

“Double Consciousness in Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans.”

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Abstract

The first novels published by Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans feature twins of mixed-race parentage--a Nigerian mother and an English father--, growing up in Britain. Eight-year-old Jessamy in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* is unaware that she was born a twin, but on travelling to Nigeria she encounters a troublesome girl she seems unable to shake off, TillyTilly. Georgia and Bessi in Evans's *26a* are identical twins who share all their experiences until a visit to their mother's homeland of Nigeria opens a breach in their perfect union. Both novels were published in 2005 and display a number of commonalities in plot, characterization, locations, and stylistic choices. In them Oyeyemi and Evans explore the Yoruba beliefs surrounding the special nature of twins, half way between the world of humans and gods. If one twin dies, parents commission a carving called “ibeji” to honour the deceased and to provide a location for his/her soul. The specialness attributed to twins by the Yoruba is compounded in both novels by the fact that they are mixed-race and by the diverging locations, cultures, and languages of their parents. Thus, this paper addresses how the two writers deploy Yoruba belief in order to raise questions about the cultural grounding of their characters' identity, and how being twins becomes a metaphor for the “double consciousness” of being black and British.

KEY WORDS

BLACK BRITISH, MIXED-RACEDNESS, GENDER, DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS,
TWINS.

Published in 2005 to much acclaim, *The Icarus Girl* and *26^a* are the first novels by two young black British women of Nigerian descent, Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans. Both display a number of remarkable commonalities in plot, characterization and locations. They feature twins of mixed-race parentage--a Nigerian mother and an English father--growing up in Britain. Eight-year-old Jessamy in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* is unaware that she was born a twin, but on travelling to Nigeria she encounters an unusual girl she seems unable to shake off, TillyTilly. Georgia and Bessi in Evans's *26a* are identical twins who share everything until a visit to their mother's homeland of Nigeria opens a breach in their perfect union. In tackling the experiences of children facing the challenges of growing up, the novels of Oyeyemi and Evans can be placed in the narrative genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Moreover, they can be seen as 'novels of transformation,' a term deployed by Stein to describe black British literature involving a double focus on the individual and on British society at large, and thus serving a performative function: 'Novels of transformation do not only deal with the protagonists' coming of age. They at once describe and purvey the transformation, the reformation, the repeated coming of age of British cultures under the influence of what I call "outsiders within"' (Stein 2005: 32). Black British women authors have in recent years produced a substantial number of works dwelling on the identity construction of black British children growing up in Britain, of which *The Icarus Girl* and *26a* are but two. One might also mention Joan Riley's pioneering *The Unbelonging* (1985), Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* (1997), Lucinda Roy's *Lady Moses* (1998), Aminatta Forna's *The Devil that Danced on the Water* (2002), Valerie Mason-John's *The Banana Kid* (originally

published as *Borrowed Body*, 2005), and Donna Daley-Clarke's *Lazy Eye* (2005). All these works draw to some extent from their authors' biography while ranging from the straightforward memoir to realistic fiction and beyond.¹ Yet Oyeyemi's and Evans's works are exceptional in featuring not one child but twins of Anglo-African descent.²

Critics have also placed *The Icarus Girl* and *26a* squarely within the tradition of the Nigerian novel in English. There, too, one may locate a strong interest in the figure of the child, from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to the *abiku*-child Azaro in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.³ Hron goes as far as perceiving a strong symbolism in the presence of the child in *Bildungsromane* such as *The Icarus Girl*, suggesting we should read it as standing for Nigeria itself: 'In the same way that the child protagonist has to negotiate his/her place in postcolonial society, one deeply marked by Western influence and globalization, Nigeria finds itself having to define itself anew in the global world order' (Hron 2008: 30). For Bryce too, Oyeyemi and Evans belong in the 'new Nigerian novel,' and she further claims: 'By placing them in the context of Nigerian women's writing as it has emerged since Independence, and by reference to earlier writers (from the 1960s to 1990s), I trace the new directions that fictional accounts of women's identities are taking in Nigeria' (Bryce 2008: 49).

Yet, I would contend that an analysis of the novels by Oyeyemi and Evans as either solely British or Nigerian remains problematic and at best simplistic. One might even argue that such an approach goes against the spirit of what are two profoundly diasporic novels, engaging with endless departures and arrivals. The novels switch location from Britain to Nigeria and back again. In Britain, they are set in Greater London, in homes of the striving middle classes and in schools attended by children of a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. In Nigeria, these locations shift to affluent suburban homes or even large family compounds, to which the mixed families have a

right through the wealth and status of either an English father or a Nigerian grandfather. The novels chart the tension between locations, cultures, social structures and languages that suffuses the lives of the children at the heart of the narrative by virtue of their mixed descent. This is what another Anglo-African author, Aminatta Forna, has described as the 'pattern of sudden departures and unheralded arrivals in new countries that would mark my childhood' (Forna 2002: 103). Thematically, both novels tackle the impact that a visit to the maternal homeland, Nigeria, has on the children. In *The Icarus Girl* this happens at the very beginning of the novel, when Jessamy is eight, and the narrative spans one traumatic year in her life, until she turns nine. The conflict between herself and her twin or alter ego is resolved during a second visit to Nigeria, so that this double movement from Britain to Nigeria, and back again, emphasizes the interrelatedness of both locations and cultures. In *26a* the visit to Nigeria takes place in the first half of the book, when the girls, Georgia and Bessi, are about to turn ten, and their father, Aubrey Hunter, is transferred to Nigeria for three years. Although this novel has a much longer span, twenty-five years starting from the twins' birth, the Nigerian visit represents a momentous episode in their lives, on one hand because it is during this period that the girls' change from childhood into puberty takes place, and on the other because a certain event during the visit will mark them forever, particularly by opening up a rift in the so-far perfect union of the twins.

The dual terrains of the novels' settings are paralleled by the doubleness in the protagonists themselves. The figure of the *doppelgänger* or the 'racial shadow' has been a fixture of many contemporary immigrant novels, usually by way of suggesting either the feelings of inferiority of the subject, haunted by an essential lack in authenticity, or else the missing connections to the homeland. Wong has described how the double 'is formed through repression and projection, in a general defensive process known

variously as splitting, dissociation, decomposition, or fragmentation' (1993: 82). Yet, twinning in Oyeyemi and Evans is more closely connected to the particulars of Nigerian demographics and folklore. The high rate of twin births in Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba, is a well-known, scientifically recorded fact that has led to 'studies among medical researchers interested in understanding the genetic and environmental factors that may explain the four-fold difference in the rate of Yoruba twin births compared with European populations' (Renne 2001: 63). Likewise, anthropologists and sociologists have studied the traditional practices surrounding twins. Originally, twin births were received as harbingers of evil and misfortune, and this resulted in twin infanticide, a practice that has slowly disappeared. However, twinship continued to be regarded as extra-ordinary and twins came to be sacralized in different ways, with special rituals, names, objects, even shrines associated to them (Renne 2001: 66; Oruene 1985: 209).

Many Nigerian ethnic groups held a belief in the special nature of twins, half-way between the world of humans and gods; they were considered *orisa* or gods, and were thought to have supernatural powers. Among the Yoruba, if one twin dies, parents commission a carving in their image called *ibeji* to honour the deceased. According to Oruene, this is a precaution evolving from 'the belief that twins possess one soul between the two of them, and with the death of one, the twin could not be expected to live with half a soul' (1985: 209-10). Honouring the departed seems to be considered extremely important in order to prevent the dead twin's revenge, because the fear remains that 'the wrath of the slighted twin will trouble the survivor with nightmares and even cause death' (Thompson 1971: 11).

These beliefs and traditions come into play in the novels by Oyeyemi and Evans, constituting a rich layer of magical realism on which they build powerful portraits of a

mixed-raced subject who is actively engaged in coming to terms with the 'double' nature of their black British identity. Once more, it should be noticed that, while this stylistic trait can be traced back to Nigerian literary precedents, it has become prominent in other examples of black British writing. Thus, the existence of an other-worldly dimension brings to mind the *abiku* in Ben Okri's trilogy; in Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*, the protagonist talks to 'Daddy people;' and in Mason-John's *The Banana Kid*, Pauline's closest friend is Sparky, another *abiku* or child trapped between dimensions. Similarly, doubleness itself has long been considered a feature of the black experience in western societies, as first pointed out by W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). For DuBois, African Americans had a 'double consciousness,' that is, their identity was divided (part white, part black), which might result in either an enriched, amplified sense of self or else in a schizophrenic, thwarted identity.⁴ Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) drew on DuBois's keen insights in order to construe dividedness as an essential marker of the (post)colonial condition. With their emphasis on dual locations, dual parentage, and dual selves, *The Icarus Girl* and *26a* explore the bicultural, biracial condition of their protagonists within the context of contemporary Britain.

As intimated by DuBois, such double consciousness is not necessarily a feature to celebrate. On the contrary, it may well be a source of trouble and conflict. Much of the poignancy of these fictions lies in the interface between the everyday world and a magical dimension, insofar as identity problems are conveyed through the intrusion of the latter into the former. When the world of myth and magic trespasses more and more often into the regulated quotidian world, this raises tensions that, if unsolved, may eventually lead to death or near-death experiences. In *26a*, an alternative, magical dimension exists alongside this one, and is brought into the narrative from the first page

of the novel, which depicts the birth of the twins not as a joyful coming to life but rather as a traumatic death experience. They feel like furry creatures killed by incoming traffic as they try to cross the road. At the age of two, the older twin, Georgia, has another close to death experience when she eats part of the living room carpet, hair, and even sofa tassels. Their singular connection as twins also entitles them to live in another dimension. Their attic room is another realm entirely, their own little kingdom where only some are allowed to enter, and they even give it a different address altogether:

On the outside of their door Georgia and Bessi had written in chalk '26a,' and on the inside, 'G+B' at eye level, just above the handle. This was the extra dimension. The one after sight, sound, smell, touch and taste where the world multiplied and exploded because it was *the sum of two people*. (Evans 2005: 5; my italics)

'The sum of two people' is one of the ways in which the author conveys this perfect union of minds; another recurrent term is 'twoness in oneness' (69). Yet in their London home there is more 'twoness' than oneness, particularly in the way their parents embody a rather dissonant marriage that clashes in an increasing number of respects. While Ida cooks Nigerian food and eats everything warm, including salads and ice-cream, Aubrey is the kind of Englishman who cannot do without butties and pudding. Similarly, their home furnishings display ebony carvings of spirit women with horns and eyeless black masks meant to variously protect the family and bring them wisdom, alongside miniature watercolours of the English countryside and a tapestry of the Derbyshire dales. Although such disparate elements well come together in a harmoniously syncretic atmosphere, here they are the wordless signs of Aubrey and Ada's failure to see eye to eye. As the narrator comments: 'They were colliding, silently, through geography' (Evans 2005: 38).

The Hunter family's lengthy visit to Nigeria when the twins are barely ten years old brings them into contact with Ida's homeland and its traditions. There are two traumatic events in this period that will affect the twins' future. First, their maternal grandfather reveals that long ago, twins were regarded as evil and one of them was put to death, either by fire or by water. He tells them the story of Onia and Ode, two girl twins perfectly attuned to each other, who suffered this fate. Ode was set on fire and she returned from death to live in her sister's body for a year, when she was forced to leave. The surviving twin took revenge on the community, and that, according to the storyteller, put an end to the practice of infanticide.

The second traumatizing event during the Nigerian period is the sexual abuse that Georgia, the more vulnerable of the twins, suffers at the hands of a servant, an ordeal from which she never manages to recover. Georgia chooses to keep this secret, simply because to her it is an unspeakable act, but in the process she also needs to shield her darker thoughts from her twin, thus breaking up the perfect understanding they have shared until then.

As they return to Britain, Georgia carries with her an unreachable darkness, and the gap between the twins widens to the point that Bessi decides to explore 'what oneness is' (Evans 2005: 130). As they become adults, Georgia's decline into isolation and depression continues. More and more often the darkness of another dimension interferes with her everyday life. She sees imaginary cockroaches (that she associates with Nigeria and particularly with her abuser), until, unable to function normally, she starts to see the twins of her grandfather's story. She asks them about the other dimension, and they invite her over. Eventually, Georgia takes her own life. 'Twoness' is resolved, once and for all, into 'oneness.' By means of this character, Evans shows

how doubleness may bring about self-destruction if the subject is unable to reconcile cultural and racial differences productively.

In *The Icarus Girl*, Jessamy is a precocious only child who has just been moved to a higher form at school and is feeling lonely and isolated. She is also being bullied by older children. Her first visit to Nigeria does not truly help. In her extended family there are no children her age, and so she continues to miss a friend or a sibling. Besides, there is a strong language barrier because she can speak no Yoruba. At the same time, this strange place unbalances her when she has to confront a certain doubleness in both her mother and herself, unlike her English father. Most of all, she is troubled by names. She finds out that her mother Sarah goes by her Nigerian name Adebisi, and even that she, Jessamy or Jess, has a Nigerian name chosen for her by her grandfather. Thus during her Nigerian visit, she has to answer by the new name Wuraola, meaning 'gold' (presumably for her skin colour), and this really troubles her: 'Wuraola sounded like another person. Not her at all. Should she answer to this name, and by doing so steal the identity of someone who belonged here? Should she ...become Wuraola? But how?' (Oyeyemi 2005: 19-20). Being in Nigeria awakens her to her double nature, and at the same time increases her feelings of isolation and unbelonging. She is thrilled when she discovers that a girl of roughly her same age is living in an abandoned building that used to be the servants' in the family compound. This girl is Titiola, an unpronounceable name for Jess that she promptly transforms into TillyTilly, a repetitive name for the double nature of a spirit child that is visiting from another dimension. From the beginning TillyTilly displays unusual powers, being able to open locked doors and gates, and to steal small objects undetected.

When Jess returns to London shortly afterwards, and she faces once more the bullying and the loneliness of her school days, TillyTilly reappears. As Jessamy's

isolation and loneliness continues to grow, TillyTilly becomes more powerful and aggressive, acting out against anyone Jess has a grudge against, whether they are classmates or members of her own family. Jess has mixed feelings towards TillyTilly. Jess is grateful because she has been saved from loneliness, and occasionally pities TillyTilly when she gets a glimpse into the other girl's lonely heart too, but she fears her power.

The Icarus Girl could then be read as a story about a girl and her imaginary friend if it were not once more for the importance of Nigerian myth in order to interpret the tale. Through TillyTilly Jess finally learns that she had a twin, Fern, who died at birth. When she confronts her mother about it, Sarah brings her a book describing *ibeji* statues and their function, and explains that traditionally, 'twins are supposed to live in, um, three worlds: this one, the spirit world, and the Bush, which is a sort of wilderness of the mind' (Oyeyemi 2005: 182). Throughout her ordeal, Jess will visit all of these worlds repeatedly, as she becomes more and more afraid of TillyTilly, finally realizing that this twin wants to possess her body and to take over her place. Therefore, TillyTilly behaves like the vengeful twin that has not been honoured as she should in Nigerian belief. But TillyTilly functions as well as a Gothic *alter ego* or *doppelgänger*, a double from another, darker dimension, who can play havoc in someone's life:

The double is symptomatic of a crisis in self-acceptance and self-knowledge: part of the self, denied recognition by the conscious ego, emerges as an external figure exerting a hold over the protagonist that seems disproportionate to provocation or inexplicable by everyday logic. (Wong 1993: 82)

Once more the Harrisons visit Nigeria for Jessamy's ninth birthday, and it is then that the Gothic shadow of TillyTilly takes possession of Jessamy's body. Only the traditional wisdom of her grandfather allows him to recognize the signs, and fights them

with the help of an *ibeji* carving. At this point Jess is freed of TillyTilly and she stops being two in order to be, in Evans' term 'two in one,' for she has become reconciled with her double nature, and with the fact that she is one and double, English and Nigerian, as her mother had pointed out to her when Jess expressed her fears that she was not Nigerian enough (Oyeyemi 2005: 242). In that sense, TillyTilly can also be interpreted as a 'racial shadow,' that is, as a truly Nigerian child that compensates for a diasporan subject's feelings of inadequacy and lack of ethnicity.⁵

Cooper has explicated the mental disorders of the protagonists of both novels, Georgia and Jess, in relation to the 'madwoman in the attic' tradition. 'This escape into madness,' Cooper argues, 'links these writers to a different tradition, a Western feminist one, where madness is the consequence of the silencing of women' (2008:54). It is certainly true that, in both novels, visiting Nigeria involves coming into contact with a grandfather figure standing for a deeply androcentric culture. Gender issues are highlighted through the tense relationship between the Nigerian mother and grandfather. Georgia and Bessi's mother Ida in *26a* ran away from home at the age of **sixteen** in order to escape an arranged marriage for which her father was to receive 'two goats. Four hundred naira. And a portable television from England' (Evans 2005: 29). It took over a decade for Baba to forgive Ida not only her disobedience but also her later marriage to a white man. In *The Icarus Girl*, Jess's grandfather is still resentful that his daughter, whom he had sent to Britain to study medicine, wrote to him to say that she was switching to English literature instead, an action that he rates as one of cultural and racial betrayal: 'Words describing white people, white things, every single story spun out in some place where *we* don't exist!' (Oyeyemi 2005: 26). Jess's grandfather's racial pride is compounded with class and gender privileges. His family has always been wealthy and powerful, and though they no longer have servants in the way they

used to, he exerts his ample power over the women of his family, who cater to all his wishes. Yet, this grandfather is more positively portrayed than the one in Evans' work, insofar as he reaches out to his mixed-race granddaughter in ways that the other family members never fully contemplate.

Despite the striking similarities between the novels by Evans and Oyeyemi, their resolutions of the identity conflict of the mixed-raced person differ. In Evans's, there can be no perfect union of identities that would seem to collide rather than to collaborate. The imprint that the Nigerian visit leaves on the twins resonates with death and gendered violence. They are unable to cope with both kinds of heritage. Caught in the paralyzing and crippling dichotomy between Nigeria and Britain, Georgia succumbs to her unresolved doubleness. Although Bessi survives, and eventually learns to cope with her twin's absence, she does so at the cost of moving away from her Nigerian roots. Perhaps the key to Bessi's survival lies in the year she spends in the West Indies. One might see this alternative exposure to another postcolonial society as helping the character break out of the either/or trap in which her twin has fallen. Contact with black people other than Nigerians may have shown Bessi a path towards a more inclusive identity that allows her to be both black and British, like Lara in Evaristo's work of the same title.

On the contrary, in Oyeyemi's novel, violence can be overcome if one has the right assistance. Although Jess, too, goes through an unspeakable ordeal, she is helped and eventually saved by someone who understands the ways of this and the next dimension, her grandfather. The Nigerian ancestor therefore plays a positive role that has no similar counterpart in Evans' novel, where the twins' grandfather remains remote. Above all, Jess understands that underneath TillyTilly's show of aggressive power there is only the very human need to be remembered. And in remembering she

finds the key to actively deconstruct and reconcile in herself the tensions between British and Nigerian identities.

Weedon has argued that 'recent black British writing is making positive contribution to [the process of becoming a more diverse society] by rendering visible the issues at stake, by suggesting new ways of articulating Britishness, and by offering a range of narratives of the interrelation between British and black histories' (2004: 95). Through the portrayal of the traumatic childhoods of mixed-race subjects in contemporary Britain and their ordeals as they attempt to articulate their biological and cultural hybridities, Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans are certainly doing their part.

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¹ Diana Evans, for example, has admitted in an interview with Bernardine Evaristo that the initial impulse for her novel was intensely autobiographic, due to the death of her twin, but that later on "truth began to merge with fabrication and imagination" (Evaristo 2005: 33). Although there is certainly an autobiographical element in the novels under analysis, I do not subscribe to other critics' attempts to read them and their protagonists as mere reflections of their authors' lives, as Hron has done for Oyeyemi (2008: 39).

² An episode concerning twins, the beliefs surrounding them, and the death of one of them also appears in Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor Stones* (2006).

³ Hron has traced more examples of the critical position that the figure of the child holds in African and Nigerian literature in a recent article. See "Oran a-azu-nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels," *Research in African Literatures* 39.2 (2008), 27-48.

⁴ For more on W.E.B. DuBois's influential ideas, see Mar Gallego Durán 2005: 622-5.

⁵ Hron has called attention to the frequency of the word 'half' in Oyeyemi's text, 'stylistically intimating Jess' sense of incompleteness' (2008: 37).