“Jess-who-wasn't-Jess”

Double Consciousness and Identity Construction in Helen Oyeyemi's

*The Icarus Girl*

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Abstract

During the last decade many female writers of British decent have focused on identity construction and coming of age. These writers have been especially interested in exploring how people living in the diaspora are trying to cope with their ambivalent feelings towards their mixed cultural heritage. Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* is one of these novels. The novel depicts a young girl's struggle with the dualism within her, being both British and Nigerian, that threatens to dissolve her self-identity. This essay will explore how *The Icarus Girl* deals with the theme “double consciousness” (imposed binaries) and how the narrative's structure and stylistic devices enable the story to be read (interpreted) from two different perspectives, thus the narrative's structure offers an ambiguous double reading that corresponds to Jessamy's unresolved doubleness. The first reading suggests that the traumatic experience of “double consciousness“ is left in a status quo, or even being fatal, which in the essay is called the Western reading. The second reading suggests a recovery, i.e. that the young protagonist comes to terms with her mixed cultural heritage, the so-called West-African reading. In pursuing this aim I discuss how “double consciousness” in this novel is a traumatic state of mind transferred from mother to daughter, but also how stylistic devices, belonging to the genre of the fantastic, are used to emphasize the theme and make possible the two different readings.
In the last couple of years, many female writers of Black British descent have focused on identity construction and coming of age and have been especially concerned with ethnic issues. The question raised in this subject has been whether it is possible to transform into a person that successfully can combine different cultures and locations, social structures and languages (Cuder-Domínguez 3). By using the figure of the child and moulding it with both Western and African culture, some of these women writers “navigate, negotiate or come to terms with imposed binaries” in order to explore how people living in the diaspora are trying to cope with their ambivalent feelings towards their mixed cultural heritage (Hron 2-3). In these novels the sense of having a “double consciousness” puts the protagonists into a state of mind that could be called traumatic. In many of these novels certain events, among them a visit to the maternal homeland, are stirring up an already glowing fire, often due to traumatic experiences during these events. What is haunting the young protagonists is basically a question of ‘who am I?’ where people that are supposed to support them (mainly parents) are sending ambiguous signals since they in turn are struggling with the same question.

The author of the The Icarus Girl, Helen Oyeyemi, is one of these postcolonial writers that merge Western and West-African culture and literary traditions. Oyeyemi draws on the Icarus myth and the Gothic motif of the doppelganger, as well as the Ere Ibeji myth, the abiku myth and magic realism, in order to tell her story about being caught between two cultures.

This essay will explore how The Icarus Girl deals with the theme “double consciousness” (imposed binaries) and how the narrative's structure and stylistic devices enable the story to be read (interpreted) from two different perspectives, thus the narrative's structure is in itself a representation of the theme of “double consciousness”. The first reading suggests that the traumatic experience of “double consciousness“ is left in a status quo, or even being fatal; this is what I call the Western reading. The second reading suggests a recovery, i.e. that the young protagonist comes to terms with her mixed cultural heritage; this is what I call the West-African reading. In pursuing this aim I will discuss how “double consciousness” in this novel is a traumatic state of mind transferred from mother to daughter, but also how stylistic devices, belonging to the genre of the fantastic, are used to emphasize the theme and make possible the two different readings.

First I will give a brief presentation of trauma theory, since the protagonist in The Icarus Girl is experiencing emotions and events that are traumatic to her. I will also explain the term “double consciousness” which is important to understand in order to follow my analysis. This presentation will serve as a theoretical background or framework for the analysis to come. The following analysis is divided into two parts: I begin with an analysis of the theme of “double consciousness”,
and then move on to discuss how the narrative's structure and Oyeyemi's use of certain stylistic devices that belongs to the genre of the fantastic, emphasize the difficulties with imposed binaries, allowing the novel to be read from two perspectives: the Western and the West-African readings.

In the 1990s, literary critics showed an interest in literature that used trauma as a theme in exploring the condition itself, not as much what was remembered, but rather how and why it was remembered (Whitehead, *Trauma* 3). Important trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman have contributed significantly to trauma theory in literary criticism.

- But in what way is trauma as a psychiatric condition related to fiction? A psychological trauma as a pathology is not only “intense personal sufferings” but also the search for and recognition of a reality that has caused this suffering (Caruth, *Trauma* vii). The event that caused the trauma does not necessarily have to be a violent experience and does not always traumatize everyone experiencing the event, but it cannot be “assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is … to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, *Trauma* 4-5). Trauma fiction then deals with the issue of how to retell a story that cannot be retold, but where it is a necessity to try to retell this story in order to recover from the trauma, and for making visible historical instances of trauma (Whitehead, “Journeying” 14). However some literary critics call for caution against using trauma theory without any historical and cultural considerations. Different cultures have different ways of conceptualizing memory, identifying what memories one can have and especially how to deal with traumatic memories. The forms of mental disorders can also vary, which means that a certain symptom in one culture does not have to have the same significance as in another (Whitehead, “Journeying” 14). It can be argued that postcolonial writers use trauma in fiction differently from Western-oriented writers through their focus not only on the individual's relation to a wider community, but also in articulating other concepts of “suffering, loss and bereavement” as well as using alternative stories of recovering and healing. In doing so postcolonial writers both respond to, reflect and/or reject Western as well as non-western commonalities (Whitehead, “Journeying” 14 14). Finally, trauma theory as a concept is called into the question both in literary, medical and scientific theory. Questions have been raised whether it serves any point at all to label a psychiatric condition as a trauma or how its manifestation can be separated from other psychiatric conditions, and if a trauma actually can be transferred from one generation to another, which has been a claim in trauma theory concerning the Holocaust. I will not enter that debate in this essay for several reasons, but for my analysis I will use the definitions presented above and I will use trauma as a term for the very strong emotional feelings that torment the young protagonist in *The Icarus Girl*
and that are pushing her towards a mental breakdown. Her trauma is her incapability of coming to terms with her “double consciousness”, her mixed cultural heritage.

“Double consciousness” is a term coined by W.E.B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) and describes the “peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness” (Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”). Du Bois argues that “doubleness” or “double consciousness” is an important feature of black people's experiences in Western societies. Being black is being divided into two identities – white and black, thus resulting in either a successful “enriched, amplified sense of self or … in a schizophrenic thwarted identity”, i.e. a state of complete loss of a fixed identity (Cuder-Domínguez 280).

It is within this framework Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* belongs with its depiction of a young girl's struggle with the dualism within her that threatens to dissolve her self-identity. The story is set in contemporary Britain and Nigeria, and the eight-year old protagonist Jessamy Harrison is part British and part Nigerian. She is a very precocious and lonely child that has moved up a grade and who is being bullied by the older children. She has a deep and affectionate relationship with her father, Daniel, but her relationship with her mother Sarah is strained. Jessamy's recurring tantrums and fever attacks have caused a split in the family trinity and as the story develops their fragile relationship is torn apart. A visit to Nigeria to meet Sarah's large family is further emphasizing Jessamy's lack of self-identity and the dualism she can sense in her mother. Jessamy becomes friend with Titiola, or TillyTilly, who draws Jessamy into a world of supernatural events and reveals the hidden secret about Jessamy's stillborn twin sister Fern whom she did not know of. TillyTilly not only offers friendship but is all that Jessamy is not: strong, fearless and lively. Jessamy admires TillyTilly and wants to be like her. After the return to England, TillyTilly mysteriously shows up again and Jessamy realises that no one but her can see and hear TillyTilly. As time goes by TillyTilly becomes more hostile, not only towards Jessamy but towards people in her surroundings. When TillyTilly swaps places with Jessamy, i.e. mentally and physically enters her body, Jessamy starts to fear her. When Jessamy's friend Siobhan is hurt by TillyTilly (although everyone believes that it is Jessamy who has done it) and Jessamy's father Daniel has become depressed due to the ordeals in the family, Sarah takes them back to Nigeria to celebrate Jessamy's ninth birthday. It is an desperate act of hope of recovering from the tragic events that have stricken them. TillyTilly tries to take over Jessamy's body and life once and for all. It is only Jessamy's grandfather Gbenga who understands that something is wrong with Jessamy and he wants to bring a medicine woman to the house to help her. After a heated argument Sarah leaves the house with Jessamy but there is a car
crash and Jessamy goes into a coma. Jessamy finds herself in a world she recognises as “the Bush”, another dimension of which both her mother and TillyTilly have spoken.

Jessamy in *The Icarus Girl* is emotionally unstable and her occasional tantrums and fever attacks are a source of considerable anxiety, anger and sorrow for herself and her parents (Oyeyemi 8, 210-212, 84, 88). She spends most of her time alone writing haikus, reading *Little Women* and *Hamlet*, and playing with her toys, left all alone with her thoughts and emotions. Every morning she has to remind herself of whom she is: “My name is Jessamy. I am eight years old” (Oyeyemi 3) - so as to ground herself into the real world, while she is desperately trying to make a space for herself out there among other people: “there's something about . . . [them] that's too different from me. It makes me...weird. I don't want to be weird and always thinking weird things and being scared, and I don't want to have something missing from me” (Oyeyemi 127). But that is the problem, she *is missing* something and her problem of identification is connected to her mother who wants her to be something she cannot even begin to comprehend: “she wants me to be Nigerian or something. And I don't want to be changed that way; I can't be. It might hurt” (Oyeyemi 268). A comment to which her mother strongly, but not convincingly, opposes: “it's not matter of my wanting you to be Nigerian - you are . . . You're English too, duh. And it's OK” (Oyeyemi 268), but it is not okay to Jessamy because then she must perhaps become either Jessamy the British girl, Jessamy the Nigerian girl or Jessamy the “half-and-half child” (Oyeyemi 14) and the consequence of that is that she must add things to or take away things from her self-identity, and that will hurt her.

Her confusion over whom she is, is further increased when she meets her grandfather Gbenga and for the first time hears her Yoruba name, Wuraola: ” Who? . . . 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?” (Oyeyemi 21). She is not only Jessamy Harrison, she is also Wuraola and these names symbolise her imposed binaries, her belonging to two different cultures, but not belonging to neither fully. When confronted with her Yoruba name, her Nigerian heritage suddenly goes from being an abstract image to something very concrete. According to Gbenga and Yoruba traditions, a name can reveal the characteristics about its bearer. “Oyegbebi” grandfather Gbenga says, “means 'kingship lives here'. He tapped his breastbone. Here. Here is where kingship lives. I am a princely man, and my children therefore should be proud and strong. Everyone who hears my name and knows my people should know that” (Oyeyemi 30). Jessamy's Yoruba name means “gold” and her mother's Yoruba name is Adebisi meaning “adding to the crown” (“Nigerian Names”). Thus implicated in the names of Jessamy, Sarah and Gbenga is their heritage of “kingship”, and that they should be proud and strong. Also implicated in their
names are their cultural heritage and family connections. Thus Jessamy cannot disregard her Yoruba heritage because it is a part of her self-identity, although she has no one who can guide her in this process. The one person who could, her mother Sarah, is also caught between two cultures. Sarah's ambivalence and her inability to help her daughter is a determining cause that exacerbates Jessamy's identity crisis (trauma).

Jessamy's relationship with her mother Sarah is marred by an ambivalent maternal heritage. Sarah, born and raised by affluent Nigerian parents in Nigeria, seems to struggle to reconcile herself with her self-chosen migration and life in Britain. This is a choice that has exposed her to the displeasure of her family, and in particular that of her father Gbenga. Fifteen years ago he sent her to England to study medicine, and is not pleased that she studied English literature instead and became an author. He tells his granddaughter Jessamy that her mother does not know what she wants, that she follows the slightest wish from someone within her (Oyeyemi 28). What Sarah does is pointless: “What job do you find in Nigeria that requires that knowledge of all these useless words? . . . Words describing white people, white things, every single story spun out in some place where WE don't exist” (Oyeyemi 29). Gbenga's judgement is clear: Sarah has abandoned her African heritage and settled down in a world dominated by the beliefs and notions of white people, thus rejecting her true identity. She married someone who did know nothing at all. Whatever doubts Sarah might have she does not meet any sympathy from her father. She has to try to negotiate her doubleness on her own and her ambivalence towards her ethnicity is displayed several times in the novel. Her harsh upbringing which she did not approve of then, is what she is now giving her daughter (Oyeyemi 119, 206, 210-211). Jessamy has become afraid of her mother's “almighty cuff on the back of the head” (Oyeyemi 206) and Sarah's threat that “Nigerian parents . . . could kill a child over disrespect” (Oyeyemi 120). Sarah shows no interest in teaching Jessamy to speak Yoruba but corrects her English in order for Jessamy to speak proper (adult) English, and through this act she excludes Jessamy from her Yoruba heritage, but at the same time she refuses to tell Jessamy any Western fairy tales and only tells her Yoruba folk tales. Sarah finds Jessamy's quiet behaviour, her reserve and her self-chosen seclusion from the company of other children peculiar, and believes it to be unnatural, because “In Nigeria . . . children were always getting themselves into mischiefs, and surely that was better than sitting inside reading and staring into space” (Oyeyemi 6). Yet she does not approve when Jessamy is “getting into mischiefs”, and since Sarah is working from home, Jessamy is often told not to disturb. Thus Sarah, inconsistently, encourages Jessamy to read and stare into space. All in all it is as if Sarah cannot decide what to embrace from her Nigerian heritage and what to appreciate from her life in Britain. To use a simple simile: she is
like switch without a dimmer – she can only be on or off, never something in-between.

As we have seen, the problem of forming an identity due to the “double consciousness” is inherited from mother to daughter in *The Icarus Girl*. This doubleness is creating a distance between Sarah and Jessamy, and in Jessamy's case this is threatening to finally dissolve her self-identity; it is a trauma that needs a solution. The narrative structure in *The Icarus Girl* reflects this “double consciousness” of mother and daughter so as to further emphasize it. Oyeyemi draws on both Western and West-African myths, thus creating alternative stories of what are well-known myths (within their culture) to which the reader have certain notions and expectations concerning the mythological interpretations. Thus the novel can be read as representing at least two discourses depending on the reader's point of view. The interpretation of Jessamy's trauma and whether or not she recovers is determined by it being interpreted according to either discourse. Two things are of special interest for the trauma of doubleness and its interpretation: Firstly there is TillyTilly's role as a “ghost of the past” or “the repressed coming back to haunt the living”. Secondly there is the tragic car accident in the end when Jessamy goes into coma and finds herself in “the Bush”.

There is an uncertainty about TillyTilly's identity throughout the novel because whenever she appears strange supernatural things occur. This puts *The Icarus Girl* in the genre of the fantastic. The fantastic novel is characterised by three conditions according to Tzvean Todorov: First of all the world of characters in the novel is considered by the reader as a world of living persons, thus the reader hesitates “between a natural and a supernatural explanation” (Todorov, *The Fantastic* 33). Second, this hesitation is shared by a character in the story and finally there is no possibility given to read (in the story) the text as an allegory or a poetical work (Todorov 33-34). Todorov also makes a distinction between the fantastic and its neighbouring genres the uncanny and the marvelous. The uncanny is when the supernatural can be explained and the marvelous is when the supernatural is accepted (Todorov 41-42). During the following analysis of Jessamy's supernatural adventures when she is with TillyTilly, the two different readings suggested in this essay, affect the reader's generic expectations on *The Icarus Girl*. When interpreted from a Western point of view, coloured by modern psychology, the supernatural elements turns the novel into the uncanny, but analysed from a West-African point of view, coloured by traditional beliefs, it turns into the marvelous.

The first time Jessamy meets TillyTilly she observes that something about her “was out of proportion. Was she too tall and yet too... small at the same time? Was her neck too long? Her fingers?” (Oyeyemi 46). Her whole appearance is odd because she seems like someone who has crawled out of a tomb: “her toes and feet were whitened with gravel scratches and sand, and … dust … The skin of her knees and elbows was ashen and greyish in patches” (Oyeyemi 47). At first
TillyTilly is mimicking Jessamy's voice and gestures as if she has to learn how to talk and act like a human, as if she has forgotten how to be human – she resembles a Gothic doppelganger. TillyTilly's real name is also strange to Jessamy, it sounded “jarring”: “Titiola? She pronounced it Tee-tee-yo-la, wincing when she said it . . . I'll say it wrong, and I know your name means something. Um. What's your surname? … TillyTilly? Can I call you that?” (Oyeyemi 49-50). Again, as discussed above, there is the significance of a name that says something about who you are. Since Jessamy cannot pronounce Titiola and instead addresses her as TillyTilly, she unconsciously strips Titiola from the very thing that defines her – her name.

Back in England, TillyTilly draws Jess into a world of supernatural events where time and space seem to dissolve. They enter houses unseen and discover secrets about Jessamy's classmates. The first time TillyTilly brings Jessamy to another dimension they seem to fall down through not only a staircase but through earth (Oyeyemi 152). Suddenly they lie on the ground where the earth is only a few centimetres away from their faces. It is as if they have been buried alive. One night, during a fever attack, Jessamy finds a little baby girl lying under her bed crying softly. The baby disappears and it is then that TillyTilly reveals to Jessamy that she has had a stillborn twin sister called Fern. TillyTilly suggests that she and Jessamy can be twin sisters: “You have been so empty, Jessy . . . I know - I'm the same . . . I'm your sister, and you are my twin...I'll look after you”(Oyeyemi 176). What TillyTilly offers is protection, a friendship where they do not have to ask what is needed because that knowledge is already shared between them. TillyTilly fulfils a need within Jessamy of being seen, understood and taken care of, because the only one besides TillyTilly who seems to understand Jessamy is grandfather Gbenga: “they both flinched a little from the sheer nakedness of contact between eye and eye. It wasn't unpleasant . . . but the surprised movement of two who are accustomed to looking closely at other people, but unaccustomed to being seen” [my emphasis] (Oyeyemi 23).

However, the ghostly atmosphere intensifies when Jessamy's self-identity grows weaker and TillyTilly becomes stronger. Jessamy starts to fear TillyTilly, especially when TillyTilly at one point takes control of Jessamy's body and mind, which turns out to be so terribly frightening and sad that she demands TillyTilly not to do so again (Oyeyemi 208-213).

Jessamy soon realises that no one else but her can see TillyTilly, yet that is not entirely true; there are at least three people that notice that something strange is going on around Jessamy. She suddenly disappears in front of her cousin and their baby-sitter (Oyeyemi 152,154), and Jessamy's new friend Siobhan can actually sense TillyTilly. Siobhan wants to be sure that it is not only her and Jessamy in the room, so she asks Jessamy to put her hand on Siobhan's head (who has her eyes
closed) and tell TillyTilly to open and close the door (Oyeyemi 283). Siobhan is excited when she can hear TillyTilly, but suddenly she “was struck with how cold she [TillyTilly] felt, but it was a constantly moving coldness . . . she didn't want to see her at all: from the moment that Tilly had come into the room, Shivs [Siobhan] had felt a...badness” (Oyeyemi 284). Siobhan gets the feeling that the presence is not another girl, it is something else and although she can feel fear, she realises that this fear is Jessamy's to hold and that “this thing [my emphasis] meant to harm Jess, punish her” (Oyeyemi 285). Siobhan suddenly senses that Jessamy is going to die: TillyTilly turns into be a harbinger of death, of anger, and of sorrow. TillyTilly has become something wicked that destroys not only Sarah's computer and the bathroom mirror, but which is also violent against people. An important scene (and we shall return to this scene) is when Jessamy wakes up one night and smells TillyTilly's skin like “a wet, rotting vegetation smell” and suddenly something (TillyTilly?) hangs upside down from the ceiling:

- face dangling a few centimetres away from hers; those pupils, dilated until there was no white; those enormous, swollen lips, almost cartoonish except that they were deepest black, encrusted with dead dry skin, coated here and there with chunks of (I don't know, I don't want to know; please don't let me ever know, even guess) something moist and pinky-white...

The lips, which had paused, continued to move. Transfixed she caught a glimpse as they moved over a small, mauve stump, the remains of a tongue . . . Jess began to scream, long and loud, as the silent, never-ending torrent of reddish black erupted from that awful mouth, and engulfed her, baptising her in its madness.

The worst thing was that it was really happening. (Oyeyemi 260-261)

The description of this scene resembles those in horror fiction but with the exception that this scene is connected to the trauma of “double consciousness” that is inflicting Jessamy's self-identity, but also to the horrors that occurred during the age of slavery. Right before this scene TillyTilly has been talking about Jessamy's unattainable (according to TillyTilly) wish to belong. There is no need to belong, she says and anyway “There is no homeland, there is nowhere where there are people who will not get you” (Oyeyemi 260). She continues to spit out confusing words, fragments of a past that they have not experienced yet share with their ancestors. “[O]ur blood” she says, has been spilt like water for drinking, for washing and she, TillyTilly, is a witness of the cruelty of the past (Oyeyemi 260) and recalls Jessamy's African heritage and puts it in opposition of her British heritage, adding one could guess, to her confusion; Jessamy is the daughter of both a colonized and colonizing culture.
Taking into account a Western-oriented interpretation, or reading, and Western psychoanalysis, TillyTilly represents the id of Jessamy, her unconscious, the repressed that has emerged to the surface. Jessamy identifies herself as the troublemaker, the one in the family that is not perfect since “Most of the arguments seemed to have something to do with her” (Oyeyemi 206) and as we have seen her perception of her “self” is blurred. Dr McKenzie, her psychiatrist, suggests that TillyTilly is Jessamy's alter ego responding to her “need for an outlet for emotions that she doesn't want to show”, “a personality markedly different from her own” (Oyeyemi 288-289). In psychiatric terms a double personality 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, qtd. in Cuder-Domínguez 283); then Jessamy “becomes” this other person “TillyTilly”, having tantrums, fever attacks and in general behaves awkwardly whenever she senses her “double consciousness”, and her feverish imagination creates an imaginary friend in order to relieve some of the pressure she feels; it is her way of “acting out” the repressed feelings and experiences she has hidden. Her imagination tricks her into believing that it is TillyTilly who does all the bad things, like pushing Siobhan down the stairs (Oyeyemi 301-303), thus the supernatural elements in the novel do only exist in Jessamy's mind. When the novel's supernatural elements are interpreted this way it does not only leave the genre of the fantastic but enters the uncanny. Oyeyemi uses the motif of the Gothic doppelganger and other characteristics connected to the fantastic to emphasize the return of the repressed. TillyTilly incarnates this “ghost” of the repressed. She shows characteristics that in Western horror fiction and films are related to a poltergeist (and in West-African traditions belong to wicked spirits, like the abiku). This emphasizes that a trauma of the past, in this case the transference of the “double consciousness” from mother to daughter in the novel, can come back and haunt the living, causing a schizophrenic state of mind where the traumatized sees and feels things that no one else can, but which does not diminish the magnitude of the experience.

The use of stylistic devices belonging to the genre of the fantastic, are very common in trauma fiction in order to express the haunting of the past. Those who die suddenly and/or violently without proper mourning come back to haunt the memories of the living. These ghosts “embody or incarnate the traumas of recent history and represent a form of collective and cultural haunting” and the novels of the haunted present discuss whether “the ghost of the passed can be exorcised” at all (Whitehead, Trauma 7), which is a question also raised in The Icarus Girl. This leads us into another interpretation of TillyTilly's role in novel – the West-African reading.

What if the reader, and Jessamy too, perceive TillyTilly as Jessamy's stillborn and unmourned
twin sister Fern? In a reading that takes into account West-African myths and traditions such as the myths of twins in the Nigerian Ere Ibeji cult and the myth of the abiku (the haunting of an evil child spirit), Dr McKenzie's suggestion of an alter ego is utterly mistaken. As Sarah puts it: “My father would die laughing” (Oyeyemi 289). Before I continue to discuss this topic, a summary on the Ere Ibeji cult and the folklore surrounding the abiku is needed.

In Nigeria half of the population is under eighteen and, especially among the Yoruba people, there is an extreme high rate of twin births (“Ere Ibejis”). Thus in Yoruba folklore twins have been believed to possess special powers. Twins have a double soul of which one is divine and the other mortal, but since there is no certain way of distinguishing which one is which, both are treated with the uttermost care and respect. Their duality render them the ability to wander between three worlds: “this one, the spirit world and the Bush...a sort of wilderness for the mind” (Oyeyemi 200). Therefore periodic rituals and rites are performed for the twins after their birth and through all their lives to ensure that no evil is evoked by them or in them. When a twin dies special rituals are performed in order to make sure that the dead twin will not come back and haunt the living twin troubling “the survivor with nightmares and even . . . death” (Cuder-Domínguez 280). Due to the death of the other twin, the survivor has problems in trying to cope with being left with half a soul, but this can be evaded through the making of an Ere Ibeji wood sculpture which represents the dead twin. This Ere Ibeji sculpture is naked with disproportionately long arms, a large head and very short legs (“Ere Ibejis”). The Ere Ibeji statue is carefully taken care of by the mother of the dead child for as long as she lives, a duty that the surviving twin (if a girl) inherits.

The abiku myth is also connected to children but not necessarily to twins, and it shares similarities with the Western motif of the poltergeist in that it torments the child and the child's family. Yoruba people once believed that an abiku was an evil spirit that died and was reborn within a child causing much misery to its parents since their child died at an early age (Ellis n.pag). The abiku was believed to take the greater part of the food from the child and the child starved to death, and this served in the past as an explanation of infant deaths. In much West-African contemporary fiction the abiku is used as a symbol for death and for an unstable political and social society governed by a capricious dictatorship that brings war and suffering to his people.

As shown earlier in the essay TillyTilly was depicted as a doppelganger, a poltergeist, a ghost, but her characteristics and the supernatural events together with her destructive possession of Jessamy, share similarities with the abiku myth. TillyTilly and the supernatural events can from a West-African point of view be interpreted either that Jessamy has been exposed to an abiku's ravages, or rather that TillyTilly is Jessamy's stillborn sister Fern that has entered the world of the living,
haunting them like an abiku, in an attempt to get acknowledgement of her existence, and to receive the love and proper mourning that she has for so long been refused. This is also when the novel turns into the marvelous. One very good example is the horrific image mentioned earlier (see this essay 10) when Jessamy sees something dangling from the ceiling and she realise that “The worst thing was that it was really happening” [my emphasis] (Oyeyemi 260-261). Although the supernatural features of TillyTilly and the strange events that she and Jessamy experience can be explained by abikus and dead twins, the supernatural is still a fact. Oyeyemi intertwines the two West-African myths to emphasize Jessamy's difficulties and struggle to reconcile herself with her double nature, and at the same time Oyeyemi distorts the myths by doing so. There are some evidence of that in the text that point in this direction, because during an argument Jessamy accuses her mother (due to what TillyTilly has told her) of being the cause of Fern's death and of bringing TillyTilly to Jessamy (Oyeyemi 255). Obviously there is a void of silence surrounding the loss of one daughter and the troublesome reality surrounding the other one. The implications of the “double consciousness” have affected Jessamy's parents' decisions of the past and affects their reaction when Jessamy reveals that she has learned of her sister. Two cultural traditions clash – one which tends to repress sorrows of the past, to ignore, even hide events that are too shameful or hurtful, like the difficulty to bond emotionally with a child or the loss/mourning of a dead child; the other offers an acknowledgement of these emotions through traditional rituals. In Sarah's Nigerian heritage, as seen above, there is a possibility to recover from the trauma of losing a child and to commemorate that child in the community by following the traditions of the Ere Ibeji cult. In following that tradition she could have acknowledged her African heritage. But in the novel the necessary rituals have not been performed because Sarah's ambivalence towards her mixed cultural identity has made her turn her back on traditional Nigerian beliefs: “Jess lives in three worlds . . . She's abiku, . . . The spirits tell her things! Fern tells her things. We should've...we should've d-d-done ibeji carving for her!” (Oyeyemi 181). Sarah admits to Daniel that she did not know that she was allowed to remember (Oyeyemi 180) and later on she confesses that she is afraid of Jessamy and by doing this displaying the distance between her and her daughter: “I can't mother this girl. I try, but....I'm scared of her . . . She is not like me at all. I don't think she is like you either. I can't even tell who this girl is” (Oyeyemi 210-211). The significance of honouring old traditions and the trans-generational trauma that leaks down from mother to daughter is shown when Jessamy starts to dream about a long-armed woman that she first saw as a drawing made by TillyTilly (Oyeyemi 78-79). This long-armed woman resembles an Ere Ibeji figure. Jessamy realises that TillyTilly and the long-armed woman are the same person, “like two sides of a coin”(Oyeyemi 171).
What can be seen above is how a traumatic event can be passed on to future generations, in The Icarus Girl from mother to daughter. This so-called haunting, according to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, is the result of a (often) shameful and silenced experience that is kept as a secret or barred from consciousness, sealed within the psyche of the next generation as a “crypt” (Petersen 16; Whitehead, Trauma 14). This unspoken trauma, this dead gap, is present in the following generation as a marked absence, a phantom, a ghost that the child inherits unconsciously. This is a variant of the classic 'return of the repressed' (Whitehead, Trauma 14). Unfortunately for the following generation this phantom, through its hauntings, leads to “mental illness such as phobias, madness and obsessions” (Whitehead, Trauma 14) and as we have seen this is an appropriate description of Jessamy's problem.

The use of both Western and West-African myths also has decisive importance for the interpretations of the ending of the novel. Jessamy's friend Siobhan is pushed down the stairs by TillyTilly (Oyeyemi 301-303) and severely hurt because TillyTilly has developed, to Jessamy's consternation, a habit of getting people that Jessamy does not like, or that TillyTilly is envious of. Therefore she has hurt Siobhan, Jessamy's teacher Ms Patel and Jessamy's father. Siobhan's accident, which everybody believes to have been caused by Jessamy, is the reason why the Harrisons go back to Nigeria in the end of the story. The ending can, as with the appearance of TillyTilly, be read from a Western and a West-African point of view, but the outcome is as ambiguous as Jessamy herself and not even the suggested points of view give a satisfying interpretation of the resolution of Jessamy's “double consciousness”.

In the end of the novel Jessamy is in a coma due to the tragic car accident and struggles to find her way back to the “real” world from “the Bush”, a wilderness for the mind. Read from a Western perspective it is a rather pessimistic ending that unfolds before the reader. The title The Icarus Girl suggests a connection with the ancient Greek myth Icarus and implies an end where Jessamy has ultimately lost control over her body and mind. Icarus is often seen as a symbol of “the incautious exuberance of youth” (“Greek Mythology”). His flight too close to the sun (despite his father's warning), which melts the wax that holds his wings together makes him plunge to his death in the Mediterranean: his tragic death being a symbol of hubris. Icarus believes that he can control his destiny, and because of his youth and inexperience he overestimates his powers.

It can be argued that Jessamy's identity crisis escalates due to the visit in Nigeria where “it all STARTED” (Oyeyemi 7) and that her revisit in the end is the final breakdown of her “self” thus symbolising a rise and fall similar to Icarus. There are some events in the novel that, considering the implication of the title, refer to the myth, but it is a distorted version of the myth. In a discussion
Jessamy reveals to TillyTilly that she would like to fly, but not in an aeroplane, more “like when we were falling yesterday, but only like, upwards” (Oyeyemi 162). In a dream she can feel how she “was sliding breathlessly into the waiting sky” (Oyeyemi 219). Then there is the important moment when Jessamy celebrates her ninth birthday in Nigeria. TillyTilly appears again, looking like one of Jessamy's cutouts from books. Her appearance frightens Jessamy and now TillyTilly claims her payment for getting all the people for Jessamy (Oyeyemi 316). They fall down into something black with no top or bottom. While TillyTilly lands, Jessamy keeps on flying, like she wanted to but “not like this, not when she was soaring through things” (Oyeyemi 317). Helpless she can only watch (floating as an astral body) TillyTilly going on in a frenzy all day in her body. Jessamy's wish to fly could be interpreted as a wish to escape all that troubles her which is her “double consciousness” and dissolving self-identity. In dream interpretation falling represents anxiety, the fear of failure, being helpless, overwhelmed by emotions while flying means liberation, freedom, a spiritual awareness; but flying can also be interpreted as the wish to escape from situations that are painful or further emphasize the limitations that the dreamer experiences in real life (“Dreams site”). These interpretations are, as we have seen, applicable to Jessamy's situation although she is simultaneously flying and falling, as if she cannot decide whether to set herself free or not from the burden of her imposed binaries.

Finally there is another parallel to the Icarus myth and that is when Jessamy wanders through “the Bush”. After some confusing moments she decides that she is going to get TillyTilly, whom she now sees as “the sun” (again a parallel to Icarus) and she rushes straight into TillyTilly: “hopped, skipped, jumped into Tilly's unyielding flesh … Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up” (Oyeyemi 334). Interpreted in the light of the Icarus myth Jessamy finally loses the last shred of her self-identity and submits to madness rather than solves her trauma of doubleness. The Yoruba poem that ends the novel, Praise of the Leopard, implies that Jessamy's bold attack is meaningless, because this “gentle hunter” (TillyTilly as a symbol of the “double consciousness”), this “beautiful death” spares no one: “his loving embrace splits the antelope's heart” (Oyeyemi 335). Jessamy's internal conflict cannot be solved. What happens here is that the Western Icarus myth's symbolism is strengthened by the West-African poem about the leopard. Fearlessly the leopard throws itself into hazardous situations, like Icarus who refused to listen to his father's warning, and like Jessamy who believes she can negotiate her imposed binaries by herself. By adding a West-African poem Oyeyemi blends Western and West-African cultures, or rather blurs out the borders between them, pointing towards similarities rather than differences; being human and forming an identity is not a question of borders, cultures and languages but something universal.
When *The Icarus Girl* is read in the light of the West-African myths, however, the outcome is different. First of all Jessamy has a helper, her grandfather Gbenga, who soon realises that something happened to Jessamy in Nigeria and who can sense the presence of TillyTilly. He sends her a warning that “Two hungry people, or one hungry and one full can never be friends, the hungry one will eat the full one” (Oyeyemi 248). When TillyTilly takes possession of Jessamy on her ninth birthday, Gbenga is the only one who notices that something is wrong with Jessamy who now is “Tilly-who-was-Jess” (Oyeyemi 211). He barks at her to stop, surprising everyone since he has never spoken like that to her before (Oyeyemi 318). The reason for his action is that he can sense, through his special bond with Jessamy, that someone has taken possession of Jessamy's body and that she herself is missing. “Where is your daughter?” he repeatedly asks Sarah and says to her that she has to start praying again and to believe in miracles, curses and other things that cannot be explained rationally, and thus point forwards his decision to use other methods than the so-called modern, rational, psychological ones in order to help Jessamy (Oyeyemi 320). His decision to bring a medicine woman to the house (despite the fact that he is an honourable and proud member of the Oritamefa Baptist Church, Oyeyemi 60) arouses an excited argument between Gbenga, Sarah and Daniel about the absurd and incongruous in this suggestion. When Jessamy is in a coma Gbenga decides to smuggle in an Ere Ibeji statue to guard the corner “for the little twin who needed help needed the forgiveness it brought needed to win more than ever” (Oyeyemi 330).

Jessamy finds herself in the Bush, the wilderness for the mind, which is the place she heard of a long time ago “*when she had been real*” (Oyeyemi 330), which implies that she has no identity any longer. She hears a humming telling her that she is “going to die” (Oyeyemi 331). A silent girl carries her through the Bush and suddenly she hears her name being called out three times: “Wuraola” (332), symbolising not only the three times her grandfather called her Wuraola (Oyeyemi 313) but also symbolising the three worlds that twins can visit: the real world, the spirit world and the Bush. The silent girl draws her close and they gaze into each other’s eyes. First Jessamy believes she is looking at herself but then she understand that “It's...her” (Oyeyemi 333). “You can share my name” Jessamy says and the girl is suddenly “taken away into the sky in a stream of light”. The twin, the sister who never got a proper Yoruba name (Oyeyemi 177) because she was already dead when she was born, is at peace. According to the magic of the Ere Ibeji statue, it has set free the ghost of a lonely and lost child thus reconciling the dead with the living (“Ere Ibeji”). The ghost of the past is remembered. TillyTilly, whether she was that part of Fern that envied the living sister or an abiku that festered not only on Jessamy but also on Fern, is conquered by Jessamy (Oyeyemi 334). On a symbolic level this event signifies that Jessamy is given an
opportunity to recover from the trauma of her “double consciousness”. She can be both Jessamy and Wuraola, “reconciled to her double nature” with the knowledge that “she is both one and double” (Cuder-Domínguez 283).

*The Icarus Girl* depicts the “notion of selfhood as split or multiple” (Bryce 50). The protagonist Jessamy Harrison has an unstable self-identity. Her “double consciousness” is inherited from her mother Sarah, who has found herself caught in a “precarious emotional state and mental anguish”, a state which she shares with many immigrants (Hron 38). Oyeyemi's usage of myths from both Western and West-African cultures emphasizes this “double consciousness” which is one of the themes of the novel. Her narrative technique ruptures the perception of familiar myths and literary concepts when she distorts them: there is the Gothic doppelganger and the modern horror fiction trope the poltergeist, and the Icarus myth; there is the traditional beliefs of the mystical powers of Yoruba twins and the evil spirit abiku. The novel offers an ambiguous double reading that corresponds to Jessamy's unresolved doubleness. A Western-oriented reading, taking into an account the implications of the Icarus myth, is not offering a “working through” of the traumatic experiences, thus it implies that the ghost of the past, the unresolved trauma, cannot be exorcised and that Jessamy fails to acknowledge her double nature. The second reading, the West-African approach, offers some recovery from the trauma of “double consciousness” in that Jessamy finally embraces her Yoruba name Wuraola, through the aid of her grandfather, and on a symbolic level not only acknowledges her Nigerian heritage as hers, but also, shares it with her other half, represented by her twin sister Fern.

Migration is common in the modern global world, and, whether migration is self-chosen or forced due to political or religious persecution, civil war or poverty, the question remains how to cope with rootlessness and/or traumatic events. Where is home if there is no homeland left or there has never been one? Who is left to tell about the past and to form a new future? Is it possible to combine different cultures within oneself? Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* is one of the novels that address the issue of identity construction in the diaspora, and how that struggle can cause a clash between generations, between parents who have migrated and their children born in the new country, but also between two cultures. Oyeyemi uses myths and motifs from two different cultures that are incompatible with each other. Thus the narrative structure and the narration itself mirror the experience of Jessamy Harrison or anyone who struggles to find a place to call home and to form an identity that fits into the society to which this person belongs. The trauma that the “double consciousness” is inflicting on Jessamy and Sarah is paralleled by the two different readings, or interpretations, that are offered in the novel. The end of the novel does not give a satisfying answer.
to whether Jessamy overcomes her identity crisis and comes to terms with her binaries. On the other hand that is perhaps not necessary, because every reader has at least once in their lives questioned their identity and asked the question: Who am I? Such questioning is a natural part of growing up. Then there are of course implications as the ones narrated in *The Icarus Girl* where migration and being born into a family of different cultures can be argued to obstruct an easy transition into adulthood, and for an adult trying to fit into a new country, a new culture and new traditions there are many trials, of which perhaps none turns out to be successful. What *The Icarus Girl* attempts to do is to retell a story that cannot be retold or fully understood, in order to describe the circumstances that mould us into humans, and to provide us with an image of what it is like to be human.
Works cited

Primary

Secondary


