

Unclaimed Experiences: Identity and Trauma in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

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Abstract

Trauma, shaped by experience, alters a person's identity, especially how they perceive and position themselves in contemporary society. The interconnection between identity and trauma explains how traumatic experiences such as displacement, discrimination and violence define an individual. This paper examines how traumatic experiences shape the protagonists' identities in Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*. The novels show how trauma leads to conflicting identities while opening doors for human growth through the experiences of the protagonists. The study's theoretical basis for analyzing the novels is Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. According to Caruth's idea of belatedness, trauma is experienced belatedly and its repercussions manifest long after the traumatic event as survivors make sense of initially inexplicable events. It concludes that although trauma upends a person's identity, it can also strengthen resilience, resulting in self-discovery and the creation of a fresh sense of self. The degree of this change is contingent upon how traumatic events are perceived by the individual and the community in which they take place.

Keywords: Trauma, identity, Cathy Caruth, unclaimed experiences, Oyeyemi, Okoroafor

Introduction

Identity has become a significant issue in modern literature, offering a framework for comprehending self-perception and societal perception of persons. Kwame Anthony Appiah posits that identity is not formed in alienation but grows through societal institutions such as family, education, and religion (180), emphasising that it is shaped by our interactions with others and changes as we move to new places and realities.

Donald Cuccioletta asserts that identity transcends physical appearance and biological traits, incorporating psychological, historical, cultural, and social aspects of human existence (8). Culture is a powerful force in identity formation, providing the values, traditions, beliefs, customs, and language through which individuals understand themselves and their

communities. Joy Nwiyi and Monica Udoette contend that identity is embedded in cultural practices, which in turn form the foundation on which personal and collective identities are constructed (252), reinforcing the inseparable relationship between culture and identity, particularly in African societies where communal values shape individuals.

The connection between trauma and identity is equally important. Particularly in adolescence, traumatic events can alter the formation of an individual's identity, which in turn can alter how those experiences are interpreted and dealt with. According to Nwiyi, gendered inequality, deeply traumatic events, and the existence or absence of supportive relationships suggest that identity is reconstructed through suffering as much as through cultural belonging. When individuals are unable to transform painful experiences positively, fractured identities

emerge, affecting self-esteem and psychological well-being, and frequently manifesting as fear, anxiety, isolation, silence, emotional instability, and an inability to reconcile past experiences with present realities (Berman et al. 275–276).

Literature thus functions as a vital medium through which issues of belonging, exclusion, trauma, resilience, and healing are interrogated.

This paper examines trauma theory and identity in Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, using Caruth's trauma theory to interrogate the points where identity and trauma frequently intersect, portraying identity as a means by which individuals confront injustice and redefine their experiences.

Methodology

This paper examines Identity and Trauma in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl* through a qualitative lens. The textual

analysis serves as the study's primary source of text and data. It uses close textual analysis to examine the representation of identity and trauma. Additional sources include literature that interrogates identity and trauma theories.

Literature Review

This study adopts Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. Trauma theories investigate how the psychological effects of trauma on individuals and their identity are represented in society. Trauma, which originated in Freudian psychoanalysis in the 1990s, is said to arise from repressed memories of sexual assault and lead to the development of a dual identity. According to Nasrullah Mambrol, trauma alters a person's emotional worldview and storytelling ability, influencing how people and groups create meaning and identity (Mambrol 50). Later, Caruth developed this theory, contending that trauma results in startling and agonizing sensations that are difficult to adequately describe in everyday language. Such events frequently create dissociative reactions

because they are too much for a person to handle, which results in a shattered identity (4). Caruth goes on to say that the mind is unable to completely comprehend the traumatic event at the moment it occurs due to its overpowering nature. Rather, the trauma reappears out of the blue in intrusive thoughts or memories, demanding recognition. Similar to this, Laurie Vickroy characterizes trauma texts as works that bring back suppressed or forgotten memories, giving disenfranchised people who have endured domestic abuse, enslavement, poverty, and war a fair voice but are unable to speak for themselves in public (131).

Anne Whitehead outlines narrative techniques that communicate the impact of trauma on identity. She argues that trauma literature is not only concerned with recalling painful events but also with how those events are represented and remembered in narrative form. To make this achievable, writers employ techniques such as intertextuality,

repetition and flashbacks to depict how traumatic memories forcefully enter a person's mind without their control (Whitehead 7). This gives room for society to experience the effects of trauma, which can spread beyond the individual and affect the wider society.

Sonia Baelo-Allué reinforces this perspective by distinguishing psychic trauma novels, which focus on individual psychological suffering and identity fragmentation, from cultural trauma novels, which explore the wider social and historical consequences of traumatic experience. She argues that trauma cannot be narrated in an orderly way; trauma writers deliberately use narrative techniques that imitate the survivor's fractured memories and disrupted self (70). Trauma fiction therefore demonstrates that trauma affects not only how people remember the past but also how they construct, understand, and negotiate their identities in the present.

Caruth's trauma theory, however, has been criticised for failing to capture traumatic experiences in cultures outside Europe and North America. Craps and Buelens contend that existing trauma theories tend to represent only one side of historical trauma, privileging Western experiences while neglecting the traumatic legacies of formerly colonised societies (2). Irene Visser raises a similar concern, arguing that Caruth's dominant formulations exclude many non-Western voices and privilege the Western perspective as the most authentic or ethically appropriate response to traumatic experience (270). These constraints highlight the necessity of reconsidering trauma theory from non-Western viewpoints, especially in literary works that examine how trauma creates identity in the context of cultural displacement and colonial legacies.

This paper examines *The Icarus Girl* and *Who Fears Death* through Caruth's theory of unclaimed experience, investigating how traumatic experiences

influence the construction and reconstruction of identity in both novels, thereby extending trauma studies beyond its predominantly Western orientation and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of trauma and identity in contemporary African literature.

Identity and Trauma in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*

Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* examines the character of Jessamy Harrison, who is the protagonist. Her quest for identity and belonging is sponsored by many factors; one among them is being biracial: her father is white and her mother is black. The cultural gap between her parents affects her personality and makes her feel like she does not belong. This divide becomes the foundation of her cultural identity, leaving her feeling like a stranger in both England and Nigeria. The fear of not belonging leaves her on the fence between two worlds:

To Jess, sitting in the cupboard,
the sound of her name was

strange, wobbly, misformed, as if she were inside a bottle, or a glass cube, maybe, and Mum was outside it, tapping. I must have been in here too long “Jessamy!”... She was sitting inside the cupboard on the landing, where the towels and other linen were kept, saying quietly to herself, I am in the cupboard. She felt that she needed to be saying this so that it would be real. It was similar to her waking up and saying to herself, My name is Jessamy. I am eight years old. If she reminded herself that she was in the cupboard, she would know exactly where she was, something that was increasingly difficult each day (Oyeyemi 1)

Jessamy finds solace and a sense of belonging in enclosed, secluded places such as cupboards and the garden. This becomes

her primary spaces of safety and escape, offering refuge from the overwhelming demands of the outside world and mirroring her internal struggle to find a place of belonging.

On the plane to Nigeria with her parents, Jessamy is anxious, anticipating how her cousins will perceive her. She wonders whether they would “look at her, then see her, and just not really...well, care?” (Oyeyemi 17). This internal question reveals the depth of her trauma of not belonging and turns every new experience into a rejection. The anxiety leads to a tantrum, revealing the emotional distress she has been holding inside. This usually occurs in confined spaces, such as the cupboard, and on the plane, her father has to intervene to calm her down.

Caruth’s account of trauma, often understood only after the traumatic event has passed, as it returns through recurring memories (Caruth 4), is evident in Jessamy’s trip to Nigeria; this brings unresolved

feelings about her identity and belonging, constraining her to confront the cultural conflicts that have conditioned her individuality. Jessamy's rejection by her cousins fuels her unresolved conflict. She seems not to belong anywhere; the place that should have provided a feeling of belonging becomes another source of alienation. Although her mother attempts to prepare her for the visit by familiarising her with the names and ages of her cousins, this proves insufficient to bring acceptance. The emotional rejection intensifies her feelings of displacement. "Her cousins remain aloof: the older ones greet her with "tentative but almost patronising smiles," while the younger ones stare in awe, surveying her clothes, her hair, her entire self with raised eyebrows" (Oyeyemi 20). Rather than offering the companionship she desperately seeks, they treat her as an object of curiosity. Jessamy is once again regarded as an outsider, too sophisticated to be fully accepted in her mother's homeland.

Moreover, Jess is forced to accept a new identity when she is called a new name. When her grandfather "calls her Wuraola", she freezes, unsure what to say or do. Of course, she knew that Wuraola was her Yoruba name, the name her grandfather had requested in a letter for her Nigerian naming ceremony, and that it means "gold". She knew all this. Yet nobody had ever called her Wuraola, not even her mother, whom she could now see from the corner of her eye, making anxious, silent gestures for her to approach her grandfather (Oyeyemi 21). Assuming this new name in an already unfamiliar cultural space triggers trauma and an identity crisis. The trauma is compounded by the hybrid identity and the constant negotiation of imposed identities.

Jessamy's unclaimed experiences result in an accumulating trauma of belonging and fractured identity, which force her to turn inward and seek companionship in an unconventional arena. This psychological retreat opens a door to what

others cannot see, leading her to form a bond with her spirit friend Titiola, whom she affectionately nicknames TillyTilly. Tilly is assumed to be the ghost of her deceased twin sister, whom Jess is unaware. The Yoruba cosmology of the *abiku* myth becomes a part of Jessamy's identity crisis. Jacob Olupona notes that, the Yorubas hold a firm belief that there is no separation between the spiritual and physical world. Instead, both worlds co-exist in continuously interact to shape human life (253). This belief provides a platform for understanding the *abiku* myth, where Jessamy's identity crisis emerges from her position between the human and spirit worlds. Also, the Yoruba notion of *ibeji* (twins) complicates her identity. Jain further notes that in the Yoruba tradition, twins are linked spiritually and when one dies, the surviving twin is believed to be connected to the spirit realm. Jess's connection to her dead twin Fern, combined with TillyTilly's influence enhances her spiritually hybrid identity. She does not

belong only to the physical world; she exists across multiple realities. Jess is happy to make friends with TillyTilly. And for the first time, she feels truly seen and desired:

She laughed too, glad that the two of them were there, one standing, one sitting, in the sunshine, glad that she had been so eager to be friends with somebody for once. It was a peering through good and pretty coloured glass, this gladness, this feeling that someone had been around the compound, knowing who she was, and wanting to talk to her. She had never been sought out this way before. It was funny and pleasing, like a bubbling fizz growing in her stomach (Oyeyemi 38).

This friendship represents a moment of validation and acceptance for Jess. In her desperate need for connection, she cannot afford to offend her new companion. When

sharing her thoughts about a poem or book, she speaks with visible anxiety:

Jess couldn't remember the last time she'd told anyone what she thought about a poem, or a book, or anything much really... She stood still, upright, her cheeks flushed, deliberately not looking down at Tilly but concentrating on a book in front of her until the gold lettering of the title had blurred. She didn't want Tilly to laugh or make fun or anything; she didn't think she could bear it (Oyeyemi 44).

Her caution reveals how valuable her new relationship feels to her, a privilege she is determined to protect at all costs. Unable to find belonging in the external world, her trauma drives her to seek connection in the spiritual space where TillyTilly exists. This friendship becomes a survival mechanism: a way to cope with the unbearable loneliness stemming from repeated experiences of

alienation. However, as Caruth notes, trauma involves "the impossibility of knowing" its full impact (Caruth 11). Jess's eager embrace of TillyTilly is both comforting and dangerous, a belated response to earlier wounds that she cannot consciously process. The "bubbling fizz" of joy she feels is a temporary escape from her fractured self, yet it also pulls her further into the unseen. This reenactment aligns with Caruth's idea that trauma survivors often repeat or reenact their wounds in disguised forms in search of mastery or connection. Oyeyemi uses the character of Jess to depict how unresolved identity sponsors trauma in individuals, which ends up affecting not only the individual but the family, society and nation at large.

Identity and Trauma in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* investigates how identity becomes a medium of disadvantage and suffering. The Okeke

are already marked as an inferior race, preordained as subordinates to the dominant Nuru people: “it was well known that the Okeke were born to be slaves of the Nuru” (Okorafor 22). This identity is imposed and religiously verified by the goddess Ani and inscribed in the Great Book. When the Okeke attempt to resist this inherited identity, they face collective genocide through the systematic rape of Okeke women:

The Okeke women screamed and ran in all directions. Najeeba screamed so loudly that all the air left her lungs and she felt something give from deep in her throat. She'd later realize that this was her voice leaving her forever. (Okorafor 27)

Stef Craps argues that this kind of trauma is structural, arising from oppressive social and religious systems rather than a single traumatic event (77). The traumatic event

represents what Caruth describes as a “missed encounter” with death, in which violence overwhelms the survivor's capacity to comprehend the experience as it occurs (7), with its psychological effects felt later through recurring memories that shape identity.

Najeeba's rape is a purposeful means of subordination. The head of the Nuru soldier, whom she describes as “tall and strong like a bull,” rapes her. His anger was visible despite the veil covering his face (Okorafor 25). Caruth's paradox of traumatic witnessing of trauma as an event both realised and not fully understood, is reflected in the fact that, despite seeing the violence committed against her, she is unable to identify her attacker since his face is hidden. Najeeba suffers irreversible psychological damage as a result of the attack, which shatters her identity and dignity.

The Ewu, the offspring of these attacks, come to embody shame. Thus, she

says, “Just by looking at me, everyone can see that I am a child of rape,” declares Onyesonwu (Okorafor 15). Their pale eyes and characteristic red hair serve as continual reminders of the abuse inflicted upon their mothers. The Ewu exemplify Caruth’s claim that trauma is “not locatable in the original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Every interaction with an Ewu child becomes a fresh confrontation with the past because of their fractured identity, which transforms their minds into battlefields where the initial trauma is perpetually reenacted through self-loathing and rejection.

When Najeeba seeks help in a nearby settlement, she and her baby are stoned and rejected. The second stone strikes her thigh, triggering a flashback: “she had flashbacks of a year ago, when she died. When instead of stones, a man’s body had slammed against her” (Okorafor 34). This illustrates Caruth’s concept of belatedness, the way the past

breaks abruptly into the present. Baby Onyesonwu’s “screeching and crying” in the background makes her both witness and co-victim of her mother’s trauma, creating a double belatedness that draws the next generation into the cycle of trauma before she can understand what is happening. Ultimately, Onyesonwu transforms her wound into a source of power, confronting the Nuru oppression orchestrated by her own father, Daib, and rewriting the Great Book at the cost of her own life. This rewriting restores the Okeke identity from one of defeat and shame to one of resistance and wholeness.

Conclusion

Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* and Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* demonstrate that identity is shaped by culture, worldviews, social realities, and traumatic experiences. Both novels reveal Caruth’s trauma theory that trauma does not end when sad or violent events end. Oyeyemi’s *The*

Icarus Girl projects a fractured identity and trauma in ways that mirror Caruth's "Unclaimed Experience". Through Jess, a biracial girl caught between cultures, the novel shows how her very presence displaces her wherever she goes. Through Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death*, the paper reveals how trauma becomes inscribed in a person's identity. Thus, the impact of trauma persists, shaping the characters' thoughts and identities. These narratives demonstrate, through the characters' complex personalities, that an individual's identity is subject to change rather than fixed. Through self-discovery, resistance, and personal growth, the protagonists in these narratives learn to define themselves beyond the identities imposed by society, a process that is neither quick nor easy, involving painful memories, emotional struggle, and the building of resilience.

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