

The Unspeakable Wound: Trauma, Abjection, Dissociation and the Quest for Healing in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* and Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder*

Lila Raj Bimali 

Florida State University, USA

lrb24@fsu.edu

Received: April 25, 2026;

Revised & Accepted: June 29, 2026

Copyright: Author(s), (2026)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Abstract

Background: This essay explores *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi and *An Ordinary Wonder* by Buki Papillon, focusing on psychological trauma, repressive culture, and the search for healing in the African diaspora. The work centers on Otolorin Akinro, and Jessamy Harrison, examining their struggles to assert individuality while seeking a sense of belonging within their communities. Ultimately, the analysis reveals how social, familial, and colonial systems intersect to oppress these characters, severely compromising their psychological well-being.

Methodology: This comparative study conceptualizes the “wounded self” through a multifaceted theoretical lens. It draws on Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, Julia Kristeva’s abjection, Susan Rubin Suleiman’s dissociation, and Sayantani DasGupta’s critiques of medical imperialism, placing them in conversation with indigenous African healing epistemologies.

Results: The findings indicate that systemic expectations and historical violence precipitate profound alienation. Jessamy is isolated from her Yoruba heritage and subjected to a pathologizing Western medical gaze. Consequently, her crisis manifests through a spectral twin, resulting in a Gothic tragedy. In contrast, Otolorin engages directly with traditional Yoruba cosmological healing. This approach successfully resists clinical categorization and allows for the active integration of their dissociated identities.

Conclusion: This paper examines how African diasporic individuals navigate conflicted postcolonial settings. Through Otolorin, whose resistance to assimilation symbolizes defiance, trauma is reframed from shame into liberation. Textual analysis demonstrates how cultural and colonial violence constrains non-conforming lives and that ultimately advocates for healing strategies rooted in indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords: trauma, abjection, dissociation, postcolonial, healing, African diaspora, indigenous epistemology, comparative study

Introduction

An Ordinary Wonder by Buki Papillon and *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi are two Nigerian diasporic novels that examine the lines separating psychological trauma, cultural repression, and the pursuit of healing in African and diasporic contexts. The protagonists of both novels – Otolorin Akinro, an intersex Nigerian child, and Jessamy Harrison, a biracial Anglo-Nigerian girl – are positioned at the nexus of selfhood, difference, and belonging. Their stories demonstrate how trauma is created and sustained by social, familial, and colonial structures in addition to being internalized by the body and psyche. This essay contends that interpreting and analyzing these narratives through the combined lenses of Julia Kristeva's abjection, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, and Sayantani DasGupta's critique of medical imperialism exposes how Western models that pathologize are insufficient for addressing injuries stemming from cultural and colonial violence.

These specific texts were selected for comparison because they present parallel yet distinctly divergent trajectories of non-normative youth navigating the Nigerian diaspora: one spiraling into gothic fracture, the other fighting toward cosmological integration. Within this study, healing is operationally defined not as a Western biomedical "cure." Nor does it mean the total eradication of psychological trauma. Instead, it constitutes a transformative process of relational, narrative, and cosmological reintegration. This study draws from indigenous Yoruba epistemologies, which share a foundational logic with Nepalese *jhankri* shamanic practices. Through this lens, healing transitions the "wounded self" out of abjection, dissociation, and alienation. This psychic movement ultimately restores the individual to communal and spiritual harmony. Operationally, this restorative process manifests through specific textual markers. These include a character's capacity to reclaim indigenous spiritual spaces. Furthermore, characters reframe non-normative identities as sacred and reconstruct agency from colonial fragmentation. Therefore, healing is not measured by the absolute absence of suffering. Rather, it depends on the subject's active integration of historical, bodily, and cultural trauma. This transformative process occurs through a ritual witnessing that fosters a coherent, self-affirmed narrative.

Literature Review

Most scholars read *The Icarus Girl* as a Gothic and postcolonial novel. Diana Adesola Mafe argues that the novel shows how colonial history causes racism, dislocation, and emotional pain, especially for diasporic girls (Mafe, 2012, p. 21). Jordan Stouck uses abjection theory to explain Jessamy's struggle to form a stable identity, showing both psychological and cultural conflict (Stouck, 2010, p. 90). A collection edited by Chloe Buckley and Sarah

Ilott places the novel within Oyeyemi's wider Gothic and postcolonial work ([Buckley & Ilott, 2017](#)).

Research on *An Ordinary Wonder* is still limited. A recent study examines gender and intersex identity, showing how the novel challenges fixed gender norms and uses Yoruba spirituality for support. María Cano Fernández compares the novel with another Nigerian text and shows how queer identities develop through gender, race, and social relations ([Cano Fernández, 2024](#)). This paper fills that gap by using trauma theory and postcolonial ideas in a comparative way ([Craps, 2013, pp. 11, 19](#)). At the theoretical level, Stef Craps is central. He argues that trauma theory is too focused on Western models and ignores non-Western experiences. He calls for more culturally sensitive approaches. This is important for both novels, where Western medical and psychological models do not fully help the characters. This call for culturally sensitive frameworks resonates in recent Global South scholarship mapping diverse traumas and marginalized identities. For instance, [Adhikari \(2024\)](#) investigates the enduring legacy of historical wounds and postcolonial trauma in East African fiction through Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*. Concurrently, contemporary research has expanded into the geopolitical intersections of gender and societal oppression. For instance, [Adhikari \(2025\)](#) analyzes cross-cultural constraints on women's lives and bodily autonomy in South Asian literature. By engaging with these current trajectories, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between broader postcolonial trauma studies and localized, indigenous healing mechanisms. This paper follows his idea but goes further by closely reading the novels and showing how Yoruba knowledge offers practical alternatives for healing.

Theoretical Framework

What makes this comparative reading productive is the way these distinct theoretical lenses – Caruth's trauma theory, Kristeva's abjection, Suleiman's dissociation, and DasGupta's critique of medical imperialism – enter into a productive tension to construct what this paper terms the “wounded self”. While [Caruth \(1996\)](#) maps the internal, repetitive structure of psychic trauma, [DasGupta \(2020\)](#) insists that such repetition is never merely psychological, but is the legible scar of systemic and colonial violence. [Suleiman's \(2008\)](#) account of dissociation bridges the psychoanalytic and the somatic, explaining the splitting strategies both protagonists adopt to survive environments hostile to their existence. Finally, [Okello and Musisi's \(2015\)](#) account of traditional healing supplies an alternative epistemological framework, viewing psychological rupture not as an isolated Western pathology, but as a disharmony in social and spiritual relationships (p. 253).

The Nature of the Wound: Caruthian Trauma

To comprehend the baseline psychological architecture of this suffering, we must turn to [Cathy Caruth \(1996\)](#), who defines trauma as a paradoxical experience rather than a straightforward, easily assimilated injury. Drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth notes that trauma is an event experienced “too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore

not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the survivor's nightmares and repetitive actions" (p. 4). The subject only comes into contact with the traumatic event through its belatedness, because it is too overwhelming to be processed at the moment of occurrence.

To illustrate this internal loop, Caruth utilizes Torquato Tasso's epic allegory of Tancred and Clorinda, wherein Tancred unwittingly kills his beloved in disguise, and later, striking a tree in an enchanted forest, hears her voice crying out from the bleeding trunk. For Caruth, trauma is less a simple physical pathology and more "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (p. 4). Thus, the wound becomes a dual site of profound disruption and potential testimony, expressing its truth indirectly through symptomatic recurrences. This aligns directly with Julia Kristeva's foundational concept of abjection too.

A strong and unsettling synthesis emerges when these ideas – trauma, abjection, and dissociation – converge on the postcolonial body. The postcolonial condition operates as a collective wound that cries out. It embodies a traumatic history defined by violence, exploitation, and cultural disruption. The protagonists, Jess and Otolorin, must dismantle themselves in order to survive in the conflicting and unfriendly environments they live in. Consequently, the wounded self theoretical framework is not only a diagnostic tool but also a critical method for hearing the frequently non-linear stories of suffering and survival that arise from political and personal violence.

In *The Icarus Girl*, trauma initially presents as enigmatic and psychological before becoming fully embodied. Prior to the emergence of TillyTilly, Jess is depicted as a child overwhelmed by a pre-existing anxiety, that Caruth described as "the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control" ([Caruth, 1996, p. 2](#)). Her unexplained fevers and compulsive behaviours, including her withdrawal into cupboards while repetitively whispering "I am in the cupboard" ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 3](#)), as well as her "haiku phase," ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 7](#)) during which writing was described as feeling "punched very hard, just once, with each haiku" ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 7](#)), represent the initial, enigmatic expressions of a trauma lacking a discernible origin.

Although initially envisioned as a restorative return to origins, the journey to Nigeria ultimately triggers a resurgence of trauma. This psychological crisis manifests through the haunting apparition of her spectral twin, TillyTilly. Caruth, in her analysis of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, asserts that the essence of trauma is found not solely in the recurrence of the injury, but also in "the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound" ([Caruth, 1996, p. 3](#)). TillyTilly represents this voice accurately. She represents the manifestation of the unknown, the unintegrated core of Jess's trauma - trauma stemming from the death of her twin Fern, her divided cultural identity as a "half-and-half

child,” ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 261](#)) and the historical violence of colonialism that precedes her existence. TillyTilly represents the manifestation of Jess’s deep-seated alienation and historical loss.

In *An Ordinary Wonder*, the trauma is explicitly physical and consistently recurring from the beginning. Olorin’s body represents a wound for their family and society, and their existence comprises a succession of distressing experiences that Caruth describes as a cyclical “possession by a sort of fate” ([Caruth, 1996, p. 2](#)). The traumatic experiences are vividly physical, commencing with the initial violation during the examination by Babalawo’s wife, Apetebi: “She crouched forward, bony fingers searching briskly through fold and crevice . . .” ‘Please,’ I croaked. Please don’t cut me.’ “Warm liquid pooled uncontrollably under my thighs, and somewhere, I died of shame” ([Papillon, 2021, p. 26](#)). This event, encountered prematurely and unexpectedly, is not cognitively processed but is instead inscribed directly onto the body, later manifesting in nightmares and a persistent sense of bodily alienation.

The “voice” of the wound is not an external entity but rather the body’s intrinsic, repetitive expression of somatic suffering and shame, encompassing falls, assaults, and involuntary physical responses. Only when Olorin is driven to the edge of suicide does this somatic expression manifest in a conscious, testimonial form through a final letter to their sister, Wura. This act represents a significant moment of witnessing, aiming to convert the repetitive, bodily trauma into a linear narrative, thereby rendering the truth of their existence accessible. It is the result of the wound’s “cry,” an outspoken statement born of utter hopelessness.

Mechanisms of Survival: The Kristevan Abject

The violent logic of Kristevan abjection filters the traumatic experiences of both protagonists, illuminating the ways in which their communities and even their own psyches try to drive them out. According to Kristeva, the abject is anything that “disturbs identity, system, order” ([Kristeva, 1982, p. 4](#)). What disregards boundaries, positions, and regulations? “The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite (4). Though the abject “does not cease challenging its master” ([Kristeva, 1982, p. 2](#)) from its place of banishment, it is what we violently expel – vomit, the corpse – to constitute ourselves as clean and proper subjects ([Kristeva, 1982, p. 3](#)). The personification of the abject is TillyTilly. From the moment she first appears, her physical characteristics identify her as a border-violating entity. Jess observes that her skin is “ashen and greyish,” that her body is out of proportion and that her dress is “slightly too big for her” ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 47](#)). She is the epitome of the “in-between,” a living transgression of the lines separating the living from the dead, the real from the ghostly, the young from the ancient, Nigerian from British. The corpse is Kristeva’s most powerful illustration of the abject: “the utmost of abjection . . . It is death infecting life” ([Kristeva, 1982, p. 5](#)). TillyTilly is this death-in-life, the unresolved, decaying memory of Fern, Jess’s deceased twin, who returns with a vengeful agency instead of being buried. “Jess wasn’t there anymore . . . She felt as if she were – being flung, scattered in steady handfuls, every part of her literally thrown into things”

([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 209](#)). The novel's most intense terror peaks when the line separating Jess from her abject double completely dissolves, creating a sense of literal psychic disintegration. This is a "gagging sensation," a sense of being "turned inside out, guts sprawling," which is the psychic equivalent of the body's response to the abject ([Kristeva, 1982, pp. 3–4](#)).

The abject in *An Ordinary Wonder* is found inside Otolorin's own intersex body rather than as an external double. Their bodies are created as monstrous from birth because they transgress the sacred border between male and female. Mojisola, their mother, views Otolorin as a "thing" that upends her carefully constructed world of social respectability rather than as a child. Otolorin internalises this violent othering after hearing her mother reveal her anatomy to Auntie Abiye: "Put like that, I sounded hideous" ([Papillon, 2021, p. 42](#)). Maternal rejection is a desperate Kristevan act of self - preservation because Oto's body is the "exorbitant inside," a threat that comes from the mother's own womb. The examinations by Apetebi and the urologist, the physical punishments, and the sexual assaults by Bayo and Elijah all serve to enact and reinforce this primary abjection. The initial expulsion from the maternal symbolic order is reenacted in these acts, which treat Oto's body as an object of disgust, curiosity, and violent conquest. Oto's status as a monstrous, border – violating entity that needs to be subjugated and punished is reinforced by the attacks, which are the logical conclusion of this lifelong rejection, where societal hatred is internalised and acted out.

The location and possible resolution of the abject constitute the main distinction. Jess comes to the depressing conclusion that the abject is her only "homeland" in *The Icarus Girl* because the abject is an externalised, spectral force that eventually consumes and defines the self. The abject in *An Ordinary Wonder* is a somatic, internal reality that is eventually integrated and changed by a healing process with a cultural foundation.

Dissociative Strategies: Fragmented Selves

The psyche may use dissociation as a survival strategy if the trauma continues and the pressure of rejection becomes intolerable. A psychological process known as dissociation involves a breakdown in the usual integration of consciousness, memory, identity, and perception as well as detachment from reality. Based on Susan Rubin Suleiman's notion of contemporary trauma theory, this analysis argues that for Jessamy and Otolorin, dissociation functions as a necessary, albeit perilous, survival mechanism against 'unspeakable' threats to their bodily and psychological integrity.

Oyeyemi's protagonist, Jessamy, experiences a psychological split as a result of her extreme loneliness, anxiety, and cultural alienation. TillyTilly can be viewed as a dissociative self-state rather than just an imaginary friend. TillyTilly represents Jess's suppressed rage, her Nigerian ancestry, her loss of her twin, and her perceived "badness" ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 284](#)). This is intuitively understood by Dr. McKenzie when he proposes that TillyTilly is "an alter ego . . . "an internalized imaginary companion . . . a personality that is very markedly different from

her own” ([Oyeyemi, 2005, pp. 288–289](#)). Jess dissociates in order to cope with the trauma of her life, but this tactic backfires because the dissociated self, TillyTilly, becomes independent and starts acting out violently, which further separates Jess from the outside world.

Analogously, Oto in *An Ordinary Wonder* also suffers from dissociation. A typical dissociative reaction to intense physical pain and fear is the out-of-body experience that occurred during the fall down the stairs – “I hit the bottom with a squelchy crack and popped out of my body into a flash of light so strong, I was blinded” ([Papillon, 2021, p. 7](#)). More subtly, Otolorin’s ongoing need to conceal their actual identity by being “invisible” ([Papillon, 2021, p. 12](#)) obliges a prolonged dissociation from their own identity and physical form. In addition to being a wish, “Lori” is a dissociative space where the true self can exist without fear of social and familial rejection.

Analysis: Dissociation in the two novels

TillyTilly is the embodiment of everything Jess suppresses, including her unresolved trauma, agency, anger, and Nigerian ancestry. TillyTilly’s early imitation of Jess symbolizes the disjointed, disintegrated aspect of the self that has broken away. She gives Jess the ability to express violent and transgressive urges that she is unable to control, for example, tormenting Colleen McLain and her mother. This is consistent with Suleiman’s explanation of dissociation creating a distinct personality that contains the traumatic event. Suleiman argues “that in situations of extreme stress, a dissociation takes place: the subject “splits” off part of itself from the experience, producing “multiple personalities” in the process” ([Suleiman, 2008, p. 276](#)).

TillyTilly acts as a malevolent counterpart of Judith Herman’s therapist. She imposes a traumatic narrative rather than assisting Jess in regaining memories. She guides Jess to the tomb dedicated to the deceased twin that implies a suppressed past (the death of a twin at birth or in utero) that Jess is unaware of. This directly addresses Suleiman’s argument: Is TillyTilly a creation of Jess’s imagination, “that many people are prone to having false memories “implanted” in them – though not false memories of trauma” ([Suleiman, 2008, p. 279](#)) that “wreaks havoc in real life,” ([Suleiman, 2008, p. 278](#)) or is she disclosing a historical fact? The dissociative experience – a total detachment from consensual reality and a descent into the fractured, traumatizing underworld of the psyche – is metaphorically represented in the climax when TillyTilly drags Jess through the solid staircase and into the earth.

Similarly, Otolorin’s “Lori” identity is a dissociated self that needs to be suppressed in order to survive. This is a different kind of splitting: separating a fundamental aspect of the self rather than forming a new entity. Otolorin exhibits chronic, structural dissociation in the form of persistent alertness and concealment. The water goddess Yeyemi in Otolorin’s visions symbolizes a constructive, therapeutic kind of dissociation. Otolorin’s consciousness dissociates and escapes to a “realm where the great mother gives milk to her offspring” ([Papillon, 2021, p. 3](#)) when the physical and psychological suffering becomes intolerable, for

example, after being thrown down the stairs, during the exorcism, of Otolorin in the novel. Their true self, “beautiful” and whole, can exist in this “silver-blue tunnel of tiny stars” ([Papillon, 2021, p. 7](#)), which is a psychic sanctuary.

This is consistent with Suleiman’s observation that dissociation serves as a survival strategy and a means of escaping an intolerable situation. Suleiman further argues that “the brain is not able to fully assimilate or “process” the event, and responds through various mechanisms such as psychological numbing, or shutting down of normal emotional responses” ([Suleiman, 2008, p. 276](#)). Otolorin’s narrative also supports Suleiman’s essay’s McNally claim that the trauma is not suppressed. Otolorin painfully recalls every act of violence and derogatory statement. Surviving the memories they are compelled to live with and integrating their dissociated self (Lori) into their everyday lives without being destroyed is the struggle, not memory recovery.

Systems of Pathologization: The Medical Gaze and the “Black Museum”

Both the novels effectively criticise Western knowledge systems, especially psychology and medicine, for their part in pathologising and objectifying the traumatised person, which exacerbates their trauma. Sayantani DasGupta offers a critical perspective on this common theme in her examination of “medical racism” and the “Black Museum” ([DasGupta, 2020, p. 34](#)). DasGupta describes that Western medicine has historically relied on “bodies of colour” and has been “integral to creating notions of biologically different races” ([DasGupta, 2020, p. 34](#)). It serves, DasGupta further extends the argument of Wendy Chun, as a “technology and a mode of medicalization,” putting suffering on display in order to legitimise oppressive power structures ([as cited in DasGupta, 2020, pp. 34, 39](#)).

This dominance manifests as a psychological diagnosis in *The Icarus Girl*. Jess’s English father and eventually Dr. McKenzie, a child psychologist, pathologise her “fevers,” tantrums, and social disengagement rather than viewing them as signs of a spiritual or cultural crisis. With its empirical focus, this Western biomedical model is completely unprepared to understand a haunting resulting from the diaspora’s cultural split. Dr. McKenzie tries to justify TillyTilly during a crucial therapy session by saying that she is real “but not real in the same way as this table is,” akin to a “idea of a mermaid” ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 268](#)). As Jess correctly points out, this explanation is insufficient and condescending; it is a basic interpretation error. Furthermore, Dr. McKenzie’s clinical detachment fails to account for Jess’s biracial identity and her status as a “half-and-half child.” This position places her entirely outside the normative white psychological models he employs. By ignoring these racialized dimensions of her alienation, his medical gaze subtly perpetuates the very systemic erasure that fuels TillyTilly’s violent manifestations.

The novel’s depiction of a psychological establishment that, in its well-intentioned ignorance, becomes another site of alienation and misrecognition for Jess, further solidifying her unbelonging, responds to DasGupta’s call to “examine medicine’s historic and present-day

complicity in the dehumanization, subjugation, and torture of bodies of color” ([DasGupta, 2020, p. 33](#)). DasGupta’s “Black Museum” analogy is further supported by *An Ordinary Wonder*, which depicts medical objectification in a more direct and terrifying manner. In this symbolic museum, Oto’s body is put on display. “It takes two visits, during which my body is prodded and probed and clamped open in ways I’d never known was possible, with medical photos taken (my face covered) and everything measured, including my teeth . . . I feel like a particularly interesting specimen” ([Papillon, 2021, p. 232](#)) is how the Western urologist’s examination is described. DasGupta’s analysis of medicine’s part in the “dehumanisation, subjugation, and torture of bodies of colour” ([DasGupta, 2020, p. 33](#)) is strikingly evoked by this scene. Even though Oto is freed from superstitious labels like “demon” by the urologist’s clinical diagnosis, the diagnosis itself – “incomplete testicular feminization” – and its placement on a “Genital Virilisation Staging Scheme” ([Papillon, 2021, p. 233](#)) remain tools of the same biopolitical system. It aims to categorise, quantify, and taxonomise departures from a binary, white, Western norm. Here, the medical gaze is a contemporary expression of what DasGupta, citing Laporte, refers to as “imperial cleanliness” – a hygienic campaign for conventional gender and physical purity that is reminiscent of the eugenic reasoning behind removing “undesirables” from the social body. But by ultimately subordinating Western medicine to an indigenous epistemological framework – a move that is still unattainable for Jess in her remote setting – *An Ordinary Wonder* provides a more thorough blueprint for resistance.

Paths to Healing: The Spectrum of Possibility

The two novels’ examination of healing and the potential for integrating the traumatic wound is where they diverge most. The Yoruba ideas of the ibeji (twin spirit) and the role of the Babalawo (traditional healer) are two alternative, culturally grounded frameworks that are purposefully presented in both texts, but they are used for very different purposes – one tragic, the other transformative. The idea of the ibeji is presented in *The Icarus Girl* as a non-pathologizing explanation for Jess’s illness. According to Sarah, her mother, twins are considered sacred in Yoruba culture and are thought to exist in “three worlds: this one, the spirit world, and the Bush, ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 181](#)) which is a sort of wilderness of the mind” ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 200](#)). This model, which is consistent with Okello and Musisi’s research on African traditional healers, offers a communal and spiritual explanation for Jess’s predicament by attributing it to a broken relationship between the living and the dead, the human and the spiritual, rather than to personal psychosis.

Crucially, this unattainability is profoundly geographic as well as psychological. Jess’s physical location in suburban England isolates her from the communal, lived reality of Yoruba spiritual practices, rendering them distant, intellectualized folklore rather than accessible, operative healing modalities. Conversely, Otolorin’s physical presence in Nigeria ultimately allows for direct, localized intervention. Unfortunately, for Jess, this knowledge is still unavailable as a workable remedy. It is portrayed as folklore, a cultural fact that cannot be operationalised

because it lacks the ritual and social context. Jess finds herself torn between two worlds, unable to fully utilise the traditional framework (her ties to Nigeria are shattered and intellectualised) and utterly let down by the modern one.

DasGupta's claim regarding the "failure of imagination when it comes to race" ([DasGupta, 2020, p. 34](#)) in institutional medicine with regard to race and culture is aptly illustrated by the existence of this alternative knowledge system, which primarily serves to highlight the profound inadequacy of the Western model. The system's inability to accurately diagnose the wounds of the past prevents it from "imagine(ing) more racially just futures" ([DasGupta, 2020, p. 34](#)). As a result, Jess is not healed. The novel ends with the horrifying realisation that there might be no belonging, only the endless, violent negotiation with the ghost in the mirror for the "half-and-half child" ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 261](#)). TillyTilly, the abject witness, changes from a protective confidante to a predatory entity.

The tragedy is exacerbated by the healing framework's existence as an alluring but unattainable possibility. For Jess, TillyTilly appropriates and taints the act of bearing witness. Jess's doubles frequently muffle or overpower her own voice. TillyTilly takes over as the main narrator of Jess's suffering, but as demonstrated by the attack on Siobhan, her testimony is destructive, vindictive, and ultimately results in increased isolation. Adults like Dr. McKenzie and Jess's parents routinely reject her attempts to explain her reality. The testimony increases trauma and alienation at the end. The final pages of the novel underscore this profound narrative uncertainty, culminating in a psychic collision where Jessamy "hopped, skipped, jumped into Tilly's unyielding flesh" before the text abruptly fractures into the incantatory concluding line: "Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up" ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 321](#)). While this analysis interprets this repetitive waking as confinement within an inescapable psychic abyss, scholars such as [Mafe \(2012\)](#) emphasize the radical ambiguity of Oyeyemi's ending, arguing that Jessamy's literal merging with her abject twin can be read not as absolute psychological defeat, but as a complex, open-ended negotiation of diasporic hybridity. Contrary to Jessamy's captivity, Otolorin's story offers a difficult but doable way of rejection through a synthesis of knowledge systems and narrative reclamation.

Cosmological Integration

In sharp contrast, *An Ordinary Wonder* presents traditional healing as a viable, active, and potent agent of integration rather than as folklore. The Babalawo is an interpreter of cosmic order in addition to being a physician. His cosmological and narrative intervention aims to "uncover the god's intentions and resolve the riddle of your existence so as to guide you onto your true path. For it is ruin to pursue the wrong destiny" ([Papillon, 2021, p. 27](#)). In line with Okello and Musisi's definition of traditional healing as care that addresses "the whole individual, dealing with the mind and body together instead of separately," ([Okello & Musisi, 2015, p. 255](#)) this approach is client-centered and holistic.

Importantly, this perspective reframes Apetebi's first traumatic examination; her response, which is devoid of the disgust Oto anticipates, starts the process of contesting the Kristevan abjection imposed by Oto's mother. The healer's wife perceives a human being where the mother perceives a monster; the Babalawo perceives a destiny where the mother perceives a curse. The novel's brilliant move is to argue for a synthesis of knowledge systems. This is made evident by Otolorin's statement, "I'm clear about being examined so I can understand myself. What Babalawo began with his *Odu-Ifa* divination, she will hopefully expand with her urology degree" (Papillon, 2021, p. 232). In this case, Western medicine is subordinated to the native epistemological framework. The urologist provides the "what" (the clinical data), while the Babalawo provides the essential "why" (the cosmic context and spiritual purpose). His statements, like "the eagle raised as a chicken must one day recognise itself and choose to fly" (Papillon, 2021, p. 30), offer an identity rooted in destiny as opposed to the pathological identities imposed by family and clinic. The final reconciliation with Wura, which reveals the intergenerational trauma of violence against intersex children, completes this process of narrative repair. It allows Oto/Lori to become what DasGupta might call a "positive hybridity," a subversive force that upends the colonial and patriarchal "museum" of gender binaries from within. This transition from abjection to integration aligns with recent queer scholarship. [Cano Fernandez \(2024\)](#) examines these non-normative identities within Nigerian coming-of-age narratives. Through this analysis, the scholar highlights the transformative power of reclaiming indigenous spiritual spaces. This reclamation offers a counter-narrative to both colonial homophobia and Western biomedical categorization.

For Oto, testifying is a difficult but transformative accomplishment. A crucial step in asserting agency is the suicidal choice to write a farewell letter to Wura. It is an effort to turn a lifetime of physical suffering into a logical, linear story and to wrest control of the narrative from those who have violated them. Caruth's definition of trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4) is reflected in this act. This exact act of address is found in Otolorin's letter. It is potent to transform from a passive victim of trauma to an active author of their own story. That it emerges from the very edge of despair does not diminish its transformative force; if anything, it amplifies it. The family witness Wura learns about their grandmother later justifies and contextualises this personal testimony that finally results in a shared narrative and helps healing and reconciliation.

Theoretical Synthesis: Listening to the Wound

Oto's trauma in *An Ordinary Wonder* is Caruthian: the violent exorcism, the "fall down the stairs" (Papillon, 2021, p. 7), and Bayo's attempted assault are all "too soon" and are replayed. The voice from that wound is "Lori's" voice. DasGupta would contend, however, that Oto's personal suffering is inextricably linked to the colonial past that forced Yoruba society to conform to strict and binary Western gender and religious standards. This colonial hangover turns Oto's body into a battlefield where native conceptions of spiritual destiny are

pathologized as demonic. The sword was forged in the furnace of colonialism and missionary ideology, but the wound is personal.

Okello & Musisi show that a vast, successful, and culturally cohesive system of healing has always existed in Africa, parallel to and frequently marginalized by Western medicine. They treat mental illness, which is what Western medicine would refer to as a “rupture of life’s harmony” ([Okello & Musisi, 2015, p. 255](#)), as something that frequently calls for social and spiritual healing. They criticize the limitations of Western biomedical hegemony vehemently. And, they both agree that health must be viewed holistically and encompasses more than just the absence of disease.

The notion that trauma “is always the story of a wound that cries out” ([Caruth, 1996, p. 4](#)) is Caruth’s main contribution. The fundamental issue is one of listening and observing. Tancred’s story is about his wounding allowing him to finally hear Clorinda’s voice. A cultural framework for this precise listening process is offered by Okello & Musisi. According to their model, the healer’s job is to hear the wound as a social and spiritual message as well as an individual symptom. The “crying voice” could be a social conflict, a troubled spirit, or an ancestor. Through activities like “group ancestor worship (kusamira)” ([Okello & Musisi, 2015, p. 253](#)), the community participates in the healing process by listening and responding. This establishes a strong link between conventional practice and psychoanalytic theory.

Both acknowledge that the truth of the suffering subject is not immediately accessible and requires a specialized mode of listening. In *The Icarus Girl*, TillyTilly, a terrifying character, “cries out” for Jess’s trauma. This voice is pathologized as an “alter ego” by a Western therapist such as Dr. McKenzie ([Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 288](#)). As Okello and Musisi posit, a traditional healer might instead hear TillyTilly as a sign of a dislocated ancestral connection or a restless spirit (the deceased twin Fern). The story should not be repressed; instead, the goal should be to listen to it, comprehend its meaning, and bring harmony back.

Limitations of the Study

Though the comparative analysis explores crucial insights into the healing trajectories of non-normative postcolonial subjects, it is not without limitations. The study is confined in its scope to two specific Nigerian diasporic novels and is largely dependent on the theoretical frameworks of Caruthian trauma and Kristevan abjection. Therefore, these conclusions may not apply uniformly across the wider African diaspora and to other postcolonial regions with different indigenous worldviews. Nevertheless, this work establishes a foundational framework for future scholarship. Subsequent research could expand upon these insights by analyzing a broader spectrum of contemporary literature. Furthermore, future studies might explore how these Western trauma models intersect with other localized healing traditions across the Global South.

Conclusion: The Spectrum of the Wound

Finally, two insightful, complementary reflections on trauma in the postcolonial setting are provided by Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* and Buki Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder*. By re-reading trauma through African epistemologies of healing, this paper poses a challenge to western universalism in trauma theory and reclaims the wounded body as a site of resistance rather than pathology. Both Jessamy and Olorin are subjected to the violent mechanics of rejection and the recurring returns of trauma, which are exacerbated by knowledge systems that pathologise their very existence, as demonstrated through the theoretical lenses of Caruth, Kristeva, and DasGupta.

However, the two extremes of the traumatic experience are represented by their journeys. In the end, the diasporic self is a haunted house in *The Icarus Girl*'s eerie, Gothic portrayal of the unhealing wound. A terrifying fusion of self and other that promises only perpetual negotiation rather than resolution results from the abject double becoming the only witness to a history of violence and a present of profound unbelonging. It is a story of unavoidable breakage. *An Ordinary Wonder* makes the case for integration and emancipation while unapologetically depicting the cruelty of such a life. It implies that a culturally grounded healing is necessary for the culturally specific wound, one that can reinterpret the meaning of the wound by combining the spiritual and the scientific. The book shows how genuine healing entails turning the wound from a symbol of rejection and suffering into a source of holy testimony and a basis for a free future.

When taken as a whole, these books map the difficult terrain of survival and suffering for people whose identities and bodies serve as battlefields for societal fears. They show that the human search for meaning and wholeness endures despite the deep wounds caused by inflexible categories of body, identity, and culture, which frequently speak in voices of terror and shame. The availability of a sympathetic witness and a cosmological framework that can genuinely listen, comprehend, and ultimately reframe the story of the wound is crucial in determining whether that quest ends in the terrifying embrace of the unhomey self or the hard-won victory of *An Ordinary Wonder*.

Funding Statement: No fund available from any institution

Transparency Statement: I confirm that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: This research has no data set. It is based on textual analysis.

Conflict of Interest: I declare there is no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions: Author conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.

References

- Adhikari, T. P. (2024). Gurnah's *Paradise* and the Scars of Slavery." *North American Academic Research*, 7(12), 615–622.
- Adhikari, T.P. (2025). "Nasrin's *French Lover*: Women's Lives in Bangladesh." *Nepal Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2025, pp. 175-88. <https://doi.org/10.3126/njmr.v8i4.83523>.
- Buckley, C., & Illott, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Telling It Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi*. Sussex Academic Press.
- Cano Fernández, M. (2024). Representation of queer identities in coming-of-age, Nigerian-set narratives. *FemCrítica: Revista de Estudios Literarios y Crítica Feminista*, 2(4).
- Caruth, C. (1996). Introduction: The wound and the voice. In C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (pp. 1–9). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Craps, S. (2013). *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- DasGupta, S. (2020). Visionary medicine: Race, health, power, and speculation. In P. Crawford et al. (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Health Humanities*, edited by Paul Crawford et al., Routledge, 2020, pp. 33–38.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Mafe, D. A. (2012). Ghostly girls in the 'Eerie Bush': Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* as postcolonial female Gothic fiction. *Research in African Literatures*, 43(3), 21–35.
- Okello, E., & Musisi, S. (2015). The role of traditional healers in mental health care in Africa. In E. K. Akyeampong et al. (Eds.), *The Culture of Mental Illness and Psychiatric Practice in Africa* (pp. 249–261). Indiana University Press.
- Oyeyemi, H. (2005). *The Icarus Girl*. Bloomsbury.
- Papillon, B. (2021). *An Ordinary Wonder*. Algonquin Books.
- Suleiman, S. R. (2008). Judith Herman and contemporary trauma theory. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36(1/2), 276–281. *JSTOR*<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27649762>
- Stouck, J. (2010). Abjecting hybridity in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 41(2), 89–112.

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s), *Nepal Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.