



Inherited Wounds: Gender, Memory, and Generational Trauma in *Homegoing*

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Abstract

This study explores how gender and memory intertwine in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. Drawing on intersectional theory, it analyzes the ways trauma generates gendered memories and influence how characters construct their identities and navigate historical legacies. The study traces how these memories—of both oppression and resilience—fuel the novel's central themes of resistance, empowerment, and healing. The analysis also illuminates how Gyasi's alternating narrative structure embodies gendered memory itself, offering contrasting perspectives that distinguish male and female experiences. Throughout, the study emphasizes memory's transformative power in shaping how characters perceive themselves and the world around them. Key Words: gender, memory, identity, self, trauma

Introduction:

Yaa Gyasi's critically acclaimed *Homegoing* (2016) follows the intergenerational trajectories of half-sisters Effia and Esi and their descendants spanning Ghana and America from the 1700s to contemporary times. Within the novel, memory functions as a recuperative force, amplifying marginalized voices systematically erased from hegemonic historical discourse. Despite substantial critical attention to the novel's representation of slavery, scholars have insufficiently examined the nexus of gender and memory in Gyasi's work. This study intervenes in that scholarly lacuna by analyzing the gendered dimensions of memory in *Homegoing*, arguing that acts of remembrance are constructed as inherently female labor. While male

characters demonstrate futurity-oriented perspectives focused on survival, female characters assume custodianship of both familial and collective historical memory. This paper illuminates the integral role of African and African-American women in preserving cultural identity amidst slavery's disruptions. I examine how enslaved African women are repositories of memories that counter dominant historical narratives that have excluded or misrepresented women's experiences thereby highlighting the 'significance of memory in historical trauma' (Figueroa-Vásquez 108)

The narrative trajectory of *Homegoing* begins in Fanteland along the West African coast, following two genealogical lines descended from Ghanaian half-sisters whose destinies diverge dramatically: one enters marriage with a British slave trader, while the other suffers abduction into American slavery. These parallel lineages converge generations later when Marcus and Marjorie meet in California and undertake a pilgrimage to Ghana, seeking ancestral connection. Although individual chapters present discrete generational experiences, the novel demonstrates how slavery and colonialism function as persistent historical forces that shape contemporary existence. This narrative architecture reveals the transgenerational transmission of trauma inherent in the transatlantic slave trade, illustrating its lasting impact on African and diasporic African subjectivities across the Atlantic divide.

Gyasi's narrative expanse structured as a "multigenerational family saga" traverses divergent geographies and generations, mirroring the diasporic journeys of the characters themselves. (Gallego 9). While each chapter of the novel functions as a discrete short story, a sequential reading allows readers to construct interrelations between the vignettes through cross-generational references and overarching thematic motifs. When taken in isolation, the individual chapters stand independently as self-contained narratives. However, when considered cumulatively, the recurring crossover mentions of prior protagonists and enduring thematic preoccupations facilitate an integrative framework that bridges the stories into a broader interlinked saga spanning seven generations. Through these intersecting narrative techniques, Gyasi weaves the disparate strands into a macro-narrative fabric, with each thread interconnected across temporal and geographic divides through subtle narrative resonances. Lisa Ze Winters says, 'the characters in Gyasi's novel persistently navigate the never-ending reverberations of their diasporic beginnings'(Winters 340). This panoramic canvas not only elucidates the complex gender dynamics of varied sociocultural contexts but also crafts a vivid portrayal of how gender mediates processes of cultural memory, identity formation, and resilience in response

to collective trauma. The alternating narrative structure, distinctly crafted for each character, invites exploration into the differential evolutions of gendered memories, as well as the indelible imprints of traumatic experiences.

The ability of Gyasi's female characters to remember comprises a vital yet burdensome inheritance, allowing them to preserve intergenerational continuity and identity. From Effia's haunted first-person account of the slave dungeons to Quey's narration of her vision of H's lynching, Gyasi's female characters 'negotiate' the memories of trauma. (Figueroa-Vásquez). Rather than representations of factual accuracy, these gendered memories provide subjective truths that convey varied experiences of oppression and survival. However, memory also serves as a source of anguish for certain female characters, such as Esi, who is defined by the loss of her matrilineal past. By framing memory as a gendered act, Gyasi recentres African women's marginalized voices in accounts of slavery and its "afterli[ves]" (Hartman 6)

In *Homegoing*, Gyasi builds a family structure centered on the matriarch Maame. Following her rape and the birth of her daughter Effia—ancestor to Marjorie—Maame flees captivity and eventually marries Asare, bearing a second daughter, Esi, who will become Marcus's forebear. The novel follows both daughters' descendant lines separately, using Effia's and Esi's diverging paths to trace how the violence of slavery, colonization, and systemic racism echoes through time. Gyasi gives voice to the stories of women or survivors of slavery who have been silenced either in the form of serious trivialization or complete erasure. (Michel-Rolph Trouillot)

Esi's narrative begins in the subterranean dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, where she has been detained for two weeks after being captured in a slave raid targeting her Fante village. While the chapter's present action unfolds within this dungeon, the narrative primarily illuminates the antecedent events precipitating Esi's captivity. The dungeon operates as a liminal zone—an anti-domestic space and site of non-belonging—where Esi and fellow captives exist in temporal suspension before their eventual transport to undetermined locations. This transitional space embodies displacement and existential liminality, rupturing the captive women's connections to their origins and social networks. The instant Esi recognizes her permanent severance from her home village, she splits her life into 'Before the Castle and Now' - two discrete eras demarcated by her captivity:

Before the castle she was the daughter of Big Man and his third wife, Maame. Now she was dust.

Before the Castle, she was the prettiest girl in the village. Now she was thin as air". (31)

Esi's narrative which presents her experience of incarceration within a dungeon alongside "hundreds of women" (28), illuminates the gendered conditions of confinement and dehumanization within the slave trade. In addition to the severe psychic trauma of losing liberty, home, and kinship structures, Esi endures bodily and emotional violation through rape perpetrated by one of the guards. The rape also illustrates the ways in which slavery enacted both physical and psychological devastation specifically upon the bodies and psyches of African women. Goldenberg defines objectification as 'an instrumental subjugation of a people by those with power.' (81). The rape Esi suffers objectifies her, rendering her body a location for the guard to carry out acts that assert his gendered power and domination. She is dehumanized into an object upon which the guard enacts his abusive masculinity. Esi's subjectivity and humanity are overridden as she is horrifically reduced to a physical site for performances that reinforce the rapist guard's control, hypermasculine authority, and deprivation of her agency. Esi's emphasizes how sexual violence within slavery objectifies women's bodies. Through her nuanced depiction of gendered acts of remembrance, Gyasi reveals the integral role of memory in reconstituting identity, reconnecting fractured lineages, and promoting healing in marginalised groups impacted by "intergenerational trauma" (Figueroa-Vásquez 98).

Early on, the women's voices are the ones telling the stories of slavery and survival and histories of strength in facing difficulties. The narrative unravels the intricate relationships between gender, memory, and, "trauma of the rapes of enslaved African women", and encapsulates the intricate interplay of individual and collective memories (Figueroa-Vásquez 102). By employing the gendered experiences and acts of remembrance of its female protagonists Gyasi illuminates how the traumatic ancestral memories impact processes of identity construction. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" describes how later generations have a strong mediated connection to traumas experienced by previous generations. Though they didn't live through the trauma, the stories, images, behaviours, and impacts are transmitted so deeply that these inherited recollections feel like personal memories. Through intergenerational accounts and effects, the trauma becomes deeply internalised as memory in its own right by generations that follow. (Marianne Hirsch)

Many women in the novel experience sexual violence and the lasting effects it has on them psychologically. Esi, subjected to a horrific sexual assault, later has a daughter, Ness who is similarly enslaved. For Esi, her memories of being repeatedly raped by her white masters haunt her. The rapist's smile haunts her preventing her from ever smiling again, a trait her daughter, Ness, born into slavery, inherits as she "...had never learned how to do it quite right. The corners of her lips always seemed to twitch upward, unwillingly, then fall within milliseconds, as though attached to that sadness that had once anchored her own mother's heart. (Gyasi 72)

Ness would always associate real love with a hardness of spirit' (Gyasi 71). The narrative here communicates that Esi's traumatic experiences are inherited by her daughter Ness. Again, the following passage in "Marcus" examines how traumatic experiences by previous generations gets passed down and have an impact on their descendants in later generations:

He had only heard tell of his great-grandpa H [a victim of the convict leasing system] from Ma Willie, but those stories were enough to make him weep and to fill him with pride. Two-Shovel H they had called him. But what had they called his father or his father before him? What of the mothers? They had been products of their time, and walking in Birmingham [Alabama] now, Marcus was an accumulation of these times. That was the point. (296)

Evidences of the long-lasting traumatic effects of slavery on the characters who did not directly experience the brutality their ancestors faced are ample in *Homegoing*. Despite the physical liberation of many characters who were once enslaved, the legacy of slavery remains a source of re-traumatization and unresolved grief, manifesting in both physical and psychological wounds across generations. The history of enslavement casts a shadow over the present day, leading to a prevailing sense of confusion and uncertainty for the characters.

As stated earlier, Gyasi positions femininity and the subjective experiences of female characters as central to its elucidation of slavery and its enduring influences on African and African American identities. By privileging women's voices and standpoints, the narrative furnishes innovative frames of reference and epistemologies for analysing the institution of slavery and its intergenerational reverberations. The textual foregrounding of feminine perspectives serves to renew the examinations of this historical phenomenon and its complex interrelationships with the formation of cultural identities. In centring the specificity of women's

vantage points, the narrative provides a significant counterbalance to masculinist frameworks that have conventionally dominated historical accounts within this domain.

In *Homegoing*, the representation of the processes of enslavement – including the terrors of raiding, confinement, and transatlantic shipment – are focalized primarily through the experiences of female characters. Rather than depicting these traumas of bondage from a masculine perspective, Gyasi centres experiences of women undergoing the horrors of being reduced to commodity (Hartman). By detailing the brutalities of the slave trade through subject position that the female characters take Gyasi foregrounds the gendered dimensions of this system of exploitation and violence.

The processes of accessing, vocalizing, and transmitting remembrances of suffering and resilience may enable initiatory progress in working through grief stemming from the wounds of the past. According to Claudia Marquis, familial contexts may facilitate practices of remembrance and reconnective historical recuperation that counter dominant imperial narratives, enabling alternative articulations of Black histories ((Marquis 32).

This article has argued that the gendered body, deprived of autonomy, may become a locus of struggle. Hence, it is imperative to re-examine women's lived experiences through a gender-conscious lens, elucidating the patriarchal power dynamics that normalize rape and sexual violence while simultaneously silencing afflicted women. Conceptualizing embodied womanhood as a site contested by competing forces is important to expose the systems that simultaneously perpetrate and conceal gendered abuse. By scrutinizing events through a gendered perspective, we can re-politicize the frequently depoliticized, moving marginalized women's suffering from the peripheries of understanding to a position of centrality that provokes structural critique.

The suffering of African women has frequently been relegated to a peripheral position in literary analyses. Hence, it is crucial to re-situate and engender portrayals of women's experiences, traumas, and silences within African literary traditions, contextualizing them within appropriate cultural frameworks. By approaching women's tribulations as a marginal subject, past critical orientations have often obscured the gendered dimensions of female characters' depictions. Centring and engendering the specifics of African women's represented hardships, within their proper sociocultural milieus, can illuminate and re-politicize what has often been critically sidelined. This approach insists upon the importance of contextualizing and theorizing women's suffering in African literature through consciously feminist and gender-attuned lenses. Retrieving

women's effaced histories into the light of acknowledgement is an essential step toward justice and solidarity across experiences of oppression.

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