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EVIL FRIENDS:

CHILDHOOD FRIENDSHIP AND DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN MEERA SYAL'S *ANITA AND ME* AND HELEN OYEYEMI'S *THE ICARUS GIRL*¹

Childhood narratives have been for decades an important source of interest in different academic disciplines. The exploration of identity development they often contain accounts for the appeal of this kind of fiction not only within literary studies but also within fields such as psychology and cultural studies. At the literary level, their frequent juxtaposition of realistic plots and symbolic elements has led to an awareness of common patterns in them which have attracted critical attention. Indeed, in his 1984 seminal study on childhood autobiography Richard N. Coe argues that a significant number of these narratives present parallel preoccupations which take the form of recurrent themes and images often embodying symbolic truths (1984: 17).

One of such themes is friendship, a concept which has been defined in scientific terms as “an emotional relationship which includes elements of mutual trust, assistance, respect, understanding and intimacy” (Flanagan 1996: 123). Though not often given primary attention in critical approaches to childhood fiction, perhaps as a result of the central position ascribed to familial relationships and individual subjectivity, friendship stands as an important component in early identity development, as it has been proved by studies in the fields of psychology and pedagogy which contend that friends provide emotional support and facilitate not only emotional development but also the learning of empathy (Flanagan 1996: 122). As Cotterell argues, “[t]ogether with family, friends are the primary bonding materials in the edifice we call community” (Cotterell 1996: 21). Preadolescence same-sex friendship, in particular, has been highlighted as playing an essential role not only in the development of an individual's sensitivity to other people's needs, but also in future social adjustment (Erwin 1998: 6). The significance of friendship in identity formation explains its frequent presence in literature and more specifically in childhood narratives, as it will be the case in the novels analysed in the following pages.

It is my view that contemporary diasporic fiction focused on children represents an important contribution to the genre by adding a new dimension to the portrayal of childhood experience, since it incorporates issues of ethnic difference, home and belonging which were previously absent from it. As Roger

Bromley explains, narratives by writers from ethnic minorities portray characters “for whom categories of belonging and the present have been made unstable as a consequence of the displacement enforced by post-colonial and/or migrant circumstances” (2000: 1). Nowhere is this affirmation more apparent than in novels depicting the identity conflicts of young characters whose childhoods turn increasingly difficult due to their position as second-generation migrants and, therefore, to the “in-between” space they inhabit between their parents’ original culture and Western society.

Two authors who have tackled these childhood conflicts are British writers Meera Syal and Helen Oyeyemi, whose first novels *Anita and Me* (1996) and *The Icarus Girl* (2005), respectively,² offer an insightful exploration of problematic friendships which play a crucial role in leading the protagonists towards maturity.³ The diasporic nature of the focalising characters stands as a powerful link between both narratives which highlights the complexities surrounding the construction of identity in second-generation migrants. Thus, in both novels the protagonists turn to damaging friendships for support and approval in a society which marks them as ethnically different and alien to the nation. It is the aim of this essay to analyse the relevance of the friendship motif in the aforementioned narratives by Syal and Oyeyemi as well as the similarities in the way it is deployed in each of them in their exploration of identity conflicts in diasporic children. In order to do this, I will focus initially on the conflicts experienced by the protagonists as a result of their ethnic difference, which will allow the subsequent examination of the friendship that ensues and the assessment of its effects on their perception of themselves as diasporic individuals.

Despite several differences regarding tone and narrative strategies, both novels display numerous parallels among which we must highlight their semi-autobiographical nature, since both deal with the experiences of a little girl who grows up in the author’s ethnic community: Indian-British in Syal’s *Anita and Me*, Nigerian-British in Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*. While Syal’s novel is narrated in the first person by nine-year-old Meena, who offers a humorous account of growing up in the 60s, eight-year-old Jessamy in *The Icarus Girl* is the one to focalise a third-person narration of a more sombre tone set in present-day London. The incorporation of the uncanny through the deployment of the *Doppelgänger* theme⁴ – a concept used in German folklore to refer to the ghostly double of a person whose sighting brings bad luck – accounts for the use of a different narratorial voice, since, as the author herself explains, a third-person narrator was necessary to make the story credible and prevent its being taken as the imaginative production of a troubled girl (Forna 2006: 55).

It is significant that both narratives begin with episodes revealing the protagonists’ feelings of dislocation, thus offering an important clue as to the nature of their conflicts. If Meena resorts to inventing stories about herself in order to survive, as a way “to feel complete, to belong” (Syal 1997: 10), for solitary Jessamy hiding for hours in a cupboard is, to her mother’s concern, the most effective strategy to fight against her perception of a dislocated self: “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 2006: 3). Hence in both

characters their diasporic condition seems to lie at the heart of their conflicts, as we can observe in the repeated allusion to issues of location and belonging. As Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk suggest, diasporic individuals are carriers of a consciousness which provides an awareness of difference, most frequently of a racial or ethnic nature, and this stands as a basic aspect in their identity which usually emerges against a dominant cultural force challenging their self-perception (2005: 30). For both Meena and Jessamy, their different ethnic origin is constantly reminded in their everyday lives in Britain, since they often have to face racist abuse from their peers eventually leading to aggressive reactions and parental reproof.

Identity conflicts are depicted more acutely in *The Icarus Girl* as a result of Jessamy's introverted personality – in contrast with Meena's spontaneity – and her ambiguous position as a “half-and-half” child (Oyeyemi 2006: 13), the mixed-raced daughter of an English father and a Nigerian mother. Indeed, Jessamy's split identity as a result of her bicultural origin is often evoked in the novel, as in the episode when she reflects on her Nigerian name, Wuraola, meaning “gold” in Yoruba: “Wuraola sounded like another person. Not her at all. Should she answer to this name, and by doing so steal the identity of someone who belonged here? Should she . . . become Wuraola? But how?” (Oyeyemi 2006: 20).

For both protagonists, having a friend beyond the family not only marks a departure from the limited environment of early childhood: it also materialises their desire for an equal to identify with. As Stuart Hall argues, the concept of identification is intimately intertwined with that of identity, although he warns against its frequent over-simplification as a process that can ever achieve completeness:

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the ‘naturalism’ of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always ‘in process’. (Hall 1997: 2)

Within psychology identification in the peer group has been perceived as a significant need in adolescence which provides a social identity and an enhancement of the individual's self-concept (Cotterell 1996: 13-14). This enhancement of self-perception can certainly be observed in Meena and Jessamy as they initiate friendships with blonde, rebellious Anita and mysterious, Nigerian Tilly-Tilly, respectively.⁵ The fantasy of total identification with the new friend is emphasised in both narratives by numerous passages, such as that in which Meena can see in Anita's eyes “the recognition of a kindred spirit”, reaching such a point of identification that she perceives in them her “own questioning reflection” (Syal 1997: 150). For Meena, Anita also becomes her “passport to acceptance” in society (Syal 1997: 148) due to her European, and thus “unmarked”, ethnic origin, which once again highlights the relevance of ethnicity in the development of her identity.

Indeed, in Syal's novel friendship with Anita runs parallel to the protagonist's rejection of her own ethnic background, culminating in the total disidentification with her own image in the mirror⁶ and the appearance of a split

identity, since she perceives herself as “a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench” (Syal 1997: 149-150). In *The Icarus Girl* Jessamy’s confusion about her bicultural origin, present at different stages during the narrative, takes the form of resentment towards her mother for the hybrid identity she has imposed on her, as she confides to an understanding psychologist:

‘Sometimes I feel like she wants me to . . . I don’t know. 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.’

‘Hurt?’ said Dr McKenzie.

‘Yeah, like . . . being stretched.’ (Oyeyemi 2006: 257)

An interesting disparity between both narratives lies in the different relevance attributed to gender issues. While in *Anita and Me* gender plays a crucial role in Meena’s identification with Anita, since the latter embodies the protagonist’s ideal of femininity as she approaches puberty and her sexuality awakens, gender issues in *The Icarus Girl* never appear in such an explicit way. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the early age of the protagonist, which places her at an earlier stage in the development of her identity and, thus, at a phase in her life in which gender awareness is still not problematic.

In both novels the new friend’s unruly, defiant behaviour becomes a model to be admired and imitated by the protagonist as a materialisation of the confidence she lacks, eventually provoking her challenge of familial and social rules and, therefore, growing tensions in her family. From a psychological perspective the influence of friends in childhood and adolescence is connected to a gradual loss of intimacy with parents which may lead to conflicts within the family, although this influence must also be acknowledged as a source of social support (Erwin 1998: 8). In the novels analysed, the support offered by Anita and Tilly-Tilly brings about a transformation in the protagonists towards a more confident attitude which will prove valuable in her process of maturation, as Jessamy herself realises: “Ever since she had come back from Nigeria, [Jessamy] felt as if she was becoming different, becoming stronger, becoming more like Tilly” (Oyeyemi 2006: 151).

As already stated, the cruel, remorseless behaviour of the new friend, whose favourite hobby is to humiliate others, encourages the same pattern of conduct in the protagonists, producing not only disappointment within their families but also increasing trouble in their everyday lives. As the narratives advance, different episodes evince a growing anguish in both Meena and Jessamy as remorse and fear, both of their parents’ punishments and of their friends’ capacity for evil, begin to shake their consciences. Thus, the scene in which Anita bullies her weak, introverted younger sister into showing her nakedness in front of everyone proves to Meena the extent of her friend’s cruelty. In addition, the protagonist’s initial admiration for Anita soon gives way to sympathy at her dysfunctional family and bleak future, as well as to alarm as she suspects her involvement in racist attacks.⁷

A similar progression can be observed in *The Icarus Girl*, as Jessamy goes through her most terrifying experiences when she discovers her friend’s

frightening habit of taking revenge on those who have hurt her. Tilly's supernatural ability to control Jess's body becomes another source of terror, although realising her friend's desire to occupy her position eventually allows Jessamy to have a more positive perception of her mixed-race identity: "Jess thought about it, then realised that she didn't [want to be like Tilly], really. And that she hadn't for some time. For a little while it had seemed to be ... OK just to be her, Jess" (Oyeyemi 2006: 218).

This situation leads to a gradual misidentification in the protagonists which can be interpreted as part of a process towards a more mature stage in their lives. According to psychological studies of child development, children at this new stage seek deeper friendships based on "reciprocal emotional commitment", where "[f]riends act as confidants and therapists" (Flanagan 1996: 124).⁸ In the novels this process comes as a consequence of the protagonists' awareness of their own individuality and the impossibility of total identification with their chosen friends, in consonance with Stuart Hall's theories about identity (Hall 1997: 3), and it eventually culminates in a period of illness which symbolises a painful maturation. Thus, Meena's long hospitalisation after falling off a horse in a distressing episode with Anita initiates a healing process which makes her understand that she and Anita "had never been meant for each other" (Syal 1997: 282). In *The Icarus Girl*, sudden bouts of pain and fatigue leave Jess prostrated in bed, defenceless to Tilly's wishes. However, this helpless situation also contains a positive side in that it allows her to build strategies for overcoming her fears that will turn helpful in the future, such as that of imagining a "safe place" inside herself, supplied by her psychologist (Oyeyemi 2006: 210, 243).

It is the intervention of two parallel pairs of characters towards the end of the narratives that eventually prompts the solution to the conflicts, thus establishing what can be perceived as the most evident link between the two texts. The first of these characters is a new friend with whom a better communication is established: in *The Icarus Girl* it is a cheerful, understanding, white girl called Shivs, who befriends Jess; in *Anita and Me*, a boy Meena meets while in hospital feels attracted to her "exotic" Asian appearance and thus helps her to improve her shattered self-esteem, despite his reproduction of Western stereotypes about Indian femininity. In both cases the disintegration of the former relationship is accelerated by jealousy. Hence Jess's fondness for Shivs leads to Tilly's jealous attempt to manipulate her into thinking that only people with a common ethnic background can understand each other (Oyeyemi 2006: 217), thus showing once again the relevance of ethnicity as a major theme though here deployed with a manipulative end. In *Anita and Me* it is Meena who feels jealous of the new friendships Anita has initiated without telling her, not only for the betrayal this represents but most importantly for the racist, skinhead ideology they exhibit:

My best friend was sharing me with someone else and I knew whatever she had been giving me was only what she had left over from him, the scraps, the tokens, the lies. I had fought for this friendship, worried over it, made sacrifices for it, measured myself against it, lost myself inside it, had little to show for it but this bewildered sense of betrayal. Now I knew that I had

never been the one she loved, I was a convenient diversion, a practice run until the real thing came along to claim her. (Syal 1997: 277)

The second parallel character that can be found in both narratives has even a more prominent role, as it is the one to bring peace to the protagonist and to strengthen her link with her ethnic community. In both cases this character is one of her parents' progenitors, brought from India to assist the family, as in Meena's Nanima, or visited in Nigeria, like Jessamy's grandfather. According to Flanagan, grandparents can become important attachment figures and be helpful in periods of parental conflict due to the special emotional relationship they often develop with their grandchildren (1996: 121), a relationship which can be observed in both novels. Furthermore, the fact that none of these two characters has gone through the experience of migration allows them to be interpreted as embodiments of the ancestral knowledge of their community and symbols of their "untouched" traditions.

Apart from awakening the protagonists' interest for their own ethnic origin, both characters develop very close relationships with their granddaughters which grant them a special understanding of the girls' personal plight. If Meena refers to her grandmother as "some kind of sorcerer" (Syal 1997: 209), gifted as she is with the power of bringing harmony to the family, Jessamy's grandfather in *The Icarus Girl* gives her invaluable advice on the phone after miraculously divining the trouble she is going through: "Two hungry people should never make friends. If they do, they eat each other up. It is the same with one person who is hungry and another who is full: they cannot be real, real friends because the hungry one will eat the full one. You understand?" (Oyeyemi 2006: 239-240).

It is significant that Jessamy's grandfather should be the one to eventually rescue her from her friend's evil appropriation of her identity, which he achieves by resorting to Yoruba folklore when he decides to take her to a so-called "medicine woman" and later when he places a symbol of her stillborn twin next to her as protection from evil influences.⁹ By including Yoruba traditions as a vital element in the resolution of the conflict, the author is translating Nigerian values into a Western idiom, in a vindication of African culture. Endowed with sudden strength, thanks – it is implied – to her grandfather's intervention, Jessamy finally defeats Tilly by overcoming her fear and being self-confident for the first time in her life. The ending of the novel, though not devoid of ambiguity, offers an optimistic note through the combination in the final sentence of the image of an awakening – from the nightmare experienced – and the reiteration of the preposition "up": "Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up" (Oyeyemi 2006: 322).

As regards the conclusion of Syal's novel, Meena's stay in hospital followed by the unexpected death of her boyfriend finally prompts a better valuation of her own self as well as an appraisal of her desires, as is proved when she conscientiously undertakes the revision for her eleven-plus exam in order to continue her education. Her final reflection after her success, when she is moving to a grammar school and a better-off neighbourhood, reveals a more confident, mature Meena who is aware of her capacities and her position in the world:¹⁰

I now knew I was not a bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or no place. The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home. This sense of displacement I had always carried round like a curse shrivelled into insignificance against the shadow of mortality cast briefly by a hospital anglepoise lamp, by the last wave of a gnarled brown hand. I would not mourn too much the changing landscape around me, because I would be a traveller soon anyhow. (Syal 1997: 303)

Hence both narratives conclude when the protagonist has freed herself from the influence of the evil friend, a moment which represents the final step towards the solution of her identity conflicts. Choosing a harmful friend can thus be interpreted as a rite of passage for both Meena and Jessamy, since it brings about a painful period in their lives which finally allows them to mature and enables them to establish more fulfilling relationships in the future, free from their previous feeling of unbelonging as bicultural individuals. The motif of harmful friendship stands, therefore, as the central theme in both narratives, and is deployed in parallel ways with the authors' exploration of identity development in ethnic minority children. In their novels Syal and Oyeyemi resort to different settings and narrative styles which eventually produce two literary works of differing natures: one humorous and openly autobiographical, organised as the memories of the protagonist, and the other more serious and sombre, narrated from an external viewpoint. Nevertheless, the use of parallel episodes and situations in the initiation and termination of the friendship and of analogous characters who facilitate the resolution of the conflict are features which emphasise the parallel nature of the authors' approach to the themes of childhood friendship and ethnic identities.

In addition, Syal and Oyeyemi, by deploying the motif of evil friendships, foreground the special vulnerability of second-generation migrants as a result of their location in what has been called the "Third Space" of enunciation, a place in which self-definition requires a difficult negotiation between cultures (Bhabha 1994: 38). Thus, for Meena and Jessamy their ethnicity seems to be a serious burden at the beginning of the narrative, when both want to erase their Indian and Nigerian origins, although by the end they have learnt a lesson about friendship and human behaviour and can go on with their lives as better prepared individuals. The authors' choice of age for the protagonists highlights the importance of identification and identity issues right before the onset of puberty, a period which is considered crucial in life from psychological perspectives. Although friendships are always dynamic and in a continuous process of change (Erwin 1998: 13), it is certainly in this period that they are most changeable and influential, since individual identity is then at its initial stages of formation. Diasporic children in Western societies are all the more vulnerable in this situation due to the difficult space they inhabit as bicultural individuals. Syal and Oyeyemi offer in their novels a powerful exploration of these issues inscribing new preoccupations not only in the writing produced by ethnic minorities, but also in the well-established tradition of childhood fiction.

- 1 This paper has been produced with the support of the Research Group *The Expression of Diversity in the English-Speaking World* (University of the Balearic Islands, Spain). An early draft was presented at the NAES (Nordic Association for English Studies) Conference held at the University of Bergen, Norway, on 24-26 May 2007.
- 2 Both novels received considerable attention at the time of their publication: *Anita and Me* was the winner of the *Betty Trask Award* and was shortlisted for *The Guardian Fiction Prize*, whereas *The Icarus Girl*, initiated when Oyeyemi was studying for her A-Levels, was launched after she had been offered £400,000 for it (Sethi 2005: 1), a sum which can be compared to that offered for Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* (2000).
- 3 Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara* (1997) and Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996) are other interesting examples of diasporic childhood narratives, although they will not be discussed here as they do not deal with friendship in a sustained way.
- 4 Reviewers like Ali Smith have highlighted the use of this motif in the novel (Smith 2005: 1).
- 5 Actually, Meena's friendship with Anita also entails being accepted by a group of peers, as Anita's popularity makes her be always surrounded by other neighbouring girls and eventually form a gang (Syal 1997: 138).
- 6 This image can also be found in other diasporic narratives by women such as Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999).
- 7 Social class is another interesting issue tackled in the novel, as both Meena and Anita grow up in a working-class neighbourhood. It is significant that at the end of the narrative the protagonist moves to a higher-class area, something impossible for Anita's family which reflects the social mobility characteristic of the Asian community in Britain.
- 8 According to Flanagan, this phase covers the period between the ages of 10 and 12 approximately (1996: 124).
- 9 As recounted in the novel, according to Nigerian folklore twins inhabit three worlds: the physical world, the spirit world and a kind of "wilderness of the mind", which makes them particularly vulnerable. It is common belief in Yoruba culture that when one twin dies in childhood the surviving child must go through a rite: the family must offer a carving to the god of twins to make sure the dead one is peaceful and the one alive protected (Oyeyemi 2006: 191-192).
- 10 The fact that both protagonists excel academically is highly significant: Meena passes her eleven-plus exam at the end of the narrative, being the first one in her neighbourhood to do so in many years; Jessamy has recently been moved one year above her age at school when the narration starts. This is proof of their maturity and will allow them better expectations in life as well as a greater social mobility.

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SUMMARY

EVIL FRIENDS: CHILDHOOD FRIENDSHIP AND DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN MEERA SYAL'S *ANITA AND ME* AND HELEN OYEYEMI'S *THE ICARUS GIRL*

Childhood fiction has received great critical attention due to its exploration of identity development, a tendency which can also be observed in contemporary diasporic narratives dealing with the experience of ethnic minority children. Two of such narratives are *Anita and Me* (1996) by Indian-British Meera Syal and *The Icarus Girl* (2005) by Nigerian-British Helen Oyeyemi, both focused on the childhood experiences of two girls from ethnic minorities who grow up in racist societies. This essay surveys the connections that can be observed between both novels as they deploy the friendship motif in their depiction of the protagonists' identity conflicts after turning to damaging friendships for identification and approval. The assessment of the links between both narratives leads to insightful reflections regarding diasporic writing and identity formation in migrant children.

KEYWORDS: identity, diasporic fiction, childhood narratives, friendship, ethnicity, Meera Syal, Helen Oyeyemi.