
‘Home Strange Home’: Childhood and the Diasporic Experience of Space in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*

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To be born is to come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile. So it was with me.

– Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*

Childhood has more often than not functioned as a relevant novelistic trope for drawing new maps of the self and/in the world. In the West, the fictional space of childhood is in constant dialogue with a larger, discursive domain that ever since the Enlightenment, has been engaged in the process of historicizing and spatializing what has come to be termed as the ‘Eurocentric self’. The sojourns of the so-called ‘self’, constituting its often uniquely individualized experiences of time, space and identity are time and again played out in the Western bildungsroman that traces the veritable *rite du passage* from childhood to adulthood. The worlding of the Classic Western bildungsroman, irrespective of all specific socio-cultural and historical contexts, privileges a certain ‘temporal-spatial expression’ or ‘chronotope’ (Bakhtin 258). In this type of novel, the individual appropriation of space in time is mapped through a linear, chronological pattern of progress. This individual cartography of progress stages childhood as a process of multiple and progressive ‘becomings’, creating thereby, an image of the self which compliments the Western grand narratives of individuation. This

concrete chronotope of the Western bildungsroman offers little room for silence, absence, slippage or lapses with relation to the unitary, unfragmented image of the self. We, readers and writers and our texts have, however, travelled a long way from the heyday of Western imperialism to the anarchic years of decolonization, standing finally, at the thresholds of global multiculturalism and neocolonialism. In our eyes the neat chronotope of the western bildungsroman now reveals fissures and violent ruptures, the image of the self crumbles, confirming the cultural presence of a plethora of alternative identities: Black, Asian, Euro-Asian, Euro-African, subaltern, queer and the list goes on. The modern diaspora novel-of-belonging (and let us call it a novel- of- belonging rather than a bildungsroman) exhibits this attempt to create fresh spaces for such hitherto ignored or unexplored identities. In this context the child emerges as a significant cross-over figure in diaspora fiction, straddling multiple cultures, identities and homelands. In contemporary global diasporas, such as the African diasporas in Europe and America, childhood experiences constitute a site of perennial conflicts, struggles, resistances and negotiations between several cultural identities. The chronotope of this new diaspora fiction, engaging in the complex experiences of childhood in the interstices of multiple cultures, prioritises fluidity and ambivalence over fixity and determinism that had characterized that of the Western bildungsroman of the previous centuries.

Childhood, very much like gender, is a locus of diaspora experience that has engaged contemporary migrant African writers like Bernadine Everisto, Sefi Attah, Esi Edugyan, Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans. In exploring childhood as a site of marginalisation, repression and discrimination as well as a site of new emergent identities, African diaspora fiction seems to offer these writers and their communities a highly ambivalent avenue for self fashioning.

The paper opens with a discussion of Helen Oyeyemi's debut novel *The Icarus Girl* which seeks, rather sceptically, the magic of belonging in the global diasporic space where several perspectives come alive at once, where myths and cultures intersect, where "Anything is possible, one way or another" (Okri 559). The novel is, in the author's words, a product of purely childhood impressions, a part of which has been inspired by the author's own experiences of growing up in London where her Nigerian parents had moved when she was only a little girl of four. It is a text which has evolved literally from a mere children's story the author had intended to write, involving a eight- year old girl and the 'history' (Oyeyemi, Interview 2.2.2005) of her imaginary friend into a complex work addressing the predicament of childhood in the African diasporic context. In the story Jess seems to articulate what her author defines as "the muddled perspective of someone who is in a Nigerian cultural framework but not of it" (Oyeyemi, "Home Strange Home"). This 'muddled perspective' however, is necessary in characterizing a peculiar form of 'double consciousness' (Gilroy 1) that Jess is entitled to as a girl of mixed parentage growing up in cosmopolitan London. The novel traces Jess's peculiar appropriation of space through a negotiation of story-worlds whose many cultural chronotopes are mutually irreconcilable.

From the very beginning Jess is shown as precociously well-read with a critical bent of mind unusual for an eight year old. She feeds her imagination with images, characters and situations from fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Little Women* and even serious poetry like Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. She is also well versed in stories from the Yoruba myth that her Nigerian mother Sarah keeps telling her. Jess no doubt takes after her mother, who is a writer by profession, trading in stories through which she can fashion her own identity as a diaspora writer. It is through Jess however, that

Oyeyemi chooses to articulate her own ambivalent position as a Nigerian woman writer living in Britain. The predicament that haunts Jess is that suffered by her community at large – a constant anxiety that the several story-worlds, magical no doubt, in their potentials for imaginative freedom, are perhaps mutually irreconcilable. The second source of insecurity that she faces as a child is that she may be alone in her strange experience of negotiating identities, stories and perspectives, an experience she believes, none but her spirit double can understand. The story of Jess and her mysterious twin self becomes, in this light, a quest for a space of belonging. The novel's complex chronotope which involves a revisioning of many existing novelistic chronotopes, shows how a quest such as Jess's may be realised through new spatial and temporal thinking. In inserting such a mode of thinking in a novel dealing with childhood experiences, the young author creates new dimensions for diaspora fiction.

The crisis of belonging in the global diasporic space that Jess feels from a very tender age is reflected in the very beginning of the novel where something as apparently secure as a domestic space seems to throw challenges at her in every step. When we first meet Jessamy Harrison, she is “sitting inside the cupboard in the landing” (Oyeyemi, *Icarus* 3), reminding herself scrupulously about the exactitude of this physical location. A few lines onwards and Oyeyemi writes that Jess, lost and perennially insecure as she is, does not much like “life outside the cupboard” (Ibid 4). The cupboard, an enclosed space is Jess's chosen niche which gives her an illusion of belonging, much like the attic room of the twins Bessi and Georgia in Diana Evans' 26a. Life outside the cupboard is a confusing welter of colours and shapes that reminds her how increasingly difficult it is to hold one's place in this world. It is the enclosed space within the cupboard, a small home-within-a-home that reminds Jess of who she is and where she belongs. It helps her put things into perspective.

With Jess, locked up in her own world of fervid imagination, the threat posed by the outside world is inescapable. Strangely enough the first of these threats comes from her mother as the novel begins with Sarah calling out the name of her daughter who remains unresponsive until she is discovered hiding in the cupboard. Jess's fragile illusion of security is severely shaken as she hears her name being pronounced from outside, "strange, wobbly, misformed" (Ibid 4) as if she were a little elf trapped inside a bottle, with her mother tapping it from outside. The idea of being trapped inside a bottle, like a mischievous elf or a magical genie is of course something Jess must have come across in fairytales, judging by her wide range of reading. The playful world of fairies and elves however is strangely subverted when Jess, a mere eight-year old imaginatively reinterprets it with relation to her own dark and disturbing world. To Jess the cupboard provides a relief that is only temporary and the big bad world becomes almost a magnification of the popular gothic trope, the attic which harbours monsters who will "get" (Ibid 260) her if she is not careful. As the novel proceeds, one learns that these monsters are not simply the commonest of people around Jess, who demand things of her, bully her and who never cease to remind her that she is different or special in a negative sense. There are other monsters, the quiet ones, lurking in every story that the world invents and for Jess who seeks to belong, there is forever a danger of being trapped in the stories which claim to define her ethos.

In the novel, this ominous game of entrapment is set in motion by Jess herself, when during her brief stay in Nigeria with her maternal grandparents, the little girl accidentally meets and befriends a imaginary friend called Tilly Tilly. Jess's carefree games with Tilly Tilly, which seem magical in the beginning, soon become darker and darker as they begin to spell serious trouble for her and her family. Events take a disturbing turn when Jess comes to know that Tilly is an

embodiment of her dead twin Fern, who had died at birth and whose soul was not appeased due to her parents' non-observance of the Yoruba cult of *ère Ìbeji*. As Jess comes under the spell of her spirit double, her identity is subject to the strange case of splitting and doubling. Jess's counselling by Dr. Mackenzie, a British psychiatrist, however can do nothing more than aggravate her schizophrenic condition. Through Jess and her disturbed childhood, Oyeyemi may very well be providing a critique of the Eurocentric cult of the individual. In her counselling sessions the psychiatrist asks Jess to identify her own voice, her own 'safe place' (Oyeyemi, *Icarus* 218), where she is neatly cut off from her shadow self, Tilly Tilly. The difficulties faced by Jess, and her creator Oyeyemi herself, lies however, precisely in the adaption of this Eurocentric individualistic stance towards the appropriation of space. Tilly Tilly's hauntings which render Jess schizophrenic in the eyes of the West could mean something very different to the child herself. This imaginary companion plays the part of a missing twin in Jess's life, one who, despite her dark mischiefs, initiates her into the ancient Yoruba experience of a shared self. The dark secret of twins or spirit beings called the *abiku*, as Yoruba myth puts it, is that they live in 'three worlds': "she lives in this world, and she lives in the spirit world and she lives in the Bush" (Ibid 181). Twin children, who are denizens of these multiple worlds communicating across the illusory barriers of time and space present alternative notions of the self that are not individual, but collective and cosmic. As a child being brought up on a mixed cultural diet, it is after all not unusual for Jess to be caught between such contrary identities and spatialities. An ambivalent resolution to this crisis of identity and space is offered at the end of the novel where Jess, has a strange vision while remaining unconscious following a street accident. In this vision Jess sees herself uniting bodily with her spirit double Tilly Tilly. The union immediately precedes her waking "up and up and up" (Ibid 334) into

an uncertain future. Jess's ambivalent awakening into an unknown future is paralleled by her grandfather's ritualistic erection of the *ère Ìbeji* statue to appease the dead twin and to invite her to participate in the material life of her living twin. A dual note of trouble and reconciliation, vengeance and forgiveness comes alive at once in the end when contrary cultural spaces collide into a kind of rapprochement.

Through this strange tale of twin possession, Oyeyemi thoroughly revises and rewrites the chronotope of the novel of growth in the context of Nigerian diaspora. Her very title 'The Icarus Girl' creates an uncanny correspondence between Jess, who falters in her attempt to fly through and across fictional spaces and Icarus, the young novice in Greek myth who fails in his attempt to fly away from the enclosed space of the prison. In her magic games with the imaginary playmate Tilly Tilly, Jess further is haunted by a fear of falling incessantly through space, reminding us of Alice's words in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*: "Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end?" (Carroll 17). The inclusion of the first two subtexts indicates a certain space crisis that Jess repeatedly experiences as a mixed race child belonging to the diaspora community. On the other hand, the inclusion of Yoruba myth creates alternative worlds and their promise of more open spaces in the novel. Imaginary figures like Tilly Tilly and the mysterious goddess of twins who travel with Jess all the way from Nigeria to Britain present a dimension of spatial mobility and imaginative fluidity that Jess herself seeks so ardently. These figures which cannot simply be written off as figments of Jess's imagination are rooted in Yoruba myths of the cosmos, where life is an interface between the material world and the spirit world, where identity is not individual, but communal. Jess's journey through multiple cultural spaces in search of an identity thus comprises a story whose chronotope is not simple, but complex, because in it the chronotopes of multiple genres co-

exist in ceaseless dialogue. The chronotope of the Western bildungsroman, with its uni-linear *rite du passage* is thus problematised by Jess's non-linear journey in search of a home, a root and an identity that is multiple. The realistic chronotope of the Western novel of growth is hereby rewritten into a magic realistic chronotope of the diasporic novel of identity where dreams and reveries, myths and divinations are as real and palpable as the material world in which events take place. The symbolic subtext of the Greek Icarus myth again, with its tragic story of a failed rebellion against Fate implies a chronotope of regression contrapuntally set against the bildungsroman chronotope of progress in Oyeyemi's novel. There are moments when Jess also feels like Alice who seems to suffer an endless fall into a wonderland of absurd adventures. However, when Jess at the end of the novel "wakes up and up and up", one wonders whether she like Alice, has outlived her dream at all since at the moment of her waking the dream and the reality collide bodily into an uncertain union. The chronotope of the dream where events leave no trace in time, of myths and fairy tales where events are distilled from time and that of the real world where things happen in time overlap to create and define the complex experience of childhood in the diaspora.

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