

Representing Trauma and the Legacy of Slavery in Contemporary African American Fiction: From Silence to Healing in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016)

Amira Khouloud Abed

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes Yaa Gyasi's debut novel, *Homegoing* (2016), and explores each character's traumatic experiences as a legacy of slavery and the slave trade. The paper delves into the way trauma becomes an ancestral legacy and a burden of the past - an intergenerational trauma - that is transmitted to the descendants over two centuries and studies its impact on different generations of African Americans in the novel. By relying on the insights of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch, the narrativization of trauma through writing fiction is considered therapeutic, and it provides a space for reconciliation; the paper explores the healing journey of the characters in the novel.

**Keywords:** *Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi, trauma, memory, healing, slavery, the slave trade

**Bio:** Amira Khouloud Abed is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Szeged, Hungary. Her current research focuses on trauma studies by researching the legacy of slavery and the slave trade, the power of African American female fiction in verbalizing the silence around this taboo, and the way fiction serves in the process of healing wounds of the past. Her areas of interest include slave and neo-slave narratives, contemporary African American fiction, and Trauma Studies.

E-mail: [khoul934@gmail.com](mailto:khoul934@gmail.com)

## Representing Trauma and the Legacy of Slavery in Contemporary African American Fiction: From Silence to Healing in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016)

*Amira Khoulood Abed*

### Introduction

African American female writers address and narrate in their fictions the traumatic experiences entrenched in the Black community. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) were among the most influential literary productions that deepened and expanded the discourse of slavery and centered Black women's experiences and their personal realities. Following the literary footsteps of Morrison and Walker, is the work of Yaa Gyasi, the Ghanaian American novelist, *Homegoing* (2016) is a contemporary narrative to explore this topic. The plot of the novel covers a family saga and falls into the genre of historical fiction that relates to the story of two half-sisters "Effia" and "Esi" who experienced distinct fates of slavery, suffering and healing as Esi is brought into slavery while Effia gets married to a wealthy British slave trader. The narrative organization of the novel offers multiple perspectives on the hidden aspects of slavery. The novel consists of two parts and fourteen chapters, seven chapters each. Each chapter of the novel narrates the account of a different character; Effia, Esi, Quey, Ness, James, Kojo, Abena, H, Akua, Willie, Yaw, Sonny, Marjorie and Marcus consequently. Yaa Gyasi skillfully conveys the harrowing ordeal of slavery and the slave trade by extending its enduring impact beyond the historical period in which trauma happens. The traumatic experience of slavery is represented again and again in the narratives of each character's journey. This novel tells the story of these fourteen characters tracing their life journey through enslavement, colonization, their confrontation of trauma and finally their path towards healing as well. Yaa Gyasi delves into the accounts of seven generations in order to explain how things happened, how they reacted, cope and moved on in their lives. Throughout the whole story, she portrayed the way things started first at the beginning with the Matriarch Maame, a slave girl who escaped slavery and ran away from the slavery plantation through lighting a fire on the day she gave birth to Effia. After this incident, life changed for the upcoming generations and the whole ancestry. Effia, Maame's daughter from Cobbe Otcher lived a hard childhood and she was given into marriage and lived in her castle away from her family. In contrast, Esi who is Maame's daughter from Big Man lived an easy childhood, but she eventually brought into slavery during a raid when she got tortured, raped and lost a piece of her mother (a black stone pendant). The descendants of both girls grew up with remnants of the past. Effia's descendants had multiple issues in identifying themselves either Americans or Africans or either Blacks or Whites. They were torn up between the acceptance and the denial of their fates, as Quey, Effia's son who felt a sense of fragmentation due to his skin color. Ness, Esi's daughter lived unbearable experiences of enslavement, beating and torture in the Hell plantation under her master the Devil and consequently her son Kojo kept painful memories of slavery even though he escaped it once he was a baby. On the other side of the family lineage, Akua Collins who is Abena's daughter and Effia's great granddaughter inherited the curse of the fire, and she kept hallucinating and dreaming of it and due to this she killed her two daughters Abee and Ama and left a scar on her son's face Yaw. In this context, Yaw's son Sonny grew up seeing multiple ways of the segregation towards the Black population although slavery was abolished but segregation still existing. The memories of the captivity, pain of slavery, trade and escape reached the members of the last generations as well. Despite the fact that they encountered neither slavery in itself nor the slave trade but they tend to have lasting memories and entrenched fears that they inherited from their

ancestors. The perfect portrayal for this is the way Marcus who derives from Esi's line and Marjorie who derives from Effia's line have fears of water and fire although Marcus was not deported during the transatlantic slave trade through the Atlantic Ocean and Marjorie did not escape slavery through the fires lit by the Matriarch Maame but still they bear everything from their ancestor's past. These incidents that the different characters have passed through over time, and encounter either directly or indirectly as an intergenerational experience are at the kernel of this investigation as the latter studies the way people confront, deal with and understand the traumatic aftermath of past occurrences including slavery and the slave trade. It also sheds the light upon the way this trauma turned to be inherited within the whole family lineage, and it portrays the path of the characters towards healing and finding solace amidst struggles.

Previous research about this novel is mainly concerned with the feminist approach through which they analyze the treatment and the attitude of female characters. The work of Himas Nadira Septiana (2022) entitled "Women's Struggles Against Oppression in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*" tackles the oppression experienced by women, highlighting its types focusing on three female characters, Effia, Esi and Willie. Some researchers discuss the way Yaa Gyasi sheds light on what has been silenced or omitted from African history as in "The Reconstruction of History from Margin to Center in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Eliana Alves Cruz's *Agua De Barrela*" by Ane Caroline Ribeiro Costa (2023), while some focus their attention on the meanings of blackness in the US and the distinct perspectives regarding racial inequality in relation to the experiences of migration from Nigeria and Ghana to the US as the work of Clara Befaluy Avenoz (2020) "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*: American Blackness and White Privileges Through the Lens of African Diasporic Experience". Drawing upon the results of the former studies, this study, however, is an attempt to explore the traumatic experiences that each character in *Homegoing* endured in the period of being enslaved, captured and sold as a commodity starting with the mother Maame and her two daughters Effia and Esi. It also demonstrates how the heartbreaking phases of their lives between suffering and escape became ancestral and were transmitted to all the descendants.

The traumatic legacy of slavery that impact different generations of African American males and females is present in Yaa Gyasi's novel. Furthermore, *Homegoing* reveals the power of healing and recovery as the characters navigate a fictional and spiritual path towards overcoming their traumatic experiences. The key question of this investigation is how and to what extent trauma can be dealt with in a fictional site: how personal harmony and societal restoration may be regenerated through narration. It studies to what extent trauma can be narrativized, especially experiences related to slavery and the slave trade. Second, it surveys how *Homegoing* depicts trauma as an intergenerational experience inherited and transmitted through its haunting appearances. Third, it explores how the process of healing is symbolized within the narrative of *Homegoing*.

Throughout this research, a variety of disciplines, terms and areas of research are raised including intergenerational memory, trauma studies and the healing process as the main points of this inquiry. Though these three main aspects are clearly tied together, there exists a need to clarify the kind of relationship among them. In essence, intergenerational memory is the portrayal of how experiences and feelings, especially traumatic ones, are passed over generations from ancestors to descendants. This type of memory is an inheritance of the unbearable pain encountered by the past generations or ancestors who physically and emotionally lived in a certain traumatic phase of their lives. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, these intergenerational memories are a direct result of trauma; thus, trauma studies are the media through which we understand and receive a clear explanation of how these traumatic incidents occurred at the level of the human psyche and soul, how people confront and deal with them, and what impact is left on their identity. More importantly, trauma studies depict the way these people navigate their way towards reconciliation and healing. This journey of healing is a whole process in which trauma victims confront sorrow and pain, understand it,

and even more accept it. Basically, these people who passed through trauma are involved in a journey of self-reclaiming, understanding of their wounds, escaping silence or denial and turn it into power to move forward.

## I. Representing Trauma in Contemporary African American Fiction

According to Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) the meaning of the word “trauma” or “wound,” signifies an injury on a body. In its later usage, in both medical and psychiatric contexts, and according to Sigmund Freud, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted upon the mind and not upon the body. It is not a wound of the body, a simple and curable event, but it is an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and does not find its way to consciousness until it imposes itself again on the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. Trauma always seems to be the story of a wound that cries out, that speaks more of a reality that is not accessible elsewhere (13).

Cathy Caruth (1996) problematized Freud’s theory of belated appearance from the perspective of language, claiming that the traumatic event is more complicated and thorough to be defined in simple terms. She argued that trauma has a drastic impact on the traumatized victim who most of the time does not understand the whole incident. Moreover, she points out that this case is due to the lack of awareness or recognition of the occurrence itself at this level which can act as a direct threat to the victim since the traumatic past may haunt the present at any moment in an unexpected way bringing within the process an ulterior reality. Thus, trauma can be defined as an overpowering experience of sudden or catastrophic events when the response manifests itself as the involuntarily delayed and recurrent appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive encounters (Caruth 1996, 20).

In an interview that has been done by Cathy Caruth with Geoffrey Hartman, he was talking about trauma in literature stating that “In the non-pathological course of events, the ‘unclaimed experience,’ as you call it, can only be reclaimed by literary knowledge” (Caruth and Hartman 1996, 641). Similarly, according to Geoffrey Hartman (1995) trauma theory “emerges focusing on the relationship of words and trauma and helping us to “read the wound” with the aid of literature” (537). So basically, literary works and any production with the use of language tend to give some access to the buried traumatic elements in the human psyche.

Moreover, the trauma novel goes further than just portraying the repetitive traumatic incidents buried in the unconscious of the individual. Conversely, it deals also with the different apparent sides of the experiences of trauma and their survivors. It explores the reasons behind as well as the effects of trauma on the personal and collective level. These experiences of trauma victims are given voice through the comprehensible narratives afforded by trauma novels (Yang 2023, 7). Therefore, literary trauma studies examine the connection between words and the wounds. Its primary focus is on words that cause wounds and may be healed using language itself. Literary expression is the key for the silence to be heard and the wound to be perceptible (Hartman 2003, 259). Besides, Anne Whitehead (2004) pointed out that:

One of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot. Repetition mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression (86).

The depiction of these occurrences was also among the concerns of African and African American female writers as they took the responsibility of bringing into focus the wounds and traumas of slavery and the slave trade. The African literary works of fiction unveiled a large portion of the African identity, history and cultural legacy. They address a variety of lived issues during the period of slavery, slave trade and the post-colonial era. These texts tend to study the lasting impact of colonialism and the complexities felt afterwards that lived era as well. The twenty-

first century brought into light several preeminent narratives that confront the stigma of slavery and trade since they both were viewed as a mark of deep shame even if they were addressed in literature. This means that even though writing about slavery and the slave trade existed from the 18<sup>th</sup> century till now, but the scope and the perspective have changed as the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century literature focuses more on aspects of race, identity, trauma and healing. Among which, Yaa Gyasi an African Ghanaian novelist via her notable work *Homegoing* (2016) portrayed the atrocities of slavery and slave trade, extending its enduring impact beyond the historical period in addition to the depiction of trauma that struck the African population.

## II. Trauma Narration in *Homegoing*

Narratives existed even in our past; they are rooted in the earliest human civilizations and histories. The tradition of storytelling is adopted by people as a way to communicate their experiences and to make sense of the community and the world as a whole. In contrast, the narrative of trauma is claimed to be a fragmented one. Since trauma is against the chronological orders of the text, it usually comes in the form of fragmented flashbacks and memories. This narrative fragmentation is similar to the branches of a tree. It is quite impossible to expect how the flow of scenes will link together and create a whole plot. In fact, this method of fragmented storytelling highly depicts the unspeakability of trauma and its path to healing (Yang 2023, 4).

In *Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi alternately portrays the chronicles of the descendants of Effia and Esi for seven generations on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. She moves back and forth from one family lineage or generation to another. The chapters of the novel act as a standalone narrative that might be understood and analyzed in isolation from the rest of the work. Some of the stories are set within the same period and the same geographical frontiers. But some tend to fluctuate between the past and the present, as well as between Africa (Ghana) and America. The nonlinear narrative structure and the dual storytelling technique used by the narrator give a sense of fragmentation, disruption and disorder. From the beginning, the fragmentation of the narrative in *Homegoing* is easily identifiable which mirrors the fragmented identity that results out of slavery.

The separation between the two sisters “Effia & Esi” has brought a sense of dissolution and fragmentation into the family lineage. As Yaa Gyasi (2016) points out through the speech of Baaba “You are not your mother’s first daughter. There was before you. And in my village we have saying about separated sisters. They are like a woman and her reflection, doomed to stay on opposite sides of the pond” (40). The separation between the girls affected their lives from their childhood. Each of the girls is committed to a totally distinct path. Esi lived an easy childhood but in contrast, the life for Effia at an early age was not that easy. She was born out of fire and brought into a shattered family where she endures multiple forms of pain, harassment and difficulties. The physical imperfection of her body is tangible through her scars.

Baaba beat Effia. Cobbe beat Baaba. By the time Effia had reached age ten, she could recite a history of the scars on her body [...] For each scar on Effia’s body, there was a companion scar on Baaba’s, but that didn’t stop mother from beating daughter, father from beating mother. (Gyasi 2016, 10)

Yaa Gyasi (2016) repeatedly uses the word “beating” in such a context on purpose to show the apparent wounded psyche of the first descendant of the family. As previously mentioned in the first section, Anne Whitehead (2004) stated that – similarly to the Freudian compulsion to repeat - is among the key literary devices in trauma fiction that occurs at the levels of language, imagery or plot. It stimulates the aftermath of overwhelming experiences and the narrative’s disarray in terms of chronology or progression (86). I believe that this act of repetition constitutes the trauma narrative of the literary novel as the various modes of repetitions of being beaten in *Homegoing* and having memories and nightmares about the fire build the trauma narrative of slavery.

Silence dominates the life of the whole ancestry. It is at the heart of their attitude and of the way they see and deal with things. They are deprived of expressing opinions or delivering what they think of. To illustrate, Effia's father, "when he came back into Baaba's hut to find Effia, the child of the night's fire, shrieking into the air, he looked at his wife and said, 'We will never again speak of what happened today'" (Gyasi 2016, 9). The brutality experienced after enduring the darkness of the woods, the burning of the fire and the hardships of escape turned them speechless. They have no intention of delving again into the memories of that day or overtly speaking of it. This repression and silence are not restricted only to the feeling of terror. Yet, it develops to be a way of life or much more a way of oppression as Effia Otcher is asked a hundred times to keep her mouth closed as a condition to be loved.

In *The Shell and the Kernel*, both Abraham and Torok argue that individuals who were tormented by unspeakable conundrums tend to present in their speech a sense of avoidance. They completely evade any linguistic element that can uncover their hidden gaps (Abraham and Torok, quoted in Rand 1990, 58). Although Baaba is not a direct victim of the overwhelming incident experienced by Maame, Cobbee and Effia, her psyche is inflicted subconsciously by that pain. For this reason, she always opts to remain silent, with no questions to ask or views to deliver. Moreover, her love for silence turned out to be oppressive and painful. She "... reached into Effia's mouth and pulled out her tongue, pinching the tip with her sharp fingernails. 'Who are you that you think you can question me, eh? If you do not do as I say, I will make sure you never speak again'" (Gyasi 2016, 15). This silence is a clear sign of the intergenerational trauma that existed with the different characters regardless of their direct or indirect confrontation of the traumatic incidents. The intergenerational sense of trauma is tied to Marianne Hirsch's term of "postmemory". According to Hirsch (1997) postmemory portrays the experience and the stories of those who did not directly encounter the traumatic material, but they inherited it from their ancestors (22). In the context of novel, there is Akua Collins, Abena's daughter and Effia's great-granddaughter whom the idea of postmemory is depicted through their life experiences. Akua inherited the curse of the fire from her mother and grandmother without witnessing neither the fiery escape of the Matriarch Maame nor the fire that burned her mother's body. She always had reoccurring memories, nightmares and hallucinations of the fire. In Yaa Gyasi's words "Akua couldn't remember the first time she'd seen fire, but she could remember the first time she'd dreamed of it" (2016, 162). Additionally, silence may represent a token or a fragment of endurance with earlier objects (Arlow 1961, 51-52). In this respect, silence itself can act as a manifestation of a sweeping incident that cannot be expressed through words; silence speaks. It tends to replace linguistic verbalization as a response to pain. Furthermore, silence may serve as a shattered fragment of a whole profound occurrence, object and even feeling. In Yaa Gyasi's case, she intentionally uses the narrative to reveal the connection between the act of silence and all the psychological collective traumas experienced by each member of the lineage. To expand a little bit on the idea of collective trauma, there is a need to refer to some of the specificities that stand under this term. The African American people tend to suffer from "collective trauma" as they experienced the brutalities of slavery and the slave trade as a whole collectivity or group. Unlike the individual sense of trauma, this shared experience leads to the creation of a collective memory in which this group of people remember these occurrences in a closely similar way. In addition, this collective life experience has an impact on these people's identity as a whole, their norms and also their perception towards certain social and cultural aspects.

Thus, silence is a gap in speech which results in creating a gap even in the memory. Therefore, there is something missing or something that remains unspoken and repressed. Effia's confrontation with silence exceeds her blood links. It extends to her husband James Collins. Her speech with her partner is always swamped with secrets and gaps. Most of the time, James tends to keep things hidden from Effia, a prominent example of that is his involvement in the slave trade business; "After that first day in the Castle, James never spoke to Effia about the slaves they kept in the dungeon" (Gyasi 2016, 28). Since Effia is a black African woman who married a white British man, this topic is unspeakable for James and the other girls in the castle.

It is taboo to discuss the enslavement of the Black population and the way they exchanged with goods. In Yaa Gyasi's words, "They all looked away. No one ever mentioned the dungeons" (27).

The victimization of the survivors is a preeminent part of their existence. It may affect the way they view themselves, their place and the world. They are silent about it most of the time, this silence is not just external but internal as well. Thus, the victim consciously and unconsciously tends to suppress undesirable feelings about his/her own experience and deals with it as an outside or unfamiliar element within his/her body. This act of self-ignorance creates a sense of fragmentation in attitude and memory (Culbertson 1995, 169). The fragmentation of the soul is clear through the speech of different characters of the account via the use of disjointed syntax. To elucidate, on the day of an enemy attack against the Asante, Maame the matriarch was terrified to enter the woods once again "Maame babbled nonsense words, words she had never spoken before. Sister, Baaba, fire. Sister, Baaba, fire" (Gyasi 2016, 43). What the mother experienced is a reopened wound on her spirit and her fullness, there are always missing parts from her "Maame was not a whole woman. There were large swaths of her spirit missing" (43).

Additionally, this sense of fragmentation manifests in both the speech and the soul. W. E. B. du Bois (1903) referred to the latter as "Double Consciousness", a state where a person cannot declare himself neither African nor American. Moreover, the 'negro' is the seventh son who was born with a veil that prevents him from generating an accurate self-consciousness. It only permits a perception of the self in relation to the other world. Du Bois (1903) addresses the idea as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (5)

In reference to the novel, this double consciousness is evident with Quey, Effia's son and Maame's grandson. He has a feeling of fragmentation regarding his skin color, since he is one of the half-cast children of the Cape Coast Castle. He always receives questions regarding his identity as follows: "'Are you white?' 'I'm not white' 'What are you?' 'I'm like you' 'Not like me'" (Gyasi 2016, 54–55).

The memories of an overwhelming experience are repressed by the victims. They tend to come in a belated appearance and haunt the survivors who are not able to articulate what they went through. The mind processes the previous painful encounters through persistent tracking flashbacks, ghosts and nightmares. Furthermore, traumatic memories recur unexpectedly in the form of distortions and displacement. The latter may even intensify the distressing feeling. Subsequently, the individual turns into the attitude of avoidance with a total rejection to confront these acts of memory (Molino 2014, 325).

The experience of fire has a large haunting and reoccurring effect on Maame's descendants. This can be traced easily throughout the novel. For example, Effia's father "... knew then that the memory of the fire that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued" (Gyasi 2016, 9). There are haunting legacies and latent memories that threaten the family lineage of Cobbe Otcher. The fire raged by the mother Maame would always be there through unexpected acts of memory and flashbacks. The quote mentioned before clearly highlights the continuity of pain and the succession of the previous experiences of traumas that would never die unless they come again in the form of ghostly visitations. Moreover, Yaa Gyasi (2016) has referred to the possibility of the pain

---

<sup>1</sup> "N-word" is used originated by Du Bois as he uses the word in his work *The Souls of Black Folk*, to explain the term "double consciousness" and the sense of two-ness and confusion felt by the person, more precisely, an African American individual in the process of self-identification.

inheritance as follows “And Esi knew, too, that her mother would die rather than run into the woods ever again, die before capture, die even if it meant that in her dying, Esi would inherit that unspeakable sense of loss, learn what it meant to be un-whole” (42).

Another case for the recurrence of trauma is that of Akua Collins, Abena’s daughter and Effia’s great granddaughter. She inherited the curse of the fire which camouflaged the escape of the matriarch Maame and the fire that burned her mother’s body and burned the white men in Edweso. There are evil spirits in the family lineage that made her restless. She is always dreaming of the Fire flames and sees hallucinations even when she is awake. In Yaa Gyasi’s words:

In her dreams the fire was shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart. The firewoman would carry these two little girls with her all the way to the woods of the Inland and then the babies would vanish, and the firewoman’s sadness would send orange and red and hints of blue swarming every tree and every bush in sight. (162)

Akua’s dreams are never empty from the fire flames. Every single night she wakes up screaming out of fear. She even fights sleep, which is something that cannot be defeated by a human. The fire ghosts get stronger as if they feed on her terror. This kind of suffering is unspeakable and even incomprehensible since the firewoman does not explain why she comes for Akua. There exists a large amount of ambiguity and prevailing creepy silence in addition to a sense of fluctuation between the desire to know and the rejection to ask.

### III. The Way Home Towards Healing and Recovery

Across a prolonged period, the pertinence of the process of writing about trauma and healing was at the kernel of many works. The therapeutic function of writing cannot be denied since it is capable of transforming the psychological burden of the past into a way of processing the memories of trauma. Writing arranges for the confrontation of the victim with that buried repressed material. Moreover, as claimed by Judith Harris (2003), words are able to reduce the feelings of sorrow and terror people keep inside and also take off the weight of oppression and weakness (2). She believes that including personal experiences of hardships and disorder within the process of writing is a prerequisite for healing and reconciliation (16).

Writing provides a therapeutic space for the individual (Ryden 2005, 56). This space acts as a room where the individual discusses and articulates the traumatic encounter and turns it from being repressed in the unconscious to being freely expressed in the consciousness. Once the traumatized victim of those materials admits the existence of his painful and shameful experiences, he paves the way for the healing process. In other words, this process needs at first a sense of acceptance and personal confrontation which breaks the barriers of shame. Eventually, people start to feel at ease when they address that burden, and additionally, they accept being a part of it not just ignore its existence. For Wendy Ryden (2005), healing is the act of connecting and locating the individual experience within the context of a broader narrative, and apparently this is what writing is capable of (58).

The different characters in *Homegoing* went through a journey of pain, enslavement and loss of identity but they were able to reclaim their seized freedom and heritage, not only at the personal level but the collective as well. Each character has endured things differently and the same goes for their process of recovery. They walk on distinct paths of self-reconciliation. The latter requires them to break the barrier of silence and speak out or share their sorrow. Yaa Gyasi shows how the characters start to heal through the act of narration since “Language is the medium that mirrors the struggle” (Harris 2003, 31). She heavily delves into the depths of their anguish and carefully portrays it throughout the novel.

The existence of a conflict between both speaking and silence affects the different branches of the survivor’s life. Moreover, the language used to share this silence may serve as a source for healing and recovery because the human voice along with the testimony of the

previous traumas can lift the load of silence from human pain and despair (Blumenfeld 2001, 74). People start giving voice to their silenced trauma and releasing their repressed suffering without being afraid of the appearance of those incidents one more time. To dig through repression means knowing more about oneself and unveiling the truth that is necessary to find solace.

Interestingly, many survivors opt for oral and written discourses of telling. They attempt to describe their suffering to heal the emotional wounds they have deep in their psyche. After the prevailing tendency of survivors to narrate their trauma as a way for recovery, the term ‘discourses of healing’ emerged. It acts as an umbrella that gathers the different texts or speeches delivered by the survivors. These discourses permit them to make their way into consolation since “telling is healing” (Thompson 2004, 653-654). In relation to *Homegoing*, Marjorie sees writing as her way to free herself from her ancestors’ painful haunting memories and ghosts. She “was working on her poem for The Waters We Wade In” (Gyasi 2016, 251). Poetry helps her to overcome the pervading silence that surrounded her memories and life for so long. Through the poem, she expresses the sorrow and oppression her mother, father and Old Lady felt once they were captivated, shipped and brought into a black fate within the dungeons of the Cape Coast Castle. Moreover, the poem shows the way Marjorie accesses the endurance of brutality that her family lineage went through. The sound of silence is broken by her voice and words that fly to fill the gaps found within the souls of every black or half-raced descendant to tell more about the physical and psychological torture they faced. Even though she has no direct contact or confrontation with the previous incidents, the sense of pain is still engraved on her soul and memories. Writing in this case is a cure for the shattered and the fragmented pieces of herself. It connects all of them in a way that brings more understanding and knowledge for her generation and the upcoming ones. Besides writing and narration, reading is also depicted as a form of expression and proclamation to feel relief. It lies in the context of the pain that people bear inside. In other words, once people read about their trauma and its reasons or anything related to it, this helps in reducing the amount of unease they feel. Sonny spends most of his time reading *The Souls of Black Folk*, a book that brings him a great sense of awareness and knowledge since it tackles the different experiences of the African Americans as segregation, color line, the veil and the talented tenth. This intertextual reference raises Sonny’s intention for reconciliation with his past and reality.

The characters’ journey home can be traced differently throughout the novel since each one has his/her own way of doing so. Some go for acceptance, confrontation and forgiveness while others view that love and social relationships are their only solution to being free. But the most prominent outlet is following God’s path. The latter is the most utilized coping mechanism by trauma survivors to reconcile with painful and shameful past experiences. The reliance on spirituality and God is clearly shown in the narrative of *Homegoing*. The majority of the characters tend to mention in their speech words like Nyame, Asamando and other spiritual names. They believe that God is the one and the only who can bring them a sense of relief and fill the gaps within their souls. Spiritual healing is eternally substantial; it exceeds the mental alteration and the relief or freedom from pain. Its literal meaning is ‘the healing of the spirit’, the cure of what is inside people since the soul is the center of the human being where his emotions lie and reality occurs (Blackburn 1976, 34-35).

In that respect, Ness has experienced horrifying living conditions in Hell and even though she knows that escaping the Devil Plantation is not possible, the mentioning of God in Aku’s talk gives her some hope. “but listening to this woman, who sounded like her mother had, who praised the god her mother had praised, Ness knew that she wanted her family to be the first” (Gyasi 2016, 81). To return to the main point, Ness is described praying for God all the time to purify her soul from all the sins and the pain she previously saw and went through, since after the brutal way her husband Sam is killed she believes that Hell is inescapable only by the help of a deity “‘Lord forgive me my sins [...] Deliver us from evil [...] And protect my son, wherever he may be’ ” (83). She prays for God day and night, during her work and free time, she prays for

forgiveness, relief and protection. As far as that is concerned, Abena after being rejected in all her village and the curse that followed everything she touches, she decides to leave to Kumasi searching for home. She goes to the missionary church, and only there she feels the solace she is looking for “she touched the stone at her neck and said thank you to her ancestors” (Gyasi 2016, 142). Her way to the church makes her approximate to God and realizes that this is the missing part of her soul. When she finally arrives home, she chooses to forgive her ancestors and forgive herself in the first place which alleviates the load over her shoulders.

The healing journey and seeking solace has multiple routes. Making social relationships is one of the ways to achieve that inner peace. After her struggle with the ghosts of the fire and the incredible hurt she felt, Akua looks only for her family. She believes that the association of her husband Asamoah and her children is able in one way or another to heal the wounds she bears on her body and soul: “the broken family nestled into one another, each hoping the others’ presences would fill the wound their personal war had left behind” (Gyasi 2016, 175). In addition, love is a cure for the shattered soul of James Richard Collins. His passion for Akosua frees him from all the constraints of the village, heritage, traditions, family and more importantly those of the past. He escapes everything and becomes liberated to embark on a totally different and new journey of recovery where he finds his true self.

Forgiveness is considered as an important step for the ability to achieve mental, spiritual and physical well-being. It stands for forgiving the self and those who caused the trauma and pain. This act requires both admission and acceptance at the first place to properly occur with the individual. Actually, it does not mean forgetting the wounding experience and the perpetrators, but it means that hostility and anger no longer exist heavily inside the victims. Moreover, forgiveness opens-up a space for moving on and leads to the purification of the soul (Levy 2025). In connection with the novel, forgiveness is clearly present with Willie who decides to forgive her husband Robert for leaving her and accepting the abusive treatment she receives each time from the White men. Once she meets her former husband on the road with his new family, she smiles which means that she forgives him and she accepts the fact that he hurt her and left her away with their son: “She felt like the smile had opened a valve, like the pressure of anger and sadness and confusion and loss was shooting out of her, into the sky and away. Away” (Gyasi 2016, 201). All the words and the things she prepared to say the day he decided to go flew high in the sky. It makes her chest pure and empty from all the bad feelings she keeps inside. This is how she heals and continues her path with Eli, Josephine and Carson. Thus, to find solace there is always a need to accept being hurt; it is a step on a long journey.

Furthermore, the way home has a lot to do with forgiveness. This is what Esther always tells Yaw, but he does not believe. He sees forgiveness as a trick or as something overused by the church, the whites and the wrong doers to justify their deeds (Gyasi 2016, 216-217). In contrast, after Yaw returns home to visit his mother, he unveils the desire to know his own story. The story of the intricate scars that cover his face is the physical manifestation of forgiveness. This longing is no longer repressed deep inside, and he realizes that he is not wrong and neither is his mother. The whole family is a victim of an evil lineage full of captivity and oppression. His mother feels so sorry for him, and she asks for forgiveness because she knows that the latter is able to release the guilt she feels for her son and the painful, dark fate she made him endure. Even though Yaw cannot forget his wounding experience, he needs to be free from resenting it to continue his path in life, and this is what he decides to do. He forgives his mother and becomes free from the burden of the past. So, the act of forgiveness along with confrontation and acceptance serves to throw away the painful pent-up and repressed desires and sorrows of the past traumatic occurrences. They all help the survivors as well as the victims to make their own path towards healing. Recovery is indeed a long and difficult process to achieve but it is worth it, and this is what all the characters strive to do. They bury their sentiments of fear and hesitation away for the sake of building a new cured version of themselves.

While Chapter II emphasizes from a psychoanalytic perspective, the unconscious nature of the silence and repression performed by trauma victims, Chapter III does not contradict what

has been argued previously but it sheds light on a more aware and conscious level of dealing with trauma. This is to mean that the trauma victims and more precisely the characters of *Homegoing* (2016), engage in a journey of recovery and healing that begins once they articulate their pain and open up about their hidden emotions either through speech or writing. Throughout this process, they gradually came into understanding themselves, their pent-up sorrow and the occurrences that they have passed through. It is quite important to note that trauma has a belated appearance. Thus, the traumatic load may reappear during the process of healing. At this stage, people start confronting their traumatic anguish, understand it, relate to it, and more importantly accept its existence as the first step towards reconciliation with their past. This act of acceptance depicts a conscious decision that is made for the sake of finding solace. On that account, the search for recovery and healing moves the individuals from unconscious repression and silence towards a more self-aware stage of trauma processing where confrontation, understanding and acceptance occur.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explored how trauma can be dealt with in a fictional site to reach personal reconciliation and societal restoration. Besides, this study aimed at answering three main questions: to what extent can trauma be narrativized, especially experiences related to slavery and the slave trade, how *Homegoing* depicts trauma as an experience inherited and transmitted through its haunting appearance, and how the process of healing is symbolized within the narrative of *Homegoing*? In doing so, ideas grounded in trauma studies and psychoanalysis were discussed, applied, and utilized to analyze the narrative of *Homegoing*.

This paper showed that trauma is an unbearable experience that hinders the capability of expression and overt sharing on the side of the victims that is beyond the limits of representation. Literary works and the process of writing help the survivors to verbalize their suffering. Still, it is never enough due to the fragmentations, gaps, uncompleted narration and the disjointed syntax of their speech, which is silenced most of the time. Additionally, the memories of trauma are shattered and incomplete; they exist as flashbacks and nightmares that unexpectedly haunt the survivors in a variety of places and periods. The previous trauma occurrences are not restricted solely to those who have a direct confrontation with the events but also their descendants who serve to share the heavy burden of the past and escape the barrier of shame, especially in the case of slavery and the slave trade. To represent the trauma of slavery in this contemporary novel, I relied on the theories of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch.

The manifestation of the past painful encounters through literature gives a chance for speaking, processing and rethinking the overwhelming endurances of the past. Reading *Homegoing* (2016) from the lens of trauma studies makes it clear to see the victimization of the characters as a result of the rooted association of slavery and the slave trade. The paper proves that the sense of pain and trauma that began with Maame the matriarch has been transmitted and inherited across the intergenerational level. It also highlights the existence of silence, gaps, and fragmentation as well that prevail in the narrative of *Homegoing*. Moreover, this paper delved into exploring the multiple ways followed by the characters in their search for a spiritual home, including writing, reading and speaking. It argued that social relationships along with the spiritual path serve to cure and calm the open wounds of the victims in *Homegoing* and made them reconcile with their pasts.

## Works Cited

### Primary Source

Yaa, Gyasi. 2016. *Homegoing*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf.

Secondary Sources

- Arlow, Jacob A. 1961. "Silence and The Theory of Technique." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 9(1) : 44 –55. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306516100900103>. Accessed: April 29, 2025.
- Avenoz, Clara Befaluy. 2020. "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*: American Blackness and White Privileges Through the Lens of African Diasporic Experience." Master's thesis, Barcelona University. Available at [https://diposit.ub.edu/dspace/bitstream/2445/170900/6/TFG\\_Bafaluy\\_Avenoz\\_Clara.pdf](https://diposit.ub.edu/dspace/bitstream/2445/170900/6/TFG_Bafaluy_Avenoz_Clara.pdf). Accessed: April 29, 2025.
- Blackburn, Laurence H. 1976. "Spiritual Healing." *Journal of Religion and Health*.15(1): 34 –37. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505326>.
- Blumenfeld, Emily. R. 2011. "Poetry of witness, survivor silence, and the healing use of the poetic." *Journal of Poetry Therapy*. 24(2):71–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2011.573283>.
- Caruth, Cathy, and Geoffrey Hartman. 1996. "An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman." *Studies in Romanticism*. 35(4): 630 – 652. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601201>.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press. PDF
- Costa, Ane Caroline Ribeiro. 2023. "The Reconstruction of History from Margin to Center in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Eliana Alves Cruz's *Agua De Barrela*". *Cerrados*. 32(61) : 135–147. <https://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/cerrados/article/view/45872>
- Culbertson, Roberta. 1995. "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self." *New Literary History*, 26(1): 169– 195. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057274>.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*. US, Yale University Press. PDF.
- Harris, Judith. 2003. *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing*. Albany, State University of New York Press.
- Hartman, Geoffrey H. 1995. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies." *New Literary History*. 26(3): 537–563. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057300>
- Hartman, Geoffrey. 2003. "Trauma within the Limits of Literature." *European Journal of English Studies*. 7(3): 257–274, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1076/ejes.7.3.257.27984>
- Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. United States of America, Harvard University Press.
- Levy, Terry. 2025. "Why is forgiveness so important to emotional recovery from trauma and how do you get there?" *Evergreen Psychotherapy Center*. (January 2025). <https://evergreenpsychotherapycenter.com/why-is-forgiveness-so-important-to-emotional-recovery-from-trauma-and-how-do-you-get-there>
- Molino, Michael R. 2014. "Traumatic Memory and Narrative Isolation in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hill*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 53(4): 322– 336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2010.494258>
- Rand, Nicholas. 1990. "Psychoanalysis with Literature: An Abstract of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's 'The Shell and the Kernel.'" *Oxford Literary Review*. 12(1/2): 57– 62. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43974460>.
- Ryden, Wendy. 2005. "Stories of Illness and Bereavement: Audience and Subjectivity in The Therapeutic Narrative." *Storytelling, Self, Society*. 1(2): 53– 75. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41942907>
- Septiana, Himas Nadira . 2022. "Women's Struggles Against Oppression in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*". Master thesis, Maulana Malik Ibrahim Islamic State University Malang.
- Thompson, Riki. 2004. "Trauma and the Rhetoric of Recovery: A Discourse Analysis of the Virtual Healing Journal of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors." *JAC*. 24(3): 653 – 677. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866647>.
- Whitehead, Anne. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

Yang, Yali. 2023. “The trauma and fragmentation narrative in Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” *Humanities and Social Sciencies Communities*. China, Northeast Agricultural University. 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02046-6>