



## The Woes of Slavery: Enslaved Women's Traumatic Journey in *Homegoing*

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the traumatic journey of enslaved women by analysing the oppression and anguish they are subjected to through the lens of trauma theory in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing (2016). The paper argues that the trauma that enslaved women encountered in Gyasi's Homegoing takes the form of rape, dehumanisation and deprivation, which were practices rooted in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Trauma theory serves as the foundation of this study and the lens through which the arguments presented in this paper are framed. Trauma theory has been applied in various fields, including education, health, sociology, and literature. For example, Bulut (2019) uses Trend's Approach to trauma to investigate mental disorders, where he suggests that stress can trigger psychiatric illness in normal individuals, even though stress is not regarded as a mental health disorder. Thomas & Crosby (2019) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the literature on interventions implemented in schools to identify the prevailing framework for promoting and implementing trauma-informed care in schools. The study also assessed the effectiveness of school-based support for youth affected by trauma and drew implications for modifying current practices (p. 422).

Criticism of trauma in slavery studies from Gerber (2019) argues that traumatic occurrences are widespread globally and hurt health. It has enabled professionals in primary care, including nurses and their extended care teams, to comprehend the possible consequences of trauma on patients. Similarly, Kossew & Brewster (2012) assert that trauma in literary and historical novels has been extensively examined in trauma theories, which highlight the crucial role of the unassimilated nature of trauma. This necessitates a persistent revisiting of the wound that symbolises the harm inflicted on the physical and mental well-being of characters in literary works. Other scholars like Balaev (2008) have affirmed that trauma theory in modern literature suggests that trauma generates an inexpressible struggle that fractures or annihilates one's identity (p.149). The idea of trauma has been used in fictional novels to conceptualise and imbue more significance to distressing situations depicted in the texts. Canellas (2018) argues that the immense psychological impact of slavery on millions of individuals worldwide is immeasurable. However, the emergence of Trauma Theory in literary studies has provided writers with a means of conceptualising a distinct genre known as trauma fiction. Similarly, Balaev (2008) suggests that the word "trauma novel" pertains to fictional works that depict

significant loss or severe dread experienced by individuals or groups. The trauma novel is characterised by the profound change in one's identity triggered by an external, often horrifying event. This transition sheds light on the journey of reconciling with the intricate workings of memory, which shape one's newfound understanding of oneself and the world. He further asserts that the novels illustrate how an experience disturbs an individual's understanding of themselves and their relationships with family and society, as well as the values associated with the traumatic event. This disruption is influenced by cultural factors both inside the world and the novel. By using the psychoanalytic idea of trauma, this research examined the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma experienced by women due to the oppression inflicted upon them by their slave owners.

## **2. THESIS STATEMENT**

This paper examines the traumatic journey of enslaved women in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* by arguing that slave-holders subjected enslaved women to severe hardship, brutalities and exploitation during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. According to Kankam(2020), the Transatlantic Slave Trade was a major cause of trauma for its victims. Slavery inflicted physical and psychological pain on its victims, thereby making slavery the most heinous crime committed against Africans. Trauma in literary texts has become a significant study explored by scholars to analyse 'trauma novels' which portray literary works that depict loss, horrifying events and severe dread experienced by individuals or groups of people. Balaev's (2008) research has shown that trauma is an integral part of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Even though Gyasi's *Homegoing* has received some literary criticism, the concept of enslaved women's traumatic journey has not been fully foregrounded, thereby making this study significant by exploring enslaved women's traumatic journey in the text..

### **2.1. Author and Texts**

Yaa Gyasi, a writer of Ghanaian-American descent, was born in Mampong, Ghana. She is the offspring of Kwaku Gyasi, a professor specialising in the French language at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, and her mother, Sophia, a nurse. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Stanford University and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, a creative writing programme at the University of Iowa. Gyasi has claimed that throughout her childhood, she experienced shyness and developed a strong bond with her brothers due to their shared experiences as young immigrants in Alabama. Additionally, she found solace in novels, considering them her closest companions. Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) drew inspiration from her visit to Ghana in 2009. This journey was her first return to Ghana since she left as a baby for Alabama. Her work *Homegoing* has established her as one of the emerging female African authors who have contributed their perspective to the atrocities of slavery. Gyasi (2016) has garnered distinction as a young female African writer hailing from Ghana. Her text illuminates the participation of Ghanaian chiefs and Europeans in the pre-colonial slave trade in Ghana. *Homegoing* implies that the chiefs of pre-colonial Ghana, driven by their yearning for political and economic authority, betrayed their people.

Yaa Gyasi's novel has received a lot of critical attention from scholars, bringing her novel to the attention of the general public. Gallego (2019) explores the connection between sexuality and healing in the works of Toni Morrison and Gyasi. Upon analysing the literary output of these two female authors from Africa and African American descent, Gallego posits

that their works are rooted in historical context. *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi examine the importance of a reconstructive narrative that challenges the official historical accounts of slavery, in order to provide a new perspective on Black identities. She contends that these two authors have used their artistic expression to establish a new manifestation of identity and empowerment for those of African descent. She contends that Morrison and Gyasi examine the harmful and demeaning categorisation of enslaved women, highlighting the significant contributions of these authors in political and literary spheres by creating artworks that aim to establish a new sense of identity for the violated and objectified Black bodies. Gallego's arguments challenge the current study to probe further into how slave masters undermine enslaved women, thereby treating them as lesser beings, which affected black identity in *Homegoing*.

Motahane et al. (2020) examine the concept of African identities in *Homegoing* by focusing on the metaphor of female descendants and their connection to the Trans-Atlantic routes. The authors investigate the prevalence of the metaphor of female lineage in narratives of female experiences among Africans and African-Americans. This metaphor has the potential to highlight and reshape African diaspora identities, creating new identities for both the current and future African generations. Consequently, *Homegoing* serves as a valuable resource for researchers to question and reshape Black identities that were concealed and disregarded by the White race. Gyasi's undertaking of this endeavour ensures that the historical narrative of the Black race will be reinterpreted for future generations. It will serve to highlight that, despite the oppressive grip of slavery, individuals of African descent remain resilient and capable of rectifying the injustices of the past. Similarly, Chwiggy (2021) argues that *Homegoing* explores the influence of the retention and loss of hereditary stones on the transmission of ancestral memory and cultural history across generations within the family of two sisters, Effia and Esi. Subsequently, the analysis focuses on the contemporary offspring of these individuals, who revisit their forefathers' native land in Ghana. Gyasi's trip, particularly to the historical Cape Coast Castle, significantly influences their recollection of their ancestral history. The study's distinctiveness lies in its lamentation of the historical darkness by simultaneously emphasising the Black woman's unwavering will for freedom as shown in the chosen novels. However, the concept of how slavery traumatised the female descendants through hardship and dehumanisation is missing in (Motahane et al.2020, Chwiggy 2021) studies.

Other Critics who have examined the theme of slavery in Gyasi's novel, such as Sandbrook(2017), have focused on analysing specifically and exploring themes of slavery, endurance, and transcendence. He suggests that the story portrays the initiation of the slave trade and sheds light on the inhumanity and brutality inflicted upon individuals, leading to their dehumanisation. The inherent capacity for the darkness that exists within all of us is a central theme in life. However, it is also important to acknowledge the novel qualities of generosity and hopefulness, which represent our highest virtues. Our goal should be to suppress our darker tendencies and emphasise these positive qualities. In the novel, the story of civilisation is portrayed as a quest that serves as a reminder of this pursuit of fulfilment. Similarly, Addai & Annin(2024) affirmed that slavery in the text depicts how slavery broke African kinship ties and left characters in a misplaced identity. Scholars like Wanga et al (2022) had similar views to Addai and Annin when they argued that the representation of identity in the text transcended the kingdom since the constant evolution of identity and fluidity of cultures impact individual

characters in the novel. Others like Welnhofner (2017) examine *Homegoing* and explore how it portrays the structural oppression present in both American and Ghanaian societies. She argues that the novel effectively illustrates the consequences of colonialist imperialism and slavery, highlighting the interconnectedness of contemporary struggles within the black community. She contends that *Homegoing* suggests that the present-day suffering experienced by the Black race is mostly structural, stemming from their subjugation within a culture and society that disproportionately privileges white individuals over Black individuals. This study considers Gyasi's work to be a continuation of Morrison's *Beloved* because of the fact that almost all African Americans can trace their ancestry back to Africa. The literary works presented in *Homegoing* depict slavery as an age-old institution intricately tied to Ghanaian chiefs, the exploitation of black individuals, the reshaping of black identities, and the prominence of enslaved female descendants in narratives of female experiences spanning from Africans to African Americans. Whilst others like Kavipriya & Sutharshan (2023) have detailed their exposure on the oppression of women, where women are marginalised in society. Scholarship works on Gyasi's *Homegoing* (Sandbrook 2017, Welnhofner 2017, and Kavipriya & Sutharshan 2023) help the current study to unravel the link between slavery and trauma.

### 3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Enslaved Women and Rape

Gyasi's *Homegoing* depicts several manifestations of rape that are rooted in physical trauma. Gyasi's work portrays Esi as one of the female characters who experiences sexual assault. Esi, the offspring of "Maame and Big Man", gets ensnared in the institution of slavery. Upon Esi's arrest and enslavement, she maintained a positive outlook, believing that her parents' profound love for her would prompt them to rescue her. However, Esi's waiting to be rescued from her parents proved futile as the majority of abducted slaves embarked on an irreversible voyage. Esi and other female slaves are confined in the dungeon of Cape Coast Castle, where they endured a succession of sexual assaults perpetrated by the slave guides. Gyasi highlights sexual assault by portraying the atrocities of Esi's rape. Esi's rape exemplifies the physical anguish endured by enslaved women. Esi has a tranquil demeanour; her limited speech allows her to internalise her suffering and indignation. Esi's rape not only silences her but also leaves her feeling disoriented and overwhelmed by the emotional distress caused by the ordeal in the dungeon. Esi's experiences of rape not only affect her physical health but also profoundly damage her sense of self. Consequently, in Gyasi's narrative, rape functions as a psychological injury that deeply wounds an individual's identity. Esi's sense of self-worth, which is closely tied to her resilient nature in the face of hardship, is shattered as a result of sexual assault. Gyasi reveals the dehumanising treatment of Esi by the slave owners, who intend to 'commodify' her sexual organs for their pleasure and gratification. The slave owners in *Homegoing* see the black bodies as a means to be used for their gratification and controlled for dominance.

The concept of rape in slavery has been supported by Aidoo (2018), where she argues that rape plays a crucial role in maintaining slavery, serving as a brutal tool of power and domination used to humiliate and torment enslaved women. Slaveholders asserted their dominance by perpetually subjecting slave women to sexual abuse, thereby asserting control over their bodies. For instance, Esi in Gyasi's *Homegoing* becomes an object of pity as she goes

through several sexual violations in the dungeons with marks on her body to showcase the physical and psychological trauma of rape. The following extract depicts Esi's rape.

*He ensnared her in a folder trap, parted her legs, and penetrated her. She emitted a loud cry, but he swiftly covered her mouth with his hand. Subsequently, he inserted his fingers inside her oral cavity. Inflicting harm upon them seemed to provide him with satisfaction, prompting her to cease her actions. She shut her eyes, compelling herself to rely on her hearing rather than her sight, feigning that she was still the little girl in her mother's humble dwelling on a night when her father had entered, imagining that she was still gazing at the earthen walls, desiring to grant them seclusion, to distance herself and seeking comprehension of the factors that prevent pleasure from transitioning into pain. Upon completion, he displayed a scared and disgusted expression towards her. He displayed a sense of loss as if he were the aggrieved party. "As if he were the one who had been subjected to a violation" (149).*

From the above, words like 'ensnared her', 'penetrated her', 'his fingers inside her oral cavity', and 'she shut her eyes' from the excerpt reveal physical trauma. Enslaved black women are shamed during rape as though they are animals and not humans. Slave masters regarded enslaved black women in the texts as mere objects of satisfaction. After satisfying their lust, they turn to inflict more physical pain on the victim as though the victim is at fault. Esi, as the victim of the above rape, is perceived by her victimiser as horrible and disgusting, as though she is the violent one. It must be noted that after enslaved black women are raped, their victimisers blame them and feel disgusted for mingling their bodies with black bodies since they feel that the black body is dirty and cursed. Esi experiences verbal abuse from her rapist through the language used. Similarly, Bourke (2012) views rape as a violation of a woman's sexual identity, causing a psychological injury that impacts women. This may result in a breach of one's selfhood, since an individual's identity is more prone to being delineated by their sexuality. Consequently, the survivors of rape consistently exhibit diminished self-worth. This is evident in the cases of Mamme and Esi, who, when seen through a psychoanalytical lens, experienced profound psychological and physical distress as a result of their encounters with rape. Gyasi and other authors who emphasise the theme of rape in their works primarily focus on the dehumanising effects of sexual abuse on women, resulting in their enduring suffering.

### **3.2. Dehumanisation of Enslaved Women**

Apart from rape, the dehumanisation of enslaved women is another canker in the novel. In Gyasi's *Homegoing*, she exposes how Esi is an embodiment of physical trauma who goes through several dehumanisations. She is forcefully abducted from her exquisite residence and confined to a dungeon, where she endures daily lashings and torment. Esi and the other enslaved individuals are confined inside a dimly lit dungeon, where the dungeon guards administer punishment to these individuals. Esi and the other women endure brutal physical abuse, resulting in lifelong scars on their bodies. The slave guards are assigned the task of inflicting daily beatings and torture on the slaves to instil terror in them. The slaves are subjected to regular beatings by slave guards as a means of disciplining them and asserting dominance. This practice leaves the slaves unable to resist or defy the commands of their lords. Similarly, Gyasi's *Homegoing* refers to the Transatlantic Slave Trade as hell. Both slavery and



hell exemplify places of suffering and torture. Gyasi's usage of the term hell to describe the slaves' living conditions evokes a vivid depiction of anguish and torment among the people in the text. Gyasi's protagonists, like Esi and Ness, endure anguish and suffering inflicted by white slave owners. Gyasi's use of the term hell to depict the living circumstances of slaves serves as a symbolic representation of the malevolent impact of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on the experiences of female characters in *Homegoing*. The term hell is used as a metaphor to draw a comparison between the actions involved in the slave trade and the intense torment experienced in the concept of hell.

Again, Gyasi has shown in her literary work that the anguish caused by slavery is perpetual, which explains why Ness, the daughter of an enslaved woman, continues to be plagued and tortured by her past. According to Welnhofner (2017), Gyasi portrays the slavery business and its participants in a negative light by likening it to Hell. Ness, who was born into slavery, serves as the main character through whom Gyasi depicts the experiences of a slave. Gyasi depicts Ness's contemplation on the inherent wickedness and dehumanising nature of slavery in the following passages: 'The plantation was Hell, 'the sun-scorched cotton so hot it almost burned the palms of your hands to touch it. Holding those small white puffs almost felt like holding fire, but God forbid you let one drop. The devil was watching' (8). Thus, Gyasi's vivid description of what she refers to as hell for the enslaved resonates with the images that the Bible paints about hell, a place of unending suffering, pain and torment. To show that slaves are tasked under the hot sun to work in the field without rest, and as they work, 'the devil is watching', the devil here refers to the slave masters to show that slaves have to work in fear and intimidation because the devil is ready to punish any slave who disobeys. Some slaves are whipped to death on plantations just to put fear in the other slaves. Gyasi's *Homegoing* is equivalent to the hell the Bible describes since slavery subjects its victims to torture and unending torments. Slavery also leads to trauma; therefore, the two, hell and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, are inseparable since they both invoke physical trauma.

### 3.3. Deprivation of Enslaved Women

Another canker in the novel is deprivation; Afua in Gyasi's *Homegoing* goes through a series of deprivations in the slave trade. Afua is a nursing mother who is captured by slaveholders. She is thrown into the Cape Coast Castle. Afua and her baby are locked in the dungeon and deprived of food for several days. Both Afua and her baby are left to starve. Afua is unable to bear the anguished cry of her baby, as she joins her baby to cry, as reflected in the following lines. "A woman was crying so hard that it seemed her bones would break from her convulsions. This was their desired outcome. The infant had soiled itself, and Afua, its maternal figure, lacked lactation. She was unclothed, save for the little piece of material provided by the dealers to clean her nipples as they discharged fluid" (17). The statement depicts that the mother didn't have any food; it also indicates that the baby didn't have any nourishment from her mother's breast since her mother has been deprived of food for many weeks, resulting in her inability to make breast milk. This is because lactating women need enough nutrition in order to produce breast milk. The infant's impending screams due to hunger are heard all over, muffled by the mud walls, blending with the multitude of women's wails that envelop it.. The lack of essential resources results in the distressed vocalisation of both the maternal figure and the infant. Afua, the mother, is also distressed by the idea that her baby is on the brink of death, and she is unable to rescue her child. The slaveholders deliberately provided limited food rations to enslaved women to weaken them, to facilitate their control and exploitation. Enslaved

women, while weakened, possess little or no physical power to resist or combat slaveholders. Consequently, this enables slave owners to assert dominance over the slaves, resulting in psychological distress for female slaves.

Again, the dungeons serve as another form of deprivation. The dungeons that the slaves live in are not habitable for humans. Gyasi depicts life in the dungeon as a source of deprivation of the well-being of all slaves, since the conditions in the dungeon are unbearable for humans to live in. "The mud walls of the dungeon made all time equal. There was no sunlight. Darkness was day and night and everything between. Sometimes there were so many bodies stacked into the women's dungeon that they all had to lie, stomach down, so that women could be stacked on top of them" (30). Gyasi's novel exposes the living conditions of slaves in the dungeon as depressing for slaves, as Gyasi describes the dungeon as dark without sunlight, and slaves have to urinate and defecate in the dungeon. "Now the waste on the dungeon floor was up to Esi's ankles. Esi could hardly breathe, but she moved her shoulders this way and that until she had created some space. The woman beside her had not stopped leaking waste since the last time the soldiers fed her" (48). Life in the dungeon for slaves is disgusting and unbearable. The slaves have to endure these unhygienic conditions in addition to constant beatings, torture, and sexual violence in the dungeons. The inhuman nature of the slave masters to the slaves showcases the Transatlantic Slave Trade as one of the most destructive institutions that ever existed in the world. This inhuman treatment of slaves caused the death of many slaves in the dungeon, since many could not endure the hardships in the dungeon from Gyasi's text.

Another exemplified character that is exposed to dehumanisation is Tansi. Tansi in *Homegoing* is deprived of staying with her family after she was caught in adultery. Tansi's predicament reiterates the adulterous woman's story in the Bible which was caught in the very act of adultery, but her accusers summoned her to be punished, and the man was left to go free. It is clear that Tansi's story illustrates how women are more deprived in slavery than their male counterparts since society let go of the man and decided to punish the woman. Tansi's narrative exemplifies the persistence of gender prejudices within the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Tansi is exiled from the community and compelled into servitude due to her act of adultery, resulting in her separation from her family and loved ones. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the family plays a crucial role in an individual's development. Displacing an individual from her cherished ones and relocating her among those who despise and deny her basic needs and treating her badly hurt the person. The profound anguish experienced by the majority of enslaved individuals stems from their forcible separation from their beloved kin, knowing they would never have the opportunity to be reunited with their relatives. Mandelbaum et al (2016) argue that family psychoanalysis provides insight into the psychological dynamics among relatives experiencing trauma, enabling a better understanding of violence. Thus, making the intension of Tansi's family very difficult to understand since they could not liberate their daughter from being punished by the entire village, and she has to be sold into slavery and the man who impregnated her goes scot-free.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The paper assessed the physical trauma that enslaved women were subjected to through the lens of the psychoanalytic theory of trauma. The study contextualised trauma in this paper to mean anything that brought pain to enslaved women's bodies. The paper argued that slave masters used rape and sexual violence to demean enslaved women and subjected them to

silence and domination. The analysis demonstrated how the dungeon, where slaves were confined before their transportation, stripped them of their liberty and fundamental necessities. Enslaved women suffered from deprivation of food and lack of hygienic conditions, leading to the death of many. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that the existence of slaves on the farms was marked by profound sadness. Slaves endured immense suffering, and slave owners showed a complete lack of concern for their well-being, since they saw them only as property. Slaves were subjected to all kinds of inhuman treatment.

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