

BEATRIZ MARQUES GONÇALVES

ILLNESS, INTIMACY AND CARE IN YAA GYASI'S  
*TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM*

*Transcendent Kingdom* (2021), Ghanaian-American novelist Yaa Gyasi's second novel, is an intimate portrayal of family dynamics, grief, and care. The novel tells the story of Gifty, a neuroscience PhD student at the University of Stanford who studies reward-seeking behaviour in mice to better understand the root causes of depression and addiction. Focused on her career, Gifty shies away from any kind of relationship with her co-workers. One day, she receives a phone call informing her that her mother is not well and decides to bring her home and care for her. Her mother's presence unearths Gifty's childhood memories and, as she tries to make sense of her research, she attempts to understand her mother's illness and her brother's untimely death. Addressing the novel, critics and scholars alike have written on the role of religion and science in Gifty's life (Kumar and Singh 2022), loss and grief (Monthe 2021), addiction and depression (Yerima 2021), as well as displacement (Lea 2021). Gyasi deftly explores these themes in her novel; nevertheless, I am interested in exploring the representation of care in Gifty's story. Caring for both her mother and her brother was a significant aspect of Gifty's childhood, which deeply shaped her life as an adult. In this paper, I discuss the ways in which Gifty's experience of caring for her loved ones and their struggles with mental illness affect her relationships not only with family, friends and colleagues, but also with herself. My analysis of the novel is grounded on Joan Tronto's ethics of care and Black feminist theory (Collins 2000; Graham 2007). I argue that Gifty's experiences of care are

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central to her growth as a character, leading her to realise that to take care of those she loves she must let herself be taken care of in return.

#### TOWARDS A BLACK FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE

The word “care” “derives from an association with the notion of burden” (Tronto 1993, 103). In other words, Tronto explains, caring implies accepting some form of burden, saying that caring is a “species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (103). Care is a practice, involving both thought and action directed towards a specific end. It consists of four interconnected phases, which she believes to be: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving. The process starts with recognising the existence of a need for care and assessing that this need should be met; this “requires that one start from the standpoint of the one needing care or attention” (19) to recognise their needs. Upon recognition of the need that must be met, one must assume responsibility for the identified need and determine how to best meet it. This is what taking care of implies. What follows is “the direct meeting of needs for care” (107), as the care-giver comes into contact with the person receiving care. This phase is accompanied by the care-receiving phase, where the object of care (or the person receiving care) responds to the care being provided. It is important to stress that the relationship between the care-giver and the care-receiver is not without its obstacles, because care is not an activity between equal actors.

The ethics of care has been a topic of debate within feminist studies since the 1980s. However, little attention has been paid to the specificities of care within the context of Black women’s lives. Mekada Graham (2007) highlights this gap and suggests turning to Black feminist thought to tackle the concerns and care practices of Black women, who “occupy a unique social space, where racism as a prominent factor in their life experiences is mediated through the interconnections of gender, age and class” (195). Drawing on Graham, I turn to Black feminist thought to deepen the analysis of *Transcendent Kingdom* and care relations.

The relationship at the heart of the novel is between Gifty and her mother. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins argues that “[t]he mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women” (102), deeply shaping the identity of each of them. Black daughters

are taught and encouraged to be independent, “to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities” (183). On the other hand, “work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of motherhood” (184), because it is seen as a way of contributing to their children’s survival; Lucille P. Fultz (1996) adds that economic conditions require Black women to work outside their home, “making it impossible to provide proper care during their absence” (229). As a result, both Collins and Fultz recognize, Black mothers may find little time or patience for affection. Despite this, the mother’s “physical care and protection are acts of maternal love” (Collins 2000, 188). In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty, the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants, experiences little affection from her mother but, as she grows older, she recognises the protection and physical care her mother provided. These experiences will shape how she responds to care both as care-giver and as the one being cared for.

#### “MA WAS A ROCK”

Due to its nature, the process of care is intrinsically layered: it is, after all, based on the intrapersonal relationship between the care-giver and the care-receiver. The relationship at the heart of the novel is between a mother and a daughter, whose roles as care-givers and care-receivers change throughout the years and fundamentally impact the daughter’s growth and relationships. The novel opens with a particularly harrowing memory: that of Gifty’s mother lying still in bed. This is Gifty’s most powerful memory of her mother, who, “for months on end,... colonized the bed like a virus” (Gyasi 2021, 3), first when Gifty was a child and then when she was a graduate student.

At twenty-eight years old, Gifty becomes her mother’s care-giver, a reversal of traditional roles, where the mother is the provider of care for her children. Gifty is working at her lab when she receives a phone call from Pastor John, the leader of her mother’s church in Alabama, who informs her that her mother fell ill once again. It is worthwhile to note that he never once says the words “ill”, “illness”, or even “depression”. Pastor John merely refers to her mother’s illness as “it” (5), suggesting a resistance to acknowl-

edging Gifty's mother's struggle with mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Gifty's response is that "[s]he should come stay with me," a decision made without hesitation (5). The decision initiates a process where the daughter becomes the care-giver and the mother is now the care-receiver. In Tronto's words, care begins with the acknowledgement of someone's needs. In the days leading up to her mother's arrival, Gifty, remembering the first time her mother lay in bed, unable to move or feed herself, buys Ghanaian cookbooks and cooking tools to learn how to cook the dishes from her mother's homeland. Despite Gifty's efforts, which correspond to Tronto's care-giving phase, "the direct meeting of needs for care", Gifty's mother, the care-receiver, shows no interest in eating and silently retreats to her daughter's bedroom. Gifty knows that the road towards her mother's recovery will not be easy, but she is determined to help her. However, the situation they find themselves in is uncomfortable for both; after all, the roles are reversed and the daughter becomes the care-giver to her mother, and the already strained nature of the mother-daughter relationship further complicates the relationship between the care-giver and the care-receiver.

Gifty's mother exemplifies a pragmatic Black mother whose priority is her children's survival. At a young age, Gifty aptly nicknames her mother—a strict and hard-working immigrant woman from Ghana—The Black Mamba.<sup>2</sup> The mother worked as a care-giver for the elderly and her strict schedules meant that "[s]he was never around" (Gyasi 2021, 20). She even met Gifty's father while helping her own mother at the marketplace in Kumasi. Gifty recalls her mother's strictness when disciplining her children, managing the household, and insisting they attend church. Her mother was not an affectionate woman, yet always made sure her children were fed and safe. She did not tell her daughter she was pretty; instead, she forced Gifty to look

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<sup>1</sup> During her first depressive episode, the mother herself "was distrustful of psychiatrists" and "didn't believe in mental illness" (32), displaying an attitude consistent with African-Americans' general distrust of mental illness diagnoses. According to a study conducted by Conner et al. (2010), African Americans, particularly the older generations, are more likely to internalise stigma toward mental illness and its treatment, as exemplified by Pastor John's reaction. On the other hand, studies have noted that Black communities might distrust mental health services (Keating and Robertson 2004), which is another aspect that might contribute to Pastor John's reluctance in naming the mother's depression as is and Gifty's mother disbelief in mental illness.

<sup>2</sup> The Black Mamba is a venomous snake that inhabits eastern Africa. Despite the snake being associated with death due to its extremely venomous bite, in the novel the mother is nicknamed Black Mamba by her two children because "when she's mad she moves really slowly and quietly and then, all of a sudden, there she is." Nana believes this is because their mother is "an African warrior" (Gyasi 2021, 11).

in the mirror and told her: "Look at what God made. Look at what I made" (20). As Fultz (1996) argues when discussing Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973), "[Black] daughters discover early on that in place of tenderness and demonstrative affection they must frequently settle for physical care and protection. They come to understand love not as a verbal expression or affective gesture but rather as sacrificial acts" (229). Indeed, as an adult, Gifty recognizes that, although her mother was never particularly affectionate towards her children, she nevertheless did what she could, given the circumstances of their family.

When Gifty takes her mother in, her childhood memories start to surface, as she struggles to make sense of her mother's illness, her research, and her brother's addiction. As she embarks on this role reversal, Gifty comes to realise just how similar to her mother she has become: "I was already my mother's daughter by then, callous, too callous to understand that she was reckoning with the complex shades of loss" (Gyasi 2021, 38). At another point in the novel, Gifty realises that she has started to resemble her mother physically: "I'd caught myself in the mirror making that same face and it had startled me. The thing I feared, becoming my mother, was happening, physically, in spite of myself" (47). This mother-daughter relationship, like many others, is a "symbiotic merging of consciousness and subjectivities, bonding and alienation", "marked by tenderness and tension, love and resentment, sacrifice and inadequate appreciation" (Fultz 1996, 228). The relationship between Black mothers and daughters is furthermore complicated due to what Collins calls "a troubling dilemma": that of ensuring the daughter's survival within "intersecting systems of oppression", while still encouraging her to be independent and self-reliant (Collins 2000, 183, 299). As her children's sole care-giver, in the novel, the mother tries to provide for her children's success by working multiple jobs and ensuring that they have food and shelter. Although she is not a particularly affectionate woman, her independence and resilience in the face of adversity become a model for her daughter, who, at a young age, is forced to grow up quite quickly due to the tragic circumstances that befall the family.

#### AMERICA, THE UNHOMELY WORLD

While caring for her mother, Gifty realizes how similar to her she has become, not only physically but psychologically as well. The callousness and

fierce independence of both the mother and the daughter are, however, strongly tied to different traumatic events in their lives that shaped not only their identities but also their relationship. A Ghanaian immigrant, the mother struggles to adapt to America and assimilate into her community in Alabama. As Ava Landry (2018) writes, African immigrants who arrive in the U.S. “must deal with Blackness as a master status, or their most salient social identity, in ways that are new, complex, and foreign” (127). In the new country, the newly-arrived family instantly becomes a Black one, despite the promises of equality inherent to the American Dream. In the U.S., Gifty’s mother and father must “learn not only how to enter a new society but also how to enter a new society that has already systematically subordinated them” (Gyasi 2021, 135), and contend with what Landry calls “a unique, tense, and ever-present struggle between pre-migration ethnic identity and post-migration racial identity”, which is assigned to them (128). Being Black becomes the defining mark of the family’s experience in the U.S., so much so that the racism and discrimination they face prompt the Chin Chin Man,<sup>3</sup> Gifty’s father, to fly back home, leaving the rest of his family in the U.S.

The Chin Chin Man’s decision deeply affects the family. Managing a now single-income household, with no other family members to help, the mother becomes the sole care-giver of her children and must work longer hours to guarantee that her children are fed and expenses dutifully paid. When Nana injures his ankle during a basketball game, he is prescribed OxyContin and, impatient to quicken his recovery, he becomes addicted to the medicine. At first, he attempts to hide his pills, but the mother discovers his hiding place and disposes of the pills, marking the beginning of Nana’s terrible withdrawal. It is during this period that young Gifty witnesses her mother’s practicality and resilience first-hand, as she observes her mother bathing the terribly sick Nana. Later on, the mother tells Gifty, “There will come a time when you will need someone to wipe your ass for you” (142). This episode is a turning point in Gifty’s growth. As a child, Gifty used to be “loud and chatty” (42), characteristics that quickly disappeared during Nana’s struggle with addiction. Not wanting to add to her mother’s burden, Gifty retreats into herself as Nana’s addiction consumes the entire family (157). On the other hand, witnessing her mother caring for Nana will shape how Gifty responds

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<sup>3</sup> The father’s nickname comes from his love of achomo, “which he called chin chin like the Nigerians in town did” (12). It is Gifty’s maternal grandmother, who sold achomo, that gives him this nickname. Since the mother also calls him the Chin Chin Man, Gifty, who only spent the first years of her life with her father, also calls him by his nickname because she never thought of this man as her father (12).

to the needs of her mother during her depressive episodes. Soon, at the age of eleven, Gifty will attempt to care for her deeply depressed and grieving mother, displaying the same practical spirit and resilience that her mother showed during Nana's struggle with addiction. This reversal of roles will happen again seventeen years later, and it will prompt a change in the relationship between Gifty and the people around her.

Another important aspect of the care process, apart from the complex dynamic established between the care-giver and the care-receiver, are community ties. After all, this relationship does not exist in a vacuum, but it is shaped by the social context surrounding it. Gifty's family is one of the very few Black families living in Alabama. When Nana becomes addicted to OxyContin, his mother attempts to use her experience as care-giver to care for him. However, his relapses force her to seek help within her church. Upon her arrival to the U.S., the mother struggles to adjust to her new city, but eventually finds a church<sup>4</sup> and begins to feel more at home, despite being a member of the only Black family attending it. Although the family are welcomed by the community, they are not a part of it. One day, the ten-year-old Gifty overhears a conversation between churchgoers concerning Nana's addiction. "[T]heir kind does seem to have a taste for drugs" (158), one of them says, clearly distancing themselves from the struggling family due to the colour of their skin. The mother's pleas for help go unanswered and the family is left to care for Nana by themselves. Shunned by their own community and doubting whether rehabilitation would work again, Gifty and her mother do their best to provide care for Nana on their own, further alienating themselves from the church community.

Nana's untimely death triggers Gifty's mother depression and reconfigures the family's dynamics of care, putting Gifty in the role of the care-giver and ultimately ending the period of her childhood. Suffocated by guilt, Gifty's once stoic, pragmatic mother is unable to cope with her son's passing and retreats to bed. Eleven-year-old Gifty, "out of [her] depth", takes it upon herself to provide care for her mother (177). She makes food that her mother does not touch, she cleans the house because her mother believes that "[c]leanliness is godliness" (8). However, young Gifty's best efforts, just

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<sup>4</sup> The church Gifty's mother walks into is a Pentecostal church, the First Assemblies of God Church in Alabama, "a church packed full of white, red-blooded southerners" (39) whose neutral clothing contrasts heavily with the colourful Ankara the mother wears to worship. Although the church the mother attended in Ghana was also a Pentecostal church, it had a more open attitude towards mystics than the one in Alabama, and the mother must adapt her beliefs to try and fit in with this community.

like her mother's while trying to take care of Nana, are not sufficient. Gifty is taken to Ghana to spend the summer with her mother's family. Upon her return she finds her mother smiling again yet realizes her mother will never be the same. The events of Gifty's childhood irreparably change her: like her mother, she too becomes like a callus, hardened by the losses she experienced.

#### BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF CARE

When Gifty resolves to take care of her mother, she is confronted with the memories of her brother's addiction and her mother's depressive episode. While the two motivated her research, they also transformed her. A self-described callous woman, like her mother, Gifty has difficulties with intimacy. At university, her relationship with Anne encounters barriers due to Gifty's reluctance to share more stories of herself: "she knew only a handful of mine, and I had always been careful to select the happy ones" (Gyasi 2021, 216). Even though she eventually tells Anne about her brother, she suddenly ends the relationship. The same happens with Raymond: their relationship abruptly ends when he reads her journals in an attempt to learn more about her. It is only when Gifty offers to take care of her mother that she starts slowly acknowledging her need to place trust in others.

Gifty mirrors her mother's approach to care, hoping her practicality will meet the mother's needs. Like her mother did throughout Gifty's childhood and Nana's addiction, Gifty focuses on meeting her mother's most basic needs: she cooks Ghanaian food, which her mother initially leaves untouched (15), tells her about her days (30), plays music that her mother likes (83), and, like she did as a child, cleans her apartment (84). In other words, she remembers what her mother did to care for Nana's health and mimics her actions, adapting them to her mother's own needs. One day, her mother shows promising signs of recovery: she asks Gifty for water and then makes a remark about Gifty's dreadlocks. Such responses, Tronto reflects, are an essential part of the process of caring since they "provide ... the only way to know what caring needs have actually been met" (108). Although the remark about Gifty's hair does not necessarily reflect her mother's needs, it reminds Gifty of her mother's typical straightforwardness, which encourages Gifty to keep talking to her and providing care. Nonetheless, soon enough Gifty's strategies prove insufficient as the weight of caring for her ill mother and



confronting the painful memory her presence uncovers begin to form a heavy burden for Gifty.

The relationship between the care-giver and the care-receiver is complicated. It is not equal: receiving care places an individual in a vulnerable position, since their needs are exposed and the meeting of these needs is only possible if someone else, the care-giver, intervenes. This vulnerability can be a source of tension during the care process since it depends on the availability of the care-giver to provide adequate care according to the care-receiver's needs. It can also create an internal conflict for the care-giver, who "will find that their needs to care for themselves" clash "with the care that they must give to others" (Tronto 1993, 109). In *Transcendent Kingdom*, this conflict arises as Gifty is confronted with the memories of her childhood and the acknowledgement that she has not adequately processed her grief for the loss of her father, her brother and, in a unique way, her mother. As both women navigate the care-giver/care-receiver relationship, independent and self-reliant Gifty surprises herself by confiding in two colleagues: Katherine and Han. By sharing her burden, Gifty slowly allows herself to be taken care of in return.

Both Katherine and Han recognise Gifty's need for companionship, but Gifty still finds it hard to share with them the intimate details of her life. "When I tried to broach the topic of my mother," she admits at one point, "my words turned to ashes in my mouth" (Gyasi 2021, 75). Katherine stresses that she hopes Gifty is taking care of herself, and Gifty realises that she "didn't even know what it would mean to take good care of" herself (75). During her life Gifty has learned to place her needs below these of other's and to swallow her grief in order not to be a burden. This is, perhaps, a survival strategy passed on by her own mother, who worked long hours to ensure her children's well-being, illustrating Collins' description of Black motherhood. However, as she accepts the responsibility of caring for her mother, she begins to acknowledge that she, too, has needs that must be met. Her initial reluctance may be related to what she and her mother experienced during Nana's addiction—their community abandoning them and refusing to help. Slowly, she confides in Han who, unlike Anne or Raymond, never presses her to answer his questions about her brother (97). Katherine offers Gifty baked goods, "her way of saying that she was there if [she] needed her" (179). One day, when Gifty returns home, she discovers her mother has disappeared. Desperate, she calls Katherine, who immediately helps Gifty find her. Back home, Gifty bathes her mother, like the older woman had

done to Nana, and the latter reassures her daughter in Twi that “it will be all right” (242). Both women have finally learned to entrust others with their needs. By asking for help, Gifty creates a small community of people who respect her needs and care enough to meet those needs. When Gifty’s mother dies, Gifty finds herself at peace with her past, although still trying to “make meaning of the jumble of it all” (246). By confronting her traumatic memories through the process of caring for her ill mother, Gifty slowly begins to comprehend that she must put her callousness and fierce independence aside.

#### CONCLUSION

Care is a complex process that requires constant adjustments due to the varying needs of both the care-giver and the care-receiver, but the needs of the care-giver may go unnoticed. In a family setting, the care-giver is typically a parent who provides care to their children with the goal of ensuring that their needs are met. In the context of Black families, particularly focusing on the relationship between Black mothers and daughters, this care relationship is further complicated due to the experiences of Black women. Black mothers tend to place stronger emphasis on the survival of their daughters, instilling in them a sense of independence and self-reliance that might come at a cost—the lack of a closer, more emotional relationship. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the protagonist Gifty grows up with a Ghanaian mother who is a practical, strict, and hard-working woman. The relationship between the mother and the daughter is tense and oftentimes difficult due to the Chin Chin Man leaving and Gifty’s brother’s addiction and death. These experiences shape Gifty’s childhood and have a profound effect on the mother-daughter relationship. Nevertheless, when her mother requires care, Gifty immediately offers to help and becomes her mother’s care-giver, a reversal of roles that enables her to confront her past traumas. Taught to be self-reliant, and reluctant to show vulnerability, Gifty begins to realise, when she becomes her mother’s care-giver, that she must start trusting others with her own burdens and let others take care of her. As Gifty accepts their unwavering support, she begins to find peace with her memories.

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ILLNESS, INTIMACY AND CARE IN YAA GYASI'S *TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM*

## Summary

Yaa Gyasi's second novel, *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020), is an intimate portrayal of grief, care, and mental illness. The story is centred on Gifty, a 28-year-old African-American neuroscience PhD student who, during one of her mother's depressive episodes, becomes her care-giver. The mother's haunting presence in Gifty's neatly organised life brings back memories of her absent father, her brother's struggle with addiction, and her mother's suicide attempt, traumatic

events which forced Gifty to care for her family at a young age and which became the motivation behind her research on reward-seeking behaviours. Drawing on Joan Tronto's (1993) ethics of care and Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) Black feminist thought, in this article I discuss the ways in which Gifty's experiences of caring for her loved ones and their struggles with mental illness affect her relationships with family, friends and colleagues, and with herself. I argue that these experiences, particularly regarding the mother-daughter relationship, are central to Gifty's growth as a character; at first reserved and callous, Gifty is led to realise that, to take care of those she loves, she must let herself be taken care of.

**Keywords:** *Transcendent Kingdom*; Black feminist thought; care; mother–daughter relationship; Black women

CHOROBA, INTYMNOŚĆ I TROSKA W POWIEŚCI  
*POZA KRÓLESTWO* YAA GYASI

Streszczenie

Druga powieść Yaa Gyasi, *Poza królestwo* (2020), to intymny literacki obraz żałoby, troski i zaburzeń psychicznych. Powieść koncentruje się na Gifty, 28-letniej Amerykance afrykańskiego pochodzenia i doktorantce w dziedzinie neuronauk, która opiekuje się swoją matką w trakcie jednego z jej epizodów depresyjnych. Obecność matki w zorganizowanym życiu Gifty przywołuje z pamięci kobiety wspomnienia jej nieobecnego ojca, zmagania brata z uzależnieniem i próby samobójczej matki — wydarzeń, przez które już w młodym wieku musiała dźwigać ciężar opieki nad bliskimi, a które w późniejszym życiu dały przyczynek jej badaniom nad mechanizmami uzależnień. Opierając się na założeniach etyki troski Joan Tronto i czarnego feminizmu Patricii Hill Collins, w artykule omawiam, w jaki sposób walka bliskich Gifty z zaburzeniami psychicznymi oraz jej doświadczenie opieki nad nimi kształtują jej relacje z otoczeniem i sobą samą. Doświadczenia te, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem relacji matka–córka, w kluczowy sposób budują Gifty jako bohaterkę; początkowo chłodna i bezduszna, Gifty stopniowo uczy się rozumieć zależność między opieką nad innymi a troską o samą siebie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Poza królestwo*; czarny feminizm; opieka; relacja matka–córka; czarne kobiety