

# Women in Distress and Psychological Fragmentation in Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr. Fox and Boy*, *Snow, Bird*: A Female Gothic Study

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## Abstract

The present paper examines female characters and their psychological fragmentation in the novels *Mr. Fox* (2011) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014). In order to analyze these female characters feminist gothic perspective is used. Helen Oyeyemi is one of the famous Black British novelists. Through her writing she explores themes like gender, race and identity. She addresses the questions of female identity, emotional suffering and psychological instability by using modern adaptations of Gothic and Fairy Tale traditions. In the novel *Mr. Fox* (2011) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) Oyeyemi highlights psychological fragmentation of women. It reflects Gothic tension between selfhood and social expectations. In order to study these female characters theories of Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and Julia Kristeva are taken into consideration. The paper states that the psychological condition of female characters from the select novels has its origin in patriarchal narratives, racial anxieties and fractured identities. By sketching these female characters, Oyeyemi reconstructs the female gothic heroine for contemporary era. To portray these female characters she uses narrative multiplicity, doubling, Fairy tale revision and haunting as a tool. In conclusion study mentions that psychological fragmentation works not only as a symptom of oppression but also as a strategy of resistance. It enables female characters to challenge the structures that seek to define and constrain them.

**Keywords:** Helen Oyeyemi, Female Gothic, Women in Distressed Psychological Fragmentation, identity, trauma.

## Introduction

In the contemporary era, Gothic fiction has emphasized psychological dimensions of identity, trauma, and emotional suffering. This tendency is reflected in Oyeyemi's novels where Gothic convention is mingled with postmodern narrative strategies like metafiction and fairy tale motifs through which she focuses female identity. The characters from her novel suffer from contemporary experiences of displacement, repression, and fractured selfhood. Traditional gothic fiction has portrayed women as a victim of patriarchy. The female gothic convention focuses women's fears, vulnerabilities and struggle against restrictive social structures. Rather than portraying women as passive victim of patriarchy, contemporary gothic fiction underlines the reasons of female suffering. In the novels *Mr. Fox* (2011) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) female characters suffer due to patriarchy and racial tensions. Oyeyemi tries to comment on these sociocultural forces that become reason for women's psychological fragmentation. She uses gothic as a tool and presents social condition in her novels. This paper studies the female characters and their distressed emotional state. Their fragmented identities reveal the instability of social categories like gender, race, marriage and beauty. By portraying the female characters of Mary Foxe, Daphne Fox, Boy Novak, Snow Whitman and Bird Whitman Oyeyemi exhibit the way psychological fragmentation becomes central to female experiences in contemporary gothic fiction.

## Theoretical Framework:

Theoretical framework used for the present research paper is taken from Gothic and Feminist criticism. To understand female characters from the novels *Mr. Fox* (2011) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) female gothic theories as well as psychological theories are used. Thus, major feminist and gothic critics are taken into consideration to study female characters from select novels. In female gothic criticism importance is given to the women's experiences in patriarchal society. It tries to explore how patriarchal authority is the reason for women's psychological repression and threats to identity. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have mentioned that patriarchal culture restricts women within limiting narratives that divide them into idealized or demonized figure (17). Psychological tensions are developed because of these divisions which can be noticed in Gothic literature. According to critique Diane Long Hoeveler, "Gothic heroines occupy unstable positions in which emotional vulnerability reveals the conditions of patriarchal power (5). Thus, female gothic functions not only as a political but also as a psychological condition. Psychological fragmentation is a state in which identity is divided into conflicting or unstable selves.

Feminist critique Julia Kristeva writes about abjection where she explains how individuals experience distress when the boundaries between self and other become uncertain (4). In the gothic fiction this is reflected in the form of doubles, mirrors, ghosts and shifting narratives. Novels of Helen Oyeyemi explore these gothic techniques in order to demonstrate psychologically distressed women whose identities are fractured because of social expectations and personal desires.

#### **Mary Foxe as a Distressed woman:**

Mary Foxe is the imaginary character in Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr. Fox*. St. John Fox creates this female character in his fictional writing. Through her character Oyeyemi portrays psychological fragmented state of a woman. It is Mary who challenges traditional notions of identity. Mary oscillates between fiction and reality which situates her in unstable position. Mary resists the patriarchal authority that tries to control her existence. With the passing time she develops an independent consciousness. Mary becomes the example of Gothic women whose identities are threatened due to patriarchy which becomes the reason for her emotional suffering, confusion and resistance. Oyeyemi portrays Mary's character whose identity is dependent on the writer. She feels unsure about her value as a female because of the stories of misogynist. One of the reasons of Mary's distress is she knows the position given within stories that repeatedly subject women to violence and silencing. As Mary is the imaginative creation of St. John Fox, she constantly tries to establish autonomy within narratives that are written by a male author. The fact that becomes the reason of Mary's emotional distress is her existence is depend upon someone else's imagination. This dependence develops her fragmented identity in which she is simultaneously subject and object, creator and creation. Through Mary's instable psychological condition Oyeyemi focuses broader Gothic concern of divided selfhood. She is situated among stories, roles, and identities that makes it difficult to establish a coherent sense of self. Hence, she is unable to achieve narrative independence. In this context, Gilbert and Gubar's concept of female confinement is particularly relevant. Mary becomes victim of literary structures that replicate patriarchal authority. Thus, her fragmentation represents the historical marginalization of women's voices within literary traditions.

#### **Daphen Fox as a Site of Domestic Gothic Anxiety:**

Daphen Fox is Mr. Fox's wife who represents the Female Gothic heroine. Her emotional suffering originates within the domestic sphere. the reason of Daphane's emotional suffering is the treatment she receives from her husband. St. John Fox and Mary Foxe are involved in a metafictional relationship that disturbs Daphen's emotional state. Emotional neglect, marital insecurity and the gradual insecurity of the trust within marriage are the reasons of Mary's psychological condition. In the novel her marital life appears stable but she experiences profound uncertainty regarding her husband's emotional and imaginative life.

Daphen's sense of reality destabilizes because of the secrete relationship between St. John and Mary Foxe. The distressed state of Daphen is reflected in the novel it is expressed in Mr. Fox's story as,

"Daphen said she hadn't finished yet. She said she ought to burn the house down, and she just might do it, while I was sleeping. She said I was a dead man walking. She said she was going to Reno. She said she should never, never have married a tarnished individual like me. Finally at the top of her voice, she said:

'WHO IS SHE? THIS WOMAN YOU'RE HUMILIATING ME WITH.'" (71).

Her distress symbolizes the Gothic transformation of Domestic space into a site of anxiety and alienation. Home generally functions as a secure environment but in the novel, it becomes a place where trust and identity are constantly undermined. Daphen confronts emotional ambiguity and betrayal she differs from traditional Gothic heroines who confront supernatural dangers,

Diane Hoeveler's theory of Gothic vulnerability is suitable in the case of Daphane. Her emotional suffering reveals the unequal power dynamics embedded within marriage and patriarchal relationships.

#### **Boy Novak and her Psychological Fragmentation in Boy, Snow, Bird:**

Boy Novak is a female character in Helen Oyeyemi's novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014). Her psychological distress originates in childhood trauma and experiences of displacement. In the beginning of the novel, Boy lives with her abusive father who is a rat catcher. Later she runs away from him as she wishes to reconstruct her identity through reinvention. However, her present is constantly haunted by her past. Her life at Flex Hill was full of worries. She says,

"Three things were unsatisfactory about me-the first, that I was from Manhattan... The second problem was my name...The third problem was that I hadn't brought any skill with me" (16).

These lines show the problems that Boy faces when she comes to Flex Hill. Later, Boy marries a man named Arturo Whitman with the thought that she will become emotionally stable. Boy tries to create her stable self but memories of past life disturb her. These memories function like ghosts. The conflict between who she was and who she wishes to become develop her fragmented identity. The racial secrets of the Whitman Family intensify Boy's emotional distress. Revelations regarding Whitman family's racial past challenges her assumptions about identity and belonging, producing further instability. In order to understand Boy's experiences, Kristeva's concept of abjection becomes useful. She experiences situations that blur boundaries between self and other, certainty and uncertainty. In its consequence her identity remains unstable throughout the novel.

#### **Snow Whitman and the Gothic Burden of Beauty:**

In Oyeyemi's novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), Snow is a beautiful daughter of Arturo Whitman. In the beginning she appears to embody fairy-tale perfection. As she looks beautiful, she fits within the social norms of beauty hence becomes an idealized feminine figure. Her beauty is described by Olivia as,

“Snow’s beauty is all the more precious” (139).

She symbolizes Gothic tradition of distressed woman whose life is shaped by family secrets, racial anxieties, social expectations and emotional isolation. The reason behind Snow’s fragmented identity is she exists largely through the perceptions of others. Her family members and community members project fantasies and expectations onto her thus she cannot live as an autonomous individual. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women are often divided into cultural archetypes. This argument reflects in Snow’s condition. Oyeyemi has sketched the character of Snow who gets trapped within the role of the beautiful heroine. This role restricts her ability to define herself independently. Her distressed emotional state demonstrates how idealization can be as psychologically damaging as oppression. Snow’s emotional fragmentation and isolation is increased as she fails to fulfill societal expectations.

#### **Bird Whitman and Inherited Psychological Distress:**

It is the character of Bird Whitman that unfolds another layer of psychological distress. Bird represents another important example of fragmented subjectivity. She is a daughter of Boy Novak and Arturo Whitman. With her birth atmosphere of Whitman’s family changes. Her birth is described as,

“There was the quicksand, then there was Bird in my arms, safe and well, and dark....

“That little girl is a Nigro”” (131).

From her birth she seeks the history of her family. She digs out family secrets and racial ambiguity. Being a black child in a White family, she struggles to develop a coherent sense of identity. Bird’s point of view frequently reveals uncertainty concerning family relationships and personal belonging. Her emotional confusion originates from stories about race, beauty, and ancestry. Unlike traditional Gothic heroines, Bird’s psychological tension is generated by previous generations. Thus, her fragmentation reflects both personal and collective experiences of distress. Through the character of Bird, Oyeyemi demonstrates that identity is not only shaped entirely by the individual but it takes shape from family histories, cultural narratives, and inherited traumas that continue to influence subsequent generations.

#### **Conclusion:**

Helen Oyeyemi’s both novels *Mr. Fox* (2011) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) are significant as they portray women in distress. The emotional suffering of these women characters is closely associated with their fragmented identities. The reason behind Mary Foxe and Daphen Fox’s psychological state is Patriarchal narratives. While Boy Novak, Snow Whitman and Bird Whitman come across various forms of psychological conditions that originates from traumatic histories, racial anxieties, and social expectations. Oyeyemi reinterprets Female Gothic heroines by using Gothic techniques like doubling, haunting, narrative instability, and fairy-tale revision. Through her novels, *Mr. Fox* and *Boy, Snow, Bird* she underlines that psychological fragmentation is not just a personal condition but a response to surrounding cultural forces that restrict and divide female identity. Thus, in the tradition of Gothic narratives female characters in the novels of Helen Oyeyemi represent contemporary women who suffer psychological fragmentation resulted from the contemporary situations.

In conclusion, Female characters from Oyeyemi’s select novels resist against the problems in their life. Through these characters Oyeyemi changes female distress into a site of resistance. Traditional narratives are challenged by Helen Oyeyemi’s novels that expose the structures responsible for fragmentation.

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#### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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