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Inherited Scars: Exploring the Persistence and Evolution of Trauma in Literature

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Abstract: Trauma, as a concept, bridges disciplines, with literature serving as a powerful medium to explore its transmission across generations and its impact on memory and identity. This essay examines how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016), and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) depict intergenerational trauma through symbolic elements such as the spectral figure, the stone, and recurring names. By analysing these symbols, the essay explores how trauma manifests cyclically in narratives, shaping identities and legacies while reflecting pain and resilience. Additionally, the research integrates insights from epigenetics, illustrating how inherited trauma mirrors biological markers and narrative memory. This comparative study underscores storytelling's vital role in understanding, confronting, and transforming inherited pain, framing trauma not just as a shadow of the past but as a dynamic force for recovery and renewal across generations. The theoretical plurality of trauma's representations, offering a deeper understanding that transcends conventional notions of trauma as merely neurotic or terrifying. Instead, it reveals the paradoxical pleasure in both telling and witnessing traumatic events, affirming literature's capacity to engage with pain as a pathway to understanding and resilience.

Keywords: Symbolism, Trauma Narratives, Memory and Storytelling, Intergenerational Trauma, Global Traditions of Trauma Theory, Epigenetics in Literature

“In all forms of art, part of you is in the trauma, and part of you is a step away from it.”

— Maya Angleou

Literature has long served as a mirror to the complexities of human experience, capturing both the tangible realities and the intangible emotional landscapes that shape individuals and societies. Among its most enduring and potent themes is trauma, a force that transcends time, geography, and cultural boundaries. While trauma has been studied for centuries in disciplines such as medicine, psychology, and sociology, its role in literature has grown increasingly nuanced, particularly through the work of scholars like Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. These thinkers emphasize that trauma is not merely a psychological wound confined to the past but an active, unresolved force that continues to shape narratives, identities, and collective memory. As global perspectives on history and suffering evolve, literature increasingly functions as a medium through which both personal and communal wounds are acknowledged, examined, and, in some cases, reimagined.

In literature, trauma often resists conventional storytelling structures, instead manifesting in fragmented, nonlinear, and recursive ways. It lingers in the shadows of history, memoir, and fiction; surfacing in silences, repetitions, and ruptures that characterize many trauma narratives. The transmission of suffering across generations is how trauma gets inherited rather than confined to a single moment, has become a crucial focus in literary studies, particularly as authors grapple with the enduring impact of historical atrocities such as slavery, colonialism, war, and political violence. Caruth argues that certain traumatic events defy full comprehension, existing in a space beyond direct representation. However, through narrative expression and the act of bearing witness, these experiences acquire meaning, not necessarily in the form of resolution but through their ability to be shared, understood, and integrated into cultural memory (Caruth 3). In this way, literature does more than reflect the pain of the past; it actively reshapes how trauma is remembered and processed.

Similarly, trauma narratives serve a critical function in restructuring cultural memory. Laurie Vickroy contends that literature plays a crucial role in bringing personal testimonies into the public sphere, preventing the erasure or repetition of past horrors (Vickroy 5). By presenting trauma as an ongoing, interwoven force rather than a singular historical rupture, these narratives challenge traditional historical frameworks and demand a reconsideration of how societies engage with memory, identity, and inherited suffering. Across a range of literary works, trauma is not only conveyed through plot and character but also embedded in the very structure of the narrative itself. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016), and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), symbols operate as central vehicles through which trauma is preserved, re-experienced, and sometimes transformed. These symbols; the poltergeist in Morrison's novel, the stone in Gyasi's, and the recurring names in Márquez's do not merely represent trauma, they embody it, making visible the ways in which suffering reverberates across generations. Morrison's poltergeist is a

spectral force that disrupts the present, compelling characters to confront memories long buried beneath the weight of survival. It is both an external manifestation of repressed pain and a catalyst for remembrance, forcing those who have endured slavery's brutality to reckon with its lingering psychological toll. In *Homegoing*, the stone serves as both a literal and figurative link to ancestry, balancing the tension between loss and resilience. Passed down through generations, it becomes a symbol of continuity amid fragmentation, anchoring descendants to a history that is simultaneously painful and vital. Márquez's use of recurring names, on the other hand, underscores the cyclical nature of trauma, illustrating how unresolved wounds perpetuate themselves within familial and societal structures. Unlike Morrison's and Gyasi's symbols, which offer some potential for reconciliation, Márquez's repetition of names suggests a form of entrapment, where trauma is neither overcome nor escaped but endlessly reiterated.

These techniques reveal the textual anxieties surrounding the representation of trauma, questioning whether history can ever truly be "known" or whether it is always mediated through distortion, forgetting, and reconstruction. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma resists full articulation because it is inherently belated. It does not announce itself immediately but resurfaces later in fragmented, unpredictable forms. This explains why memory in these texts refuses to conform to linear time, instead recurring cyclically or intruding through supernatural elements. Furthermore, Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* illuminates how trauma extends beyond direct survivors, shaping the identities of later generations (Hirsch 5). In *Homegoing*, for example, Esi's descendants experience a sense of rootlessness and loss that mirrors the structural disconnection imposed by slavery, despite being temporally removed from the original event. This suggests that trauma, much like memory, operates not as a singular rupture but as an ongoing, inherited experience.

The significance of these symbols extends beyond their individual narratives. They highlight how literature captures trauma's elusive nature, often portraying it in cyclical or fragmented forms that mirror the lived experiences of those who suffer its effects. By intertwining trauma with elements of magical realism, historical fiction, and nonlinear storytelling, these authors illustrate how inherited suffering shapes both personal identity and collective consciousness. While these symbols frequently reinforce a sense of being trapped in the past, they also carve out spaces for resilience, memory, and, in some cases, recovery. As literature continues to grapple with the question of how trauma is transmitted and transformed across generations, these symbols function as narrative tools that illuminate the ongoing dialogue between past and present, trauma and healing, loss and survival.

By analysing how storytelling employs symbolic elements to confront painful histories, this discussion will explore literature's capacity to bear witness to suffering, give shape to the unspeakable, and offer new possibilities for understanding inherited trauma. Additionally, contemporary scholars continue to expand the conversation on trauma's presence in literature. Josie Gill's 2020 work explores

how trauma narratives intersect with genetic memory, proposing that literature not only reflects the psychic scars inherited from past generations but also parallels the biological imprints left by those scars. This further reinforces the idea that trauma is not merely remembered; it is lived, embodied, and continuously reinterpreted through storytelling.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses the spectral figure of Beloved to represent the intertwined psychological trauma of Sethe and Denver, trauma passed down through generations. Beloved's transformation from a disruptive force to an adult woman mirrors the evolving nature of this trauma. As a poltergeist, she embodies the uncontrollable, invasive energy of trauma, haunting Sethe's home and psyche, forcing a confrontation with repressed memories. When she takes the form of a physical woman, Beloved becomes a more embodied representation of trauma, driving a wedge between Sethe and her past lover, and deepening Denver's relationship with her. The cyclical, intergenerational nature of this trauma is evident in the recurring violence and estrangement between mothers and daughters. Sethe's actions, rooted in the unresolved trauma of her own mother perpetuate a cycle of suffering across generations. The pivotal moment of Beloved's murder ties Sethe and Denver's shared psychological devastation to their inherited trauma, revealing the profound impact of slavery's brutality on their identities and relationships. Morrison uses Beloved's haunting presence to show how trauma binds characters, forcing them to confront a past that shapes their futures. Beloved functions as a vessel for the "rememory" of slavery, to describe how trauma transcends individual experience and becomes embedded in collective memory.

"Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory... But it's not. Places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the picture of it stays—not just in my head, but out in the world.

"Can other people see it?" asked Denver.

"Oh, yes. Someday you'll be walking, and you hear something or see something. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else." (Morrison 38)

Sam Durrant terms this phenomenon "racial memory," a form of inherited trauma that remains unspoken yet ever-present across generations (Durrant82). Sethe and Denver's dissociative states marked by fragmented time and language, reflect the fractured psyches shaped by this inherited suffering. As Beloved forces them to relive their past pain, she becomes both a direct manifestation and a repository of their trauma. Through Beloved's monologue, Toni Morrison crafts an unfinished, repetitive, and emotionally detached narrative, offering readers a new way to engage with a traumatic past. This fragmented and ambivalent storytelling fosters a deeper awareness of history, even when it remains unresolved and inconclusive.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* is a deeply expansive and intricately woven narrative that traces the enduring impact of slavery and colonialism across seven generations. Through its intricate structure, the novel examines how trauma is both inherited and reimagined within diasporic histories, shaping the identities of those who come after. Central to this exploration is the symbolic function of the stone, an object that not only serves as a physical artefact of lineage but also embodies the ways in which cultural memory is preserved, disrupted, or lost over time. The stone functions as a material conduit for memory, reflecting broader theories of embodied memory and cultural artefacts in the preservation of history. As in the study of historical trauma, objects often act as vessels of remembrance, bridging personal and collective pasts. Gyasi's narrative juxtaposes the divergent experiences of Effia's and Esi's descendants, illustrating how the presence or absence of inherited symbols shapes their ability to process historical trauma. Effia's lineage is marked by the continued presence of the stone, which serves as a crucial link to her ancestral past. Passed from one generation to the next, the stone functions as a material reminder of origins, resilience, and continuity in the face of historical ruptures. Though Effia's marriage to a British slave trader is steeped in exploitation and coercion, the stone remains an emblem of endurance, offering her descendants a form of rootedness amid the dislocation imposed by colonial violence. In this sense, the stone represents more than just a family heirloom; it becomes a repository of memory and survival, a touchstone that counteracts the erasures imposed by history. Through this symbol, Gyasi illustrates how even within oppressive structures, there exist small yet powerful acts of preservation that help sustain cultural identity across generations.

In stark contrast, Esi's lineage is defined by the absence of the stone, a void that mirrors the devastating effects of her forced separation from her family and homeland. Captured and sold into slavery, Esi is severed from the ancestral ties that might have provided continuity and a sense of belonging. This loss is deeply felt across generations, manifesting in her daughter Ness, whose inability to smile becomes a haunting physical embodiment of unhealed wounds and inherited suffering. Without a tangible marker of connection to the past, Esi's descendants struggle to reclaim their sense of identity, their histories fractured by the systemic violence of slavery and racial oppression. The absence of the stone in this lineage underscores how trauma, when left unacknowledged or unprocessed, can perpetuate cycles of disconnection and loss. Through this striking juxtaposition, Gyasi highlights the dual nature of intergenerational trauma: it can either entrench suffering in a repetitive cycle of pain or, when actively confronted, serve as a catalyst for healing and transformation. The novel ultimately suggests that even histories marred by violence and displacement contain the potential for reconnection and recovery. This idea is powerfully realised in the novel's final moments when Marjorie, a descendant of Effia, and Marcus, a descendant of Esi, come together. Their reunion, though occurring centuries after the initial rupture, symbolizes the possibility of healing across time. It signifies not only the resilience of diasporic identity but also the

idea that inherited trauma, when acknowledged and remembered, can become a foundation for reconnection rather than perpetual loss.

As trauma theorists have noted, the legacies of historical suffering do not vanish with time; rather, they continue to shape individual and collective identities in complex ways. Resmaa Menakem underscores this point, arguing that resilience, much like trauma, is passed down across generations: “[A]fter 400 years, African Americans have combated trauma with innate and learned resilience” (50-51). In this light, *Homegoing* challenges the notion that inherited pain must lead only to further fragmentation. Instead, Gyasi’s novel demonstrates that acts of remembrance, whether through storytelling, cultural artefacts, or familial reconnection, offer a way to transform inherited trauma into a source of strength and continuity. In *Beloved* and *Homegoing*, this narrative form is not only a tool of remembrance but also an act of resistance. From a decolonial perspective, these texts actively challenge Western historical frameworks that have historically erased or misrepresented the traumas of slavery and colonialism. By centring oral histories, supernatural elements, and non-linear structures, Morrison and Gyasi reclaim the narratives of the oppressed, positioning storytelling as a counter-hegemonic force. As Édouard Glissant suggests in his theory of *opacity*, postcolonial narratives need not conform to Western expectations of transparent, linear storytelling; instead, their fragmented, multi-layered structures reflect the reality of historical rupture (Glissant 147). In this way, *Beloved* and *Homegoing* disrupt dominant historical narratives and insist that inherited trauma cannot be neatly resolved but must be engaged with on its own terms.

With *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez explores a form of trauma rooted in forgetting, familial dysfunction, and the cyclical nature of human suffering. Unlike *Beloved* and *Homegoing*, which foreground systemic oppression particularly slavery and colonialism as the origins of intergenerational trauma, Márquez situates trauma within the family, emphasizing how patterns of repetition and the failure to engage with the past perpetuate suffering across generations. In doing so, he highlights an insular but equally destructive mechanism of inherited trauma, one that is self-contained yet inescapable. At the core of this cyclical trauma is the Buendía family, whose fate is sealed through the relentless repetition of names: José Arcadio, Aureliano, and Remedios passed down through generations. These recurring names blur the boundaries of individual identity, suggesting that the characters are not entirely autonomous but rather trapped within predetermined roles dictated by their lineage. Rather than allowing for personal evolution, the act of naming functions as an unconscious means of preserving dysfunction, forcing each generation to re-enact past mistakes without the opportunity for resolution or change. Robert Kiely observes that this compulsive repetition serves as an indication of unprocessed pain and familial stagnation. Similarly, Emir Rodríguez Monegal describes this pattern as “familial repetition,” a cycle in which history endlessly loops back on itself, leaving the Buendías unable to grow or break free from inherited burdens (Monegal, 34).

Ursula, the family matriarch, explicitly laments this condition, recognizing that each new generation falls into the same destructive patterns, weighed down by unresolved histories that remain unexamined and unchallenged.

Beyond the repetition of names, Márquez employs the motif of forgetting to further explore the nature of trauma. The insomnia plague that strikes Macondo literalizes this theme, as it threatens to erase not just personal memories but the very function and meaning of objects. In a desperate attempt to counteract this erasure, the townspeople begin labeling everything in their environment, a futile effort to impose order on a world slipping into amnesia. However, this act of labeling reduces memory to mere words, stripping it of its emotional and historical significance. This artificial preservation mirrors the Buendías' own failure to engage meaningfully with their past, highlighting how their inability to confront history ultimately ensures their downfall. The emphasis on forgetting aligns with contemporary trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma resists full articulation and often manifests in fragmented, repetitive, or delayed ways. By portraying forgetting not as an escape from trauma but as a force that amplifies it, Márquez critiques the dangers of historical and personal erasure.

The novel's apocalyptic conclusion underscores the consequences of this cyclical trauma. The destruction of the Buendía family, foretold in Melquíades' prophecy, serves as both a narrative inevitability and a metaphor for the futility of avoiding memory rather than engaging with it. Unlike narratives that depict healing or resilience through confronting the past, Márquez presents a world in which avoidance leads to collapse. The prophecy, which has been inscribed long before the family's demise, suggests that their fate was sealed precisely because they remained trapped in patterns of repetition, failing to reckon with the very past that haunted them. In this sense, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* offers a stark warning about the consequences of unacknowledged trauma, arguing that without introspection, remembrance, and transformation, individuals and societies risk being consumed by their own histories. By weaving cyclical narrative structures and symbolic repetition, García Márquez explores trauma's intergenerational grip, portraying forgetting not as erasure but as a force that perpetuates suffering. Unlike Morrison and Gyasi, who frame memory as a path to healing, Márquez constructs a world where the refusal to confront the past traps generations in an inescapable loop. This depiction of cyclical forgetting aligns with historiographical debates on selective amnesia in postcolonial and national memory, illustrating how historical narratives are continuously constructed, revised, and, at times, deliberately obscured.

While *Beloved*, *Homegoing*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* vividly depict trauma through narrative techniques and symbolic structures, their enduring resonance lies in how they interrogate the persistence of inherited pain across generations. These novels do more than depict suffering; they question how trauma is transmitted, reinterpreted, and, at times, resisted. Viewed through the lens of

epigenetics, these texts extend beyond personal and cultural dimensions of trauma to examine how historical wounds inscribe themselves onto both the body and the psyche. Just as epigenetic changes in biology do not alter DNA but influence gene expression, the traumas in these stories leave indelible imprints on identities and legacies, shaping lives in ways that are both tangible and spectral. This biological parallel underscores how trauma is not only inherited but also mutable; capable of being reactivated, reshaped, or, crucially, interrupted.

By portraying trauma as something that resists linear chronology, these novels emphasize the recursive nature of memory and its disruptive potential. Each text engages with temporality in ways that reflect the nonlinear structure of traumatic recollection: through fragmented narratives, shifting perspectives, and recursive symbols. In *Beloved*, Morrison's ghostly figure embodies the return of a past that refuses to be buried, while Gyasi's *Homegoing* demonstrates how the aftershocks of slavery persist in the fragmented genealogies of the African diaspora. Márquez's use of repeating names in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* functions similarly, transforming personal history into an inescapable loop. These techniques suggest that trauma is not simply a residue of the past but an evolving force that bends narrative time, ensuring that history is never settled, only reinterpreted through the fractures it leaves behind. Paul Ricoeur's insights on memory and forgetting further illuminate this point. Ricoeur argues that while historical amnesia can be a tool of oppression, selective forgetting is sometimes necessary for healing (Ricoeur 79).

By bridging the literary and the biological, these texts compel us to rethink memory and trauma not as static scars but as dynamic forces open to engagement, revision, and reinvention. They challenge deterministic notions of inherited suffering, suggesting that while trauma leaves its mark, memory is not merely a passive archive of the past but an active, shaping force in the present. Much like epigenetics, storytelling in these works both maps the legacies of the past and actively reshapes them. Memory, much like trauma, is recursive rather than linear, resurfacing in fragments, symbols, and repetitions that refuse closure. These texts show that to remember is not simply to recall but to reconstruct, revealing the tension between remembrance and forgetting, rupture and continuity. Ultimately, these texts invite us to reconsider trauma not merely as a shadow of the past but as a site of negotiation, where history, memory, and resilience intersect. It is a liminal space where inherited pain can be acknowledged, confronted, and, perhaps, transformed. By examining inherited trauma through literary narratives, these texts illuminate how historical violence continues to shape individual and collective identities, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary perspectives in understanding how trauma and memory shape both literature and lived experience.

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