

Transcendent Kingdom.

Yaa Gyasi.

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Transcendent Kingdom is unlike Gyasi's earlier novel, *Homegoing* (2016). It transcends the slavery narrative to depict the present day consequences of slavery and the colonial encounter, migration and the search for the transcendent Other/order. More importantly, it is a shockingly empathetic uncovering of drug addiction and depression, their various facets, the sufferers' pain as well the suffering of the victims' loved ones. Yet again, Gyasi shows us her mastery of the tackling of big societal issues. Borrowing from the scientific parlance of Gifty, the protagonist of *Transcendent Kingdom*, depression can be described as occurring "where there is too much restraint in seeking pleasure unlike addiction where there is not enough" (36). It is around the depiction of these issues that other themes are woven into the text. Narrated through Gifty's eyes, it tells in a back-and-forth manner, the story of her family, born and raised in the southern American state of Alabama. She and her family suffer the consequences of the racially stratified history of the United States as they face racism daily in their social and work lives. This results ultimately in their clinical issues of addiction and depression as well as abandonment and family disintegration: "[...] my mother didn't know any better. She thought the God of America must be the same as the God of Ghana, that the Jehovah of the white church could not possibly be different than the one of the black church [...]. [T]hat day when she first walked into the sanctuary, she began to lose her children" (145, 146).

Having immigrated to America from Ghana with her little son and eventually her husband, Gifty's mother is in search of a better life so she can offer "her son the world" (209). The only black family in an all-white southern church, Gifty, her mother, father and brother (Nana), find a place where her mother can hold on to something bigger than herself. In a similar manner Nana, frequently the only black boy on his soccer or basketball team where he faces racial slurs, finds solace in being the best player on the court. The racism is what in due course leads to Gifty's father, the Chin Chin man's return to Ghana. This is because in America, he can never be fully expressive without provoking fear and paranoia in the white individuals who he comes across, eliminating his chances of a holding a good job and reducing him to a subordinate role in his family.

The Chin Chin man's return to Ghana signifies the beginning of the end of the family's unravelling. Alone and the sole caregiver of her children, Gifty's mother, The Black Mamba, succumbs to depression when her son, the light of her life and reason for moving to America, overdoses on heroin and dies at a very young age in the parking lot of a Starbucks. Nana's condition, like The Black Mamba's depression, is not dealt with head on. The reasons for this are the denial, shame and ignorance surrounding these issues, as well as the failure of basic human compassion and fellowship in the all-white church and the fair-weather Ghanaian circle which Nana's family associates with.

Through Gifty's telling of the bewildered pain of her young age and the shame and guilt of her adulthood, the reader comes to care deeply about her family and wish for their redemption. This is not to be, as the slow but steady dismantling of the family continues, leaving her to bear the brunt and cope in any way she knows how. She chooses science as her anchor which is why *Transcendent Kingdom* is also a bildungsroman detailing Gifty's search for knowledge of the nature of the world, existence and life in a metaphysical manner and then, later, through a scientific, methodical approach.

The novel is loaded with scientific ideas and facts, giving readers insight into the work of neuroscientists as it intertwines with the life of Gifty's family. Gifty strives to answer questions which have plagued her childhood and shaped her adulthood—"I don't know why Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead but I also don't know why some mice stop pressing the lever and other mice don't" (169). This seems to be the transcendent equivalent of what ultimately becomes her doctoral research questions—"Can an animal restrain itself from pursuing a reward, especially

when there is risk involved? [...] How does an animal restrain itself from pursuing a reward, especially when there is risk involved?" (138, 140). These questions not only tell of her desire to cure what ails her family but also to reconcile science with her faith in something transcendent which she does not want to see as God: "the more I do this work the more I believe in a kind of holiness in our connection to everything on Earth. Holy is the mouse. Holy is the grain the mouse eats. Holy is the seed. Holy are we." Ultimately, Gyasi's message is that beyond the social issues in society is the interconnectedness of all things.

At the end of the story, the reader is left bereft, hungry for reassurance that Gifty's family survives the onslaught of the clinical conditions overshadowing their lives. However, we have to make do with a sense of loss and dissatisfaction having discovered that Gifty is now the only surviving member of her family in America. This loss is somehow alleviated by the fact that Gifty is able to link her everyday existence with the transcendent by sitting daily in an empty church and by the fact that she marries Han, who understands and accepts her more than her mother ever did. Thus the novel's ending, albeit somewhat rushed, is wholesome and realistic, making *Transcendent Kingdom's* narrative a coalescing of the physical and emotional legacies of the beginning of the African or black presence in America.

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