An Investigation into the Traumatic Experiences among Black Female Characters in *Homegoing* from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

Yaa Gyasi's debut novel, *Homegoing* (2016) narrates the struggles of black female characters under structural oppression and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. While previous research has explored oppression and identity, this study explores how trauma gets passed down among black women, examining both victims' and perpetrators' experiences. Utilizing postcolonial trauma theory and transgenerational trauma concepts, this research aims to identify how oppression manifests and is transmitted among generations of black women. Findings from this study advocate, that there is a need to recognize intergenerational trauma but the past must not silhouette the future and respect for 'differences' in diverse societies.

Keywords: Slavery, Postcolonial trauma, transgenerational trauma, structural oppression, Yaa Gyasi

1. Introduction

Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* was particularly selected for this study due to her unique lived experience which embodied "migration and belonging" (Goyal & Gyasi, 2019, p. 475). Born in Ghana, Gyasi migrated to the U.S. at age two, hence her bicultural life experience shaped her different perspective on slavery and racism. She has received several American literary honors, including the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Novel and the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize. *Homegoing* (2016) is a chronological narrative of an African-Asante woman, Maame, which explores slavery on two distinct branches of a family tree. The novel began in the 18th century, narrating the life stories of two daughters of Maame, Effia, and Esi, who had different life trajectories. Effia married a British imperialist and lived in the magnificent castle, while Esi was taken captive and sold as a slave to the southern plantation in the US.

Gyasi's return to Ghana in 2009, after 18 years in America, particularly her visit to Cape Coast Castle, sparked the seminal concepts of *Homegoing* (2016). Ratcliffe described *Homegoing* as a powerful "saga of slavery and oppression" (Ratcliff, 2017, p.11), and Van Rens interpreted it as a "postmemorial family saga" that dealt with the cross-generational impacts of trauma (Van Rens, 2023, p.766). Gyasi's narratives illustrate systematic oppression in African-American families against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial eras, delving into generational trauma and the resilience of families to overcome such challenges. Moreover, Gyasi's *Homegoing* offers a unique perspective on how black people were enslaved partly due to indigenous African intertribal warfare. In this regard, Gyasi has not shunned the explicit fact that the indigenous Africans themselves to some extent, were perpetrators of the slave trade, a fact that writers of African descent always have evaded.

2. Literature Review

Considering the profound impact of the novel *Homegoing* (2016), numerous scholars have conducted in-depth analyses from various critical perspectives. Several writers have analyzed the novel from the viewpoint of black identity. Landry (2018) argued that African immigrants in *Homegoing* (2016) endured continuous conflict of racism of being Black skin before and after migration. She presented a framework of African immigrants' acculturation, portraying how the African immigrants renegotiated their identity and redefined blackness in the new environments (Landry, 2018). Unlike Landry, who focused on the conflicts of racial identity before and after immigration, Kerketta was more concerned with the relationship between cultural shifts and identity. Kerketta (2022) in her study investigated the cultural transition and identity in colonial settings, particularly the shift towards biculturalism and neo-African culture. Her study examined the complex emotions from colonial cultural whitewash, the healing and identity rediscovery of the colonized, and language issues in the postcolonial context (Kerketta, 2022). In another study, Yerima-Avazi and Ekwueme-Ugwu (2022) compared *Roots by Alex Haley with Gyasi's Homegoing,* mapping the Postcolonial concepts of diaspora and hybridity. Their research argued that despite regional differences, the hybrid identities of both African American and African characters are linked to their African roots (Yerima-Avazi & Ekwueme-Ugwu, 2022).

Diverging from the three previous studies, Motahane, Nyambi, and Makombe (2021) explored the identity of the black female characters in the novel. They explored how portrayals of women's experiences in forced trans-oceanic African migrations confront male-centric narratives. Their research emphasized the significance of female lineage in forming African and African-American identities and provided

a framework for comprehending African diasporic identities within their historical and future contexts (Motahane, Nyambi, & Makombe, 2021, p.17).

Beyond focusing on identity issues, numerous scholars have also explored the oppressive circumstances depicted in the novel *Homegoing* (2016). Welnhofer (2017) examined the enduring effects of imperialism and slavery which he argued have perpetuated the cycle of poverty within the black community (Welnhofer, 2017, p.7). Besides this, Zada and his colleagues (2022) adopted a postcolonial introspection and James Paul Gee's discourse analysis examining the difficulties encountered by black people in *Homegoing*. Their study identified diverse impacts of colonially oppressive practices on mental, physical, and socio-cultural aspects of the lives of the colonized (Zada, Khan, Shakir, & Ahmad, 2022).

Some other scholars specifically concentrated on the experiences of oppression faced by the black female characters in this novel. Mahmoud (2023) found that in *Homegoing*, female characters faced marginalization, victimization, demoralization, and sexual violence due to patriarchal societies both in Ghana and the US. Likewise, they encountered discrimination in employment in the US, impeding their journey toward empowerment and independence (Mahmoud, 2023, p.307). Jweid (2023) also examined black women's experiences in challenging oppression in *Homegoing*. He discussed the 'courageous code' as a feminist response to misogyny, enhancing social equality and female autonomy. Jweid affirmed that the novel succinctly connected the experiences of subjugated black women with stereotypes of male dominance (Jweid, 2023, p.29). Unlike the previous two studies, Kavipriya and Sutharshan (2023) narrowed their focus on three black female characters, Effia, Esi, and Willie, and found that the most notable and recurrent form of oppression encountered by these characters was rape (Kavipriya & Sutharshan, 2023, p.682).

Apart from identity and oppression, other scholars also have investigated the concept of trauma in this novel. Sackeyfio, Makosso, and Yengou (2023) deployed a psychological approach and examined the effects of the systematic oppression by colonizers in Africa as depicted in *Homegoing*. However, their analysis primarily centered on the individual trauma endured by the black female characters who had faced oppression. In a recent study, Van Rens (2023) analyzed the trauma of slavery depicted in *Homegoing* by using a post-memorial family narrative that emphasized the effects of trauma across generations and time. While Van Rens' study relied on postcolonial and post-memory elements, it lacked a robust justification as a viable framework as it did not fully explore the lasting impacts of the narrative on readers or its broader social implications.

Bridging literature and science, Mikić (2023) explored Gyasi's *Homegoing* for the physical and emotional toll of slavery and racism that echoed through generations. Mikić contended that *Homegoing* portrayed characters' experiences across different spatial and temporal contexts, thus lending readers insight into grasping the intergenerational impact of emotional trauma and resilience (Mikić, 2023, p.101). Mikić's study provided insights into the intricate connections between racism, emotional trauma, and epigenetic expression. Mikie also underscored the influence of ethnic American literature in forming our narratives about epigenetics and race (Mikić, 2023, p.112). However, while Mikie conducted a thorough investigation into the intergenerational impact of emotional trauma, her focus was predominantly on the traumatic experiences of Esi and her descendants who were victims of slavery. However, she did not extend this examination to the traumatic experiences of Effia and her descendants, who were portrayed as part of the perpetrators or accomplices in the institution of slavery.

The literature review reveals that while previous research has primarily focused on themes of oppression, identity, and trauma within the narrative, there is a notable lack of attention on the mechanisms through which the trauma is transmitted across generations. Furthermore, although a few studies have explored the concept of transgenerational trauma, they primarily address the trauma experienced by victims of slavery, rather than that of the perpetrators. Current research on the traumatic portrayal of Black women in the novel, both in the roles of victims and perpetrators, as highlighted in previous literature reviews, is sporadic.

3. Study Aim and Analysis Approach

This study aims to explore the traumatic ordeals faced by African American characters, both victims and perpetrators, in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) through textual analysis. It delves into both the individual trauma and the transmission of traumatic memory and its effects across generations within a postcolonial context.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study applies Stef Craps' postcolonial trauma theories from *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2013) and Gabriele Schwab's perspectives on transgenerational trauma from *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (2010), to analyze the trauma of black female characters in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016).

Since the early 1990s, the concept of trauma has gained significant prominence within academic circles. In Cathy Caruth's monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), the term "trauma theory (p.72)" was first coined and documented. Caruth's exploration of trauma and its effects on narrative and memory has since become a foundational text in the study of trauma. She defines trauma as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind)", which happens "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to the conscious mind" (Caruth, 1996, p.3-4).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, humanities scholars have increasingly stressed the need for trauma studies to include non-Western and postcolonial perspectives. Radstone argued that the hardships of those labeled as 'other' in the West were often overlooked in trauma theory (Radstone, 2007, p.25). Neeves echoed Radstone's critique regarding the limitations of trauma studies, emphasizing its failure to

adequately investigate trauma within non-Western and postcolonial contexts. She contended that this shortcoming had resulted in the perpetuation of similar neglects and acts of 'forgetting,' potentially detrimental to recovery and healing processes (Neeves, 2008, p.109). Similarly, Craps criticized that foundational trauma texts, including Caruth's, tended to neglect non-Western as they assume Western-centric definitions of trauma and recovery and ignored the ties between diverse traumas, ultimately risking the reinforcement of existing injustices and inequalities (Craps, 2013, p.2).

In the Western context, specific events have been often labeled as "trauma" and received more focus in trauma theory, garnering empathic identification through their traumatic experiences. Conversely, events outside this context have been less emphasized in trauma theory, leading to a deficit in empathic recognition for traumas experienced in non-Western settings. The traditional trauma theories, failing to uphold cross-cultural unity and not following through on the promise to encourage ethical interaction across cultures, can have detrimental effects on the recovery and rebuilding processes for individuals and communities. Therefore, Step Craps contends that the trauma experienced by non-Western or minority communities should be recognized and addressed in a way that respects their unique experiences, which is an aspect where trauma theory "has tended to fall short" (Craps, 2013, p.3).

According to the traditional trauma model, trauma originates from a singular, abnormal, catastrophic event; in contrast, the postcolonial trauma model posits that trauma stems from the prolonged, cumulative effects of racism or various forms of structural oppression (Craps 2013, p.4). Stef Craps and Gert Buelens (2008) conceptualized the postcolonial trauma theoretical model, elucidating the applicability of the model in comprehending the multifaceted nature of colonial traumas. They asserted that a non-Western and postcolonial context of the trauma theory was instrumental in grasping the profound impacts of "dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide" (Craps & Buelens, 2008, p.3). Besides, they advocated there was a need for a more comprehensive inclusive scope of the postcolonial trauma model, arguing that "the chronic psychic suffering imposed by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities" has not been fully integrated within trauma study model (p.3-4).

A related problem of postcolonial trauma is that the repercussions of trauma often remain as unspoken remnants of a nation's history and "vulnerable to irruption" (Schwab, 2010, p.57). According to Schwab, extreme oppression, violence, and dehumanization not only leave deep lasting 'psychological' scars among enslaved individuals but tend to be intergenerational, affecting those who may not have directly experienced the original trauma. Schwab cautioned that ordeals of suffering, resistance, and survival not only remain repressed silently within enslaved individuals, families, and communities but also get embedded as a collective historical memory of a nation. She further reiterated that the scars endured by an abusive past often lie dormant subconsciously, which subsequently get passed on to the succeeding generation, akin to an "undetected disease" (Schwab, 2010, p.3).

Thus, Craps hypothesized that the historical trauma of a nation has led to the persistent need for each generation of black writers to reexamine slavery (Craps, 2013, p.69). Yaa Gaysi is a prominent one of them. She Gyasi distinctly addressed the 'oppression theme' compared to her contemporaries. She depicted the effects of "oppression-based trauma" over an extensive period, stretching from 18th-century slavery to the contemporary era of black racism. In a similar light, Gyasi pointed to the role of African tribes in the triangular trade, portraying the shared trauma of slavery's victims and perpetrators.

5. Scope and Limitation

This research solely centers on the traumatic ordeals encountered by female characters of African descent and investigates the "oppression-based trauma," and "postcolonial syndrome" (Craps, 2013, p.4) that they have appeared to suffer. The term 'oppression-based trauma' here refers to the specific experiences of trauma endured by black female characters as a result of slavery and racism.

6. Analysis

6.1 Female Individual's Postcolonial Trauma

When Stef Craps analyzes Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), he suggests dream is "a fantasy of introjection (Craps, 2013, p.68)". Here, the dream is a mental space where the individual unconsciously assimilates and deals with external experiences, emotions, or attributes. This process occurs in a fantasy-like scenario, often symbolically representing the individual's internal conflicts, desires, or fears. When Esi was imprisoned in the dingy dungeons waiting to be shipped to the American continent, surrounded by the sounds of other women's weeping, their collective tears seeped into the ground, turning the soil below into mud. "At night, Esi dreamed that if they all cried in unison, the mud would turn to the river and they could be washed away into the Atlantic" (Gyasi, 2017, p.29). However, in this context, the narrative of trauma extends beyond a single "accident" or "event" (Caruth, 1995, p.5) that has been depicted in T*rauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) by Cathy Caruth, but encompasses a series of ongoing accidents, marked by the death and violent treatment of Esi's counterparts.

The updated third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1987), broadened the traumatic criterion to encompass not only direct exposure to serious dangers but also witnessing or learning about close family or friends encountering such threats (Craps, 2013, p.24).[1] Esi had witnessed other women in the dungeon hissing high and sharply, filling with anger and fear. [...] as if it originated from within her stomach (Gyasi, 2017, p.47). For Esi, the traumatic accidents are not "unexpected", but "available to consciousness" by witnessing and sensing her counterparts' sufferings. Then, the trauma has been reinforced by the rape from a white soldier. Before the rape took place, the white soldier smiled at Esi, and she briefly saw it as a rare act of kindness due to her long period

without encountering such warmth (Gyasi, 2017, p.47). However, after she was raped, throughout her life, Esi would forever associate a smile on a white person's face with the soldier's smile before he took her to his quarters, realizing that such smiles from white men often heralded impending harm and evil deeds (Gyasi, 2017, p.49). Esi perceives the smiles of white people as sinister and harmful, a response akin to a 'conditioned reflex' and indicative of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This excessive fear response stems from her traumatic experience of being assaulted following a white's smile. Instead of solely examining individual psychology, Craps recommends giving more consideration to the underlying conditions that allowed traumatic abuses to occur, such as political oppression and racism (Craps, 2013, p.28). In Esi's case, slavery, understood as both a historical and structural reality, enables and facilitates her traumatic experiences, including rape, a primary stressor of trauma. Her trauma, deeply embedded in its historical context, is neither singular nor unlikely to repeat, because trauma is an ever-present reality for numerous marginalized communities, as observed (Craps, 2013, p.33)

Ness, Esi's daughter and a second-generation slave in America, suffered deep trauma from being whipped after attempting to escape an abusive plantation owner with her ex-husband and son. At her new master's estate, the inspection revealing her abuse scars left everyone shocked. "She knew it was the intricate scars on her bare shoulders that had alarmed them all, but the scars weren't just there. [...] Ness's skin was no longer skin really, more like the ghost of her past made seeable, physical" (Gyasi, 2017, p.73-74). Within the context of slavery, violent behavior, and acts are not rare or unusual occurrences, but rather a common, standard practice, as describes by Craps, "a rule than an exception", and victimization of violence is not "historical events" but "continuing common everyday practices" (Craps, 2013, 53). Exposure to slavery-related violence, Ness displayed great resilience. She was compelled to confront the traumatic event she endured by herself, as failing to process its memory may make it "fester and manifest itself as PTSD" (Craps, 2013, p.23). Holding the daughter of another slave in her arms, "she allowed herself to drift off into memory. She is back in Hell" (Gyasi, 2017, p.80). While awaiting the impending punishment from her current master, she continually relived the scene of being violently whipped in public in her mind (Gyasi, 2017, p.87). The narrative indicates that Ness is experiencing PTSD, as evidenced by the way past traumatic events continually invade her thoughts and manifest in persistent, intrusive images (Caruth, 1995, p.151). According to Cathy Caruth, trauma arises from encountering an incident so shocking or unforeseen that it defies integration into existing understanding or frameworks of knowledge (Caruth, 1995, p.153). However, the traumatic event Ness experiences is not unforeseen but aligns with her prior understanding, as she has observed many fellow slaves endure similar incidents, and it's likely she may face such events again shortly. This aligns with Van Rens's view that the personal traumas experienced by the characters in each section symbolize broader traumatic experiences (Van Ren, 2023, p.778).

Willie, Ness's great-granddaughter, lived probably around the Harlem Renaissance era. For her, she suffered an insidious trauma rooted in systemic oppression and racism, and it was a case of "daily occurrence of racial trauma" (Craps, 2013, p.32), as evidenced in the subsequent narration:

> "Now there were so many white people around them that Willie started to feel scared. [...] The days of Pratt City mixing were so far behind her, she almost felt as though she had dreamed them. Here, now, she tried to keep her body small, squaring her shoulders in, keeping her head down" (Gyasi, 2017, p.220).

In the narration, Willie's "body memory" is awakened when surrounded by white people. Body memory is the concept where memories of trauma manifest through physical experiences, such as muscle tightness, bodily movements, physical sensations, autonomic responses, and similar phenomena (Minton, Ogden, & Pain, 2006, p.218). At the same time, if a person perceives a situation as a danger to their safety or survival (regardless of whether the threat is real or perceived), and this perception triggers subcortical defense mechanisms and intense autonomic responses, then that event is considered a traumatic experience for that individual (Ogden, 2021). Willie's movements of physically shrinking her presence by squaring her shoulders and keeping her head down indicate a deep-seated unease or fear. This feeling stemmed from her past experiences or societal pressures related to her days in Pratt City, where she witnessed how her black father was violently and unfairly treated by Whites. Subsequently, her fear of white people intensified, stemming from her being raped by her light-skinned husband at a jazz theater, an act incited and coerced by his two white colleagues.

Based on the preceding discussion, it's evident that trauma resulting from systematic oppression in a postcolonial setting possesses distinct characteristics. The sense of oppression dominated by white people looms over the lives of these black women like a persistent gloom, bringing traumas that are not accidental or temporary, but continually manifest in their lives. They have long witnessed the traumas endured by their elders and peers, and their traumas are further exacerbated by more specific acts of oppression. This trauma isn't the result of a solitary incident or event but rather stems from a persistent or ongoing set of common, everyday practices. This research posits that in addressing the traumatic issues faced by black women, the variable of postcolonial historical context is indispensable and cannot be overlooked. There is a need to view the trauma of black women through a lens that incorporates historical and systemic factors, recognizing that their experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of race, gender, and history.

6.2 Trans-generational Trauma among the Victims

The traumas experienced by those who were colonized and enslaved, however, are "collective in nature" and cannot be pinpointed to a single event in a specific historical moment (Craps, 2013, p.63). Rather, they're entrenched in a long history of racial discrimination and exploitation, which still impacts the present (Craps, 2013, p.63). For the systemic and structural causes, the trauma caused by experiences of oppression, violence, and injustice is shared among an entire community or ethnic group rather than being limited to personal experiences; and the traumatic effects are not confined to the past but have lasted and extend into the present. They have turned into the

"haunting legacies" coined by Gabriele Schwab, and the "legacies" linger not just with the direct sufferers, but also perpetuate across generations (Schwab, 2010, p.1). As a "family saga" spanning seven generations from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, *Homegoing* (2016) provides this study with ample data to explore transgenerational trauma, encompassing perspectives from both victims and perpetrators.

Traumatic recollections always trap people in a cycle of repetitive compulsion, transforming individuals into beings of physical suffering, existing somatically and detached from a history experienced consciously or emotionally (Schwab, 2010, p.2). As a victim of slavery who endured the horrors of a dingy dungeon, witnessed the suffering of other women, and experienced rape, Esi became ensnared in her memories, repeatedly recounting her painful experiences to Ness. In Ness' mind, her mother was a serious and steadfast woman who never seemed to share a cheerful tale. The stories she told Ness at bedtime were always about what she referred to as "the Big Boat" (Gyasi, 2017, p.70). Torture and rape, often considered the most severe forms of 'soul murder', annihilate the concept of psychic time, as the suffering they inflict cannot be healed by time in the manner that other wounds are (Schwab, 2010, p.3). These two atrocities were both witnessed and personally experienced by Esi. In her unique way, she carried forward the traces of a violent history. To reduce the obsession with past violence and injuries, an effective method is to integrate these traces into her current life. For Ness, she receives "unthought knowledge (Schwab, 2010, p.7)"[2] from her mother. Esi transforms her traumatic experiences into verbal and symbolic expressions. These experiences are unconsciously documented, leaving indelible marks deep within Ness's emotions. "Ness would fall asleep to the images of men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth" (Gyasi, 2017, p.70). The inherited trauma from Esi also "disrupts relationality (Schwab, 2010, p. 2)" of Ness. Although Ness encountered many warm and friendly slaves on other plantations, always smiling, embracing each other, and sharing beautiful stories, her soul remained captive to her mother's tales filled with sadness and severity. She could not escape from these stories, forever associating true love with a relentless and tough spirit (Gyasi, 2017, p.71). Here we may see the inherited trauma interferes with Ness's ability to relate to others and form healthy relationships, often leading to isolation or difficulty in maintaining social bonds.

Nightmares are a common sign of post-traumatic stress disorder, which stems from an experience that is extraordinarily distressing and beyond the normal scope of human encounters (Brown, 1995, p.100). Then, Ness's granddaughter Beulah was a girl who often "had night terrors", whimpering in her sleep.

> Maybe Beulah was seeing something more clearly on the nights she had these dreams, 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. Beulah ran in her sleep, ran like she'd stolen something when she had done nothing other than expect the peace, the clarity, that came with dreaming. (Gyasi, 2017, p.120)

Psychologist Natan P.F. Kellermann proposes that nightmares mirroring the trauma experienced by parents indicate the possibility of epigenetic inheritance (Kellermann, 2013, p.36). Based on Goldberg et. al, epigenetics focuses on understanding how gene expression can be modified by certain mechanisms, thereby influencing the resulting phenotype, without changing the actual DNA sequence itself (Goldberg, Allis, & Bernstein, 2007, p.635). Current research in epidemiology and associative studies supports the theory that the impacts of trauma might be transmitted via human reproductive cells (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018, p.1770). In Beulah's dream, the black child seems to be her great-grandmother Esi or grandmother Ness, struggling against the evil of the outside world; or perhaps it's Pinky, the little girl in Ness's arms, resisting after being bullied by a white young master. Either way, it represents "Unspeakable unfairness". Beulah runs in her dream as if she has stolen something, a scene strikingly similar to her grandmother Ness running through the jungle, cradling her baby, with a heart full of longing for freedom. Beulah loses "the capacity for linking"[3] in her nightmare, the mechanism of post-traumatic nightmare behavior assaulting bodily memory, which is "an attack on thought itself" (Schwab, 2010, p.2). Trauma disrupts Beulah's thought processes, impairing her ability to connect thoughts and emotions, and making it hard for her to comprehend experiences and think logically, especially in her dreams.

When the story progresses to the generation of Ness' great granddaughter Willie, the traces of trauma on her manifest as an unconscious shrinking of her body and bowing her head in environments surrounded by white people, with a desire to become "invisible". Moreover, "She could feel Carson (her son) doing the same thing" (Gyasi, 2017, p.220). Recent researches suggest that the maternal impacts of trauma exposure could affect offspring via interactions between the fetus and placenta (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018, p.247). Psychologists Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda also argue that the impact of a parent's trauma can be passed on through their parenting style, family dynamics, and behaviors (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018, p.1769). However, different from Ness and Beulah, the post-traumatic representation has already transferred from memories to somatic enactments. Based on the argument of Van der Kolk, Bessel A, trauma primarily embeds itself not in people's conscious awareness, but deeply within their "sensate experiences" (van der Kolk, 2002, p.57). He suggests that traumatic memories have a "subcortical nature," implying that after experiencing trauma, certain feelings, sensations, or actions can unpredictably trigger a consistent set of emotional or physical reactions that are completely unrelated to the current situation (van der Kolk, 2002, p.59). The bodily reactions of Willie and her son can be seen as the foundational underlying mechanisms of post-traumatic stress. For Willie and her son, even in situations without immediate harm from surrounded white individuals, the inherited traumatic memory activates their "Implicit memory", which triggers subcortical emotional regulation mechanisms, "automatic feelings of fear in response to a particular cue" (Sparr & Bremner, 2005, p.75). Subsequently, Willie's son instinctively inherits his mother's 'implicit memory,' either through epigenetic transmission or the influence of the parental environment and behaviors. This 'implicit memory' is then activated as well in situations where his mother perceives a threat to their safety or survival.

6.3 Trans-generational Trauma among the Perpetrators

In the two papers addressing trauma in *Homegoing* (2016), one by Dirk van Rens and the other by Marijana Mikić, both authors provide detailed analyses of the issue. However, both of their focuses are primarily on the narratives of Esi and her descendants, with insufficient attention paid to Effia's side of the story. In this context, this study does not question the status of Effia's descendants as survivors of psychological trauma, even though they assume the role of perpetrators in the novel. Craps points out that labeling someone as a trauma survivor or victim doesn't inherently assign them moral value, since both victims and perpetrators can experience trauma (Craps, 2013, p.15). Schwad similarly argues that both victims and perpetrators transmit the indelible legacies of violent histories across generations (Schwad, 2010, 1). To address this gap, the following section will focus on the traumatic narrative of Effia and her descendants, who are portrayed as part of the perpetrators of slavery.

Effia's fate and that of her descendants were deeply intertwined with fire. She was born during a fierce blaze that swept through the woods near her father's compound. "[T]he fire raged through the woods [...][moving] quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in the caves and hid in the trees; it burned up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind until it reached an Asante Village (Gyasi, 2017, p.3)." From the perspective of writing techniques, fire in the text holds symbolic significance. On an explicit level, it represents the family's plight due to their involvement in the slave trade. Metaphorically, fire is closely linked to European colonizers, symbolizing the slave trade sweeping through every inch of Fanteland and Asante lands in Ghana like a raging inferno (Marzette, 2021, p.102). This is evident from the psychological narration of Effia's father, as illustrated below. "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, 2017, p.3).

Quey, Effia's child with the White man James, who was "raised among the whites in Cape Coast (Gyasi, 2017, p.50)", later became the New Governor of a slave trading outpost in the Fante village where Effia was from, effectively becoming an accomplice in the British slave trade. However, as the story progresses to the fourth generation, specifically to James and Akosua's daughter, Abena, the trauma experienced by the descendants of former slave traders gradually becomes more evident.

Abena was an unmarried twenty-five-year-old woman, and nobody wanted to marry her for her father's Unluckiness because her father's crops had never grown. When she felt sorrowful about her fate, she would question her father, testing whether he dared to reveal the truth to her, explaining his accent and fair complexion. She would lose her temper with her father. "You have kept me here like a prisoner with your bad luck. Unlucky, they call you, but your name should be Shame, or Fearful, or Liar. Which is it, Old Man (Gyasi, 2017, p.134)? Whenever she inquired about matters related to her parents' families, they always gave vague answers and made up various excuses. The awareness of slavery and the atrocity of selling their people was demoted to a form of "tacit knowledge" (Schwab, 2010, p.71), which turned into a taboo subject, seldom discussed openly in family debates. One day, when she questioned why her mother's family had forbidden her parents' marriage, her mother provided the following response:

> "Your father was a…" She stopped, searching for the right words. Abena knew her mother didn't want to tell a secret that was not hers to tell. (Gyasi 2017, 135)

Schwab asserts that children of perpetrators unknowingly carry on the spectral legacies and hidden histories of their parents and their generation (Schwab, 2010, p.77). Abena is the one who always lives under the ghostly shadow of her father's secret. The continuous presence of the shadow undoubtedly affects her psychological well-being negatively. Unlike those directly sold into the slave trade, she indirectly experiences the brutal conflict between Ghana's Fante and Asante tribes and the harshness of slavery by repeatedly hearing stories about the slave trade. In her village, she would hear old people discuss the cruelty of slavery again and again.

> There's a castle on the coast in Fanteland called the Cape Coast Castle. That is where they used to keep the slaves before they sent them away, [....] then sell them to the British or the Dutch or whoever was paying the most at the time. Everyone was responsible. We all were…we all are." (Gyasi, 2017, p.142)

When the elders narrate stories of slavery, Abena resembles an empty vessel filled with unspeakable, deeper fears, silence buried under words, inconsolable sadness, deadly guilt, and unspoken shame (Schwab, 2010, p.43). These fragmented emotional shards are passed down from generation to generation. For Abena, this inheritance isn't a direct physical or psychological trauma but rather manifests through primal emotions brought about by exposure to traumatic stories, such as fear, loneliness, anxiety, and irritability.

Schwab, from a perpetrator nation's generation, acknowledges the inescapable transmission of collective guilt and shame across generations (Schwab, 2010, p.71). Feelings of shame and guilt have also become deeply ingrained in the mind of Abena's father. When Abena was heartbroken and crying over the complete death of the crops at home, her father spoke a sentence that was almost entirely unrelated to farming, "If in the moment of doing you felt clarity, you felt certainty, then why feel regret later? (Gyasi, 2017, p.145)". This study tends to interpret his words in this way: His family had a clear and firm understanding of the fact that they had sold their people into slavery, and they carried out this act without hesitation. However, as a descendant of this family, he now deeply regretted the actions of his forefathers. In truth, it's not the family trauma itself that directly affects the children, but rather the impact of this trauma on their parents' emotional well-being and behavior (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018, p.1776). This impact has closely intertwined what were once considered secret family stories with Abena's early childhood memories, forming a core part of her personal history and identity.

Here, we observe dynamic shifts, as the acts of perpetration were not committed by Abena herself, but rather by her father's generation, his counterparts, and forefathers. In this context, the inheritance of a historical legacy has two distinct aspects. Firstly, the guilt is not a

personal burden for Abena, but rather a collective guilt shared by a larger group of people, including white slave traders, local tribal chiefs in Ghana, and all those who tacitly allowed the trade of black slaves to occur before their eyes (as shown by the words of old people in Abena's village). This also confirms a significant characteristic of postcolonial trauma - its collectivity, which echoes Craps' statement that the traumas experienced by those who were previously colonized and enslaved are of "a collective nature" (Craps, 2013, p.63). Secondly, the complexity intensifies because Abena must confront a legacy transmitted through intricate, subliminal, and largely unconscious means (Schwab, 2010, p.80).

However, the traumatic legacy of Effia's family didn't end with Abena's death. The historical trauma of this family continued to profoundly affect the lives of the next generation. Her daughter Akua inherited this legacy, as evidenced in the subsequent narration:

> Akua couldn't remember the first time she'd seen fire, but she could remember the first time she'd dreamed of it. It was in 1895, [...] Then the fire in Akua's dream had been nothing more than a quick flash of ochre. Now the firewoman raged. (Gyasi, 2017, p.177)

Experiencing trauma disrupts one's sense of time, fragments their identity, and interferes with memory and communication (Schwab, 2010, p.42). Despite limited interactions with Abena due to her early death, the family trauma still powerfully disrupted the continuity of time, leading to a fragmentation of Akua's self. Akua's traumatic memory could stem from her mother, as adverse environmental conditions or deprivation during pregnancy can impact health over two generations, partly via epigenetic alterations in offspring (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018, p.1770). Additionally, Akua might directly inherit these memories from Effia, whose trauma had been transmitted through generations. In the chapter describing Akua, her fear of fire was repeatedly mentioned. Akua often had nightmares about fire and a "firewoman," screaming in her sleep and dreaming of the same story "A woman made of fire would visit me. In her arms, she carried her two fire children, but then the children would disappear and the woman would turn her anger toward me" (Gyasi, 2017, p.240). Under the influence of these recurring and intensifying nightmares, she lost her sanity in a dreamlike state, killed her two daughters, and left a permanent scar on the face of her son Yaw.

Survivors of transgenerational trauma exhibit symptoms that arise not from their individual experiences, but from the psychic conflicts, traumas, or secrets of their parents, relatives, or community (Schwab, 2010, p.49). For Akua's traumatized life, the family heritage is one of the main reasons. When Yaw finally reconciled with his mother and wanted to know the story of his Scar. His mother told him: "How can I tell you the story of your scar without first telling you the story of my dreams? And how do I talk about my dreams without talking about my family? Our family" (Gyasi, 2017, p.240)? It is clear that her family history has profoundly impacted her life, also highlighting the significant role of the family in transmitting traumatic memories. The life choices of Akua's mother subtly but decisively shape her path into one filled with trauma and despair. She admitted to Yaw that she was always a sad girl, unaware that there was any other way to exist (Gyasi, 2017, p.240). Faced with her burn scars and the scar on Yaw's face, the physical traumas, she informed Yaw that their family history included evil. Some people acted wrongly, unable to foresee the outcomes of their misdeeds. They didn't have these burned hands as a sign of warning (Gyasi, 2017, p.242). Akua's mention of 'evil' in her family lineage to Yaw undoubtedly alludes to the history of her forefathers being actively involved in the slave trade.

The other event that provokes Akua's traumatic memory is the death of the white traveler, who has been burned by Akua's husband and other leaders. When the narration goes to her first waking up from a screaming nightmare, she blames her husband for burning the white man. As a descendant of James, she grasped the English spoken by the white man, but she wasn't alone in the crowd in choosing not to do anything to help (Gyasi, 2017, p.181). This event appears to mirror the brutal treatment and killing of black people by whites during the slavery era. Yet, from a different historical perspective, Akua's silence seems to echo the voicelessness of her people when faced with the cruel treatment of their kind. Her choice to remain silent does not bring her any satisfaction in resisting the whites; instead, it further deepens the wounds in her heart. Akua's traumatic memories, acquired through epigenetics, have been intensified by witnessing a scene where a white tourist faced severe threats and unfortunately lost his life. Akua's intense fear of fire from this experience has resulted in her regularly experiencing severe nightmares. Her response to this event suggests that epigenetic adaptations can be altered and intensified as a result of environmental exposure

As the story unfolds, the fear of fire is passed down to Marjorie, Akua's granddaughter. Ever since learning about the origins of her father Yaw's and grandmother Akua's scars, she has developed a profound fear of fire. Scars serve as external symbols of familial trauma, and representations of self or others are often embedded into a child's evolving self-image by parents who have experienced trauma (Schwab, 2010, p.125). The image of the firewoman, haunting Akua's dreams, also lingered with Marjorie, not in her dreams, but as a vivid memory when she heard the story. Though the firewoman didn't visit her dreams, Marjorie felt a sense of apprehension at the sight of fire, "as though the firewoman's shadow still lurked" (Gyasi, 2017, p.274), indicating the lingering impact of her grandmother's traumatic experiences.

7. Conclusion

Through the analysis of this text, it becomes evident that postcolonial structural oppression, exemplified by slavery, not only profoundly impacts those who directly experience trauma but also continues to affect their descendants in subtle ways. Furthermore, the traumatic impacts of postcolonial oppression, stemming from slavery and racism, extend beyond the victims to also affect the perpetrators. As seen in the experiences of Effia and Esi's descendants, even those who did not personally experience these events, or are completely unaware of this history, may still suffer profound and destructive effects. The impact of wrongdoing lingers, affecting all involved, much like the memory of captivity remains with the fish long after they are released back into the water (Gyasi, 2017, p.242). Meanwhile, the trauma

model in a postcolonial context differs significantly from traditional trauma models, highlighting the inseparability of colonialism-related historical and systemic issues. Over several generations, if a systemic traumatic environment persists, it may lead to increasingly extreme forms of traumatic manifestation. Conversely, if there are positive changes in the traumatic environment, these traumatic manifestations may gradually diminish throughout several generations (Jablonka & Raz, 2009, p.162). This resonates with Schwab's assertion that if trauma is not processed and integrated, it will inevitably be transmitted to the subsequent generation (Schwab, 2010, p.49). Therefore, in understanding and addressing the issue of intergenerational transmission of trauma in the postcolonial era, this study concludes that while mourning the past is important, our focus should shift more towards the evolution of our current world, enhancing the inclusivity of a diverse modern society, and respecting 'differences'.

Notes

1. This study focuses on the shift in traumatic criteria from personal experiences to encompassing the witnessing of others' experiences, directly citing Stef Craps' *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013, 24). The source is the DSM-III-R (1987, 250).

2. This term originates from Christopher Bollas's *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (Columbia University Press, 1988). Gabriele Schwab expanded on this term in her essays. She later incorporated this idea in her book *Haunting Legacies* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

3. This term was developed by Schwab from Wilfred Bion's concept of "Attacks on Linking," in *Second Thoughts: Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis* (1967; London: Karnac, 2005), 93–109.

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