

Ode in Onia: Reading the Use of Myth and Twinhood in Diana Evans' 26a

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Abstract- *Postcolonial writers have over time engaged in the use of folklore preserved from their precolonial heritage in their works that try to understand the complexities of their postcolonial existence. Such writers have used ancient stories, songs, proverbs and other ideas from their vernacular cosmologies in intertextual conversation with their fiction. In this article, I discuss this kind of practice in the novel 26a by Nigerian-British novelist, Diana Evans. The novel explores personal experiences of twinhood which also raises questions about identity, transnationalism and migration. This paper's focus is on the ways in which Evans fetches material from her Nigerian background – the myth about twinhood – and merges it with her fiction, allowing both to engage and transform each other. Through this she has not only created a work of magical realism, but finds an effective means to represent trauma, psychic and existential struggles along with what it means to exist between categories.*

Keywords- *Twinhood; Myth; Folklore; Transnationalism; Diaspora; Postcolonial*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the strengths of the novel 26a lies in the way Diana Evans utilizes myth as a major medium by which she creatively explores the intricate nature of twinhood as it intersects with other ideas such as identity, coming of age, trauma and transnationalism. Writing about these imbrications, Jane Bryce comments on the novel, along with Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, that "the motif of twins, of halving and doubling, is complicated [...] by the motifs of migration, displacement, and metissage" (63). She further points out that the "doubling effect of biracialism simultaneously presupposes a loss of the spiritual link to Nigeria through physical displacement" (63). Evans is able to handle these matters effectively through what Bryce calls the "use of an embedded folktale" (63). Molar Wood rightly remarks that in this novel Evans has taken "the age-old myth of twins in new, unexpected directions." In this discussion, I am interested in the specific ways that Evans employs the twin myth, or the "embedded folktale", to create a narrative that explores a range of interrelated issues.

F.B.O. Akporobaro offers an idea of myth that I find quite useful for this discussion. He explains that

[m]yth is a kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. The term has a wide range of meanings, which can be divided roughly into 'rationalist' and 'romantic' versions. In the first, the myth is a false story or belief (adjective: mythical), while in the second, 'myth' is superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding (adjective: mythic). (49)

Akorobaro also importantly notes that "in most literary content, the second kind of usage prevails" (49). While myth or folklore has proven a rich source of material for modern African fiction, some scholars have expressed concern about how it is used or how its situatedness in the modern text is studied. Wole Ogundele has, for instance, voiced his worry about the problematic relationship between myth and history in African fiction, concerned specifically about "the substitution of truth and culture for history, especially for pre-colonial history" (32). He points out that most of the time the use of myth in African fiction is intended to serve the role of history, on which he frowns (32). In relation to criticism, Chiji Akoma expresses his dissatisfaction with the manner in which some "[e]ssays [merely] point out mythic strands, legends, folk tales, proverbs, songs, and oral performative 'accessories' such as riddles, chants, and proverbs, etc. operating in novels, plays, or poems, and are content with this" (82). This illustrates what Bernth Lindfors calls "anthropological criticism" (10-11), a type of study satisfied with the production of an inventory of folkloric articles, rather than carefully engaging the intricate intertextual relationship between the folklore used and the novel (or any other genre in which it is featured). Likewise, Akoma's pursuit is "to position the oral text as the pivot on which the meaning of the work rotates" (82). This discussion on Evans' novel, following Akoma's idea, is thus an attempt to explore her creative employment of African mythic material for her fictional narrative.

2. ANALYSIS

The novel is a bildungsroman that tells the story of a set of twins born into the family of Aubrey and Ida Hunter, a biracial couple living in England. In the course of the narrative, the family travels to Nigeria to visit Ida's parents

at the village of Aruwa. When there, Nne-Nne, the children's grandmother, says, "It is very special to be twins, you know that? Your motha tell you about them – the stories?" (61). Though the twins have always known there is something special about being a pair who shared the same womb, this new view is about to launch them into not just an African perspective on twinhood, but a world of their own symbolologies. The twins' mother protests saying "You scare them!" (61), presenting to the reader the friction or contradictions that exist between their multicultural background and the negotiation of their transnational identities. Baba, however, takes the stage and 'drops the bomb' by defining 'special' this way: "Dey kill them!" (62) and the twins are filled with fear wishing they could be back at Neasden in London. After a little nudge from Kemy who "had been thinking about what Baba has said earlier about the twins" (62), Baba says:

A long time ago...people believed that twins came from witches who lived in the forest. They flew around the treetops on their brooms. They ate birds and made skirts from the feathers. And when they were at their most evil, they gave birth to twins.

This is what the people believed. Twins were a curse. 'The children of devils' ...And they had to be destroyed. So this is what they did. They took the second twin ... and burnt it.

They burnt the second twin with the other children of witches, the rest of the cursed. That is, the blind, the crippled, the dumb, the deaf and the sick. And if the father of the twins happened to be a fisherman...what they did was take that second twin, and drown it, 'in the riva!' (62-63)

This provides background information on the treatment of twins in that community long before the advent of European colonialism. Twins were, during those years, victims of what Dan Growler calls "classificatory embarrassments" (42). In this he notes that "malformed, illegitimate and adopted children all represent problems of classification" (42). This is illustrated in *Things Fall Apart* where twins are grouped along with outcasts who only find their salvation among the Christian missionaries. That then is the meaning of 'special', being viewed as an anomaly. Baba himself obviously does not believe in his tale any longer. Re-telling this story of the past is constantly punctuated with the pronoun "they" and the verb "believed". The former is a pointer to a distant inaccessible past with a different cosmology. The latter points to the fact that the myths were social constructs, perhaps created to explain what seemed abnormal.

In ancient Aruwa the explanation, at variance with scientific explanations for the conception of both identical and fraternal twins, was that twins were not normal because they came "from witches who lived in the forest" (62). Not only were they from witches, they were also born when the witches were at the peak of their evil. So they were designated "children of devils" (63). Growler has pointed out that in most societies where such a classificatory embarrassment occurs, "depending on the

society concerned, rules and procedures have to be developed to 'fit' these embarrassments into [a] simple model," (42). In Baba's narrative, the mystery of twinhood was, therefore, after being explained and traced to witchcraft, simplified by the killing of the second twin. He or she was condemned along with other so-called anomalies such as the deformed and the sick.

Based on this background information he has provided, Baba further tells the mythic tale of a set of twin girls called Onia and Ode:

He told them of a woman who once had two girl twins who were best friends from the very beginning, even before they were inside their mother's womb, when they were spirits. Their names were Onia and Ode. Onia was first, Ode was second – they set her on fire.

When Ode was burnt (the father was not in this case a fisherman), Onia got sick and wouldn't eat at all until Ode's ghost entered her body. The ghost caome in, and Onia began to eat again from her cursed mother's breast. But Ode could only stay for an year, because that was how long it took for a soul to be ready to leave the earth. After that, there would be no choice.

In that year Onia had amny wicked thoughts. She dreamt that whne she grew up she would burn down the village and the forest around the village. "Then after the year was over," said Baba, "Ode left her – for ever" (63).

"She became a witch. She destroyed the whole vialge and the surrounding land, everything! And her womb was barren. That was the end of it. So afta that they decided it was not a good idea to separate twins, or kill them. Terrible things can happen, you see!" (63-64)

This time Baba tells this story believing it to be the reason for which the treatment of twins has changed. We do not see an external influence here such as the introduction of Christianity or Western influence as the factor of change as we see in Habila's *Measuring Time* or Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In this brief tale we see the community evolving in their worldview and experiencing cultural change as events check their beliefs and practices. Onia never forgives her community for killing her sister and best friend. As such she becomes a witch and sets the whole village on fire. This at the same time confirms the community's view that twins are evil and changes the ways twins are treated – killing or separation. The people no longer see the killing of twins as a good idea. This tale however serves a purpose beyond recapturing the historical-mythic past of a people. It bears an even more profound task of symbolizing the psychological struggles of the twins throughout the text. The names of Onia and Ode will reoccur in later parts of the text in the minds of the twins as a symbol of their experience.

Lindfors points out how Achebe's novels feature lengthy folktales that at first reading may seem unconnected to the general thrust of the novels, but which actually play a sort of allegorical role in connection to the main story. While that is the case with Achebe, Evans uses the tale to form the basis of her story, weaving it creatively into the body of the story, much more in the way Ben Okri merges the

abiku myth with realism. This corresponds to the kind of study pursued by Akoma: “a closer reading of several Africa-Caribbean narratives suggest that beyond the mere presence of texts and forms, or their adoption into the written work, some black writers have reconfigured the aesthetics of their act so that the oral imagination becomes the basis of their literary output” (82, emphasis mine).

The focal folktale in Evans’ novel serves a number of purposes such as foreshadowing the future of the twins Georgia and Bessi and exploring their inner negotiations of identity as twins and as transnational and biracial subjects. The next time reference is made to the tale told by Baba in Aruwa is in a letter written by Bessi to Georgia from St. Lucia. This is followed by the trance-like experience Georgia has on the dance floor on their twenty first birthday. I take the pains of quoting that whole portion because of its detailed significance to our discussion. It reads as follows:

In the distance, she saw two little girls moving towards her. They were doing cartwheels down the hill.

They stop giggling, and concentrated on cartwheels.

When they arrived they stood on the dance floor. A space emptied around them. Georgia could see clearly now, their white dresses and the same face, holding hands. One of the hands was burnt.

“I know you,” said Georgia.

“Yes,” they said. “You do.”

Georgia looked back at Bessi and pointed at the little girls. Bessi laughed and twirled. There was the sound of drums, a double heartbeat. The lights beneath the floor were headlights, icy suns. The little girls stared at Georgia, their dresses sweeping full in the wind, although the air was very still. They smiled sweetly and Georgia felt blessed.

She said: “Is it nice where you are?”

“Yes,” they said, in only one voice. “It’s the best bit.”

Georgia giggled. “Isn’t it,” she said.

A restful breeze slid across her face. She heard the distant sound of fire. One of the girls turned and whispered to the other.

Holding hands, they faced her.

“Look what we can do.”

Their smiles became wide and unsweet. Too wide. Georgia didn’t want to look but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t turn her head to get Bessi and she couldn’t speak. One little girl opened her mouth and she couldn’t speak. One little girl opened her mouth until her face disappeared. Then, into the black space, the girl with the burn hand climbed. There was no mess. She didn’t say goodbye.

Georgia cried for a moment.

She said: “Are you Ode now, or Onia?”

“Yes,” said the little girl.

“Does it hurt?” said Georgia.

“Yes,” she said. “But we forget.”

Georgia cried again.

“If I ever wanted to,” she cried slowly. “Could I learn it too?”

The girl turned away and walked up the hill. They looked back once, and whispered: “You already know!” (171-172)

This quoted portion shows how Baba’s tale about Onia and Ode is beginning to evolve into symbolism and the twins’ private language, especially Georgia. The myth therefore serves to show the complexity of twinhood, the slipperiness of their oneness and twoness. Though Ode and Onia have the same face, one has a burnt hand, signifying their individuality. The presence of cartwheels in the portion presents readers with a symbol of an early childhood experience in Nigeria where the twin myth was encountered and Georgia was assaulted sexually. The portion also foreshadows Georgia’s suicide. The question “Is it nice where you are?” (171) shows that the seed of another world has already been sown in Georgia’s mind through her individual traumatic experience. The burnt hand of one of the mythic twins therefore mirrors Georgia’s trauma which her sister Bessi is not privy to. The disappearance of one of the girls into the mouth of the other is symbolic of suicide. In this way, it provides a counter-narrative against the conventional view of suicide. Instead of a negative experience, suicide is made to look like the final realization of oneness in twinhood. The episode provides an effective example of the application of folklore to contemporary African writing in which we see the myth providing not only the groundwork on which the narrative is built, but also a dialogue between temporalities and milieus.

After this, Georgia has more ‘Ode in Onia’ encounters. When she and Bessi have a heated argument in relation to their their oneness, and Georgia slaps Bessi on the face, after which Bessi locks herself in the bathroom for over an hour to Georgia’s worry, Georgia catches sight of the mythic Ode and Onia, this time as two-in-one, Ode in Onia. The significance of this appearance in the atmosphere of tension is the foreshadowing of Georgia’s suicide, reminding her of the discussion they had on the dancefloor; the promise that where they are is nice and that the initial pain does not last after the act. The twins have now matured to a point where their oneness has a crack. Bessi has grown out of it to an extent and has achieved a level of independence, while Georgia is still a firm believer in their oneness and interdependency. The implication of this scene is the urgent need to find a place where she, Georgia, belongs – and Ode in Onia present the answer to her by their appearance.

In chapter thirteen, “[a]s [Georgia] climbed the lilac stairs, Ode in Onia waited at the top. Their eyes had got large, and their dress had got very dirty” (187). This is the chapter of Georgia’s suicide, and the appearance of ‘Ode in Onia’ in her apartment with their white dress now dirtied is significant. Earlier in the narrative Georgia has been thinking about wearing white in her private colour symbology. She links the colour with purity. Now, however, the white dress worn by Ode and Onia is stained, reminding her of her inability to fit into the physical world where she is at present, reminding her still of the childhood scar on her body, and the assault she suffered in the hands of Sedrick, which are both marks of her individual uniqueness pointing to the necessity to find herself

somewhere. She also sees a devil who tells her a death story, a story about a woman whose soul has gone missing. Further encouragement to commit suicide also comes when Georgia compares her mother's escape from Sekon to her intended suicide. Her mother tells her, "My life is my own...There was no future there for me and I cannot live for nobody else" (189). Georgia asks her questions like, "Were you scared?" "Did it hurt?" echoing the questions she has asked 'Ode in Onia' on the dance floor. Everything around her seems to be telling her it is time. She listens to Marcia Griffiths and Tony Rebel's "Ready to Go" and reinterprets the sexual fantasy in terms of her suicide.

In the final chapter, after Georgia's suicide, the focus shifts to Bessi, and the mythic representation of Ode and/in Onia takes another meaning. While at JP Funeral Directors discussing Georgia's funeral with Jonathan Pole the undertaker, Bessi begins to have some inexplicable experiences. At first it is a feeling of itching on her ribs. Then it is followed by the feeling of "[a] strange laughter [...] [welling] up in her throat [...] [which] she pushes [...] back down towards her ribs" (198). She also hears a thump in the next room which has obviously not been heard by anybody else. Bessi is not sure what to make of the experience as the "sensation in [her] ribs becomes stronger" (200). She begins to think of death.

In the course of the narrative, we discover that it is Georgia's spirit trying to reenact the 'Ode in Onia' experience, trying to merge with Bessi by entering her body. We hear her now as she speaks in the first person. When Bessi suspects it is Georgia, she says, "Is it you?" (209). Finally, Georgia is able to fit completely into Bessi and Bessi realizes it immediately. Later on, we witness a conversation taking place between the sisters. The narration mixes the use of third person pronouns for Bessi, first person singular for Georgia and the first person plural that Georgia uses for the two of them. Their conversation, an interior one, has become urgently intimate and centres on their oneness and the process of suicide.

I've got an idea.

What is it?

You are the right of me, I am the left.

The balcony creaks. Bessi's words quicken.

I give you my right hand, leg and everything on the right and when I want to touch you I take you hand in my left.

OK, that's a good idea.

I am both of us.

Yes, like a flame. It flickers Georgia, it flickers Bessi. (213)

In the piece above, we see the culmination of oneness in which Bessi becomes both Bessi and Georgia in one body. They are even depicted as speaking with one voice: "'Yes,' we say" (214); "Ida was pleased we chose a grave near a bench" (214). This experience continues for Bessi for the period of one year reflecting Baba's tale about 'Ode in Onia'. All these can be interpreted as a symbolic

exploration of Bessi's psychological state after the traumatic loss of her twin sister.

3. CONCLUSION

In this novel, Evans has succeeded in bringing together an obvious fascination with the 'mystery' of twinhood and the myths created in a pre-colonial African community to explore the incomprehensible. She has not tried to explain, dismiss or even defend the mythic narrative. Instead, she finds in it a medium through which to engage in an exploration of the intersections of the psychological and the social, the 'pre-modern' and the postmodern, in both their harmonies and contradictions. Through the myth she finds a language for the psychic struggles of her fictional twins – the struggle with multiple, and sometimes contradictory, layers of identity. The myth has also provided her the means to reconnect the migrant figure to the homeland and be a figuration of the ruptures that plague the lives of migrants who have come to exist in a form of doubleness, finding themselves between two identities, two countries, or even two races.

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