broader argument that modern power operates through regimes of visibility that determine what can be seen, said, and regulated [10]. However, Emezi’s fiction pushes this insight further by showing that visibility is not simply imposed from above but is also socially negotiated, unevenly distributed, and sometimes deliberately avoided. Moral judgment, then, is not simply about surveillance but about the contested production of perceptibility itself.

Tucker’s [11] work on African urban sexualities further deepens this analysis by demonstrating how intimacy in urban spaces is shaped by overlapping regimes of secrecy, exposure, and moral speculation. In such contexts, sexuality is not merely regulated by formal norms but by informal economies of visibility that determine what is sayable, visible, and reputationally consequential. Emezi’s narrative logic mirrors this structure by showing how intimate actions are never purely private; they are always potentially translatable into public moral discourse. This translatability creates a condition in which urban subjects must constantly anticipate how their actions might be reframed within social interpretation. What emerges is a form of anticipatory self-regulation that is spatially conditioned rather than legally enforced. The city thus becomes a moral amplifier, intensifying the consequences of visibility rather than stabilising ethical meaning.

Within this framework, urban space does not produce moral clarity but moral elasticity. Actions stretch and contract in meaning depending on who observes them, where they occur, and how they are narrated afterwards. This elasticity is not random but structured by intersecting hierarchies of class, gender, and social proximity. As a result, moral discourse in the urban environment is always partial, always situated, and always subject to reinterpretation. The implication is that deviance cannot be understood outside the spatial conditions that render it intelligible in the first place. Emezi’s city is therefore not morally chaotic; it is structurally selective in how it assigns meaning to behaviour.

Thus, *Little Rot* reframes urban space as a system of moral modulation rather than moral decay. The city does not eliminate ethical boundaries; it reorganises the conditions under which those boundaries are perceived and enforced. What appears as moral loosening is, in fact, a recalibration of visibility, judgment, and social intelligibility. By foregrounding the uneven distribution of observation and interpretation, the text reveals that morality is less about fixed principles than about spatially embedded systems of perception. This insight allows for a broader theoretical claim: urban deviance is not the breakdown of moral order but the reconfiguration of how moral order becomes visible, contested, and lived.

Desire and the Instability of Moral Categories

Desire in *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* does not appear as a stable emotional orientation or a clearly bounded ethical category; rather, it emerges as a force that unsettles the very possibility of fixed moral interpretation. What is striking in Emezi’s rendering is not simply that characters “desire wrongly,” as in the case of Feyi and Joy (1-2) but that desire itself resists the grammar through which moral judgment is ordinarily articulated. One of the most revealing narrative articulations captures this instability in the phrasing that desire

“didn’t make sense but felt right,” a formulation that immediately dislocates rational moral accounting from embodied affect. The tension embedded in this line is not incidental; it is structural to how the novel stages the breakdown of moral certainty. Feeling becomes a competing epistemology, one that does not obey the logic of ethical consistency. In this sense, desire does not violate morality; it exposes its limits of explanation.

Judith Butler’s account of performativity provides a necessary theoretical lens for understanding this instability, particularly her argument that subjectivity is not expressed but continuously constituted through repeated acts of recognition and norm citation. Butler [12] insists that what appears as coherent identity is in fact the effect of regulatory practices that produce intelligibility. Within this framework, desire is not external to moral discourse but is already shaped by the very norms it appears to disrupt. Emezi’s characters therefore do not stand outside morality when they desire; rather, they move within a field where desire and normativity are already entangled. The moral uncertainty that emerges is not a failure of judgment but a symptom of competing regimes of intelligibility. Desire, in this sense, becomes a site where normative coherence begins to fracture under its own interpretive weight.

This fracture becomes more pronounced in moments where the narrative foregrounds internal conflict, particularly where the subject oscillates between “knowing better” and acting otherwise. This split is not merely psychological but epistemic, revealing that moral knowledge does not guarantee moral action. The subject is shown to inhabit two incompatible registers simultaneously: one governed by social expectation and another by affective intensity. The result is not resolution but sustained contradiction, where ethical certainty is continuously deferred. What matters here is not the transgression itself but the inability of the subject to stabilise its meaning. Moral categories, therefore, do not collapse; they become internally contested within the subject who is supposed to embody them.

This internalisation of contradiction is further complicated by the novel’s treatment of intimacy as temporally and socially misaligned. The narrative describes attachment forming “in the wrong place at the wrong time,” a formulation that shifts moral evaluation away from intrinsic wrongdoing toward situational misfit. The language of “wrongness” here is particularly significant because it does not indicate inherent ethical violation but contextual dissonance. In other words, what is judged as morally problematic is not the act itself but its timing, placement, and social readability. This reframing is analytically crucial because it reveals that moral categorisation is not anchored in universal principles but in contextual expectations. Desire, therefore, becomes legible as deviant only when it fails to align with socially expected coordinates of appropriateness.

This instability resonates strongly with contemporary queer African theoretical interventions that challenge the assumption of fixed sexual and moral identities. Otu and van Klinken [13] argue that queer subjectivities in African contexts often emerge through negotiations with heteronormative frameworks that do not fully accommodate their forms of relationality. Within such conditions, desire is not simply a matter of personal expression but a contested site of social intelligibility. Emezi’s narrative aligns with this perspective by refusing to stabilise desire as either liberation or transgression. Instead, desire is shown as a shifting field of interpretation, constantly refracted through social expectation and moral anticipation. The instability of moral categories is therefore not incidental but constitutive of how desire becomes socially readable in the first place.

Macheso [14] further extends this reading by emphasising how Emezi’s fiction disrupts normative coherence through what he terms “queer epistemic interruption,” a process through

which narrative structure resists stable moral closure. This concept is particularly useful for understanding how *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* refuses to resolve desire into either ethical affirmation or condemnation. Instead, the text sustains ambiguity, allowing desire to remain partially untranslatable within dominant moral vocabularies. This refusal of closure is not aesthetic excess but analytical strategy: it forces readers to confront the limits of moral categorisation itself. Desire, in this configuration, becomes a site where interpretive systems falter under the pressure of affective complexity. Moral categories do not disappear; they lose their authority to fully contain experience.

What emerges across these narrative and theoretical convergences is a consistent destabilisation of moral legibility. Desire is not positioned as an exception to moral order but as a force that reveals its internal inconsistencies. The subject does not simply act against morality; the subject exposes the fragility of the frameworks through which morality is read and enforced. This is why the language of contradiction—“knowing better” while acting otherwise—should not be read as psychological inconsistency but as structural exposure of moral incoherence. In this sense, Emezi’s fiction does not depict moral failure; it stages the conditions under which moral categories fail to remain self-consistent.

Here, desire is repositioned as an epistemic disturbance within moral discourse rather than a deviation from it. The significance of *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* lies not in its portrayal of transgressive intimacy, but in its sustained refusal to stabilise the interpretive frameworks through which intimacy is judged. Desire becomes the site where moral language reveals its own limits of coherence, forcing a reconsideration of what it means to label, evaluate, or categorise lived experience. In this way, moral categories are not abolished but rendered unstable, provisional, and dependent on context rather than essence. This instability sets the stage for the next analytical movement, where the focus shifts from desire as internal contradiction to gender as a structured field of moral asymmetry.

Gendered Double Standards and Moral Policing

Gender in Emezi’s fictional world is not merely a social identity; it operates as a moral coding system through which actions are unevenly interpreted, ranked, and disciplined. What appears as moral judgment is often a gendered distribution of interpretive consequence, where identical behaviours produce radically different ethical outcomes depending on who performs them. In both *Little Rot* and *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty*, female sexuality becomes a primary site where moral discourse intensifies, not because it is inherently more “deviant,” but because it is more aggressively read through normative frameworks of respectability. This is evident in the recurring circulation of labels such as “easy” or “loose,” which function less as descriptions of behaviour than as social verdicts that collapse identity into moral conclusion. These terms do not simply describe deviance; they produce it by fixing interpretation in advance of any ethical evaluation. Gender, therefore, becomes a mechanism through which moral meaning is unevenly stabilised.

This process aligns with Saba Mahmood’s influential critique of liberal assumptions about agency, where she argues that subject formation is not always oriented toward resistance but often operates through the internalisation of normative structures [15]. In this sense, agency cannot be reduced to freedom from norms but must be understood as shaped within them. Emezi’s female characters navigate precisely this tension, where their actions are continuously filtered through external moral expectations that precede their intentions. What is judged as moral failure is frequently the misalignment between lived experience and socially sanctioned femininity. The significance of this lies in its exposure of morality as a gendered

technology of intelligibility rather than a neutral evaluative system. Moral discourse, therefore, does not merely respond to behaviour; it actively constructs the conditions under which female behaviour becomes readable as deviant.

This asymmetry becomes even clearer when contrasted with male sexual behaviour, which is often absorbed into cultural normalcy rather than subjected to moral scrutiny. In *Little Rot*, male indulgence is frequently naturalised through phrases that frame excess as “just how men are,” a linguistic move that transforms potential deviance into cultural inevitability. The analytical weight of this formulation lies in its capacity to convert behaviour into essence, thereby exempting it from ethical interrogation. What is particularly striking is that the same acts, when performed by female characters, are not read as expressions of identity complexity but as moral deviation requiring explanation. This uneven distribution of moral consequence reveals that gender is not merely a category of identity but a structure of interpretive privilege. Moral discourse, in this configuration, functions less as judgment than as asymmetrical classification.

Olorunoba-Oju’s work on sexuality discourse in Nigerian contexts further illuminates this dynamic by showing how moral narratives around sexuality are deeply embedded in cultural scripts that privilege masculine freedom while constraining female expression [16]. Within such frameworks, female sexuality is not evaluated on its own terms but through pre-existing narratives of respectability, purity, and social value. Emezi’s fiction amplifies this condition by dramatizing how these narratives are not static but continuously reproduced through everyday speech, gossip, and reputational circulation. The result is a moral economy in which women are more likely to be interpreted as morally legible subjects of scrutiny, while men remain partially insulated from similar evaluative intensity. This is not simply inequality of judgment but inequality in the production of moral visibility itself. Gender, therefore, structures not only what is judged but what becomes available for judgment.

Mkhize deepens this analysis by situating heteronormativity as a regulatory system that governs both desire and social recognition in African contexts. According to this perspective, heteronormativity does not merely exclude non-conforming identities but actively produces the terms through which legitimacy is assigned. In Emezi’s narratives, this manifests in the constant negotiation between visibility and respectability, where characters must navigate the risks of being seen in ways that contradict normative expectations. Female characters, in particular, are positioned within a field where visibility itself becomes morally charged. To be seen is not neutral; it is already to be interpreted. This condition produces what can be described as a heightened moral vulnerability, where identity is perpetually exposed to reinterpretation.

The circulation of judgment through social discourse further intensifies this vulnerability, particularly in the way reputations are constructed through what is “said about her” rather than what is directly observed. This mechanism reveals that moral identity is not anchored in empirical verification but in narrative repetition. Once a label is attached, it circulates independently of its original context, acquiring authority through social reiteration rather than factual grounding. This is where gendered moral policing becomes most visible: women are more likely to be absorbed into discursive economies where their identities are stabilised through repeated moral interpretation. The effect is not simply reputational damage but epistemic confinement, where alternative readings of identity become increasingly difficult to sustain. Moral discourse thus functions as a mechanism of narrative closure rather than ethical inquiry.

At this point, it becomes necessary to recognise that gendered moral asymmetry is not an incidental feature of social judgment but a structuring principle of interpretive power. Moral categories do not operate evenly across subjects; they are distributed through hierarchies that privilege certain forms of behaviour as culturally intelligible while rendering others as morally problematic. Emezi's fiction does not merely illustrate this imbalance; it exposes the underlying logic through which it is sustained. By foregrounding the differential treatment of male and female sexuality, the texts reveal that morality is not a universal framework but a situated system of social regulation. Gender, therefore, is not simply a site of moral judgment but one of its primary organising principles.

This demonstrates that moral discourse cannot be separated from the gendered structures that sustain it. What appears as ethical evaluation is in fact a patterned distribution of interpretive authority that privileges certain identities while constraining others. Emezi's narratives make visible the mechanisms through which gendered subjects are inserted into moral economies that predefine the meaning of their actions. In doing so, they reveal that morality is not a neutral space of evaluation but a deeply structured field of asymmetrical perception. This insight extends the broader argument of the paper: moral categories are not simply applied to gendered subjects—they are actively produced through gendered systems of visibility, interpretation, and social narration. The next section will extend this analysis by examining how these judgments become internalised as regulatory power within the subject itself

Social Judgment as Regulatory Power

Social judgment in Emezi's narrative universe does not operate as a passive reaction to behaviour; it functions as a regulatory system that actively shapes how subjects perceive themselves, anticipate others, and organise their conduct. What appears as external critique is gradually revealed to be an internalised structure of surveillance, where individuals begin to inhabit the perspective of the judging other even in moments of solitude. This is most clearly articulated in narrative moments where characters feel as though they are "being watched even when alone," a formulation that collapses the boundary between external observation and internal consciousness. The significance of this shift is that surveillance is no longer spatially located; it becomes psychological, anticipatory, and self-generating. In this condition, moral judgment ceases to require an external agent because the subject has already absorbed its logic. Social judgment thus becomes a form of distributed discipline embedded within subjectivity itself.

This internalisation aligns closely with Foucault's account of modern disciplinary power, where surveillance operates not primarily through coercion but through the production of self-regulating subjects. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the Panopticon as a mechanism that induces a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power (Foucault, 1977, pp. 201–209). The key insight here is that power becomes most effective when it is no longer visibly exerted but internally anticipated. Emezi's fictional world extends this logic beyond institutional structures into the domain of everyday social life, where judgment is dispersed across informal networks of perception. What matters is not who is watching, but the persistent possibility of being interpreted. This anticipatory condition transforms moral life into a continuous negotiation with imagined scrutiny.

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and self-presentation further clarifies this dynamic by showing how social identity is managed through interactional performance. Goffman (1963,

pp. 11–17) argues that individuals constantly adjust their behaviour in anticipation of how they will be perceived by others, particularly when managing potentially discrediting attributes. In Emezi's narratives, this performative adjustment is not limited to exceptional situations but becomes a general condition of social existence. Characters are shown to continuously recalibrate their self-presentation in response to perceived moral expectations, even when no explicit accusation has been made. This reveals that stigma is not simply a label imposed after deviation but a pre-emptive structure that shapes behaviour in advance. Social judgment, therefore, operates as a horizon of expectation that streamlines identity before it is fully articulated.

The emotional dimension of this regulatory system becomes particularly visible in the operation of shame, which functions as a bridge between external judgment and internal self-regulation. Shame in these narratives does not arise solely from wrongdoing but from the anticipation of how actions will be perceived by others. This is captured in narrative moments where characters are preoccupied with “what it would look like to others,” a formulation that shifts moral evaluation from action to appearance. The implication is that ethical life is no longer grounded in intention or consequence but in perceptual framing. Shame thus becomes an affective mechanism through which social norms are internalised without explicit enforcement. It operates as a silent regulator that reorganises behaviour in accordance with imagined social visibility.

Butler's later work on subject formation deepens this understanding by emphasising that subjection is both enabling and constraining, producing the very subject it governs. Within this framework, the subject is not simply oppressed by norms but constituted through them, even as those norms restrict its possibilities. Emezi's characters exemplify this paradox, as they simultaneously resist and reproduce the moral frameworks that define them. The internalisation of judgment does not eliminate agency but reconfigures it within the boundaries of anticipated perception. This means that selfhood is not a pre-existing entity that is judged from the outside; it is an ongoing effect of interpretive processes that are socially embedded. Social judgment, therefore, is not external to identity but constitutive of it.

The cumulative effect of these processes is the emergence of what can be described as distributed moral discipline, where regulation is no longer centralised but dispersed across everyday interactions, expectations, and internalised perceptions. In such a system, there is no singular authority issuing moral verdicts; instead, judgment circulates through a network of imagined audiences, social memories, and anticipated evaluations. This is why characters often appear to regulate themselves even in the absence of direct scrutiny. The social world becomes an internalised field of possible interpretations, each carrying the potential to stabilise or destabilise identity. Moral life is thus not governed by fixed rules but by continuous interpretive adjustment to perceived social meaning.

This internalisation of surveillance fundamentally alters the relationship between subject and morality. Rather than acting according to fixed ethical codes, individuals begin to act according to how their actions might be read, interpreted, and narrated by others. The distinction between action and appearance collapses, replaced by a regime in which perception becomes the primary site of moral determination. Emezi's fiction captures this condition with particular intensity, showing how subjects become both the producers and recipients of moral discourse. They are not only judged; they participate in their own judgment through anticipatory self-monitoring. This recursive structure ensures that social judgment remains active even in moments of apparent isolation.

What happens here therefore reveals that social judgment functions as a deeply embedded regulatory system that extends beyond external critique into the formation of subjectivity itself. What begins as public evaluation becomes internalised discipline, and what appears as moral assessment becomes a structure of perception through which identity is continuously formed and reformed. Emezi's narratives do not merely depict this process; they expose its logic, showing how subjects are shaped by the very judgments they seek to anticipate and manage. In doing so, they reveal that morality is not an external code imposed upon individuals but an internalised system of interpretive governance. This insight completes the movement from external discourse to internal regulation and sets the stage for the concluding section, where these strands converge into a broader rethinking of moral categorisation itself.

4. Conclusion

Reframing Moral Decay as Interpretive Governance

This study set out to reconsider the assumption that moral decay is a stable or empirically verifiable condition within contemporary social life and literary representation. Across the preceding sections, what has gradually emerged is a sustained displacement of "decay" as an explanatory category, replaced instead by a more intricate account of moral meaning as a function of perception, discourse, and social interpretation. The novels by Emezi do not present morality as collapsing; rather, they expose the conditions under which moral categories are continuously produced, stabilised, and destabilised through shifting regimes of visibility and judgment. What initially appears as ethical breakdown is more accurately understood as interpretive instability within contested social worlds. This reframing is crucial because it shifts the analytical focus away from moral essence toward moral production. In doing so, the paper repositions morality not as a static code but as a dynamic field of social inscription.

Across the analysis, a consistent pattern has been established: moral categories are not inherent to actions but are assigned through interpretive processes shaped by power, gender, space, and affect. Foucault's notion of disciplinary visibility, Butler's theory of performative subject formation, and Goffman's account of stigma and social presentation collectively demonstrate that moral judgment is never neutral. Instead, it is embedded within systems that determine what can be seen, how it can be read, and what consequences follow from such readings. Emezi's fiction makes this process visible by staging moments in which actions are not judged according to fixed ethical standards but through shifting interpretive frames. The result is a consistent exposure of morality as relational rather than absolute. Moral categories, therefore, function less as truths than as negotiated outcomes of social perception.

A key insight that emerges from this study is that visibility operates as the primary organising principle of moral life. Whether in urban space, intimate relationships, gendered interactions, or internalised surveillance, what is seen—and how it is seen—determines what becomes morally legible. This supports the broader claim advanced throughout the paper that morality is fundamentally a regime of perceptibility rather than a system of fixed ethical rules. The novels demonstrate that actions acquire moral meaning only when they enter circuits of interpretation, where they are filtered through social expectations, class positioning, and gendered assumptions. In this sense, moral judgment is not reactive but constitutive: it produces the very categories it appears merely to evaluate. The implication is that moral

discourse functions as a system of interpretive governance that regulates meaning before it regulates behaviour.

Equally significant is the way desire, space, and gender intersect within this interpretive system to produce uneven moral outcomes. Desire destabilises moral coherence by introducing affective excess that resists categorical containment; urban space modulates visibility in ways that privilege certain forms of behaviour while obscuring others; and gender structures the distribution of moral consequence through asymmetrical interpretive authority. These dynamics do not operate independently but reinforce one another within a broader economy of moral perception. Mahmood's critique of liberal agency, Mbembe's account of postcolonial spatial entanglement, and Butler's theory of normative citation collectively help to clarify how subjects are not merely judged within moral systems but are produced through them. Emezi's fiction thus becomes a site where these theoretical tensions are not only represented but materially enacted through narrative form.

The cumulative argument advanced in this paper ultimately reframes so-called moral decay as a misrecognition of interpretive complexity. What is often described as ethical decline is more accurately the intensification of competing moral frameworks under conditions of heightened visibility, fragmented norms, and distributed judgment. Rather than signalling collapse, these conditions reveal the adaptive nature of moral discourse, which continuously reorganises itself in response to shifting social contexts. This does not imply moral relativism in a simplistic sense, but rather points to the structured contingency through which moral meaning is produced and sustained. In Emezi's narratives, morality is shown to be neither stable nor absent; it is actively made and remade through everyday practices of interpretation.

The significance of this study lies in its conceptual reorientation of morality away from decline narratives toward a model of interpretive governance. Moral categories are shown to function as socially embedded systems that regulate perception, organise visibility, and distribute judgment unevenly across subjects. By foregrounding the relational and constructed nature of moral meaning, the analysis challenges any assumption that deviance can be understood independently of the systems that render it intelligible. Emezi's fiction does not simply depict moral ambiguity; it exposes the mechanisms through which ambiguity is stabilised into judgment and subsequently mistaken for truth. In this sense, moral discourse is not a reflection of social reality but one of its primary technologies of production. The study therefore concludes that what is often read as moral decay is, in fact, the ongoing negotiation of meaning within contested regimes of perception.

References:

- [1] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 1990.
- [2] J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA, USA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- [3] M. Burchardt, "Urban religion, neoliberalism, and moral contradictions in African cities," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 67–81, 2020.
- [4] É. Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, G. Simpson, Trans. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2006. (Original work published 1897).
- [5] Akwaeke Emezi, *Little Rot*. London, U.K.: Faber & Faber, 2024.
- [6] Akwaeke Emezi, *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty*. London, U.K.: Faber & Faber, 2022.

- [7] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, A. Sheridan, Trans. New York, NY, USA: Pantheon Books, 1977.
- [8] E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- [9] S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- [10] W. Macheso, "Queer epistemic interruption and narrative instability in Akwaeke Emezi's fiction," *Journal of Postcolonial Literary Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 33–48, 2024.
- [11] A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, CA, USA: University of California Press, 2001.
- [12] S. Mkhize, "Heteronormativity and sexual regulation in African social contexts," *African Gender Studies Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 41–57, 2023.
- [13] T. Oloruntoba-Oju, "Sexuality, morality, and discourse in Nigerian cultural frameworks," *Journal of African Cultural Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 88–103, 2022.
- [14] K. Otu and A. van Klinken, "Queer intimacies and moral negotiation in African contexts," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 54–69, 2023.
- [15] A. Tucker, "Sexuality, visibility, and moral discourse in African urban spaces," *African Studies Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, pp. 102–118, 2023.
- [16] B. D. Zoogah, "Moral economy and the social production of deviance in contemporary societies," *Journal of Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 44–59, 2024.