INTERSECTIONALITY, TRAUMA, AND RESILIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF TAYARI JONES'S *AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE*, BRIT BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*, AND YAA GYASI'S *HOMEGOING*

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Abstract: This article examines the role of intersectionality in shaping narratives of trauma, resistance, and resilience in African American women's narratives by integrating psychosocial research with literary analysis of three contemporary novels by Black women writers: Tayari Jones's An American Marriage (2018), Brit Bennett's The Vanishing Half (2020), and Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing (2016). Each text portrays women navigating systemic racism, gendered oppression, and intergenerational trauma while reclaiming agency through acts of self-definition, cultural inheritance, and relational strength. The discussion draws on empirical findings from resilience studies that identify spirituality, kinship networks, and adaptive coping as core protective factors, revealing how these dimensions are both reflected and retained in fiction. By placing literary portrayals alongside social science evidence, this study offers an interdisciplinary framework for understanding African American women's resilience as a dynamic process shaped by historical trauma, intersectional identity, and structural realities. Ultimately, it argues that contemporary African American women's literature functions as both cultural testimony and a repository of survival strategies, illuminating the human capacity for healing, transformation, and collective empowerment.

Introduction

Afro-American literature, especially works by women writers, powerfully engages with the themes of trauma and healing, reflecting both the historical wounds of slavery and racism as well as the personal struggles of gendered oppression. Their works not only depict the scars of violence and discrimination but also foreground the possibilities of survival, empowerment, and self-determination. For instance, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* explores the psychological turmoil of racial identity and the alienation faced by Black women in a racially stratified society. Similarly, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* confronts the intergenerational trauma of slavery, tracing how the wounds of sexual violence and historical memory shape Black women's lives across generations. Both narratives underscore the enduring impact of historical trauma while affirming the role of storytelling and self-expression in the healing process. African American women writers also highlight the intertwined themes of resistance and resilience. Gloria Naylor's The *Women of Brewster Place* depicts the struggles of African American women facing poverty, abuse, and systemic marginalization. However, also emphasizes the strength found in communal bonds and sisterhood. Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing portrays characters haunted by racial violence and historical ghosts, while affirming the resilience of family ties and cultural memory as sources of survival. By weaving narratives of trauma with endurance, these women writers reveal the complexities of Black womanhood and the persistent struggle for dignity. Their works demonstrate that African American literature is not solely a

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chronicle of pain but also a testament to resilience, healing, and the unyielding pursuit of justice and selfhood.

African American literature of the twenty –first century continues to portray trauma not only as a source of pain but also as a catalyst for resilience, highlighting the inseparable themes of resistance and healing. Trauma becomes a lens through which the ongoing realities of racial discrimination, economic inequality, and gender oppression are revealed, while resilience reflects the community's capacity to endure and reimagine identity. Similarly, Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) examines the shattering trauma of wrongful incarceration on Black families. Yet it also foregrounds the resilience of love, memory, and the struggle for justice. Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* examines the trauma of racial passing and divided identity, demonstrating how individual struggles can ultimately foster self-discovery and resilience. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* expands the scope of trauma across generations and geographies, tracing how the legacy of colonialism and slavery shapes the lives of descendants in both Ghana and the United States. Despite centuries of inherited pain, the novel illuminates moments of strength, connection, and healing that emerge through family, memory, and cultural identity. Together, these three works affirm that contemporary African American literature functions as both a testimony and a source of resilience. It bears witness to trauma while simultaneously constructing spaces for survival, identity formation, and communal healing by mobilizing narrative agency. Jones, Bennet, and Gyasi exemplify how literature transforms pain into a cultural archive of endurance and a vision of transformative possibility.

I. Historical Roots of Trauma

Trauma in the African American experience cannot be confined to a single historical moment; rather, it is a continuum that stretches across generations. The concept of "intergenerational trauma," first identified by psychiatrist Vivian M. Rakoff (1966) in his studies of Holocaust survivors, provided a useful framework for understanding this transmission of historical suffering. Each era of African American history-slavery, segregation, and systemic inequalities- has carried forward its wounds to future generations. Literature becomes a vital space where these inherited traumas are voiced, examined, and resisted. Another critical lens is the idea of haunting, articulated by Avery Gordon (1997) in Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination. African American history is filled with absences- the silenced voices of the enslaved, the disappeared victims of racial violence, and the marginalized lives erased by segregation. These silences do not simply vanish; they "haunt" contemporary society in the form of inequality, fractured identities, and generational pain. African American writers give these ghosts of history a presence, ensuring that the past continues to shape and unsettle the present.

Trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth (1996), deepens this perspective by emphasizing that trauma is not merely an individual psychological wound but also a historical and cultural phenomenon. In the African American context, what may appear as an individual tragedy –wrongful imprisonment, fractured family ties, loss of identity- often reflects larger systemic forces such as racial violence and structural inequality. Thus, African American literature positions personal suffering within the broader collective experience of historical trauma. Contemporary African American women writers continue to carry this legacy forward. In American Marriage, the wrongful incarceration of Roy is not only the tragedy of one couple but also a reflection of the long history of racial injustice embedded in the U.S. legal system. Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* dramatizes the trauma of racial passing and identity conflict, revealing how the legacies of racism shape family histories and personal choices.

Male authors such as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison also offer powerful explorations of trauma and racial identity. Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) highlights the in-

tersection of race, faith, and family trauma, while Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) portrays the psychological costs of racial invisibility within a segregated society. Both works reveal how systemic racism created enduring wounds that extend beyond the individual and shape community identity. Together, these narratives demonstrate how trauma, rooted in slavery, segregation, and systemic racism, remains embedded in African American lives. By transforming wounds into words, African American authors reveal both the destructive power of history and the resilient creativity of a community that continues to survive, resist, and imagine a new future.

The Great Migration (1916–1970) transformed African American life, relocating millions from the rural South to northern and western cities. This demographic shift reshaped social and cultural identities, providing fertile ground for literary exploration, as writers documented both the aspirations of mobility and the realities of continued systemic racism. Richard Wright's Native Son (1940) portrays the suffocating conditions of urban poverty and oppression, with Bigger Thomas embodying how systemic racism distorts agency and fuels alienation. Wright dramatizes the paradox of migration: movement toward freedom accompanied by entrapment in new racialized structures. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) further explores this theme through the struggles of a Black family in Chicago. Drawing on her own family's legal battles, Hansberry highlights segregation's cruelty, generational tensions, and the resilience of Black families determined to claim dignity and the right to dream. Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) complements these narratives by centering Lutie Johnson, a Black woman confronting the intersecting burdens of race, gender, and class in Harlem. Her narrative underscores how migration often reproduces, rather than erases, systemic oppression. Together, the works of Wright, Hansberry, and Petry capture the contradictions of the Great Migration, exposing disillusionment while affirming resilience. In doing so, they established a literary tradition that both critiques structural inequities and asserts the enduring strength of African American identity.

II. Expressions of Resistance in African American Literature

In African American literature, resistance encompasses the strategies by which individuals and communities confront structures of racial inequality, gendered oppression, and historical trauma. It may appear in open defiance, in the quiet endurance of marginalized lives, or in the preservation and celebration of cultural identity. Literature becomes a site where resistance is not only narrated but also enacted, offering counter-narratives to dominant histories while affirming dignity and resilience. Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) dramatizes resistance within the intimate sphere of love and marriage under the shadow of systemic racism. The wrongful imprisonment of Roy Hamilton underscores the devastating consequences of mass incarceration on Black families. Yet Jones illustrates how characters resist dehumanization by clinging to love, memory, and self-assertion, turning endurance itself into an act of defiance against injustice.

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) presents resistance through the intertwined lives of twin sisters who make radically different choices about race and identity. While one passes into white society and the other remains within her Black community, the novel interrogates the costs of assimilation and the necessity of cultural self-affirmation. Resistance here is expressed not only in overt challenges to racism but also in the refusal to allow whiteness to erase Black identity, history, and belonging. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) situates resistance in the long arc of history, tracing generations shaped by slavery, colonialism, and systemic racism on both sides of the Atlantic. By weaving together fragmented narratives of loss and survival, Gyasi emphasizes how memory itself functions as a form of resistance—preserving voices silenced by oppression. Her novel suggests that remembering, narrating, and claiming ancestral histories are ways to resist erasure and reclaim identity. These works reveal that resistance in African American literature is never singular. It can be intimate or collective, historical or contemporary, rooted in memory or enacted through love. By portray-

ing characters that persist, remember, and redefine themselves in the face of systemic violence, Jones, Bennett, and Gyasi demonstrate how literature becomes a powerful form of resistance against structures that seek to silence or diminish Black lives.

III. Reclaiming Strength in African American Literature

African American literature has long engaged with the question of how individuals and communities endure in the face of systemic oppression. Rather than presenting resilience as mere survival, these narratives highlight the creative strategies through which Black characters confront trauma, reclaim agency, and assert cultural identity. By dramatizing endurance not as passive acceptance but as active transformation, African American writers reframe resilience as a form of power—one that challenges erasure and affirms continuity across generations. Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) portrays resilience within the intimate realm of family and relationships disrupted by state violence. Roy Hamilton's wrongful imprisonment threatens to sever his marriage and future, yet the narrative underscores how characters refuse to be entirely broken by the criminal justice system. Their determination to maintain bonds of love and humanity amid injustice highlights resilience as an act of preserving selfhood in the face of external forces that attempt to strip it away. Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) illustrates resilience through the navigation of racial identity across generations. The contrasting choices of the twin sisters—one passing into white society, the other remaining rooted in her Black community—reveal how resilience can take different forms: survival through adaptation or through cultural affirmation. Despite fragmentation and loss, the novel emphasizes the persistence of identity and the ongoing struggle to reclaim belonging, showing resilience as both resistance to erasure and a reassertion of self-definition.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) situates resilience across centuries, tracing the descendants of those shaped by slavery, colonialism, and systemic racism in both Africa and America. Gyasi's intergenerational narrative demonstrates how memory itself becomes a strategy of resilience: the act of remembering silenced histories preserves cultural continuity and provides strength for future generations. Her characters embody resilience not merely by enduring suffering but by carrying forward ancestral legacies that refuse to be erased. These works show that resilience in African American literature is deeply intertwined with love, identity, and cultural memory. Jones, Bennett, and Gyasi reveal that survival is never passive but rather an active, creative process of sustaining dignity and community across both personal and historical struggles.

IV. Resilience in Literature: A Critical Perspective

Resilience, in literary and cultural studies, refers to an individual or community's capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity. It is not merely an innate trait but a dynamic process shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. Masten (2001) describes resilience as "ordinary magic," emphasizing everyday adaptive systems that enable survival. However, critics caution against over-individualizing resilience. Neocleous (2013) argues that resilience discourse often serves neoliberal ideologies, shifting responsibility from structural reform to individual endurance. In this sense, resilience may risk normalizing oppression by framing hardship as inevitable and survivable rather than preventable. Ungar (2008) highlights that resilience is deeply relational and ecological, relying on access to resources, community support, and cultural traditions. Thus, resilience must be understood not only as coping but also as resistance to systemic inequities. Conceptually, it involves reframing trauma and reclaiming agency within hostile conditions. While earlier definitions reduced resilience to psycho-

logical toughness, contemporary critiques expand it to include collective memory, solidarity, and socio-political struggle. In literary contexts, resilience often emerges through characters who transform suffering into strength. Yet, as critics remind us, such portrayals must not obscure the forces that produce suffering in the first place. Resilience is therefore both survival and critique—a testimony to human endurance and a call to challenge oppressive structures. It signifies not passive adaptation but an active reimagining of identity, dignity, and hope. This nuanced view allows resilience to be read as both a personal journey and a cultural-political act.

In Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018), resilience is explored through the lives of Celestial and Roy, whose marriage is fractured by wrongful imprisonment. The novel portrays how systemic injustice tests their relationship, yet also how personal endurance and the ability to rebuild lives in the face of broken dreams reflect resilience. Celestial, in particular, demonstrates strength as she navigates emotional turmoil, family expectations, and the burden of an unjust system, ultimately redefining her sense of self. Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) examines resilience through the divergent paths of twin sisters, Stella and Desiree. Desiree's return to her hometown after an abusive relationship reflects courage in confronting her past, while Stella's decision to pass as white illustrates another form of survival within a racially stratified society. Both sisters endure challenges tied to identity, race, and belonging, yet their ability to live within and beyond these struggles reveals the resilience embedded in their choices and sacrifices. In Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016), resilience is not confined to individuals but stretches across generations. The novel traces the descendants of two sisters—one sold into slavery and the other married to a British colonizer in Ghana—showing how trauma is inherited yet also confronted over time. Each generation's struggle to overcome displacement, racial injustice, and fractured identities highlights the endurance of memory, cultural legacy, and the will to survive. Resilience here is collective, rooted in the intergenerational strength of families and communities that carry forward stories of survival and resistance.

V. Intersectionality in Contemporary African American Literature

Intersectionality in African American literature examines how various aspects of identity—such as gender, class, and sexuality—intersect with race to shape experiences of trauma, resilience, and self-discovery. This approach recognizes that African Americans face multiple, overlapping forms of oppression that shape their narratives and struggles. Gender plays a critical role, as African American women often experience both racial and gender-based discrimination. Class further complicates identity, as socioeconomic status impacts access to justice, resources, and opportunities. These intersecting factors create unique challenges but also open pathways for resilience and healing, enriching the literary portrayal of African American lives. Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* offers a profound intersectional perspective. The protagonist Celestial's life is upended when her husband Roy is wrongfully incarcerated, a trauma rooted in systemic racism. Yet, the novel also foregrounds gender roles and class pressures within their marriage. Celestial's struggle between personal ambition and societal expectations reveals how gender, class, and race intersect to shape her choices. The novel demonstrates how intimate relationships are deeply entangled with broader systems of racial injustice, highlighting resilience through both personal strength and community support.

Brit Bennett's The Vanishing Half further exemplifies intersectionality through its exploration of race, identity, and gender. The Vignes twins make drastically different life choices, with one "passing" as white to escape racial oppression. The novel not only exposes the trauma of racial erasure but also delves into how gender and sexuality complicate identity formation. Through characters who defy rigid social categories, Bennett illustrates the compounded pressures of living at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, while also emphasizing the possibilities of agency and self-definition. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* traces generations of African and African American families whose lives are shaped by slavery, colonialism, racial violence, and systemic inequality. The novel emphasizes how race, class, and gen-

der intersect across time and geography, shaping individual and collective traumas. Women in particular face compounded oppressions, enduring both patriarchal constraints and racial discrimination. Yet, Gyasi also highlights resilience and continuity, as descendants navigate survival, cultural memory, and healing. Intersectional solidarity across generations becomes a powerful force in reclaiming identity and history.

These works demonstrate that intersectionality is vital in African American literature, offering a nuanced understanding of how various identities converge to shape experiences of oppression, survival, and empowerment. By acknowledging these intersections, contemporary African American narratives deepen the discussion of resilience and resistance, portraying the complex realities of living at the crossroads of multiple identities.

Conclusion

Contemporary African American women's literature underscores the inseparability of trauma, resistance, and resilience, particularly when analyzed through the lens of intersectionality. In Jones's *An American Marriage*, Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, and Gyasi's *Homegoing,* characters navigate systemic injustices, intergenerational wounds, and complex struggles with identity. Yet these narratives move beyond mere documentation; they illuminate the strength born of kinship, memory, and cultural inheritance. By transforming trauma into testimonies of survival and empowerment, these novels not only critique racial and gendered inequalities but also affirm resilience as a dynamic process. Ultimately, they envision liberated futures where healing emerges through solidarity, resistance, and redefined identities.

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