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The Trauma Continues: The effects of trauma on generations in *Homegoing*

Dr. Anju E. A

Transmission of the impacts of trauma from one generation to the next is referred to as generational trauma. It is a complex phenomenon. Literature has long served as a powerful medium for exploring and understanding the intricacies of generational trauma. This research article examines the depiction and exploration of generational trauma in literature, focusing on Yaa Gyasi's debut novel, *Homegoing* (2016), which delves into the profound impact of inherited trauma on individuals and families across generations. By analysing the novel through a trauma lens, this article discusses key themes, narrative techniques, and character development related to generational trauma, providing insights into the sociological, psychological, and cultural dimensions of this pervasive phenomenon. The study also attempts to explore the multifaceted dimensions of generational trauma, its consequences, and the ways in which literature contributes to its depiction and comprehension.

Key Words: Trauma, Generational Trauma, Inherited trauma, Collective history, Memory.

Literature serves as a reflection of the inner life of the individual. Through its enigmatic vision and embellished language, it reflects and magnifies all the myriad human experiences. In her path-breaking text *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth has pointed out that the modern era is a "catastrophic age", and its literature is marked by anxieties and obsessions of the age. Many writers have been engaged in illustrating the agony and trauma of the

human psyche. Of all human experiences, emotions influenced by pain and trauma cover a larger space in literary creations. Hence, Trauma has now developed into a potent and intricate paradigm that permeates modern history, literature, culture, and critical theory. In this regard, Dominick La Capra has rightly observed that trauma has evolved to "a prevalent preoccupation in recent theory and criticism," even "an obsession" (LaCapra, 2001, p. x). While exploring the widespread contemporary fascination with trauma, theorists like Nancy K. Miller, Nancy and Jason Tougaw. have also noted that "ours appears to be the age of trauma", and contemporary literature has engaged with the pervasiveness of both individual and group afflictions.

Trauma refers to an intensely distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope and leaves a lasting psychological impact. It is a deeply upsetting and distressing experience which can arise from various events, such as violence, abuse, accidents, natural disasters, or war. Trauma disrupts one's sense of safety, trust, and well-being, often resulting in symptoms such as intrusive memories, evasion, emotional numbness, and heightened arousal. Traumatic experiences have extensive psychological consequences, including long-lasting mental and emotional damage. An ongoing or past event that is traumatising cannot be mentally reconciled. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) succinctly put it in this way:

> The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it to a quality of "otherness", a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 69)

What theorists give emphasis here is the 'ubiquitous' nature of trauma. They argue that trauma is an ongoing process and does not allow for closure in the traditional sense, even if there is physically a time before and after it. Traumatic memory is very elusive in nature and exists everywhere and nowhere. The traumatic people who are holding such memories bear a great burden.

Complex trauma occurs when individuals experience repeated or prolonged traumatic events which affect their self-perception and identity. Generational trauma happens when the trauma experienced by individuals or communities is passed down through family and cultural systems, influencing subsequent generations. This concept has been extensively studied in fields such as psychology, sociology, and literary studies. Scholars have examined how traumatic events such as war, genocide, displacement, and slavery leave lasting imprints on descendants, influencing their beliefs, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships.

Generally, transmission is considered to be unintended and frequently occurs without the original traumatic event's influence being recognised. A profound analysis of the peculiar behavioural patterns of Holocaust survivors has influenced the emergence of the concept of generational trauma. Later, Native American theoreticians like Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Eduardo Duran and Teresa Evans-Campbell associated the term generational trauma with the lives of the Native American indigenous population. Brave Heart and DeBruyn argued that European colonisation of the Americas was acutely traumatic for the Native American Communities due to "the loss of lives, land, and vital aspects of Native culture" (Brave Heart and DeBruyn, 2017, p. 60). Historical trauma or intergenerational trauma can affect a person's relationships, worldview, mental health, and coping techniques, among other areas of their life. It is well defined in the following words:

> Historical trauma is trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time; it extends beyond the lifespan. Historical trauma response has been identified and is delineated as a constellation of features in reaction to the multigenerational, collective, historical, and

> cumulative psychic wounding over time, both over the lifespan and across generations (Duran et al., 1998, p. 342).

Thus, the trauma that spans generations is embodied trauma. Historical trauma, cultural trauma, and transgenerational trauma are other terms for intergenerational trauma. It is an unresolved trauma that is passed on from generation to generation: "The experience of historical trauma and intergenerational grief can best be described as psychological baggage" (Wesley-Esquimauz & Smolewski, 2004, p. 3). Succeeding generations will not be able to understand why this pain continues to reside inside them since the body still contains the stains of transgressions that the mind has automatically filtered out. This phenomenon will be primarily explored in this research paper by the term "transgenerational trauma."

The purpose of this research paper is to illustrate the various ways that transgenerational trauma appears in literature. Any piece of literature is merely "made up" by the writers to poetically illustrate a point about the reality of life. In literature, trauma is often portrayed through a range of narrative techniques and literary devices. Authors employ storytelling, symbolism, imagery, and character development to depict impacts of trauma. Through literature, readers gain insights into the internal landscapes of traumatized individuals, deepening their understanding of the complexities and enduring effects of trauma. Authors like Binjamin Wilkomirski, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Caryl Phillips, W. G. Sebald and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have explored the theme of transgenerational trauma in their works, shedding light on its nuanced manifestations and implications. The representation of trauma in literature encompasses a portrayal of its intricate and multifaceted aspects. Authors strive to depict the psychological and emotional impact of trauma on characters, delving into their inner worlds and exploring the enduring effects on their lives. This representation may involve vivid descriptions of traumatic events, a depiction of characters' reactions and coping mechanisms, and an exploration of the long-term consequences on their relationships, identity, and selfhood.

Ghanaian-American novelist Yaa Gyasi published the novel *Homegoing* in 2016. *Homegoing* immediately gained wide critical attention and received the 2016 John Leonard Prize for excellent debut book and the 2017 Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. This research paper explores how Yaa Gyasi portrays the enduring psychological and emotional impact of slavery on individuals and communities across generations. Through an analysis of characters and narrative techniques, this paper examines the ways in which trauma is inherited, suppressed, and ultimately confronted in *Homegoing*.

Homegoing is a historical fiction based on the Atlantic slave trade of Ghana. The narrative poignantly traces the story of seven generations of the descendants of Maame, an Asante woman. She has two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, as daughters who are separated by the transatlantic slave trade. The tale of one member of each descendant's family is presented in each chapter of the book with spectacular climaxes. Narrated in the third person, *Homegoing* changes its location from Africa to America and vice versa. In the final chapter of the novel, two fractions of the family reunited. The novel comes to an end with Marcus and Marjory's, the two descendants of Effia and Esi, reunion in America and their return to Ghana, their homeland.

A categorically unpleasant and disturbing encounter is referred to as a trauma. In such a situation, the horrific experiences of one's ancestors are felt by subsequent generations as though they were their own. In the novel, slavery has a traumatic impact on Maame's descendants' life. Despite being divided in two directions, her descendants demonstrate how challenging it is to terminate the traumatising cycle of successive generations. Gyasi's writing style effectively conveys how a group transmits the initial trauma of slavery to subsequent generations. The novelist's inventive use of the linked story framework to explore the enslaved people's ancestry is especially noteworthy. The author illustrates in each chapter how slavery affected the lives of seven generations of Maame's descendants. Each character is examined in light of the consequences and repercussions of slavery and colonialism. Their individual trauma stems from distinct sources: Effia's descendants carried the guilt of the slave trade. In

the novel, regarding the lingering effects of trauma, Quey explains to his son James: "You cannot stick a knife in a goat and then say, Now I will remove my knife slowly, so let things be easy and clean, let there be no mess. There will always be blood" (Gyasi, 2016, p.93). Here, Quey metaphorically expresses what will happen to their offspring. He is very well aware that although the slave trade is officially abolished, the evil it wrought will endure and be faced by his future generations. Esi's descendants, meanwhile, are unable to escape from the oppression of first slavery. Akua explains to her son Yaw: "No one forgets that they were once captive, even if they are now free" (Gyasi, 2016, p.242). Even after the abolition of slavery, Esi's descendants became the victims of institutional racism and subsequently carried traces of the trauma that was part of it for generations.

One can argue that *Homegoing* is an exploratory piece of literature that can shed light on the manner in which trauma is affectively passed down through generations. As interconnected stories, *Homegoing* vividly narrates the story of Maame's genealogy as her immediate descendants, the two half-sisters Effia and Esi, who are unaware of the existence of each other, are separated and forced to live on different continents forever. After an attack in her village, Esi is captured as a prisoner and sold into slavery, while Effia marries a rich Englishman and lives at Cape Coast Castle. Consequently, Effia remains in Africa while Esi is brought to America on a slave ship. When Maame, Effia and Esi's mother, sets the fire that frees her from Fanteland imprisonment, it serves as the novel's first inciting traumatic incident. Effia is born on that night the fire rages between the forests of Fanteland and Asanteland. Maame was a house slave in her father Cobbe Otcher's house who was raped and pregnant by him. The trauma that has followed the family for many generations is symbolised by fire, which is seen throughout *Homegoing.* In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (2016), Cathy Caruth discusses much about the topic of intergenerational trauma. She claims that trauma can be recurrent and that the memory of the trauma might be even more detrimental than the original event. In the novel *Homegoing,* fire is the most powerful metaphoric signifier

of the inter-generational trauma that has followed Maame's descendants for generations. Maame ignites the first fire, which gives her cover as she flees from servitude in the house of Cobbe Otcher, Effia's father. Cobbe Otcher has a premonition as a result of this terrible fire: "He knew then that the memory of the fire that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued" (Gyasi, 2016, p.3). As he foresaw, the trauma followed his descendants and affected them for generations. An unacknowledged presence of the fear of fire inscribed in the unconscious of many descendants of Maame. Akua, the child of Ohene and Abena, belongs to the fifth generation of Maame's family. She was born and brought up in a missionary school and is totally unaware of her family's traumatic past. But her life has been plagued by recurring visions of a fiery woman. She is horrified by fire, which she first feels after witnessing the innocent white man being burned alive as retaliation for years of white persecution. In the beginning, she has nightmares about the burning man, which eventually transforms into images of a firewoman carrying two burning children. The haunting apparition of an ambivalent and enigmatic fiery woman appears to be the transgenerational haunted-ness plagued by the recollection of her deceased grandma beyond generations. This peculiar emotional status of the character can be connected with Judith Herman's term "chronic trauma" (1997). Chronically traumatised people are portrayed by Herman as solitary creatures that suffer from intense loneliness as well as social alienation and estrangement that "pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of religion and community" (1997, p.37). The troubling and daunting familial trauma is beautifully metaphorized in the novel through the image of fire. This haunting vision of the apparition of an ambivalent and enigmatic fiery woman played a major role to interrupt her sense of self. Akua, who cannot get rid of this haunting vision, becomes so deranged by it that she attempts to burn her kids to death in her shack by fire. The episode highlights the existence of multigenerational trauma and its various transmissive cycles across generations. Yaw, Akua's only son who survived the incident, had to live with the burn scars for the rest of his life. The burn scars can be considered as a concrete

reminder of his transgenerational trauma. Marjorie, Akua's granddaughter, still has a fire phobia, which may indicate that she is still haunted by her ancestors' psychic past. Therefore, the idea of ingrained fire is a superb way to illustrate how the characters' experiences from earlier traumas have been etched into them.

In her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (2016), Cathy Caruth acknowledges the enormity and significance of traumatic experiences in a person's life. In this seminal text, Cathy Caruth examines how trauma, which is ingrained in prior experience, tries to be revealed in its narration. This allows the subject to identify and process information that would otherwise be unavailable to consciousness. Ruth Leys also shares similar notions of Cathy Caruth when she argues that "trauma does not present itself as a literal or material truth," but as a "psychical or 'historical truth'" (2000, p.282). Those dormant and overwhelming traumatic experiences are intrinsically linked to a diverse range of literary works. The narrative of a psychic wound always makes an audible cry. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub identifies that even if the wound may beg to be heard, it is inherently difficult to fully access and narrate about traumatic experience since the traumatic experiences are not always communicative or easily sculpted into a coherent narrative. Trauma that is embodied occurs between generations. The physical, psychological, and emotional anguish brought on by trauma haunts not only the minds and bodies of those who have gone through such horrific conditions, but also the lives of their progenies. Because trauma is so strong, it inhabits in the victim's bodies too. "The emotional memory and physical sensations of the trauma inhabit the body as ghosts from the past… The body becomes a bridge between past and present and therefore plays an important role in the transmission of trauma" (Stanek, 2015, p. 98). Yaa Gyasi beautifully depicts how the bodies of the traumatised generations also reflect the burdens of traumas that have been carried for generations. In *Homegoing,* family members bearing physical scars from the familial trauma they endured as a result of colonisation and slavery are present on both the two half-sister's sides of the family. In reality, their scars are a source of discrimination in addition to their African racial identity.

Ness gets severely beaten for attempting to flee the 'Hell' plantation. These scars severely disturbed her social life and forced her to lead a life of social alienation and disconnection. H, the grandson of Ness, sustains injuries while working in the mine. This scary physical appearance that makes people shun him illuminates the transmissive cycle of trauma through which he is destined to live. When Akua, Yaw's mother, sets fire to the family's hut, Yaw is left with scars. Yaw was burned as a child, leaving him with lifelong scars, the most conspicuous of which were on his face. People believed his scars were inherited or contagious, which caused him to struggle throughout his life. As a child, he was sent away from his native village. When he returned a few years later, his scars helped the villagers recognize him. Upon touching his mother's burnt hands, he experiences a deep sense of bonding with her. Thus, Gyasi makes use of physical scars to elucidate the processes of the transmission of the familial trauma. In the novel Maame's descendants are connected by a common ancestry and shared scars. The characters with scars serve as brilliant examples of the effects of generational trauma on their lives.

Another notable instance of transgenerational trauma in the novel is the portrayal of the sweeping effects of the transatlantic slave trade on various characters. The novel vividly presents the agony of slavery that spans generations. Esi scents the sea as she is taken out of Cape Coast Castle's prison. It was the beginning of the biggest trauma in her life, because her suffering is about to begin when she is carried onto a slave ship. Many of the detainees on the slave ship will pass away from their conditions on the way to America, or they may even throw themselves overboard to escape being sold into slavery. Later, in the lives of Esi and her successors, water became a symbol of death, enslavement, and separation. Fear of water endures over generations, taking on diverse forms. Ma Aku has been afraid of water all her life. She once advised H, her son, that he ought not to have accepted a job manufacturing boat. Black people dislike water, according to Sonny, because they were transported to America as slaves on ships. In later generations, Marcus's water phobia also emanates from the memory of Middle Passage, and it is generally linked to the earliest progenitor, Esi. Marcus's father rightly analyses:

"What did a black man want to swim for? The ocean floor was already littered with black men" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 284). The history of the transatlantic slave trade and the sufferings of African people is reflected in his words. Thus, water remains a representative of the oppression which originates first from slavery and then from institutional racism. Their fear of water is an indicator that a community that experiences ongoing enslavement may experience trauma and transmit it to future generations.

Transgenerational trauma is associated with an abrupt or overwhelming event and is typified by a delayed reaction involving involuntary and frequently recurring upsetting experiences, like flashbacks and nightmares. Even if James ends his relationship with his family and distances himself from them as part of ending his relationship with the slave traders, his descendants are nevertheless plagued by the transgressions of their forefathers, even if they are not conscious of their role in the slave trade. James's guilt and trauma is passed through the generations and continues to haunt the family dynamic. In the novel, this transference is demonstrated by Akua's nightmares about the fire woman, which ultimately cause her to kill her two kids and burn her hut. Beulah, Kojo's daughter, is also suffering from nightmares. The novelist illustrates Beulah's night terrors: "Some days they were so bad she would wake herself up to the sounds of her own screams or she'd have scratches along her arms from where she'd fought invisible battles" (Gyasi, 2016, p.120). That child's nights are in the grip of some fears that she could not even understand herself: "Beulah was running. Maybe this was where it started, Jo thought… a little black child fighting in her sleep against an opponent she couldn't name come morning because, in the light, that opponent just looked like the world around her. Intangible evil. Unspeakable unfairness" (Gyasi, 2016, p.120). Themes that appear in her dreams can be identified as traces of generational trauma. They indicate the psychological wounds that are unconsciously transmitted from one generation to the next. Through these nightmares, the novel illustrates the nuanced ways that intergenerational trauma can impact individuals and their families' lives.

In conclusion, the exploration of transgenerational trauma in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* offers a profound understanding of the enduring impact of historical injustices on individuals and communities. Through the intricate storytelling of interconnected characters spanning generations, Gyasi illuminates how the legacy of slavery continues to shape identities and relationships in profound ways. The novel compellingly portrays how trauma, passed down through generations, manifests in various forms of psychological and emotional struggles. From the brutalities of the transatlantic slave trade to the legacies of colonialism and racism, the novel portrays how historical injustices continue to haunt successive generations, shaping their sense of self, relationships, and societal position. By confronting the complexities of inherited trauma, *Homegoing* underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing historical injustices for healing and reconciliation. Ultimately, Gyasi's work serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human life-force and the necessity of confronting painful legacies to forge a path toward collective healing and understanding.

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