09.30.2025 **BERKELEY JOURNAL OF**

Humanities and Social Science (BJHSS) Vol. 9 No. 6

REFRAMING YAA GYASI'S *TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM:* READING THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

HALIMA SHEHU; & AMINA O

General Studies, School of Science an of Technology, Minna, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: h.shehu@futmi

DOI Link: https://doi.org/10.70382/

ABSTRACT

This article reframes Yaa *Transcendent Kingdom* throug of intergenerational trauma, ad critical gap in scholarship that h emphasized the novel's explorations science and immigrant identity. It foreg structural transmission of ancestra particularly the psychological and legacies of displacement, racism and have received limited critical attentio on foundational theories of trauma, po and diasporic inheritance, the study how the Ghanaian American protago negotiates inherited suffering across fa cultural lines. By situating the no contemporary African diaspora narratives, the analysis moves beyond psychology to illuminate how diasporic identity, the tension betwe and faith and storytelling shape both m resilience. This reading repositions *Tra Kingdom* within postcolonial and traur

09.30.2025 **BERKELEY JOURNAL OF**

Humanities and Social Science (BJHSS) Vol. 9 No. 6

REFRAMING YAA GYASI'S *TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM:* READING THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

HALIMA SHEHU; & AMINA OLANIYAN OLABISI

General Studies, School of Science and Technology Education, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: h.shehu@futminna.edu.ng

DOI Link: https://doi.org/10.70382/bjhss.v9i6.041

ABSTRACT

This article reframes Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* through the lens of intergenerational trauma, addressing a critical gap in scholarship that has largely emphasized the novel's explorations of religion, science and immigrant identity. It foregrounds the structural transmission of ancestral wounds, particularly the psychological and cultural legacies of displacement, racism and loss that have received limited critical attention. Drawing on foundational theories of trauma, postmemory, and diasporic inheritance, the study examines how the Ghanaian American protagonist, Gifty, negotiates inherited suffering across familial and cultural lines. By situating the novel within contemporary African diaspora trauma narratives, the analysis moves beyond individual psychology to illuminate how migration, diasporic identity, the tension between science and faith and storytelling shape both memory and resilience. This reading repositions *Transcendent Kingdom* within postcolonial and trauma studies,

Introduction

African diaspora literature often interrogates the transmission of intergenerational and kinship traumas, tracing how the legacies of slavery, colonialism, migration and racial discrimination shape individual and collective identities. Such works explore how trauma is not only experienced by a single generation but also inherited through memory, silence, storytelling and embodied cultural practices by descendants who may be far removed from the original events. In doing so, these narratives illuminate the interplay between personal grief and communal histories, challenging notions of time and

BERKELEY RESEARCH & PUBLICATIONS INTERNATIONAL

Bayero University, Kano, PMB 3011, Kano State, Nigeria. +234 (0) 802 881 6063.

berkeleypublications.com

E-ISSN 3027-0332 P-ISSN 3026-9741

09.30.2025 Pg.181

Vol. 9, No. 6

Berkeley Journal of Humanities and Social Science

demonstrating how Gyasi expands the terrain of African diaspora literature by exposing the subtle yet enduring mechanisms of trauma inheritance in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Intergenerational Trauma, Postmemory, Diaspora, Migration, Faith

Healing and offering nuanced insights into resilience, survival, and cultural continuity within diasporic contexts. By foregrounding the interconnections between personal grief and communal histories, African diaspora narratives complicate linear understandings of time and healing to reveal how the past intrudes upon the present, creating a temporal disjunction that unsettles the boundary between lived experience and ancestral memory. In this way, literature of the diaspora not only records the enduring afterlives of slavery, colonialism and migration but also enacts the creative strategies through which communities negotiate loss, reassert agency and sustain continuity.

Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) follows Gifty, a Ghanaian American neuroscientist whose research into reward-seeking behaviour is influenced by a family history marked by loss, addiction and depression. Raised in a devout Pentecostal household in Alabama, she struggles to reconcile her scientific vocation with her religious upbringing while grappling with the opioid-related death of her brother and her mother's debilitating mental illness. Through recollections and introspective narration, Gyasi probes the intersections of migration, racial identity, intergenerational trauma and the search for meaning. While the novel has received critical attention for its nuanced portrayal of immigrant life, racial belonging, addiction and the science-faith

demonstrating how Gyasi expands the terrain of African diaspora literature by exposing the subtle yet enduring mechanisms of trauma inheritance in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Intergenerational Trauma, Postmemory, Diaspora, Migration, Faith

Healing and offering nuanced insights into resilience, survival, and cultural continuity within diasporic contexts. By foregrounding the interconnections between personal grief and communal histories, African diaspora narratives complicate linear understandings of time and healing to reveal how the past intrudes upon the present, creating a temporal disjunction that unsettles the boundary between lived experience and ancestral memory. In this way, literature of the diaspora not only records the enduring afterlives of slavery, colonialism and migration but also enacts the creative strategies through which communities negotiate loss, reassert agency and sustain continuity.

Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) follows Gifty, a Ghanaian American neuroscientist whose research into reward-seeking behaviour is influenced by a family history marked by loss, addiction and depression. Raised in a devout Pentecostal household in Alabama, she struggles to reconcile her scientific vocation with her religious upbringing while grappling with the opioid-related death of her brother and her mother's debilitating mental illness. Through recollections and introspective narration, Gyasi probes the intersections of migration, racial identity, intergenerational trauma and the search for meaning. While the novel has received critical attention for its nuanced portrayal of immigrant life, racial belonging, addiction and the science-faith dialectic, the family's history of suffering is often relegated to the background. This article reframes *Transcendent Kingdom* by positioning inherited trauma at the structural centre of the narrative arguing that Gifty's story reveals how personal grief is inseparable from communal histories and the entwined legacies of faith, science and memory.

Trauma and Inherited Memory

This study situates Gyasi's novel within the broader tradition of African diaspora literature that interrogates the transmission of intergenerational and kinship traumas. Building on foundational trauma theory, postmemory studies and scholarship on diasporic inheritance, the framework highlights how the traumatic legacies of slavery, colonialism, migration and racial discrimination reverberate across generations. Central to this analysis is Cathy Caruth's (1996) theorization of the belated and fragmented nature of trauma. Her claim that trauma resists full assimilation into coherent narrative and re-emerges through intrusive memories, emotions or compulsive repetition

provides a crucial lens for understanding *Transcendent Kingdom*. Gifty's fractured recollections and her mother's grief exemplifies the persistence of trauma long after the initial moment of crisis. Complementing Caruth, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory clarifies how the "generation after" inherits the unspoken sorrows, silences and dislocations of those who came before. In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Hirsch (1997) describes this inheritance as mediated through stories, images and behaviours rather than through direct experience. The non-linear structure of Gyasi's novel mirrors this process of transmission, layering present experiences with fragmented memories of Ghana and the family's migration.

However, Michael Rothberg's (2009) theory of multidirectional memory further complicates this framework by disputing the idea that different histories compete for recognition. In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Rothberg argues that disparate histories of trauma become entangled, reshaping one another through dialogic processes of remembrance. This model is particularly pertinent to *Transcendent Kingdom* where diasporic memory surfaces at the intersection of Ghanaian migration, African diasporic displacement and American racial politics. Viewed through Rothberg's lens, Gifty's family cultural-religious inheritance is inseparable from broader historical legacies of colonialism, postcolonial migration, and racial experience in the United States. Paul Gilroy (1993) and Saidiya Hartman (2007) broaden this discussion by theorizing diasporic inheritance. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* Gilroy conceives of the 'Black Atlantic' as an intercultural space shaped by movement, a hybrid legacy of memory, trauma and creativity that circulates transnationally. While Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007) complements Gilroy's foundational text, it moves from his broad theorization of diasporic modernity to a more intimate meditation on the personal and affective "afterlife" of slavery, a concept that resonates in Gyasi's depiction of inherited silences, religious disillusionment and the subtle persistence of historical loss. Together, the two texts reveal diasporic inheritance as both cultural survival and the persistence of historical wounds. This duality is central to Gyasi's text where migration not only intensifies inherited trauma but also generates possibilities for resilience through hybrid coping strategies.

Against this background, Aditi Chakraverty (2023) offers a more recent articulation of how these dynamics manifest in diasporic literature. Defining intergenerational trauma as "the transmission of psychological and emotional distress from one generation to the next, even when subsequent generations did not directly experience the traumatic event" (323), she argues that diasporic narratives encode inherited wounds through altered affective patterns, ritual behaviors and narrative structures. Her notion of "ghost logic," the haunting presence of unspoken histories within present subjectivities,

provides a productive framework for reading Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* where silence, fractured memory and unresolved grief are central to the diasporic condition that it depicts.

Through the lens of these theoretical perspectives, Caruth's belatedness, Hirsch's postmemory, Rothberg's multidirectionality, Gilroy's and Hartman's diasporic inheritance combined with Chakraverty' insights on transgenerational trauma in literature, *Transcendent Kingdom* can be seen as a powerful narrative that explores the complexities of diasporic trauma. Like earlier African American works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) where the spectral Beloved embodies the persistence of ancestral pain (Newgas 2020), Gyasi's novel grapples with inherited suffering, memory and survival. By situating questions of grief and trauma within a contemporary diasporic context marked by the intersecting forces of migration, racial marginalization, religion and scientific inquiry, the novel illuminates how individual suffering cannot be disentangled from the collective histories of displacement, racial violence and cultural loss that shape diasporic experience. In doing so, it not only underscores the persistence of inherited wounds across generations but also broadens the terrain of diasporic trauma narratives, extending their relevance to the complexities of the twenty-first century.

While Gyasi's engagement with intergenerational trauma recalls Morrison's exploration of haunting in *Beloved,* her narrative strategy departs from Morrison's reliance on the supernatural. Instead, Gyasi grounds the persistence of the past in the psychological scars of addiction, the weight of religious memory and the search for scientific explanation, thereby situating trauma within the lived realities of the diasporic present rather than in the realm of the spectral. *Transcendent Kingdom* thus adopts a realist mode, tracing inherited wounds across geographical and cultural boundaries without recourse to the metaphysical. In this regard, Gyasi's novel resonates more closely with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), which similarly root diasporic and historical traumas in lived experience rather than in supernatural registers. Also, while Gyasi's debut novel, *Homegoing* (2016) mapped structural trauma across three centuries, two continents, and dramatizes how historical violence reverberates across generations, by contrast, *Transcendent Kingdom* narrows its focus to the interior world of an individual character, presenting trauma not as a transhistorical chronicle but as an ongoing, deeply personal negotiation of migration, grief and belonging.

Most critical discussions of *Transcendent Kingdom* highlight its thematic concerns, including addiction, depression, the intersections of faith and neuroscience, and, the ethical dimensions of care. Dina Yerima's (2021) review, one of the earliest responses to *Transcendent Kingdom*, situates the novel within African diasporic literature while focusing on its treatment of addiction, depression and religious doubt. She highlights

Gyasi's skill in portraying mental illness without sentimentality and in using Gifty's scientific career to probe inherited religious frameworks. Yerima notes the text's layered depiction of Ghanaian immigrant life in the United States is handled as a meditation on belonging and dislocation. However, while insightful, the review adopts a thematic survey rather than a sustained theoretical engagement on how these struggles may be rooted in intergenerational patterns of trauma, particularly as mediated by a gendered religious experience.

Other studies extend Yerima's discussion similarly situating *Transcendent Kingdom* within debates on migration, trauma and diasporic identity. Andrew Ngeh and Sarah Nalova (2022) in "Migration, Diasporic Realities and the Quest for Home in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*," alongside Areqi Rashad's (2024) "Faith, Science, Addiction and Depression in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*," argue that trauma emerges not only as a psychological wound but also as a socio-political condition shaped by racial structures, cultural dislocation and migration. Ngeh and Nalova emphasize how diasporic subjects navigate inherited pain while simultaneously negotiating belonging in hostile environments, a theme that is central to contemporary African diasporic fiction. Also, Wangari et al. (2022) in a comparative study of *Homegoing* and *Transcendent Kingdom*, trace how Gyasi's characters navigate fragmented identities in the context of migration and intergenerational trauma. They contend that Gifty's simultaneous embrace of scientific rationalism and her residual attachment to Pentecostal belief exemplifies the "conflicted self" of the African diaspora which is caught between inherited cultural codes and the demands of assimilation. While valuable in situating *Transcendent Kingdom* within Gyasi's broader literary production, this analysis generalizes identity crisis, overlooking the role of West African religious practices and gender based narratives in shaping Gifty's struggles. More recently, Gonçalves (2024) approaches the novel through the ethics of care, framing Gifty's caregiving for her depressed mother as a site of affection, obligation and ambivalence. While resonating with trauma studies in its attention to second-generation burdens, this reading similarly neglects how cultural prescriptions of women's roles within West African families mediate care and condition the transmission of trauma. These studies acknowledge the complexity of Gyasi's writing but largely overlook the extent to which intergenerational trauma operates as the novel's central structuring force.

Trauma and Inheritance in Transcendent Kingdom

This article argues that inherited suffering functions not simply as a thematic current but as the structuring principle of *Transcendent Kingdom*, shaping its representations of migration, religion, science and caregiving, thereby defining its distinctive contribution

to contemporary African diasporic literature. Within the novel, diasporic memory is inseparable from the transmission of trauma. As trauma theory demonstrates, psychological and cultural wounds are reproduced across generations, a process that lies at the heart of Gyasi's narrative form. The text links individual experiences of loss to collective histories of displacement that define the diasporic condition. In this context, inheritance is depicted not only as the passing on of cultural practices but also the transmission of unresolved grief, resilience, and the psychic residues of historical rupture. Gyasi thus frames the diasporic condition less as a question of geographic relocation than as a complex site of cultural negotiation, affective inheritance and intergenerational memory.

The legacies of colonization, displacement and cultural alienation extend far beyond those who directly endured such histories, leaving indelible marks on subsequent generations. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, this transgenerational impact is articulated through a narrative that interlaces personal and collective histories, centering on Gifty, a second-generation Ghanaian American who inherits unspoken burdens of trauma rarely verbalized within her family yet profoundly internalized and compulsively reenacted. The novel dramatizes how silences, omissions, and fragments shape diasporic memory show that what is left unsaid can exert as much force as what is spoken. This tension between memory, speech and silence generates a narrative of fractured continuity, embodying what Aditi Chakraverty (2023) describes as "ghost logic", that is, the haunting persistence of an unarticulated past that continues to inhabit and unsettle the present self.

The most visible manifestation of intergenerational trauma in Gifty's life is her mother's depression which she mirrors in her own emotional detachment. The novel underscores the transmission of wounds through silence: "I used to think I would know the moment she broke. That there would be a loud cracking sound, a boom. But there was only silence. Her silence" (37). Here, silence operates not as absence but as a mode of communication, encoding trauma without articulation. Chakraverty describes this as "emotional coding," the process by which trauma is transmitted not through direct storytelling but through behavioral patterns. Gifty's mother embodies endurance through prayer, unrelenting labor, and a refusal to name her pain. What Gifty inherits is not the explicit context of these coping strategies but their emotional residue, a resilience entangled with repression and a silence that has created a psychic dissonance that she struggles to reconcile throughout the novel. Her emotional suppression, persistent anxiety and perfectionist drive can be understood as manifestations of this unresolved ancestral pain.

The family never openly confronts her brother Nana's addiction or the mental health struggles that follow his sports injury. Instead, silence becomes the dominant mode of

communication, carrying the weight of both shame and denial. In some respects, this lack of speech functions as the articulation of suffering, a generational echo of what remains unsaid. From childhood, Gifty intuitively recognizes some subjects are too painful, too stigmatized to voice. This suppression not only conceals the truth but also creates an emotional distance within the family, a grief unacknowledged yet deeply felt: "Even as a child, I had known not to ask. I had learned to bury things, deep" (4). Caruth's theorization of trauma as a belated and unassimilated experience underscores how past suffering continues to shape the present in ways that is beyond conscious awareness. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty's compulsive self-discipline and her silence around emotion exemplify this dynamic. These qualities operate not simply as individual characteristics but as the lingering effects of inherited wounds, unarticulated but are nonetheless profoundly felt.

Her admission, "I began to think that I had imagined his death. That I'd conjured Nana up whole cloth just to have someone to mourn. But no. He was real. He was real" (45) captures both the unreality of traumatic memory and the instability of a self caught in unresolved loss. This recalls Caruth's insight that trauma resists full integration at the moment of its occurrence and returns belatedly in fragmented forms of recall. It also speaks to Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* in which the "generation after" inherits not literal memories of past events but their affective force through silences, fragments, and imaginative reconstruction. Nana's eventual death not only devastates the family but also symbolizes the harsh realities of poverty, racism and limited access to support systems that immigrants and their children face. In their adopted country of America, Gifty reflects that "Even when he was alive, no one saw him. Not really" (104). She does not only remember her brother but also bears the psychic traces of his unprocessed absence while attempting to reconstruct his story through the gaps and silences that embody diasporic trauma, a process that recalls Hirsch's notion of postmemory and the transgenerational transmission of unresolved histories.

Despite her mother's Christian faith, which serves at once as a shield and a crutch, she succumbs to a quiet breakdown after Nana's death. As Gifty recalls, "She stayed in bed for weeks at a time, and when she was up, she was at church. God had become her answer to everything" (93). Rather than seeking therapy or emotional connection, her mother retreats into religion, reinforcing the silence and making it difficult for Gifty to grieve in her own way. When asked if she thought she was depressed, her mother replied, "Depression is a white people disease" (122). This dismissal reflects not only a misunderstanding of mental illness but also the cultural stigma that surrounds it. Her silence on the matter is shaped by her Ghanaian background, her faith and the pressures of immigrant survival. For Gifty's mother, depression is not something that migrants, African mothers, or broadly speaking, Black women, are permitted to feel. They endure;

they pray; they push through. For them to name pain is to concede defeat. This resonates with dominant cultural and social narratives in which Black women are routinely denied the legitimacy of expressing vulnerability. Their identities are constructed through discourses of endurance, prayer and resilience where silence in the face of suffering is valorized as strength. By contrast, articulating pain is often cast as weakness or failure, reinforcing what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) identifies as the controlling image of the "strong Black woman."

This refusal to acknowledge suffering must be understood within the wider context of migratory experience and its attendant, unresolved traumas. The grief of leaving Ghana, losing a husband and burying a son are all compressed into silence for Gifty's mother. Consequently, for Gifty, there is no language for vulnerability, only the inherited scripts of survival. As a child of this silence, she grows up trying to make sense not only of her brother's addiction but also of her mother's emotional absence. Reflecting on her mother's silence, Gifty realizes that, "She had decided long ago that suffering was a thing that black women did. That we did well. That we did often" (128). This line captures the generational burden placed on Black women to bear pain without breaking and without speaking. However, such suppression produces not only resilience but also a profound internal conflict that is evident in Gifty's persistent anxiety, her perfectionist striving and her emotional detachment. These inherited wounds surface more clearly in her caregiving for her depressed mother in which the silence around depression, grief, and vulnerability shapes their relationship. The unspoken functions both as a shield against further pain and also as a conduit through which suffering pass from mother to daughter.

Diasporic Inheritance and Migration

Migration is a pivotal theme in Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* intertwining the individual and collective narratives of displacement against the backdrop of cultural memory. Gilroy's conceptualization of the African diaspora as a "counterculture" in which identities are forged through the circulation of people, ideas and cultural forms across the Atlantic finds resonance in Gifty. She inhabits such a liminal space with her Ghanaian heritage, American upbringing and immersion in predominantly white scientific institutions which all contribute to a hybrid subjectivity shaped by multiple and often conflicting cultural worldviews. Gyasi's representation of Gifty similarly echoes Hartman's meditations on the "afterlife" of slavery and colonialism, particularly in her ambivalence towards Ghana, a place that is at once intimate and estranged, and, towards the United States which is both home and hostile terrain. These tensions embody inherited silences, religious disillusionment and the subtle persistence of historical loss.

In the novel, Gyasi's characters are not simply immigrants negotiating and adjusting to life in America, they are also defined by loss, dislocation, the weight of what was left behind as well as what cannot be recovered in their adopted home. Gifty's family story illustrates this burden. Firstly, in her father, the Chin Chin Man who abandons his family and returns to Ghana. His departure is driven by the alienation, rejection, economic insecurity, hardships that underscore the systemic exclusion of immigrants in the United States. His struggles highlight how systemic barriers manifest in daily life. Despite his willingness to work, he is dismissed because of prejudice: "The Chin Chin Man had a harder time finding a job. The home health service had hired him but too many people complained once they saw him walk in the door" (28). As Gifty recalls, "Eventually he just went home, unable to take the humiliation of America anymore" (46). This moment signals not only the collapse of the nuclear family but also the broader disillusionment with the migration dream. Chin Chin Man's inability to secure stable employment illustrates how racial discrimination corrodes immigrant dignity and unsettles family stability. Robert J. R. Elliott's (2008) study of immigrant wage differentials demonstrates how employers often operate through prejudice, ignorance or generalized assumptions about ethnic groups thereby sustaining cycles of exclusion and downward mobility. By embedding these dynamics within the intimate sphere of family life, Gyasi's narrative exposes the structural forces that render immigrant families vulnerable to persistent economic marginalization, illustrating how economic marginalization becomes inscribed as intergenerational trauma.

Gyasi's portrayal of Gifty especially exemplifies the complexities of diasporic inheritance where identity is neither singular nor stable but constantly negotiated against the backdrop of migration, displacement and racialized exclusion. This negotiation recalls Hartman's reflections on the "afterlife" of slavery and colonialism where historical violence continues to reverberate in contemporary life through subtle forms of alienation, ambivalence and loss. For Gifty, Ghana represents both intimacy and estrangement, a homeland that promises belonging yet resist full reclamation. Conversely, the United States signifies both familiarity and hostility, a space of opportunity shadowed by racial discrimination and cultural dislocation. These dualities highlight the psychic burden of diasporic inheritance, of silences transmitted across generations, disillusionment with religious institutions that fail to accommodate immigrant pain, and the historical sense of loss that is often unacknowledged and yet deeply felt. In this way, Gyasi situates Gifty within a broader diasporic narrative that foregrounds the entanglement of personal struggle with collective memory, underscoring how migration is always accompanied by unresolved histories that shape belonging.

As the characters in Gyasi's novel navigate their diasporic realities, migration emerges not only as a physical relocation but also as a complex journey of identity formation and belonging. This dynamic is particularly pronounced as the protagonist Gifty grapples with internal and external manifestations of self, revealing the plural nature of identity shaped by diverse cultural contexts. For her, displacement is inherited. Although she was born in America and is technically "at home," the emotional reality is more complex as she straddles two worlds, Ghana and America, but does not feel fully accepted in either. As she reflects, "My mother left Ghana with the certain belief that America would make everything better. She believed this country would be the end of all her problems and the beginning of all her hopes" (11).

While her mother, a devout and determined woman had relocated to the United States believing in the promise of the American Dream and in the hope of securing a better future for her children. This faith in the new country's possibilities was not hers alone but was shared by those they left behind: "In Ghana, everyone we knew talked about America as though it were a promised land" (43). These collective hopes and familial pressures created a powerful force that propelled them across the ocean. Yet, for the young Gifty, the tension between her mother's Ghanaian traditions and her desire to assimilate into American norms produced a persistent internal conflict that left her estranged from both cultures: "I wasn't African enough for the Africans and I wasn't American enough for the Americans" (79). This fractured sense of belonging becomes a defining feature of her character and underscores the psychological complexity of the migrant experience.

Consequently, in *Transcendent Kingdom* migration is presented not simply as a narrative of upward mobility but as one haunted by unresolved conflicts of identity and the legacies of intergenerational trauma. The relocation of Gifty's family from Ghana to the United States established the conditions for many of the struggles she later confronts. Rather than erasing histories of displacement, colonial violence and racial exclusion, migration intensifies them by embedding these wounds within new contexts of alienation. As Gifty reflects, "I had been raised in a house that was heavy with the weight of unseen things" (75), a statement that captures how trauma exerts its force silently yet insistently within family life. This "weight of unseen things" resonates with Hirsch's notion of postmemory, the transmission of affect, grief and loss across generations in ways that remain unspoken but nonetheless are deeply inscribed in everyday experience. Ngeh and Nalova note that this limited psychic space constrains Gifty's emotional life, rendering her quiet and withdrawn, a disposition that is in fact less a personal trait and more an inheritance of unprocessed grief. The silences of her parents, shaped by their own migration, economic insecurities and disillusionment reverberate into Gifty's adulthood as both emotional distance and existential uncertainty.

Rather than affirming the conventional immigrant narrative of perseverance and upward mobility, Gyasi highlights the intergenerational traumas embedded within the migratory experience. Her novel suggests that migration is not merely a geographical shift but a transformative and destabilizing process that passes unresolved experiences down the generations. For Gifty and her family, the promise of opportunity in America is accompanied by the loss of homeland, loss of traditions, and the intangible burden of intergenerational suffering. In this sense, *Transcendent Kingdom* situates migration within a cycle of historical wounds, showing how the past refuses closure and instead reemerges in the psychic and emotional lives of those who inherit it.

Faith, Science, and the Burden of Memory

Faith and science collide in the novel at the center of which stands Gifty, a young Ghanaian-American woman struggling to make sense of a world marked by silence, loss and unanswered questions. Her life is a narrative of crossing borders from the heat of Alabama to the neuroscience lab at Stanford, from the fervent Pentecostalism of her Ghanaian immigrant mother to the empirical skepticism of the scientific method. This constant state of translation, of existing between worlds, defines her deepest struggles. It is within this fractured landscape that religion occupies a central yet ambivalent place in her life because while faith offers the promise of solace and belonging, the experience of practicing religion in a foreign context exposes her to new forms of estrangement and exclusion. For her mother, faith is an anchor, offering her a sense of continuity, a reminder of home and belonging. Amid her loneliness and loss, she holds on to faith hoping that it would give her the strength to face the difficulties that she encounters. As a child, Gifty also believed in God with the fierce devotion passed down through her mother's evangelical faith. However, her family's exclusion in America extended into the religious sphere where the church, initially a source of belonging, became another site of marginalization. She recalls how a youth leader, P.T., insisted that those who had never heard the name of Jesus were destined for hell: "And the part that bothered me most was that I couldn't shake the feeling that the people P.T. believed deserved hell were people who looked like Nana and me" (102). This moment exposes how Christianity's universal claims are undermined by racial hierarchies of salvation which leaves immigrants doubly alienated from their religious community as well as from their cultural heritage. Unsurprisingly, Nana's death from a heroin overdose precipitates a profound crisis of faith, compelling Gifty to confront questions that religion cannot readily answer: "I used to ask God to fix it. I used to believe He would, that He could. I used to believe that God was the only way to explain everything, the only way to survive it. But then Nana died" (43). Raised in her mother's strict Pentecostal church, Gifty had long been immersed in the rituals and symbols that shaped her earliest experiences of family, community, and

suffering. Crosses, bowed heads, and anointing oil formed part of her spiritual and emotional landscape, framing the way she learned to interpret trauma. Her prayers for Nana, for instance, are less concerned with his medical condition than with the visual and bodily discipline of intercession: "Me on my knees, my hands clasped until they ached, my mouth repeating the same plea: Heal him, heal him, heal him" (92).

The ache in her hands and the cadence of repetition inscribe grief and helplessness into her body, rendering prayer at once an act of devotion and a rehearsal of loss. This scene communicates not only the guilt she carries—a burden common among those who love someone caught in addiction—but also the sense of responsibility that shifts onto her. When her mother sinks into depression, Gifty assumes the burden of strength, positioning herself as the one who must hold the family together. She does not entirely repudiate faith, yet the silence that meets her pleas underscores the ineffability of trauma and exposes the limits of the consolation religion can provide, thereby generating a persistent tension between belief and doubt. Even so, her rituals endure: "Even now, when I close my eyes to pray, I see him. I see Nana's face. The sweaty, yellowing pallor of his skin. I hear his voice, calling out to God with no answer" (108). This ambivalent relationship to religious practice illustrates how identity in *Transcendent Kingdom* is mediated through rituals and inherited beliefs that are saturated with trauma. For Gifty, prayer becomes less a source of comfort than a ritualized reenactment of grief, resonating with Chakraverty's notion of "ritualized trauma." In this sense, her devotional practices not only embody her own unresolved pain but also exemplify how trauma is transmitted and sustained across generations through embodied gestures, inherited symbols, and the unspoken weight of memory.

Hirsch's concept of postmemory is particularly pertinent here as it describes the transmission of trauma across generations not necessarily through direct narration but through images, symbols, and embodied practices. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Pentecostal ritual and Ghanaian cultural memory operate as conduits for unspoken grief, embedding trauma within the visual and sensory fabric of Gifty's life. The image of the child on her knees in prayer becomes an enduring emblem of helplessness and failed intervention, a memory never fully relinquished but continually relived in her private recollections and the choices she makes as an adult. This dynamic illustrates how trauma is not only inherited but also inscribed onto bodily gestures and ritualized performances that persist even when their original meanings are questioned or rejected. Hence, although Gifty distances herself intellectually from the church, its symbolic and ritual structures continue to shape the ways in which she interprets and responds to suffering. In this respect, Gyasi highlights the inescapability of inherited memory, demonstrating how postmemory saturates both the conscious and unconscious dimensions of diasporic subjectivity.

Experiences of economic exclusion, ambivalent religious belonging, and the absence of hospitality highlight different dimensions of intergenerational trauma in the novel placing Gifty's private grief within broader structures of systemic racism and diasporic displacement. This underscores how the "afterlife" of migration is shaped by rejection as well as by negotiation. The hostility of the church is evident not only in doctrine but also demonstrated in its interpersonal dynamics as members of the congregation gossip about Nana circulating cruel racist accusations that undermine its claim to compassion. For a family already marked by displacement, this lack of acceptance intensifies their estrangement. Such exclusions resonate with Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic as a diasporic condition marked by fracture, hybridity, and provisional belonging. Gifty's Her identity is not secured by stable roots but shaped by the routes she traverses across Ghanaian heritage, African American identity, Pentecostal faith, and scientific rationalism. Each framework offers partial affiliation yet never complete belonging, leaving her suspended within the fractured mobility that Gilroy identifies as central to the Black Atlantic.

This unsettled position reflects Gilroy's insight that diasporic identities are forged not through seamless integration but through ongoing negotiation across disparate histories, geographies, and epistemologies. For Gifty, the experience of moving between faith and science, African and American cultural imaginaries, and the competing claims of memory and trauma exemplifies the fractured mobility that Gilroy identifies as central to the Black Atlantic. Her life bears witness to the tension of living in-between, where belonging is always conditional, contested, and incomplete. Pertinent also are Hartman's reflections on loss and the afterlife of slavery which foreground the ways in which diasporic identities are constituted through absence, rupture and the haunting persistence of historical violence. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty embodies this entanglement: her search for meaning in science, faith, and cultural memory illustrates how diasporic life is defined less by coherence than by negotiation, displacement, and the enduring transmission of unresolved trauma. At the same time, the silence and alienation Gifty encounters align with Caruth's view of trauma as a wound that resists expression and resurfaces belatedly echoing Hirsch's notion that the "generation after" inherits silenced or unarticulated histories. Gifty carries both her family's unspoken grief and the exclusions of her community.

In the absence of spiritual hospitality, Gifty turns to science, seeking in its order and discipline a framework for coping with grief and uncertainty. Chakraverty's assertion that diasporic trauma often searches for alternative languages of expression finds a compelling illustration in Gifty's scientific inquiry who when first introduced, is a sixth-year PhD student in neuroscience at Stanford channeling her grief into the precise,

detached realm of laboratory research. For her, science becomes not merely a profession but a means of working through inherited wounds.

Having witnessed her mother's relentless prayers and exhortations grounded in the conviction that faith could heal Nana, convictions that ultimately failed, Gifty internalizes the inadequacy of religion to explain or mend her family's suffering. Nana's death from an opioid overdose in their bedroom leaves her haunted by unresolved guilt: "I spent years thinking there was something I could have done to save him" (26). The trauma of this loss reverberates across her later life, shaping both her memories and the very contours of her sense of self. Consequently, in adulthood, her work in neuroscience functions as a substitute for confronting the unresolved trauma of her brother's addiction and death: "I wanted to know why we lived, why we hurt, why we survived. I thought science might tell me" (94). In another instance, she admits: "I started this work because I couldn't stop thinking about my brother, because even after all these years it still felt like there was something I didn't understand" (89). Her experiments on the neural basis of addiction and reward-seeking behavior in mice represent an attempt to recreate and understand the conditions of her brother's decline. This scientific endeavour is not merely an intellectual pursuit but also a profoundly personal one shaped by the pain of watching addiction consume her brother and by her attempts to understand the sorrow that enveloped her family. After his death, her search for understanding permeates every aspect of her life, especially in the lab where her research becomes a conduit for pursuing those answers. She reflects, "I am looking for the why. Always the why" (95). Her scientific pursuit is a kind of ritualistic reckoning, a space where she could revisit and control the pain she has inherited. By repeatedly staging the conditions of trauma in her lab, Gifty performs what Caruth recognizes as the *reenactment* of trauma, that is, its insistent return in new appearances rather than its resolution.

Gifty's relentless experimentation with lab mice parallels her inner turmoil and desire to locate the source of suffering, to isolate it and perhaps to heal it. As she says, "I used to think that I would be a missionary, but now I think that I'm a scientist because I wanted to understand my brother's suffering." (45). However, although she turns to data and experimentation as a means of imposing some order, these tools remain insufficient to contain the traumatic memory of her past: "The brain is a black box, and I am just scratching at its edges" (157).This metaphor encapsulates both the limits of empirical knowledge and the incomprehensibility of inherited trauma. Yet even science cannot assuage the ache that persists within her. As she immerses herself in the precision of neuroscience, the echoes of faith appear to remain. Her past as a devout Christian resurfaces in vivid flashbacks, exposing the ongoing tension between spiritual devotion and scientific rationality. This extends into her research which she likens to ritual

practice: "There is a kind of worship in the way I choose to study this world. In the way I try to understand it" (196). Thus, while her present is defined by rational inquiry and data-driven analysis, the spiritual foundations of her childhood continue to exert a subtle but enduring influence.

Transcendent Kingdom shows that for many in the diaspora, science and faith are not simply abstract ideas but vital lifelines through *Transcendent Kingdom* shows that for many in the diaspora, science and faith are not simply abstract ideas but vital lifelines through which meaning is made from suffering. As Areqi observes, Gyasi's novel weaves together four seemingly disparate concerns, science, religious belief, addiction and depression into an intimate, conflicted narrative of intergenerational trauma and rather than treating these elements as opposites, Gyasi demonstrates how they intersect to shape how Gifty thinks, defines herself and ultimately survives. Her life illustrates how faith and science can function as sources of comfort and healing, offering different but complementary ways of grappling with uncertainty and pain. In foregrounding this interplay, Gyasi suggests the radical possibility of emotional honesty across generations and cultural boundaries, a form of witnessing that makes both healing and recognition possible.

Reclaiming Voice

Narrative or storytelling becomes a tool for confronting inherited wounds. As Guerrero (2021) notes in *Memory and Resistance in Contemporary African American Literature*, memory is not simply a record of past trauma but a dynamic space where marginalized voices can reconstruct identity and agency. It plays a vital role in processing healing, even when it cannot provide neat resolutions. In a similar vein, in *Trauma, Memory and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel*, Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga (2012) observe that storytelling in contemporary South African fiction is often a means of grappling with suffering, at times functioning as testimony, at other times as a way of reclaiming dignity and agency which have been stripped away by trauma. They highlight how South African writers employ fiction to revisit collective pain, confront silenced histories and articulate experiences that defy direct expression contending that in a society still marked by the scars of apartheid, trauma is not solely individual but also inherited, shared and often carried silently across generations. What makes their analysis especially compelling is their recognition of storytelling as both memory work and a space where healing and disruption coexist. The narratives they examine resist closure, reflecting the fact that trauma rarely offers definitive endings. Instead, novels illuminate how memory endures, reshaping the present and forcing characters to live with what remains unresolved and unsaid.

Transcendent Kingdom illustrates how trauma endures within family relationships, often remaining unspoken. Gifty is haunted by her brother Nana's opioid addiction and death, as well as her mother's depression. Like the fragmented narratives discussed by Mengel and Borzaga, her story is recursive, circling memories that never fully settle. In reconstructing Nana's life and her mother's suffering through gaps and silences, she confronts the generational wounds that have been obscured by repression.The novel's nonlinear structure underscores this dynamic, shifting between past and present, personal memory and analytical detachment, scientific discourse and spiritual questioning. This fractured form reflects the discontinuities of inherited trauma and affirms Chakraverty's argument that narrative form itself embodies diasporic trauma. Gifty's reclamation of her story becomes both an act of healing and a refusal of inherited patterns of depression. Her recourse to science, therefore, is less a career choice than a survival strategy for grappling with intergenerational burden.

As Caruth observes, trauma "does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned" (151). Inherited trauma is thus not confined to what happened in the past but includes what remains unprocessed, making narrative both a vehicle for healing and a site of recovery. Caruth further notes that traumatic narratives are marked by gaps, silences, and repetitions, through which the past interrupts the present and resists closure. Gifty exemplifies this condition as she returns obsessively to memories of Nana's sports injury and opioid prescription, her mother's long confinements in bed, and her childhood prayers for her brother's survival. These recollections reappear with undiminished intensity, showing that they remain unassimilated. A repetitive exercise that Caruth argues arises not from the desire to remember but from the psyche's inability to move beyond an unfinished experience. Gifty's compulsive returns to certain memories are therefore attempts to master what resists mastery. Her narration bears the marks of this trauma in omissions, detachment and the constant oscillation between science and religion. Most striking is her profound emotional restraint, her refusal to name pain directly. Instead, she circles traumatic moments rather than confronts them, recounting with striking detachment the night of Nana's overdose:"He was curled in the fetal position on his bed. His mouth was open. His body was limp. I didn't scream. I didn't cry. I stood there for what felt like hours" (145).

This exemplifies the lack of emotions and dissociation typical of trauma. Rather than describing her feelings, Gifty provides a flat, affectless description of the scene. The silence around her emotional state suggests a breach between experience and representation which is a defining feature of unprocessed trauma. As the novel shows, silence does not make the pain go away. It simply isolates each person in their private grief. Gifty's mother suffers alone in bed while Gifty suffers in her lab. When Gifty finally

begins to tell her story we find that she is not just studying addiction also trying to reclaim the language her family lost, daring to name the hurt that was passed down to her without explanation. As Gifty shows us, to heal, the courage to speak, to listen and to name what has been hidden must be tackled, only then can the cycle of inherited pain begin to loosen its hold. By telling her story many years later, she begins to honor the parts of her family's history that were never spoken. She starts to see her mother's silence not only as absence but also as a sign of her struggle to survive. This recognition becomes the beginning of compassion for her mother and herself.

Conclusion

Reading *Transcendent Kingdom* through the lens of intergenerational trauma allows for a deeper understanding of how diasporic fiction registers suffering that is at once intimate and historical. Rather than treating Gifty's narrative as a straightforward account of addiction, grief, and faith, the trauma framework reveals how silence, repetition, and fragmentation embody the unassimilated legacies of migration, racial marginalization, and intergenerational loss. Gyasi's novel demonstrates that trauma is not confined to individual psychology but circulates through family structures, cultural memory, and diasporic identity, leaving traces that are inherited and re-enacted across generations.

This reframing also underscores how diasporic literature performs a dual task: it bears witness to pain that resists closure while simultaneously enacting strategies of survival and reclamation. By situating Gyasi alongside theorists such as Caruth, Chakraverty, Mengel, and Borzaga, this reading shows that narrative form, its silences, ruptures, and recursive returns, becomes itself a mode of articulating trauma. In this way, the novel not only depicts grief but stages its transmission and possible transformation. The theoretical contribution of this approach lies in offering trauma as a critical lens for analyzing contemporary African diaspora fiction. Such a framework brings into focus how these texts grapple with the enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism, migration, and systemic racism, while also illuminating the creative strategies by which diasporic communities confront loss, reclaim agency and preserve continuity. Read in this way, Gyasi's novel demonstrates how diasporic writing resists erasure, sustains cultural memory, and reimagines belonging in contexts marked by rupture. By foregrounding the entanglement of personal pain with collective histories, a trauma-based reading provides a powerful model for understanding how literature not only represents suffering but also transforms it into a resource for identity, continuity, and resilience.

References

Al- Areqi R. M. M. (2024). Faith, science, addiction and depression in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*. *Forum for World Literature Studies*. Retrieved from https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Forum+for+World+Literature+Studies/2024/September/1-p56225

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Chakraverty, A. (2023). Intergenerational trauma studies in diasporic writers: Unveiling the literary narratives of inherited wounds. *International Journal of Humanities, Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*, 3(2), 321–328.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Elliot, R. J. R. (2008). Immigrant wage differentials, ethnicity and occupational segregation. *Labour Economics, 15*(4), 865–891. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2007.07.006

Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. Harvard University Press.

Gonçalves, B. M. (2024). Illness, intimacy and care in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*. *Roczniki Humanistyczne*. https://czasopisma.tnkul.pl

Guerrero, P. B. (2021). *Cartographies of historical trauma: Reinscribing memory to create hospitable spaces in African American literature* (Thesis). Universidad de Salamanca.

Hartman, S. (2007). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family frames: Photography, narrative, and postmemory*. Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, M. (2012). *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press.

Mengel, E., & Borzaga, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Trauma, memory, and narrative in the contemporary South African novel: Essays* (Cross/Cultures: Vol. 153). Rodopi.

Newgas, J. (2020). Life after trauma: Spirit children in fictions of the African diaspora: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Leeds African Studies Bulletin*, (8).

Ngeh, A. T., & Nalova, S. M. (2022). *Migration, Diasporic Realities and the Quest for Home in Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street and Yaa Gyasi's Transcendent Kingdom.* Social Science, Humanities and Sustainability Research, 3(4).

Ojuola, T. D. (2024). Intersections of Black diasporic identities in African and Caribbean literature. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*.

Rothberg, M. (2009). *Multidirectional memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization*. Stanford University Press.

Wangari, J., Victor, O. O., & Selline, O. (2022). Conflicting selves and identity crisis in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* and *Homegoing*. *International Journal Corner*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net

Yerima, D. (2021). *Transcendent Kingdom* [Review of the book *Transcendent Kingdom*, by Y. Gyasi]. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*. https://letterkunde.africa