

Review Article

Migrant Female Identities: Dual and Hybrid Selves in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*

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Abstract: Migration and Identity discourses have attracted the interest of Nigerian female writers across literary generations. Over the years, studies on migration and women's identities have focused on patriarchal, racial, and gendered discourses. Most recently, scholarly interest has shifted to portrayals and constructs of women's identities not just from the hegemonic, traditional or racial contexts but to the focus on fragmentations and dualities. Focusing on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity this paper attempts to capture the complexities of identities in the consciousness of migrants especially adolescent females. Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* demonstrate multiple and multilayered identities as realities of women from multi-cultural roots to reinforce the author's perspectives on the complexities of global and local cultures. The paper concludes that Oyeyemi's novel captures multicultural and racial consciousness of females portrayed in modern and global settings. In *The Icarus Girl*, Jessamy suffers frustrations, anxieties and psychological stress as a British Nigerian owing to double consciousness and the entanglements of being a twin in the African milieu.

Keywords: Migration, Female, Identities, Hybridity, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

In modern and contemporary times, migration has become a reoccurring phenomenon; this has become potent in discourses traversing Nigerian female migrant literature. The interest to many scholars on narrating migrant experiences of women has indeed been the core of modern literary discourses. Women's experiences and their identities in the course of migration, have undergone transformations as portrayed in the works of both critics and writers. The intersection of migrations and identity are concerns expressed from diverse perspectives bothering around the periods, inclinations and realities of writers. (Gomzina, 2012) argues that identity, whether cultural, social, ethnic or personal helps people understand who they are. He affirms that, "Culture is one of the major factors influencing a person's perception of their own identity" (Gomzina, 2012 p.7) inferring that culture and self-identity are closely related. Furthermore, cultural identities as portrayed in literary texts are largely influenced by the dynamics of writers as it relates to ideologies, authors' peculiar concerns and including style. In this vein, Ideologies, however, are defined by social, historical or political realities; these have led to evaluations offered by various scholars engaged in classifying writers in Nigeria into generations.

Emenyonu (1971:8) affirms that African literature is distinct by standards and sensibilities. Concerning modern African literature, he emphasises that: "African writers are focused, indebted and committed to restore the values of Africa in their writing." (Emenyonu 1971, p.8). Similarly, with specific reference to Women's literature, Emenyonu admits that writings in the final two decades of the twentieth century by African women were a most remarkable event in the advancement of contemporary African writings. Commending the efforts of female writers for quality and craftsmanship in their writings, and for also veering into themes formerly considered as taboos, Emenyonu offers a discourse on the development and evolvement of female writings.

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In postcolonial texts, identity discourses are becoming more fundamental and prevalent. Postcolonial literature, according to Ashcroft *et al.*, (1989), in a broad sense, is writing that has been influenced by the imperial process from the period of colonisation to the current day. This probably throws more light on Bahareh Bahmanpour's (2010:45) assertions that trans-national migration has become a part of life in the postcolonial world, which is heavily influenced by globalisation. (Bahmanpour 2010, p. 45). This confirms that both colonial and postcolonial experiences have led to a great influx of Africans to the West. Hence, Kimberele Crenshaw (1989) observes and notes that it is germane to address identity in the migrant process at the intersection of different axes of social categorisation such as gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and religion. Furthermore, Maria Caterina La Barbera (2015) examines the interconnectivity of identity and migration, emphasising that identity and social constructions are eminent in the event of migration. Remarkably, the wake of the twenty-first century is witnessing the emergence of young black British writers alienated and dislocated from their cultural roots this experience and dislocation has shaped and defined their creative consciousness. The experience of these new generation writers is peculiar to their realities of being very young migrants hence, they articulate issues that concern their identities and socio-cultural sensibilities, thereby questioning and searching for the homeland and sense of self in the midst of multiple cultural spaces. Contemporary writers, demonstrate in their works, the effects of globalisation on the cultural roots of individuals. This vision is essential for these writers, as it forms part of their experience. This, then accounts for Oyeyemi's adoption of mythologies to further reflect diverse cultural heritages and multi-ethnic sensibility to enhance the relevance of migrants' consciousness of their roots.

Adesanmi and Dunton's observations that the writings of the third generation "are massively determined by the politics of identity in a multicultural and transnational frame...questioning totalities such as history, nation, gender and their representative symbolologies" (Adesanmi & Dunton, 2015, p.15) are instructive. This buttresses Oyeyemi's multi-ethnic consciousness as reflected in her writings.

On the other hand, third generation writers according to Uchenna Oyali and David Mikailu are "those that deal with hybrid and unlocalised issues, with characters portrayed as citizens of the world, unlocalised cosmopolitans." (Oyali & Mikailu 2011, p. 192). This affirmation stands true for writers such as Chimamanda Adichie, Helen Oyeyemi, Chika Unigwe, and so on, whose recurrent themes in recent novels are not just peculiar to Nigeria but globalised. Most significant are themes on migration, globalisation, hybridity, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism with undertones of modernism.

Pioneer and contemporary writers' projections of identities have assumed different dimensions obviously due to the peculiarity and difference in author's stance, ideological position, social status and generational classification. While early writers deal with matters of race, patriarchy as pertinent for identity discourses, contemporary writers delve into complexities of globalisation and identity, multiculturalism giving a nuanced perspective to recent times.

Dual Consciousness and Hybrid Selves in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*

Helen Oyeyemi's works are set in the era of globalisation, reinforcing the author's multi-cultural sensibility. Oyeyemi, being a daughter to migrants explains her drive towards reflecting the realities of bi-cultural young migrants. She suffered severe depression and was suicidal during her teenage years. This seems to explain her focus on young adults who suffer psychological distresses and mental fits as a result of mixed identities. Oyeyemi draws from European folklores as well as from oral traditions of Africa. Her themes revolve around lost homelands, fractured selves and multiple identities. Oyeyemi lives in Prague.

Oyeyemi situates the reality of her heroines within the praxis of myth, history and culture of both African and European experiences. Her exploration of Yoruba myth and folklore with European fairy tales expresses both African and European sensibilities which define her identity and consciousness. The author's reflection of cultural and oral resources is also informed by the leanings of Nigerian diaspora writers of her generation who revisit cultural issues in their works as a way of interrogating and questioning the identity and acculturation process of Africans who live in the west in the era of globalisation. Consistently for Oyeyemi, is the revisiting of cultures and cosmologies as a continuum of the vision of first-generation writers Nigerian heritage who seemingly wrote to reclaim and propagate the African identity. Consequently, while building on the interest of her predecessors, Oyeyemi's vision does not lie only in propagating the African culture but also to enunciate the multiple cultural heritage of African migrants which has become their reality in the global era. The author also articulates the tensions of young women who live with the consciousness of belonging to several cultures. This is focal especially amidst the call for homogeneous cultures projected in a globalised era.

In this light, the author consistently employs myths and traditions to reverberate and draw attention to the tensions and conflict of individuals in the process of self-identification. Oyeyemi also draws attention to the cultural interactions of migrant young individuals of mixed parentage. Hence, the intention of the author is to reflect new identities formed from both global and local interactions. Seemingly, her characters reflect the diversities and complexities of their heritage. In this vein, they live in the reality of multiple consciousness. Multi-layered identities are essential in the understanding of Oyeyemi's novels. In actualising this, the author employs oral material such as myths, folktales and cosmologies. Federick

Akporobaro asserts that “myths depict humans as an integral part of a larger universe and that impart a feeling of awe for all that is mysterious and marvellous in life. Myths are important ways of assessing dimensions and diversities of the African experience” (Akporobaro, 2004, p.184). Oyeyemi in projecting her ethnocentric consciousness, intends for an understanding and awareness of the place of oral tradition and myths in the African worldview to know that “there are various levels of existence and show that the human plane of existence is only an aspect of a larger existence of spirits, ghommids and several other beliefs” (Akporobaro, 2004, p.184).

The novel narrates the experience of Jessamy also referred to as Jess, an eight-year-old, born to a British father and Nigerian mother. It describes the complexities of a young mixed-race child struggling with self-identity amidst cultural differences and mixed identities. Jessamy who feels out of place often displays tensions, conflicts, tantrums and withdrawal from her peers, hence her mother decides for them to pay a visit to Nigeria. In Nigeria, she meets with her maternal extended family including her grandfather who plays a significant role in shaping her identity. Jessamy then meets Titola whom she often calls Tilly Tilly. Tilly Tilly, a magical character, believed to be the ghost of Jessamy’s twin, appears to Jessamy on several occasions. Tilly Tilly is often seen tormenting and afflicting Jessamy, even on her return to England. On their second trip to Nigeria, her tantrums heighten and her grandfather who understands that appeasement must be made to Jessamy’s twin, is on top of the situation to deal with it. He acts swiftly by organising a ritual for Jessamy. Sarah, Jessamy’s mother, insists on not having any ritual performed on Jessamy. This informs her decision to move to Lagos. Eventually, they are involved in an accident.

The fusion and interface of European and African traditions, reflected in mythology literature such as *Abiku*, *Ibeji* and *doppelganger*, foreground the author’s intention of exploring dual and hybrid identities. More so, the mythical and supernatural, act as the cultural space in which Oyeyemi expresses a cultural consciousness. For instance, the *Abiku* and *Ibeji* myths which are of Nigerian origin and the western oriented *doppelganger* myth are trajectories and spaces through which the struggles for self-identification are projected. In the *Icarus Girl*, it is employed to unveil an understanding of Jessamy’s identities rooted in the Yoruba worldview.

Oyeyemi integrates the *Abiku* motif to re-invent and re-emphasise doubleness and duality, apart from emphasising cultural consciousness and cross-cultural realities, Oyeyemi’s integration of the superficial and supernatural suggests hybridity in Jessamy. Her novels blend folk tradition with modern narratives, therefore, revealing the author’s multicultural sensibilities.

Accordingly, Oyeyemi’s exploration of Yoruba oral sources, firstly, is to reassert the consciousness and indebtedness of the writer to the African tradition and to highlight the intent of contemporary writers in depicting and reflecting cultural issues. The perception of cultural identity is germane in self-identification, thus validating Jessamy’s longing to connect to her African roots. Secondly, it reinstates the presence of the local and global in the event of migrations. This further, reiterates the interface of both western and African traditions as a major high point in Nigerian writings. Willem Smith (2009) submits that:

The characters in the third-generation novel tend to construct and draw their identities from multiple histories and ancestries, preventing them from being regarded as representatives of any unitary cultural or ethnic group—they are presented as hybrid individuals emerging from the post colony, who are what they are. (13)

Furthermore, Oyeyemi consciously integrates and interconnects two cultures and myths representing both African and Western traditions, firstly, to depict the dialogic dimensions and realities of migrants and diasporans as they grapple with conflicting cultures and, secondly, to reinstate a consciousness that defines the realities of modern and bi-racial individuals who struggle with cultural identification. This, also, reinvigorates the intentions of third generation writers who enunciate new sensibilities and continuity from the first generation in the discourse of cultural issues. Equally, Carole Boyce observes that:

Black women’s writing... should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing. In cross-cultural, transnational, trans-local, diasporic perspectives, this reworking of the grounds of “Black women’s writing” redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality. (Boyce (1994, p. 4)

The conflicts and sentiments that arise from belonging to two cultures and races are explicitly demonstrated in the novel. For instance, Sarah only narrates African tales to Jess. However, Jessamy’s dual consciousness is demonstrated as she asked her mother why she didn’t tell her fairy tales:

I do, Jess! I tell you the African ones, don’t I?

This was true.

‘Yeah, but what about the ones like, you know

‘Sleeping Beauty “and stuff?”

Her mother shrugged dismissively, swiftly lifting her freehand to her throat to rearrange her scarf, ‘You can read those for yourself. They’re simple enough.’

Jess waited. She wasn’t sure if the ‘normal’ fairy tales that her mother omitted to tell her, the ones that always made her seem stupid when the other kids talked about them and she didn’t know them, really were simple. (Oyeyemi 176)

It validates Jessamy’s longing to identify with both African and Western cultures. Furthermore, Jessamy’s yearning for her oral roots and heritage is demonstrated as she agitates to be told African tales. On the other hand, Sarah’s assertion that African tales will be told Jess through word of mouth while the fairy tales can be read, is instructive as it only underscores the oral function of the folktale and more specifically the tradition of transmission of folktales, which is verbal. Secondly, Oyeyemi juxtaposes the African tradition with the Western tradition. Sarah attempts to familiarise Jessamy with her African heritage and the complexities that are associated characterise doubleness, firstly, as biracial and secondly, as a twin. Sarah then performs her role in the African context as a transmitter of culture, first for the purpose of didacticism and secondly for Jessamy’s awareness:

‘Do you know what an *ibeji* statue is, Jess?’ her mother asked, in a voice that seemed to Jess too over-loud. In the old days in Nigeria, people were kind of scared of twins- some people still are.

Traditionally, twins are supposed to live in, um, three worlds: this one, the spirit world, and Bush, which is a sort of wilderness of the mind.’

Jess was intrigued. ‘For the *mind*.’ A wilderness for the mind?’ Her mum smiled. ‘You can think about that in your own time. Anyways, if one twin died in childhood before the other, the family of the twins would make a carving to Ibeji, the god of twins, so that the dead twin would be...happy’

‘How would that make the dead twin happy? I mean, I don’t think I’d be that happy.’ (192)

While this explains Jessamy’s realities, it gives an insight to the cosmology of the Yoruba. Interestingly, here, Sarah offers an account of the cosmology of the Yoruba, while exposing her consciousness of her African heritage. Sarah also performs the role of a custodian of the African culture, a role usually identified with males. Jessamy’s yearning is displayed in the interrogative stance she assumes. This stance reverberates her search for self-identification.

This, however, is unrealisable, resulting in the emergence of unstable and conflicting selves. Her grandfather’s role in appeasing *Ibeji*, the carving that must be made to liberate Jessamy and appease her twin are imperative in understanding the peculiarity of twinning to the Yoruba tradition.

On her visit to Nigeria, Jessamy encounters Tilly Tilly for the first time and it is through Tilly Tilly, Jessamy gets to know of Fern, her dead twin. However, Tilly Tilly’s presence only complicates Jessamy’s crises. Tilly Tilly is manifested by an apprehensive Jessamy and is described by Jessamy’s family physician as merely a part of Jessamy, but her apprehension is viewed by her maternal grandfather as an expression of the ghost of her twin. Nevertheless, Tilly Tilly further heightens Jessamy’s anxieties and conflicts such that each time she begins to manifest, Jessamy is her unstable self. Tilly Tilly torments Jessamy as she questions her identity:

“You always want to know where you belong, but you don’t need to belong. Do you? Do you?” (248). Jessamy, on the other hand, counters Tilly Tilly’s view, “Tilly Tilly was a liar. She said it didn’t matter about belonging, but it did.” Tilly Tilly’s voice, changing in timbre, beginning to sound like an adult woman now, carried on unstopably: “There is no homeland.” (249)

This suggests Tilly Tilly’s personality as the wandering spirit of Fern, Jessamy’s twin which according to the Yoruba tradition must be appeased to stop tormenting Jessamy, her other half. Invariably, Jessamy’s longing to belong to a particular identity is uncovered through Tilly Tilly. Significantly, the quest to find a home suggests Jessamy’s ambivalence and estrangement. The foregoing also demonstrates Jessamy’s dual and mixed consciousness, thereby uncovering the conflicts that follow. Tilly Tilly’s dramatic manipulations, on the one hand, and Jessamy’s responses which are in forms of crisis and hysterics, on the other hand, indicate Jessamy’s enunciation of a repressed self:

“Stop looking to belong, half-and-half child, stop. There is nothing, there is only me, and I have caught you. Two of me. No, us. Tilly Tilly, Jess Jess? Or FernFern, but that’s three. Tilly Tilly and JessFern? Or FernJess?” (251). Jessamy’s reality of being ‘half’ underscores and stresses multiple identities as conditions of individuals with dual roots and heritage. This reality is a function of belonging to two distinct spaces.

Apparently, the use of the twin motif foregrounds doubleness. In this light, Bryce (2008) asserts that “the motif of twins as a narrative device has emerged in these writers as a means of exploring the repressed feminine in relation to a socially conditioned version of femininity, reflected by issues of exile, hybridity and metissage.” (51) Bryce’s observations are instructive as Jessamy often exhibits fits that are detrimental to herself and to all around her. Apparently, Jessamy’s intra-personal struggles are revealed in fits and mental tensions. Jessamy’s visit to Nigeria for the second time is significant in that it shapes in her a new consciousness. For instance, she begins to have a sense of belonging so she speaks Yoruba. Jessamy’s arrival in Nigeria is phenomenal in the sense that her identity is being questioned. However, she and her father develop a consciousness that counter attempts to question their identities. Sarah opposes such sentiments:

Her father standing defensively by his suitcase, stared a confused look at her mother, who quite suddenly, took charge and began to outshout them all, speaking rapidly in a mixture of Yoruba and broken English ‘wetin you be wanting now?

You no go want us to chop? Ten thousand-naira, sae everything is Ok, or ori e tidarun?’

Minutes later, her mother had selected a driver, and the others hopelessly scattered... ‘Daniel, could you help the driver?’ she said, abruptly slipping back into her smooth English accent as she took Jess’ hand again and led her to the long, egg-brown Sedan that would take them to Ibadan. (14)

Pidgin re-emphasises and foregrounds the hybrid situation and tone in the novel. Sarah’s conversations with the taxi men, demonstrate her ability to engage with both African and western spaces. Jessamy, on the other hand, is unable to interact with her first contacts on arrival. Jessamy’s inquisitiveness to find out what a taxi man says, highlights an African consciousness which is eminent for her stay in Nigeria. Jessamy enquires from her mother:

“What does oh-yee-bo mean?” Her mum twisted around in her seat, looking puzzled, ‘what’

‘A man just said it to me.’

The cab driver looked into the rear-view mirror and laughed ‘He probably meant *Oyibo*. It means somebody who has come from so far away that they are a stranger. Jess settled back...the driver said something in Yoruba. (16)

The cab driver’s reference to ‘stranger’ relates to what he perceives of Jess’ identity. This further arouses a feeling of estrangement in Jessamy. In England, Jess is thought weird and in Nigeria she is perceived as a stranger. Sarah’s instruction that the driver speaks in English rather than Yoruba shows Sarah’s resistance to forces that would keep Jessamy from emerging conflicts:

When the driver spoke, she looked at him and said, in a slightly sharper tone than usual, ‘I think you should speak in English, so everyone can understand. It was important that they could understand and share this country too.’ (17)

‘Sharing the country too’, further suggests doubleness and mixed identities. Furthermore, Oyeyemi probes the correlation between name and identity. The motif of naming is central to this novel. This is also crucial as Jessamy questions the names her mother is called.

In *The Icarus Girl*, dual names have been deliberately employed to imply and emphasise double cultures and consciousness. Hence, Jessamy is known as Jess, Jessamy and Wuraola while Titola is called Tilly Tilly, and Sarah is Adebisi to portray both hybrid consciousness and dual status of Oyeyemi’s characters. When Jessamy arrives her grandfather’s house in Ibadan, he calls her Wuraola, a name she has never heard. While this complicates Jessamy’s sense of self, it also gives her a sense of identity and belonging in Nigeria. When Jess’ father calls her by her Yoruba name, ‘Wuraola’, she is surprised. ‘She had nearly reached him when suddenly, on an outward gust of air, he half said, half announced a name:

‘Wuraola’

Who?

She froze, not knowing what to say or do

Of Course, she knew that Wuraola was her Yoruba name.

The name that her grandfather had asked in a letter for her to be called when her mother had held her Nigerian naming ceremony. Wuraola means gold.

She knew all this.

But nobody had ever called her Wuraola, not even her mother, whom she could see now

Wuraola sounded like another person not her at all. Should she answer to her name, and by doing so steal the identity of someone who belonged here?

Should she...become Wuraola

But how? (20)

Conflicts emerge again as there is a struggle to assert self:

She sensed herself on the edge of a screaming fit, already beginning to hear her breath coming faster than usual, feel that flat tightening at the bottom of her stomach. She tried desperately to squash it. She couldn't wouldn't, mustn't, start. Screaming at her grandfather. He was not like her English granddad at all. He was...someone, something else, more hidden. (21)

Drawing comparisons with her English grandfather and her Nigerian grandfather expresses Jessamy's relationship with both grandfathers and the intra-personal struggles to adapt to a Nigerian grandfather. This indicates her disposition to the African and European sensibilities and consciousness. Here, the Nigerian heritage is portrayed as being more complex as she faces Tilly Tilly and the tensions of being a twin. She finds it difficult navigating and negotiating cultural spaces. The comparisons play a huge role in ascertaining Jessamy's identity and self-perception. They are also meant to juxtapose cultural spaces. Jessamy is confused as she is expected to adapt to her African reality. For instance, she is cautioned by her grandfather for not greeting in an appropriate.

Interestingly, Jessamy is seen adapting to the Nigerian culture. Oyeyemi's characters reflect the process of hybridisation which is essential for Oyeyemi's characters as it necessitates a negotiation of multiple cultural identities. The following description of Jessamy's position is a position which Keri Iyall, (2009) attributes to the interchange between local and global influences. He asserts that:

A reflexive relationship between the local and global produces the hybrid. The identities are not assimilated or altered independently but instead, elements of cultures are incorporated to create a new hybrid culture such that the local and the global interact, the local influences the global and the global influences the local. The local is universalised and the universal is localised. (Iyal, 2009, p.4).

This highlights the mutuality, interaction and communication between cultures in the colonial and post-colonial process as individuals express cultural synergy and transculturation.

Basically, Homi Bhabha's (1994) assertion enunciates that 'Hybridisation creates something new but distinct (Bhabha, 1994, p. 211). Jessamy displays a position that is not total of both races. Even in her speech she speaks Yoruba words with a British/African appeal with a hybrid tone. Jessamy's double consciousness is manifested and demonstrated in her hybrid tendencies.

CONCLUSION

Oyeyemi's fiction offers a critique on hybrid forms and identities shaped by migration, globalisation and multiculturalism. This is aptly captured in the interaction of various myths, religions, traditions and cultures. Her works express continuity on the conversation on tradition and culture by her predecessors. However, what seems to be distinct and focal in Oyeyemi's works is the quest to relate with her history and culture as a young migrant of Nigerian-British heritage. As a more recent writer, she is concerned with the cultural roots of women especially in the global space. Oyeyemi presents younger characters who are bicultural. In recognition of her audience, Oyeyemi features current concerns on global versus local cultures and their intersection with childhood experiences. Her depiction of bicultural adolescents accentuates the author's concerns on the effects of migration and the process of self-identification on the identities of young adolescents. Helen Oyeyemi's fiction, demonstrates a shift to multiple and fragmented identities. This shift basically reflects a development from the interest of identity discourses reflected in early female writers. Through her heroines; mainly biracial young migrants in the west, she projects multi-layered identities as realities of women from multi-ethnic roots to reinforce her perspectives on the complexities on the intersections of global and local cultures. These narratives reflect that Nigerian female writings, in portraying the female experience in the context of migration, are multi-dimensional and evolving.

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