

**STRATEGIES OF NAVIGATING LOSS, GRIEF AND DESPAIR IN
TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM BY YAA GYASI.**

NZUSYO MONTHE ELIZABETH

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Literature**

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DECLARATION

This research project is my original work and has not been submitted for examination or the award of a degree in any other university.

Signature:



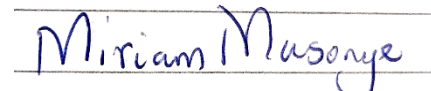
Date: 15/10/2021

Nzusyo, Monthe Elizabeth

This project has been submitted for examination with our approval as university supervisors.

First supervisor:

Signature:



Date: 14/10/21

Dr. Miriam Musonye

Department of Literature

University of Nairobi.

Second supervisor:

Signature



Date: 22/10/21

Prof. Helen O.A. Mwanzi

Department of Literature

University of Nairobi.

DEDICATION

To Justina Syowai: You are the strongest woman I know. You taught me the virtue of hard work and endurance. I love you, Mum.

To my son Mohamed: You have always been the reason I desire to soar higher, my little one. May this inspire you some day.

To Ibtisam, Ismahan and baby Warsan: You are the best gifts life could ever offer. Your smiles make life worth struggling for the best.

To Jamal Ayub Adan: Thanks for your support and unconditional love.

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ABSTRACT

This project analyses the novel *Transcendent Kingdom* by Yaa Gyasi in order to explore how different individuals respond to loss, grief and despair. This novel is a fertile ground for unearthing the role of literature in addressing inescapable yet ignored issues in our everyday discourse. It is an epitome of how literary works can capture the fragmented realities of encountering loss and grief. I focus on how different characters respond to devastating situations of loss, grief and despair. My study presupposes that different people react variedly in the event of loss, grief and despair. I therefore examine various characters' actions, thoughts and words as they attempt to survive the pain of loss and grief. This study exposes the creative power of literature in bringing closer enigmatic phenomena such as death, depression and addiction. I further examine the effectiveness of the narrative technique in the novel and how they speak to the topical issues of loss, grief and despair. I also interrogate various narrative aspects such as the narrator, narrative perspective, plot, characterization embedded epistolary and language style to portray how they speak to the navigation of loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom*. I deploy narratology theory to capture how the author presents various characters' responses to loss, grief and despair. My study arrives at the conclusion that different characters respond variedly to loss and grief as a result of varied personal choices and sometimes, varied socialization experiences. The study also concludes that artistry and creative presentation of various mechanisms of handling the pain of loss, grief and despair bring these issues closer and relatable to the addressee.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Most people have dealt with some form of loss at some point of their lives which makes loss a relatable social reality. The inevitability of loss has seen different reactions come into play among different people across global cultures. The magnitude of loss may attract intense reactions, however, ‘even the subtle losses in life can trigger a sense of grief’ (Smith Melinda et al, 1). Loss, grief and despair form part of human’s everyday lives, thus their narration and people’s mechanisms of handling them remain of interest to literary writers as well as critics.

Mechanisms of navigating the paths of loss and grief have been addressed by sociologists, psychologists and religious critics, all from different perspectives. In her article *Grief, Despair and Confronting Losses*, Kimberly Key acknowledges that ‘loss, pain and grief are an inherent part of life which begin from the moment we are born’ and that human beings automatically ‘adapt mechanisms of confronting pain of losses faced in life’ (1). Since the pain of loss and grief is universal, human beings across cultures have strived to find various coping mechanisms. It is therefore clear that finding means of navigating loss, grief and despair is an essential process in every individual’s life.

In her PhD dissertation titled *Perceptions of Death and Dying in Selected Literary Works*, Judith Jefwa acknowledges that “every society has its own socializing engines that drive people’s views concerning death thus it would be incorrect to make a blanket statement concerning how people should respond to such enigmatic phenomenon as dying or death”(14). Based on this statement, it is clear that different individuals respond differently to issues of loss and grief.

Loss manifests in different ways in the lives of human beings and if not properly handled it may lead to worse impacts such as prolonged grief, despair and mental disorders. Mechanisms of dealing with loss may not be commonly examined in real life, thus this study acknowledges the transgressive role of this novel in ‘capturing what may appear to be difficult to capture in real life’ (Michel Foucault, 45). The exploration of issues

considered sacred by the societal norms may be perceived as a way of crossing the limits. In his MA dissertation ‘Transgression as Represented in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*’, Janet Vaheer echoes Vartan (2005) defines transgression literature as:

A disobedient rebellious offspring of art, one that specifically aims to displace and destroy authority, to break taboos and to subvert established norms and conventions, an act that is typically perceived to be shocking and/even disturbing’(66).

Gyasi raises complex issues of addiction, sexual pleasures, family break-up, drug and substance abuse as mechanisms adapted by the characters in dealing with loss around them, an idea that may be considered subversive to the societal norms. This study aims at examining these strategies employed by the characters in the course of navigating loss, grief and despair in the novel.

Transcendent Kingdom may be described as an intellectual novel as it explores the protagonist’s long search for solutions to the problems facing her family. She delves into different institutions such as religion and science, in the course of unveiling the possible mitigations of drug addiction and depression.

Yaa Gyasi is a young Ghanaian American author, born in 1989 in Mampong, Ghana. Her family moved to Alabama, United States in 1991 where she was raised and did her schooling. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Stanford University, and a Master of Fine Arts from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. She is the author of *Homegoing*, her debut novel published in 2016, which won her several awards such as The American Book Award, Viclek Prize for Creative Promise in Literature and Granta Best of Young American Novelists in 2017 among other awards. *Transcendent Kingdom* is Gyasi’s second novel published in September 2020. It was shortlisted for the Women’s Prize for Fiction, 2021.

In an interview with Kate Campbell in *The Guardian*, regarding her first novel *Homegoing* (2016), Yaa Gyasi commented that “trauma can be imprinted in our DNA and that trauma can be inheritable”. In this novel the author explores various dimensions of loss such as: identity and freedom among others as she traces the lineage of a set of

Ghanaian twins separated at birth into different historical eras and geographical spaces (Ghana and America), both affected by slavery and slave trade.

In her second novel *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gyasi explores the adaptive mechanisms of dealing with loss, grief and despair. The novel was published by A.Knopf in September 1, 2020. It is about a Ghanaian immigrant family living in Alabama, America, faced by depression, addiction and grief after encountering different forms of loss. This novel has won her the John Leonard Prize, and Debut Award of National Book Critics Circle Award. *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020), which forms the basis of my study is Gyasi's second novel and the primary text in my study.

Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* presents a series of events and experiences dominated by human suffering manifesting as death, addiction, abandonment and family break-up, making this novel a tale of devastation worth the addressee's sympathy. The protagonist's urge to find means of survival, seeking answers to the haunting past pushes her to venture into neuroscience, after a scrutiny of religion fails to resolve her concerns. Drug abuse, sexual pleasures and alcoholism are among other distractions adapted by some characters as they attempt to ease the effect of loss. This study therefore focuses on the strategies employed by the characters in the course of navigating loss, grief and despair, tracing the characters' experiences versus the adjustment paths taken by the characters.

In a review of the novel, Merry Sheriff applauds the author's 'wrestle with the big questions in life such as loss, grief, family, faith and despair, in a way that is both complex and accessible' (2). This asserts that issues of loss, grief and despair are inevitable social realities in human lives and are worth studying especially if given a high artistic agency as in *Transcendent Kingdom*. The perceptions and reception on various concepts emanating from loss and grief are also key in understanding why some characters react differently to loss and grief encountered. These perceptions may be influenced by broader issues such as society and gender. However, they remain relevant in examining the navigation through loss, grief and despair in the novel

Using a narratological perspective, my study intends to examine the effectiveness of the author's presentation of characters' strategic mechanisms of dealing with the various forms of suffering they experience. The examination of how characters negotiate their position in an attempt to survive the pain is achieved through giving attention to their actions, thoughts and experiences as portrayed in this novel.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Literary critics and writers have over time engaged in various storylines that portray struggles in pursuit of different quests that bring fulfillment. Creative works addressing inherent subjects such as loss and grief draw these issues closer to the reader for scrutiny, breaking the incoherence they portray in real life. According to Colm Toibin in *The Literature of Grief*, writers of intense subjects such as loss and grief 'need to find an artful tone to suggest and communicate the most private feelings and imaginings to someone else ,to allow the reader to catch a more intense glimpse of the world'(9). Yaa Gyasi in *Transcendent Kingdom* employs various narrative techniques bringing out the struggles various characters encounter to adapt to their mental, emotional and psychological suffering. My study examines various strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair, with the main focus on characters' experiences, actions and recollections from memory to determine the gradual adaptations of dealing with loss, grief and despair. This study investigates the extent to which the author tackles the issue of loss, grief and despair which are common causative agents of mental disorders, providing agency to this ignored discourse. By focusing on various strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom*, this study demonstrates how literary works can be used to provide agency to subjects that are mostly ignored in real life discourse. This study also seeks to demonstrate how various narrative strategies are employed to explore different mechanisms of dealing with loss, grief and despair.

1.3 Objectives of the study

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom* by Yaa Gyasi.
2. To interrogate the effectiveness of the narrative strategies employed in exploring various mechanisms of navigating loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom*.

1.4 Research questions

My study seeks to answer the following key questions:

1. Various strategies can be employed in navigating loss, grief and despair in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*.
2. The narrative strategies employed in *Transcendent Kingdom* effectively explore the mechanisms of navigating loss, grief and despair.

1.5 Justification of the study

In spite of the available scholarly articles exploring issues related to loss, grief and despair, this phenomenon is often tied to philosophy, psychology or sociology. Echoing Jefwa's argument that subjects related to loss, such as 'death are often thought of as concerning only religion, medicine and anthropology' (6). My study, however demonstrates that through transgression, literature provides the best platform to examine strategies to maneuver through loss, grief and despair. I also demonstrate the ways in which the fictive world can represent psychological and philosophical issues. Through creativity literary works can efficiently address issues that are rarely discerned in real life.

My study seeks to demonstrate how narration can be used in fiction to address enigmatic phenomena such as drug addiction, death and depression. I also demonstrate how narration brings events, fictive characters and their experiences closer to reality, making the story interesting and easily relatable.

Loss, grief, despair and other mental related problems remain under-addressed among scholars across the globe. Psychologists agree to the fact that disorders emanating from loss and grief have rarely been prioritized, mostly receiving negative treatment and stigmatization. This has led to ignoring of mental illness discourses across cultures, with

the society branding the people suffering from such illnesses as ‘mad’, ‘crazy’, or ‘idiots’ among other demeaning labels. My study therefore demonstrates the need to give agency to this ‘othered’ group by examining the strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair.

My study is also time-appropriate due to the upsurge of loss and grief since the global invasion of the Covid-19 pandemic. Painful experiences such as death of loved ones, loss of jobs, isolation from family and friends have been a recent common cause of grief across the globe. My study therefore, through an examination of strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom*, can contribute to the broader global discourse of dealing such forms of human suffering.

Issues pertaining to loss, grief and despair have struck different responses across cultures as captured by different fictional writers. The very reaction to loss has been perceived differently, most times negatively across the globe. In *Literary Destigmatization of Despair and Mental Illness: A Study of the Writings of Jayakanthan*, Sundaram, O, argues that there is ‘a plethora of instances of stigma against grief and despair-related issues and discrimination against people with such illnesses in the history of all cultures’ (1). In another instance, Joseph Conrad’s short story, *The Idiots*, portrays the characters, intellectually challenged children whose parents have just passed away as idiots and lunatics. Other interpretations such as loss being a ‘punishment from the gods and an unfortunate destiny as a result of God’s grace (Larsen, 22). These myths have posed more threat to the discourse, with no solutions provided. My study therefore demonstrates the need to debunk such negative interpretation towards response to loss, grief and despair. My study, through examining various mechanisms of handling loss and grief may reduce chances of the affected from being discriminated against in the society.

1.6 Scope and limitation

This study is limited to Yaa Gyasi’s fictional novel *Transcendent Kingdom*. My area of focus is to examine various strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair as demonstrated by the characters in the novel. The narrative strategies employed by the author in exploring these mechanisms of dealing with loss and grief have been scrutinized in this study. The focus of this study, therefore, is to trace the characters’ journey in the course of establishing mechanisms of surviving loss, grief and despair.

The examination of *Transcendent Kingdom* has been done from a narratological perspective, with narratology theory guiding my study to examine the narrative structure, voice, focalization and plot among other elements of a narrative text. A library research has been conducted in the course of my study, with the aim of consulting relevant secondary sources to supplement the primary source of information which is the selected novel.

1.7 Definition of terms

Loss is an inevitably common occurrence in life together with ‘its associated grief being important elements of many adverse life events that affect people globally, from addiction, traumatic events to terminal and chronic illnesses’(Murray, 1).

Grief is the natural reaction to loss, what an individual(s) feels, thinks from the inside when they lose something or someone they love. Grief may manifest in form of yearning, pain, anxiety, and loneliness. According to Dr. Tillman Jacobi, reaction to loss vary from an individual to the other. Some experience pathological grief which involves prolonged grieving, reactive depression which may or may be not accompanied by suicidal ideations. The guilty feelings experienced by a depressed individual may lead to emotional imbalances and lead to psychosomatic disorder.

In *Death in the Midst of Life: Social and Cultural Influences on Death, Grief and Mourning*, J.B. Kamerman argues that the standard symptoms of grief are bodily distress, guilt, hostility, a preoccupation with the image of the deceased and the alteration or loss of normal patterns of conduct (66). The effects posed by grief may disrupt the functioning of the mind due to pre occupation of what has been lost.

Despair, is the feeling of having lost hope or confidence in a situation. It is an impact of grief, especially prolonged grieving which in different people and situations, may manifest as depression.

1.8 Literature review

Encounter with any form of loss and grief is inescapable in human beings’ life span. People from all walks of life have reflected and handled issues pertaining to loss, grief and despair variedly. Scholars have also had varied views on discourse pertaining loss,

grief and despair and explored related literary works, fictional and non-fictional. For the contextualization of my study, first, a review of critical works related to loss and grief has been explored. Secondly, a review of various critical responses to Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) is focused on. The essence of this literature review is to shed light on the scholarly insights pertaining to my area of study, thus bring out the gap I seek to fill.

1.9 Narrative studies on loss, grief and despair

Narration has overtime proven to be an effective way of revealing individual's deep emotions such as loss. Angela Simpson, in her study on *The Persistence of memory: Using Narrative Picturing to Co-operatively Explore Life Stories in Qualitative Inquiry*, asserts that narratives present high chances to an in-depth revelation of intimate life experiences. The focus is directed on the essence of employing narration to unearth painful human experiences such as loss' (12). The explorations of personal meaning(s) disclosed during narration were commonly found to be particularly abstract or unprocessed. In essence, the narrative approach is perceived as a strengthening tool, engendering hope in the narrators as they open up on their pain, a way of separating the victim from the problem. These sentiments are reflected in Kathleen R Gilbert study on *Taking a Narrative Approach to Grief Research: Finding Meaning in Stories* where she applauds the narrative approach as a way in which meaning is restored to meaningless concepts. She argues that 'narratives make order of disorder and find meaning in the meaningless, a concept relevant to the study of grief' (45).

Other studies have focused on narratives about loss and their impacts on the self-concept. Such studies include Sam Meekings's article on *Writing through Loss: The Rise of Grief Narratives through the Lens of Linville's Self-Complexity Theory* which depicts how writing loss 'complicates the (textual) self, and how narratives depicting such loss and its effects thus performs this complication'. Meekings's argument is that life writings based on loss and grief brings out different positions of the narrator, having in mind that the narration comes after the suffering. He goes further to argue that 'grief unmakes the self' and that the recent autobiographical narratives on loss employ strategies that 'deconstruct the self-concept and its differentiated aspects' (1).

The discourse around human suffering such as loss has been closely pegged to the affected individual's identity and that 'a healthy recovery from loss requires the sharing of memories related to the loss as a way to sustain and/or reconfigure one's sense of meaning and purpose in the face of grief (Niemeyer, 2001). This implies that (re)telling or narrating loss whether orally or in writing, is a part and parcel of the healing journey. Sharing one's experience on life suffering opens up the victim's mind, providing a convenient platform to avoid elevation of the loss to grief. I contend that Niemeyer's argument focuses on the question of how loss can affect an individual's identity as it can elevate to grief and despair. Narrating loss is an effective genesis to the journey of healing and finding possible solutions. It also gives a 'human face' to the experience, giving it a concrete meaning to the narrator and the readers.

In an article titled *Grief, Mourning and meaning in a Personal voice*, William Cornell expounds on first person narration on loss and grief-related issues and the extent to which they offer meaning to the individual narrator and the addressees. These narratives bring experiences closer to reality when they are narrated from a first person narration, creating a more concrete meaning. Cornell provides an autobiographical case study of his termination from his job and the journey through his long term illness. I find this case relevant to my study as it addresses the journey through illness, suffering and how to create meaning in conveying the message to the addressee, though in my case I am interested in the strategies the narrator employs in adapting to and navigating through her family's suffering. Throughout the novel, *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gyasi employs a similar narrative strategy as Cornell's: the first person narration.

The art of storytelling has been relied upon in expressing intimate emotions in the lives of human beings such as death and violence as they tend to concretize these ordeals. In an article, *Fragmented Stories: The narrative Integration of Violent Loss*, Niemeyer et al argue that 'storytelling is so embedded in our kind that the authors suggest we be labeled homo narrans and not simply homo sapiens' (6). In this article the scholar gives attention to the coherence and meaning created through narrating sensitive human experiences such as loss, grief and the validation this narration gives to such narratives. I agree with Niemeyer that "ordering of events into a narrative template" (1) creates coherence,

validation of the told incidents of human suffering. The author's creativity in ordering and packaging of the events in the narrative text plays a pivotal role in conveying sensible information to the addressee.

Studies related to the effects of loss, grief and despair, such as mental illness have sparked controversies following various interpretations. In *A Crazy Perspective: An Analysis of Mental Illness in Literature and how it connects with the Society*, Heather Bills argues that issues of loss, despair and other concepts related to mental disorders, in the literary arena are 'stigma attached' then 'follows the notion of the 'other' as people fear what they do not understand" (11). This sentiment exposes the stereotypical portrayal associated with human suffering such as loss, grief and despair in literature and how they are perceived in the society. Loss, grief and despair have been the leading causative agents of severe human suffering and illnesses and are also portrayed as causes of discrimination, stigmatization and othering.

1.10 reviews on yaa gyasi's *transcendent kingdom*

Transcendent Kingdom has not yet received much of critical scrutiny since it has been in circulation for only one year, having been published in September 2020. The few reviews available are mostly newspaper reviews and articles. Gyasi's first novel has seen critical and scholarly attention from different perspectives. One example is Mar Gallegos's *Sexuality and Healing in the Diaspora: A Transnational Approach to Toni Morrison and Gyasi's Homegoing* an epitome of women writers against the stereotypic projection of the African Americans, 'mobilizing the issue of gender, race and sexuality'(1). Following the slavery era, the black race has vocalized their resistance and debunked racial prejudice against them, engaging in a 'new politics of the black body'(1). Emphasis of material and spiritual well-being has individually and collectively been perceived as a healing process achieved through resilience to different atrocities. In her second novel *Transcendent Kingdom*, the author focuses on the protagonist's life experiences as a process towards achieving an objective. The quest to find solutions to various life puzzles such as grief and depression is portrayed through the characters in the novel as they strive to adapt to what life throws at them. For instance, the role of science and religion is problematized in the text as a phase in finding answers to human suffering.

In her review on *Transcendent Kingdom*, Kayman Hester (2020) examines the dissonance between seeking solace in science versus the urge to find solace in religion. The idea of duality and multitudes in human conscience is explored where the reality of being ‘a scientist at heart and Christian in spirit’ (Hester, 2) is examined. This relates to my research as I primarily focus on the strategies employed by the characters in the novel to maneuver through loss, grief and despair with science and religion being among the strategic paths taken by the characters. In essence, Hester’s argument implies that science and religion can be sought to find answers to human tribulations which is also reflected in my study as I examine Gifty’s quest to find answers to addiction, loss, grief and despair; issue that affect her family throughout the novel. Hester’s view is limited to the exploration of science and religion side by side and the general implications, while my study specifically aims at tracing the characters’ manner of dealing with loss, grief and despair.

The reviews on this novel may be few and unpublished but remain very instrumental in this study as they express the critical perspectives of different scholars and critics. This paves way for more critical attention to the novel based on other perspectives. In this study I am interested in examining the varied responses to forms of loss encountered by various characters. This study traces the various phases in the characters’ lives, their experiences, thoughts and reactions regarding how they contribute to the navigation through the various forms of suffering around them.

In an article posted in a column of The Chicago Review of Books, Rabeea Saleem views *Transcendent Kingdom* as an “evocative” epitome of the immigrant narrative exploring experiences such as racial prejudice among other issues common to immigrants. Saleem also comments on Gyasi’s choice of characterization where he(Saleem) refers to the novel as “an astutely written character study of an individual reconciling with her past” alongside her “struggles with faith and science”(1). This implies that the protagonist in *Transcendent Kingdom* faces an identity crisis as a Ghanaian immigrant living in Alabama and later in California, America. The struggles faced by Gifty and her family are part of her long struggle to finding the self. She struggles with her identity as a black woman in a male dominated career alongside her quest to find solutions to the pain and

suffering faced by her family. The various mechanisms adapted by the protagonist and other characters in the novel as they strive to survive through different obstacles around them are of importance in my study. According to Saleem, ‘contexts of the past’s entanglement with the present come into play during this struggle to find the self’(2) which I find relevant as the characters’ past and present experiences play a pivotal role in establishing survival mechanisms.

Allison Boyce in, *Transcendent Kingdom: A Memorable Exploration of Science and Religion*, views the novel as ‘an ultimate celebration of the miracle of human experience’(3). Boyce asserts that the manner in which *Transcendent Kingdom* addresses social realities especially from an immigrant perspective is credible. The loss experienced by the protagonist and her family pushes her to delve into neuroscience in search of solutions to dealing with the suffering. The fact that some concepts are unexplainable to some characters such as Gifty brings out the transcendence of life itself. The assertion that some cause and effect situations that may happen in human life are sometimes unexplainable and beyond human understanding. For instance the absurdity in “how her (Gifty) mother can survive the unimaginable loss of her son and her husband” (Boyce, 2). The portrayal of transcendence of life encounters is what Boyce applauds this novel for and describes it as a ‘celebration of the miracle of human experience’ (3).

Relevant to this study, is a review on The Wall Street Journal, where Sam Sacks points out the complementary role played by both science and religion in the quest for new knowledge. He observes that *Transcendent Kingdom* “is burningly dedicated to the question of meaning’ (2) and that is how the protagonist’s commitment to science and regular reference to religion is key in the novel. The novel “quotes the Bible as fluently as it discusses neural circuits in the medial prefrontal cortex, plumbing each other for comforts and insights but dispassionately studying the ways that each lack” (Sacks, 4). He concentrates on how the issue of science and religion are interwoven to bring out meaning, the exploration of science and religion side by side to bring out meaning. My study on the other hand perceives the scrutiny of science and religion as some of the strategies or paths taken by the character to help survive the pain of loss, grief and

despair. These strategies form phases of a journey towards finding solutions to inevitable life problems.

Nell Freudenberg's article in *The New York Times*, *In Yaa Gyasi's New Novel, a Young Scientist Tries to Understand Her Family's Pain* argues from a different perspective of the style employed in *Transcendent Kingdom*. He asserts that a 'family in isolation' is a symbolic representation of the gradual laboratory experiments the protagonist is engaged in while at the university in search of the neural electrolytes that cause addiction and how addiction can be mitigated. Freudenberg, in this article gives centrality to the style employed by the author in expressing the search for solutions to suffering around them. My research addresses how the narrative creates meaning from a narratological perspective by exploring various elements of the narrative. Freudenberg interprets the protagonist's mannerisms and limited social interaction as a diversion from the painful experiences she is facing, a form of escape from reality. He goes further to explore the question of identity from a racial point of view as the protagonist wishes to be seen as a scientist rather than a 'black woman in science'(Gyasi,11). Gifty spends most of her life trying to prove her existence. She tries to avoid the immigrant cliché' that for any black person to succeed, they must have 'sweat blood for their success'(Gyasi,43). The question of identity has been addressed exhaustively in narrating the immigrant experience where immigrants have had to struggle to an extent of 'adapting resistance identities'(Argiris Archakis,2018) in order to survive in their adopted home.

In a review on February 2021, Sarah Collins describes *Transcendent Kingdom* as a true 'strive for precision' and perceives it as an author's effort 'to make meaning of one woman's life'(Collins,2). The protagonist's experiences with her family suffering are perceived from a double lens; as a woman and as a woman of color living in a white dominated space. Collins approaches the narrative from a gender perspective where a black woman has to stay strong, balancing between her career and the reversed responsibility of looking after her ailing mother who ultimately dies of depression. Issues of gender, to some extent feature in my research as escape paths in which some characters take cover as they strive to cope with the suffering around them.

The existing reviews have explored various issues in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* from different perspectives, nevertheless the issue of loss, grief and despair has been reflected in the above reviews. It is clear that suffering is part and parcel of human life and needs to be dealt with as a way of trying to achieve balance. Various strategies of dealing with loss, grief and despair have been examined in this study through tracing the characters' experiences' past and present experiences, thoughts and actions. The author employs various narrative techniques which I interrogate further in this study. In spite of the few critical reviews done on Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* since its publication in September 2020, it is evident that the novel provides a platform for deeper scrutiny of ignored discourses on loss and grief related issues such as death and depression from a literary point of view.

1.11 Theoretical framework

This study is guided by the theory of narratology. It employs key ideas proposed by Mieke Bal, one of the key proponents of the theory of narratology. In *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narratives* Bal defines narratology as 'the ensemble of narrative texts, images, spectacles, events, cultural artifacts that tell a story' (3). The main aim of employing narratology in this research is to guide the analysis of how the narrative as an artistic structure and its various strategies are used in the production of meaning within a particular narrative, in my case the novel *Transcendent Kingdom*. The particular focus is how particular narrative strategies in the novel are employed to articulate characters' mechanisms to deal with loss, grief and despair.

Narratology provides a platform of examining the narrative structure for common patterns or codes that are found within a narrative text. The narrator in a text employs a given medium, such as language, sounds or images to address the narratee, thus there can be no text without a medium.

Mieke Bal argues that the main significance of narratology in the analysis of literary texts is the 'three-layer distinction' (5) it proposes. The layers are further expounded as fabula (a series of logically related events experienced by characters), story (the content) and a narrative text (whereby an agent conveys a message to the addressee by use of medium such as language, imagery, sounds or even a combination of all). The three

layers can be analyzed separately, however “this does not mean that these layers can exist independently of one another” (7). The elements of the fabula layer include events, place, time and actors. These elements are packaged in a certain way to form a story. All these elements are packaged and ordered into a story with the aim of ‘producing a particular manifestation and inflection (Bal, 5).

Narratology implies that for a narrative text to be better understood, distinguishing the story (what is being told) and the discourse (how it is being told) is of great importance. The process of conveying the message includes elements like narrative voice, style, time, plot, focalization and narrative modes which I focus on in my study as I trace the characters’ experiences in the course of navigating loss, grief and despair. The actual order of events as they happened is what is identified as the story while a plot is the re-ordering and presentation of these events in a narrative according to the choice of the author. The order of the events in the text ‘forms the narrating, producing the narrative action/the entire real or fictional situation in which the action of the narrative takes place’ (Gerard Genette, 27).

The plot of any given narrative is very important. Narratology entails how a text is presented or conveyed to the addressee .Peter Barry argues that, “it isn’t just the plot in the narrow sense which is at issue but style, viewpoint, place and so on, which is to say that the whole packaging of the narrative creates the overall effect”(215). The manner in which the author packages the events into a narrative order is therefore an important aspect in conveying the meaning of the text. In my study, for instance, the author chooses to present the protagonist’s experiences at different points in her life in a back and forth manner, bouncing from her life as a PhD student at Stanford and her past childhood experiences. A narrative order of events can be arranged chronologically (natural sequence of events) or Anachronically (not confined to the given order) depending on the author’s choice. The order in a narrative text helps in understanding flashbacks or analepsis and flash-forwards or prolepsis.

Theorists of narratology emphasize on the ‘agent’ (narrator) who converts a story into a narrative text by use of medium or signs. Since a narrative text is not solely about narration, it is important for readers to seek for cues that ‘concern something other than

the events'(Barry,9) such as descriptions, arguments or disclosure not directly connected to the events of the text. There are cases where the narrator and the actor is the same person such as 'in a narrative narrated in the first person, the narrator is the same person, but at another moment and another situation than when she originally experienced the events'(10). It is important, according to narratologists, to distinguish the three distinct layers in a narrative text.

Who is telling the story? is a significant question in the course of extracting meaning from a narrative text . It is emphasized by narratology theorists that 'the narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of a narrative text' (Bal, 18).This argument asserts that the relationship between the narrator's position and the content of the text is vital in discerning meaning. The narrative can be conveyed through the consciousness of an omniscient narrator, and from the narrator's point of view, a concept narratology theorists refer to as 'internal focalization'(Genette,23).

The theory of narratology gives significant attention to the aspect of narrative time which is an element of the fabula. 'There is the time of the things told and the time of the narrative; the time of the signified and the time of the signifier' (Genette, 33). For instance, a long period event in the narrative can be summed up in a few chapters or even shrunk into a paragraph of the novel. This brings out a vital role of narratives; 'inventing one time scheme in terms of another time scheme' (33).

Narratology helps focus on how the narrative is conveyed to the addressee for the purpose of discerning meaning.

1.12 Research methodology

My study aims at examining various strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*. In the course of my research, I have subjected my primary text to close textual reading to inform my study. A prime focus has been given to the various reactions portrayed by the characters as they attempt to navigate loss, grief and despair. This was achieved through paying attention to the characters experiences, actions and thoughts. A library research, involving reading relevant critical works, online journals and other library books was employed to help obtain secondary information.

Firstly, a scrutiny of critical works and reviews dealing with the issues of loss, grief and despair was done to anchor the argument of my study.

Readings on critical works and reviews on the primary text, *Transcendent Kingdom* have been instrumental points of reference in providing grounding to my argument. All the secondary materials gathered in the course of library research are meant to supplement the primary text which is at the core of this study.

After a close textual reading of the novel *Transcendent Kingdom*, descriptive interpretations of the findings were presented. I used the secondary sources to support the argument from the primary text. The theory of narratology came in handy in interrogating the narrative elements such as the order and time in interpreting the information from the narrative text. Narratology has guided my study in exploring and outlining various aspects that qualify the content (story) in *Transcendent Kingdom* as a narrative. This theory has guided me in examining various elements of a narrative such as the narrative voice, time, order, point of view and the narrative structure and how they are presented in the novel to create meaning in the characters' course of dealing with loss, grief and despair.

1.13 Synopsis of transcendent kingdom

Transcendent Kingdom is about a Ghanaian immigrant family living in Alabama, America, faced by depression, addiction and grief after encountering different forms of loss. Gifty, the protagonist is a sixth-year PhD student in neuroscience at Stanford University, school of Medicine, working on her final doctoral research on reward-seeking behavior and in finding the neural circuits related to addiction and depression.

Nana, the narrator's brother, a talented basketball player and an athlete had died of a heroin overdose when she was eleven years old. Her mother, coded TBM (The Black Mamba) is bedridden and in a grief-associated depression after her son's death. The narrator's father named The Chin Chin man abandons the family and flees to Ghana after the unbearable immigrant experiences in America. The narrator's mother moves to California to be with her daughter, Gifty, whose parent-child role reverses as she becomes her mother's care giver. Gifty's choice of career as a neuroscientist is propelled

by her life experiences, a sense of duty and the quest to find solutions to addiction and grief-associated depression. Nana's death transforms the narrator's perception of her childhood religious faith. She stops believing in God and writing letters to God as she felt betrayed. Her devotion and determination to her career is drawn from her urge to discover the basis and solutions she sees around her, especially Nana's fatal addiction and her mother's illness.

Gifty is at first a loner who keeps to herself either at her experimental laboratory or at home nursing her bedridden mother. However she gradually opens up for friendship with Katherine, Alice, Raymond and other colleagues at the university. The narrator's mother ultimately dies in her (Gifty's) apartment, in bed in company of the caregiver. The novel ends with a flash forward, Gifty being married to Han, her former colleague at the Stanford university laboratory. She narrates how she still revisits her religious beliefs of visiting the church and lighting late two candles in memory of both her mother and brother.

1.14 Chapter outline

Chapter one

Gives a background information on my study especially an information about the author, Yaa Gyasi and her works. This introductory chapter comprises of the following components; Statement of the problem, objectives, hypothesis, justification of the study, scope and limitation, definition of terms, literature review, theoretical framework and the research methodology to be employed in this research.

Chapter Two

Mechanisms of Dealing with Loss, grief and Despair in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*.

In this chapter I interrogate the forms of loss presented in the novel, their relatedness to the subjects of grief and despair, and how they affect the characters in the novel. The strategies adapted by characters as they strive to cope with loss, grief and despair facing them are examined. The author's presentation of these varied responses in the course of dealing with loss, grief and despair is expounded on in this chapter. The concept of

transcendence in responding to subjects of loss, grief and despair in this text has been discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Three

Narrative Strategy in Exploring the Mechanisms of Dealing with loss, Grief and Despair.

The artistic techniques employed by the author in conveying the message to the addressee are examined and put into a narratological context. Various aspects of narratology such as the narrative order, focalization and narrative voice among others are interrogated in regard to their effectiveness in presenting the strategies of navigating through loss, grief and despair. The theory of narratology has been the guide in interrogating how the author packages and re-orders the events and the content to create meaning.

Conclusion

The conclusion provides a brief summary of the entire project. It also gives an elaborate expose of the findings of my research. Finally it provides recommendations of potential areas for further research.

CHAPTER TWO
MECHANISMS OF DEALING WITH LOSS, GRIEF AND DESPAIR IN YAA
GYASI'S *TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM*.

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the mechanisms of navigating loss, grief and despair in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*. This scrutiny has been achieved through interrogating the characters' experiences, thoughts and actions. I begin by exploring the forms of loss encountered by the characters in the novel and their impacts on the characters' lives. This chapter captures how various characters respond to various forms of loss encountered. I also examine the factors that influence the characters' encounters, actions and thoughts in response to loss. These include race, gender, religion and social status. The main focus in this chapter is to demonstrate that various actions, conscious or unconscious can strategically be employed in surviving waves of loss, grief and despair. Adaptation to the loss encountered by the characters is more a process than an instant state. It is only meant for consolation as characters attempt to cope with the painful encounters of loss and grief but not for restoration of what is lost.

Loss and grief are central and more defined in Gyasi's second novel *Transcendent Kingdom* as compared to her previous novel where family separation and slavery are given prominence. In *Transcendent Kingdom* characters encounter various experiences of loss which propel varied reactions to grief throughout the narrative. In line with Jefwa's argument that, 'death is a hegemonic force that brings disorder in life' (ix), *Transcendent Kingdom* presents various forms of loss that interfere with the characters' normal lives. The characters are depicted as grappling with different survival routes as they face this 'enigmatic force' (2). The death of the narrator's brother and later her mother's death play a key role in the narrative's development. Gifty and her mother undergo various emotional and psychological transformations in an attempt to come to terms with the loss of their loved one. It is Nana's death that propels the narrator's doubt of the existence of God and her childhood evangelical faith. She goes ahead to question the role of religion in providing solutions to human suffering.

‘Where was God in all of this?...If Nana would never be healed and if my congregation could never truly believe in the possibility of his healing, then where was God?(174) ‘Dear God, where are you?(12).

Nana’s death ignites the quest to seek answers to more unanswered puzzles in the narrator’s life from other institutions such as science. The narrator ventures into science in an attempt to find solutions to the major problems faced by her family: her brother’s addiction and her mother’s illness. She wonders if science could work on the people who needed it most. ‘Could it get a brother to set down a needle? Could it get a mother out of bed?’(Gyasi, 44). She yearns to understand the causes and find mitigation to addiction by running experiments on the brains of lab mice, wishing to apply the same on human brains.

Literary writers have over time studied the concept of identity in relation to the immigrant narrative. Larbi Abid in *Fractured Identity* in Caryl Philip’s *Crossing the River* acknowledges ‘family, home, roots and memory as key identity shaping factors’(3) that if interfered with may lead to a ‘disastrous loss of identity’ (3). The protagonist’s family faces an identity crisis as a result of migrancy and being away from their physical homeland, Ghana. In *Reading against the Postcolonial Grain: Migrancy and Exile*, Andrew Smith comments that migrancy or exilic issues are almost always discussions of the subject who has left a birthplace elsewhere for residence and work in Europe, North America, or Australia (63). This is in line with the narrative presented in *Transcendent Kingdom* where the subjects emigrated from their native country to America with the hope of finding a better life. Echoing Miriam Musonye in *Glass not Diamonds: Ike Oguine’s a Squatter’s Tale and the American Dream*, emigration of people from Africa and third world countries is fueled by the urge to make it in life, ‘in chase of the mighty dollar’(54). In most cases this big dream to achieve wealth and better living standards than those in their homelands may be hindered by various life hurdles in their adopted homes. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, for example, the narrator’s mother’s dream of giving her son a good life in America does not materialize as he ultimately dies of heroin overdose. She also has to do several menial jobs to fend for her family as ‘her kind’ cannot get good jobs in this white dominated community.

Danielle, Roth in *(Im) possibility of Transnational Freedom of Action in Bronsky's 'Schebenpark'*, argues that immigrant 'characters are unable to create transnational identities as they are defined by discourses that assign particular identities to them' (2). In *Transcendent Kingdom* the immigrants' presence needs the context of the natives in order to fit in the host community. They live by the standards offered by their adopted home. Nana is once referred by a white church deacon as 'his kind' (112), denoting the othering of black immigrants in Alabama.

The magnitude of loss brought about by the reality of being physically dislocated from his home country weighs heavily on the narrator's father whom she calls The Chin Chin man. Adjusting to a new western culture and the unexpected racial prejudice against him propel his return to Ghana, abandoning his family in America. The narrator and her mother struggle to survive in this transnational space. The narrator's pursuit of neuroscience is fueled by the urge to overcome the stereotypes posed by the transnational space her family lives in. Her life is occupied by the need to prove herself to the world and to find answers to the problems that migrancy has caused her and her family. The narrator's mother is resilient in the face of racial toxicity and verbal attacks from her white employers. She endures everything with the hope of a better future for her family. Different individuals' responses to identity loss manifests variedly as captured in the novel.

The betrayal by religion as an emotional support system to the narrator's family impacts heavily on their lives. They face loneliness as a result of 'not belonging' and being 'othered' by the religious institution leading to psychological emptiness and malaise. This loss hits hard on the narrator's mother, for she had the church as her bosom solace, a form of antidote against her family problems and especially Nana's addiction. The obsession in religion as a firm solace proves futile on the realization that it was 'littered with racist overtones' (Kendi, 2). This was affirmed by Mrs. Cline's comment on Nana's addiction that, 'It is sad, but-and I really do hate to say this -their kind does seem to have a taste for drugs. That's why there's so much crime' (Gyasi, 112). The betrayal cuts deep into the family's consciousness, covering their atmosphere with a feeling of emptiness.

Family disintegration is a common concept in narrating loss and grief within the immigrant context. In her MA dissertation titled, *Interactive Narrative Technique in the Depiction of Societal Disintegration* in Abdulrazaq's *Gravel Heart* Jacinta Matheka argues that 'migrants are a representation of spatial disintegration' (37) in terms of space as they relocate to different places around the globe. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the narrator's family literally moves from their native country, Ghana to America in search of better living standards. This movement forms a spatial detachment from their ancestral home, culture and relatives. The narrator's mother is the first to relocate to America on an invite by a cousin, after Nana's birth. The Chin Chin man later joins them in America. The unhomey experiences in America become unbearable to The Chin Chin man who ultimately flees to Ghana in search of peace of mind. His return to Ghana contributes to the family separation as he never rejoins them as promised. Gifty laments about her family disintegration; 'there were the four of us, then three, then two' (178). At the end of the novel, the narrator is left alone out of the four of her family members

In spite of loss being a universal experience, its impacts may form differently depending on the individuals involved. In her PhD thesis titled *Eulogy*, Holland Jane acknowledges that 'loss is universal, but how an individual experiences and deals with it, is very much the result and individual circumstance and personal history' (2). The assertion is that the manner in which individuals respond to loss and grief is often pegged to their past experiences. This also reflects in Garcia Marquez's *Big Mama's Funeral* where the characters demonstrate the 'apathy they had towards Big mama when they do not take a moment to mourn her death but instead they mark it with festivities and celebrations (Jefwa, 70). The public's past experience with the deceased leader was awful and thus her death came as a relief from her oppressive leadership. Meghan O' Rourke in *The Long Goodbye* states that 'the condition of grief is nearly universal, its transactions are exquisitely personal'(57). The acknowledgement that individuals are affected by loss and grief differently is reflected in *Transcendent Kingdom* where characters' post-loss actions portray these differences. The Chin Chin man experiences the wave of racism when he migrates to the United States to join his family. He loathes being referred to as 'black' and being accused of theft which ignites the void of having lost his freedom and his identity.

The argument that ‘Loss and grief have an impact on an individual’s identity thus failure to validate real experiences with grief, is a failure to validate an individual’s full identity’ (Kendyl, 4) reflects on how some characters respond when faced by loss and grief in the novel. After her husband’s flight to Ghana and later her son’s death, the narrator’s mother, embarks on a struggle ‘to make sense of their shrunken family’ (Gyasi, 118). The experience of losing loved ones contributes to her new identity as an individual and builds in her a resilient self, still holding on to her fractured family.

The question of whether gender has an influence on how individuals respond to loss is a controversial one. Echoing Anne-Marie Mai, in *On Nordic Women’s Literature in the First Decades of the 21st Century,*’ gender themes are employed in investigations of ideas and notions concerning of human condition ,loss, grieving, madness, and attachment to the past’(1). The issue of gender has attracted a great attention to both authors and literary critics if the early 21st century, with both male and female writers ‘throwing themselves into a bona fide discovery of the possibilities offered by social gender and biological sex in terms of new ways of life’(1).

There is the often societal, cultural notion that men are less emotional and stoic while women are sensitive and emotional. In *Grieving beyond Gender*, Terry Martin discredits this notion by stating that an individual’s response to loss should be naturally experienced, regardless of any social expectations. Cindi, S. in *Unpacking My Mother: An Auto ethnography* states that an ‘early mother loss becomes part and parcel of a woman’s identity, shaping the woman and the mother she later becomes’(4). This implies that the effect of loss on younger women may manifest later in their adult lives. Echoing Judith Butler sentiments in *Gender Trouble* that ‘what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity is an act of sorts, a performance imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality’ (270). This is implies that being born male or female cannot determine how individuals behave. The response to grief and loss within the context of social gender constraints may therefore be misleading since contemporarily gender can be performed. Some females may grieve in the patterns traditionally considered ‘masculine’ while some males may grieve in a manner considered ‘feminine’. Loss and grief can be expressed variedly regardless of societal expectations.

In the article *Gender and Literature :the problem of 'Female Writing' and 'Female Reading'* Mary Rutkenen notes that 'feminine features in a text do not help us find the woman in the text'(488). This implies that features considered feminine may be associated with a male character and vice versa. This reflects in my study regarding how various characters respond to loss and grief in *Transcendent Kingdom*. The narrator's reaction to her brother's death is that of resilience and it becomes her point of departure in unraveling the cause of addiction and depression. According to Amy Blackstone in *Gender Roles and Society* 'gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environment' (335) thus how individuals should act is determined by the societal expectations. Gifty's response to the suffering in her life may not be what the society considers 'feminine' in spite of her being female. Nana's death and her mother's depression intrigue her to find answers to these heartbreaking concerns. Gifty, in her narration confesses that Nana's death had a part to play in her career choice. "Nana is the reason I began this work, but not in a wholesome, made-for- TED talk kind of way" (160). Gifty's response does not portray weakness or feeble in any manner but that of love and commitment towards her family thus dedicates her whole career to finding solutions to their shortcomings.

The Chin Chin man responds differently to the culture shock and the loss of his native home on arrival in America. Gifty narrates how her mother 'saw him try to shrink in size, his long proud back hunched as he walked with my mother through the Walmart where he was accused of stealing three times in four months(27). The racial prejudice and lifestyle in America affects the narrator's father negatively. His physique posed a threat to his freedom in this white dominated state that 'changed around big black men'(27).Unlike his experience at the airport in Accra, where his height meant he could grasp 'deep breaths of fresh air above every one's heads'(26),he is forced to suppress his masculinity in order to appear harmless. This depicts the oppression of the African masculinity in his adopted home. He feels deprived of his freedom as a black man living in America, having to work as a janitor due to lack of better jobs for 'his kind'. It is the loss of his native home and the deprivation of his freedom for being a man that rendered him 'homesick and humiliated' (27). This kills his hope of making it in America thus he chooses to return to Ghana, abandoning his family.

2.2 Navigating loss, grief and despair

Episodes of loss and grief are unavoidable. The inevitability of loss and grief in life pushes individuals to find ways of maneuvering through it all. The call for survival mechanisms through loss and grief allows development of a stable self as portrayed by the characters in *Transcendent Kingdom*. Painful occurrences that elicit sadness and anxiety in the affected characters and those within their circles propel the urge to find ways of navigating through it all. Gifty has to deal with her brother's death since childhood, through her teenage to adulthood in her years at Stanford University. The period and manner of dealing with loss may vary from one character to another as 'grieving is an individual thing as our lives are' (Smith, 7). Gifty, for instance depicts the gradual nature of dealing with loss and pain around her as it 'cannot be forced or hurried'(3).

2.2.1 Attachment as an imagined restoration of loss

Transcendent Kingdom has portrayed varied ways of surviving grief, loss of loved ones, family disintegration and identity loss. According to David Ritchie in *Loss, Grief and Representation* 'the melancholic figure in popular perception is often identified as a romantic symbol of connection between insanity and creative genius' (93). He gives agency to melancholia as a navigation tool through loss, grief and despair in contemporary art. Melancholia is the deep sadness retained as a result of holding on to the memory of our lost ones or objects. It serves as a 'fundamental mechanism for restoring a sense of meaning and place for the lost in the ongoing trajectory of self-narrative'(3). It works against the Freudian psychoanalytic ideology of detaching, letting go of the lost object or loved ones and moving on. The narrator's mother adapts to this motif throughout the novel where she clings on to her son's untimely death, resorting to isolation and starvation. This refusal to let go is her own way of expressing the mother-son bond.

Echoing Holland, that 'how individuals deal with loss and grief is absolutely personal', the narrator's mother's means of dealing with loss does not end up well as she endures severe pathological impacts and ultimately dies. Her determination to hold on in spite of the painful experiences is a choice made out of strong will and hope for a better life.

The impacts of not letting go may be crowned by ‘vulnerability but they creatively restore the sense of meaning’ (3) of our lost ones or objects in the literally sense. The Chin Chin man’s attachment to his nativity, culture and ties with his homeland work against post-colonial discourse which emphasizes that the reality of migrancy render identity markers such as nationality and ethnicity irrelevant. In *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that there is no necessary or eternal belongingness since humans now live in an in-between space (179). This asserts that migrants should forge new identities as a result of inter-cultural interactions within their adopted home. The unhomely experiences of hatred and racism by the host community also play part in The Chin Chin man’s yearning for his native land.

Melancholia as an artistic motif may be perceived as a ‘creative remodeling of the experiences of loss through art’ (Holland, 3). This allows characters to recreate the lost objects through creativity. It could be written, oral or visual art. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty’s narration which switches from two time frames; as an eleven-year old and a twenty-eight year old student at Stanford University vitalizes her brother’s memories. She keeps questioning God about her brother’s death; (re)imagining what life would be like if her brother lived. Later at Stanford University, Nana’s memory manifests in her final PhD thesis and her career choice. The whole ideology of clinging on to what is lost as a figure of art works at the advantage of navigating through sad occurrence such as loss of loved ones.

2.2.2 Return as a survival tactic

Migrancy and return motifs are common concepts in narrating immigrant experiences. In *Migrancy as Trauma*, Miriam Musonye argues that post-colonial discourse ‘presents the diffusion resultant from migration, taking place in the context of globalization as leading to blurring of borders and therefore creating new meanings’ (2). This implies that migrancy should be perceived as a potential ground for new experiences, possibilities and opportunities to the migrants. These new homologies may not be pegged to common ancestry, nationality or even race. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the narrator’s mother finds a niche in a white dominated church, adapting to the new religious culture as part and

parcel of their lives. This affirms the fluidity of migrants' culture as they can always establish new cultural ties in their host communities.

Drawing from Homi Bhabha's argument that 'cultures transgress and transform each other in complex ways leading to new perceptions and cultures'(106), migrants should embrace any cultural changes faced in their adopted home as part and parcel of their new life.

On arrival to America most of the migrants face the contrary of their expectations. 'The American dream that lures the immigrants with its diamond glitter, shatters like glass, destroying their hopes in the process(Musonye,53). This 'shattering' of hopes is what faces the narrator's parents long before she was born. The unhomely experiences faced by the narrator's father express the emotional and cultural alienation encountered by African immigrants in America. Gifty (re)narrates her mother's account on the ill treatment and hatred directed towards them, especially 'how America changed around big black men' (Gyasi, 118). The alienation and isolation in the new white dominant community in America have emotional and psychological impacts on the narrator's family, especially Gifty's father who undergoes a severe homesickness and ultimately flees back to Ghana.

Commenting on postcolonial ideologies on the physical loss of a home by migrants in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall argues that 'what was initially felt like a curse...the curse of homelessness or the curse of enforced exile – gets repossessed as a privileged standpoint from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely'(111). This implies that migrancy should be positively perceived as an opportunity for a transnational existence, giving the subjects a chance to experience various identities in the course of their mobility. Whereas postcolonial discourse paints a positive image of migrancy, *Transcendent Kingdom* presents characters whose status of migrancy leads to suffering. The narrator's family's experiences mirror most of immigrants' lives, crowded by racial discrimination, hatred and inequality in terms of job opportunities. The hope 'shattering' realization in this 'open yet closed society' (Musonye, 56) makes life hard for the narrator's family and unbearable for her father who flees to Ghana 'homesick and humiliated'(Gyasi,102).

The question of identity crisis is common in narrating the immigrants' experience. In *Narrating the Self in a Global Context: The Question of Identity in Kakuma Refugee Camp*, Kenya, Miriam Musonye discusses how refugee children's sense of identity is largely associated with geographical locatedness whose permanence is disordered by the reality of living an 'in-between' life; their original home and the possible future resettlement. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the narrator's father's sense of identity is tied to his nativity. He feels deprived of his freedom as a black male immigrant in a white dominated state which fuels his ultimate resolution of returning Ghana.

In *Diasporic Tastes capes: Intersection of Food and Identity in Asian American Literature*, Paula, Terreiro argues that:

'Presence of food images becomes especially meaningful as an indicator of the immigrant nostalgia, the sense of community of the diasporic family, the clash between generations and even the shocks of arrival and return(4).

The Chin Chin man's attachment to 'ochoma' or 'chin chin', (a Ghanaian snack food he was nick named after) cannot compare to the 'frozen, unfresh foods' (Gyasi, 87) served in America. The urge for his native delicacies is symbolic of the dissatisfaction, homesickness, emotional and psychological starvation as a result of 'unhomely immigrant experiences' in America. Food images also represent the hunger for equal treatment and the yearning for a sense of belonging in the host community. The narrator's father internal protest against migrancy reality of being an international citizen fuels his intent of fleeing to Ghana. It propels his choice to return to Ghana to regain his lost identity, home and belonging. Return motif is therefore employed in this novel as a strategy of navigating loss and despair through pursuing and reclaiming what is lost.

2.2.3 The science - religion matrix in *transcendent kingdom*

As mentioned earlier in this study the phenomenon of death-related losses and grief are mostly discussed under often pegged to medicine, religion, psychology and sociology. Literature has the platform to explore these enigmatic phenomena even closely through creative narration, performance or via visual arts. *Transcendent Kingdom* employs

narration in bringing closer subjects rarely discerned in the society such as death, depression and addiction.

Naidu, Maheshvari in *Belief and Bereavement: The Notion of Attachment* argues that 'Religion provides a framework of multiple socially and cultural narratives through which an individual can make sense of the eventualities of death, loss and grief (1). In *Transcendent Kingdom*, religion is presented side by side with science as potential subjects from which characters can derive survival mechanisms through loss and grief. The narrator engages her childhood Evangelical faith to seek answers to her brother's death and her mother's illness. As a child, Gifty wonders if God really existed and if he really did, why Nana had to die.

The search for solutions in both religion and science is evident from how the author begins the first chapter with intertextual quotes from both disciplines: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' (Hopkins Manley) and Sharon Old's, 'Nothing comes into the universe and leaves it' (ix). Religion and science literally form part of the narrator's life as presented in the two time frame narration, as a child and a young adult. As a child Gifty was a staunch Christian and a loyal member of a white dominated church in Alabama. While growing up, she questions the double standard of the church and at some point abandons her faith. Gifty's struggle with her brother's death and her mother's illness ignites her will in pursuing neuroscience, 'studying reward seeking behavior in mice, in search for the root cause of mental illness, depression and addiction (Hester, 2).

Religion is used as way of seeking solace and 'the centrality of a divine power in ordering people's lives' (Jefwa, 205). In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the narrator's mother is faced with the loss of her son, Nana, and her husband's abandonment which leads to her depression attack. In order to navigate through these challenges, she seeks solace in religion. She clings to the belief that all her tribulations were meant to happen as they are God's will.

The narrator's family turns to religion for solutions to various challenges. Her parents' battle with infertility in their earlier years directs them to prayer and fasting amidst questioning God; 'God, after I am worn out and old, shall I have pleasure?' (Gyasi, 23). After the narrator's mother indulgence in prayer, devotion and fasting she believed to be ready to conceive a child. 'Nine months to the day later, my brother Nana, my mother's Isaac was born' (25). This portrays her total reliance on religion to solve her problems. Her strong belief in her evangelical faith throughout the novel to an extent of rejecting any clinical assistance depicts what Jefwa refers to as an unintelligent, 'dim witted' way of engaging religion.

Echoing Judith Jefwa's interpretation of *Place of Destiny* by Margaret Ogola that 'an opening out of the religious spaces and that one need not to be confined to any one religion if they choose not to' (202). This assertion of choice of whether to be religious or not is adapted by the narrator in *Transcendent Kingdom* whose futile questioning of the tenets of her religious beliefs leads her to turn to science as an alternative support system. Gifty, in an attempt to adapt to the pain reconstructs and reassembles the grasp of loss and grief in her life 'in a way that reaffirms religious beliefs about the self and the world beyond (Naidu, 3). To the narrator the world is wide open arena and a free platform where people can experiment and verify different ideas including science, religions and other beliefs which may offer solace. Through her engagement with religion and science as mechanisms of dealing with loss and suffering in her life, she gets to understand the self and the transcendent nature of life.

The contradiction between these two paths in the course of finding solutions to the suffering faced by the characters is portrayed through the narrator who refuses to adopt either of them as the perfect answer to human suffering. The irreversible nature of death depicts the transcendence of human suffering. 'This tension, this idea that one must necessarily choose between science and religion is false. Both became for me, valuable ways of seeing, but ultimately both have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning' (Gyasi, 265).

The search for answers from both religion and science confirms that one does not have to belong to a certain religious affiliation or ideology to be able to understand the aspects of life such as loss, grief and despair. Towards the end of the novel, Gifty, the narrator seeks to reconcile her new self, the scientist with a constant reminder of her childhood faith in finding solutions to the problems around her. The message here is that the concept of duality can work in finding solace to handle different hurdles in life. Gifty is a ‘scientist at heart and a Christian in spirit’ (Hester, 5). Hester goes ahead to argue that ‘possession of multitude’ traits is permissible in life. One can be ‘hardworking and depressed or even be a kind addict’(5).The idea is that there should not be any confined means of life pertaining what to believe in or where to seek solace in times of need.

2.2.4 Subversive Portrayal of Drug addiction

Addiction to drug and substance abuse has been perceived differently in our ordinary lives. In most cases the victims have been blamed for indulgence in this socially unaccepted life style. Literary writers too have captured the subject variedly. In Ontivero Isabel’s, *Before You Knew Me*, an emphasis on how individuals ‘happiness for both children and adults depend on their ability to resist the cycle of dysfunction and pressures of the peers’(3) is explored. In the short story, Isabel argues that loose morals and bending to pressures of life are to blame for the characters’ indulgence in alcoholism and other social unaccepted pleasures. On the contrary, characters’ indulgence in any form of addiction may not solely be as a result of immorality or peer influence.

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the narrator’s brother, Nana gets hooked to opium in an ‘attempt to get through the adversities and piece together the fragments of a life he once had’ (Isabel, 3). Nana, a once brilliant athlete and a basketball player turns to drugs after a severe knee injury that changes his life. It is an escapist move to cope with the new self and his now unachievable dream career. The prescribed oxytocin dose and the cloud of despair push him to the edge of addiction. He ultimately dies of a heroin overdose. The yearning to navigate loss and despair manifests as a burning unrest, a battle from within his body.

Through interrogation of drug addiction as a survival tool in *Transcendent Kingdom*, my study provides a platform for querying various religious, social or even racial perceptions about addiction. Gyasi gives an in-depth image of the inner life of the addicts and the possible life experiences that may have led to their indulgence in drug addiction. She writes:

I know what Nana looks like when you take the bird's eye view: a black male immigrant from a single-parent, lower middle class household...If Nana were alive, if I entered him into a study, it would be hard to isolate his drug use and the cause of this particular portion of his pain. It would be even harder to isolate the cause of the drug use. (210).

Similarly in Jean Rhys's *Good morning Midnight*, the characters' unbearable pain lead to their indulgence in alcoholism and depression as they seek means of surviving loss of family union after a messy divorce. The author poses the questions in examining the characters reaction to these questions: Is the character's situation worsening because she is drunk all the time, or is she drunk all the time because her situation is worsening?'(23). The repetitive substance use by Nana comes after a prescription for his knee injury which jeopardizes his passion for basketball. His addiction to opium is intensified by the pain of losing his favorite sport, the guilt of burdening his family after the injury and the unhomely experiences typical of a 'black male immigrant' (210) living in America. It is this addiction that leads to his untimely death.

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, drug addiction is depicted as a problematic way of navigating loss. It is according to Laura Masferrer, one way of coping with traumatic life events' (2). Gyasi portrays substance use as a basis for racial-based othering of characters in the novel where a white church Deacon associates substance use and crime with the African race.

Literary works enable readers to reflect upon and relate these issues to their daily lives which may result in positive transformation to the directly or indirectly affected individuals. It is through narration that addiction is brought closer to reality connecting it to human experience through the characters in the novel. This may guide readers in

understanding the concept better as they interact with the addicted characters like Nana. This may transform the stereotypic perceptions of addicts in our societies.

2.2.5 Problematizing madness in the face of despair

One of the roles of literature, as mentioned earlier in my study, is the ability to address issues that are rarely discerned in our real lives. Insanity is one under-addressed subject in our daily discourses. According to Sari Betul in *Mad Women of Literature: Gender and Narrative*, 'literature has an exceptional position in narrating experiences such as madness, death, loss and despair which are located outside language and rendered unnarratable' (2). The perception of madness was quite different before the nineteenth century. It was through literature that different perspectives of madness were conveyed. In literary history, madness was sometimes treated as a soft call for empathy towards other people's suffering. For instance Foster Wallace's post suicide canonization, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, characterized by Woolf's mental illness, 'with her pockets stuffed full of stones'(6) attracts pity from the readers. In Emily Reynold's article, *The Literary Glamour in Madness*, she discusses various literary interpretations of madness in history. She argues that other works translated the madness motif as something 'romantic, more transcendental' (6) with a kind of fetish attachment to the artist.

There exist other stereotypic translations to madness in literature .Echoing Natasha M. Jimenez sentiments in her MA project titled, *Madness in Literature*;

'In various perceived articles, mental illness was thought to have occurred because of segregation, a deviance mostly associated with those from low-class and immigrants. Instead of treating it as a sociology issue, it was assumed that what was truly affecting the individuals is the loss of rationality. Madness was precisely perceived as a condition of impossibility of thought' (1).

This interpretation was much pegged to stereotypic ideologies, only associated with the 'othered' groups within a societal set up such as the poor and immigrants in the nineteenth century.

Later came the doctors' version of how the body and brain affect each other, thus terming madness as a curable physical flaw with those treated absorbed as normal people in the society. Availability of various versions on the perception of madness is an indicator that insanity has existed as long as human beings have. Literature has become an effective medium of addressing this subject with existence of literary works such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins, *A Note of Madness* by Tabitha Suzuma among others.

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, images of madness have been presented variedly. Madness has been explored on a thematic level as a devastating effect resulting from the pain of loss and suffering faced by the characters. Gifty's visit to Ghana when she was eleven years old brings an encounter with an insane man at Kejetia market. Gyasi depicts madness as a way of isolating oneself from external disturbance. She writes:

I was walking through Kejetia market with my aunt when she grabbed my arm and pointed. "Look! A crazy person, she said in Twi. "Do you see? A crazy person". The man continued past us, mumbling to himself ,tall with dust caked into his dreadlocks as he waved his hands about in gestures that only he could understand'(18).

The image of the insane man is that of a strange kind of peace, unbothered by what is going on in his surroundings. His shabby appearance and wild mannerism depict a state of hopelessness and desperation. However, he seems to enjoy his own company as he mumbles past crowds of people undisturbed. He is physically amongst the crowds at Kejetia market yet isolated into his own existence. In the case of the mad man, insanity can be perceived as an escapist move, a flight from the real occurrences as the individual seems to exist in a different realm from the rest of the people. A realm with their own language and own experiences. In the novel, the man's prior experiences are not elaborated but it is certain from the narrator's description he does not seem to face the hassles and tussle of daily life as the rest in Kejetia. He is at peace with himself and everything around him.

The image of madness can be interpreted variedly in literature. According to Laura Jose in *Madness and Gender in Late Medieval English Literature*, 'While there is a certain consistency in the literary treatment of madness-motifs, images are repeated across

genres. The ways in which these images are used can alter radically. There is no single model, it is always fluid' (3). This implies that the madness in literature can be treated to different interpretations depending on the literary context. In the novel, the narrator's mother experiences a severe depression after Nana's death. Her son's death gets too harsh to bear in spite of her previous resilience against racism among other unpleasant experiences. The narrator's description of her mother in her depressed state of mind is that of calmness, 'face still as lake water'(18) 'infinitely still, but wild inside'(4). In the case of the narrator's mother madness is portrayed as a devastating effect of the loss of her son to drug addiction. The magnitude of loss, grief and despair numbs her emotional ability to show interest in any kind of activity she had even enjoyed before. She spends most of her time curled up in bed and starving. This depicts the devastating nature of experiencing loss, grief and despair.

In the novel, a connection between the mad man at Kejetia and the narrator's mother is presented in a problematic manner. The young Gifty attempts to understand what madness is by trying to find a reflection of her mother in this crazy man and vice versa. At the mention of 'crazy' she 'pictures a split screen, the dreadlocked man in Kejetia and her mother lying in bed'(4) side by side. This comparison is meant to bring out the contrast between two individuals faced by loss. The mad man's wild appearance contrasts to the narrator's mother's outer calmness, camouflaging the storm inside. This contrast speaks to the various ways in which different individuals react to loss, grief and despair. The 'abodamfo Badam ii'- crazy person in Twi language- attracted no attention from the crowds at Kejetia in spite of his mumbles and wild appearance. 'I think of how no one at all reacted to that man in the market, not in fear or disgust, nothing, save my aunt'(4). This depicts the indignifying nature of loss of sanity in the case of the mad man. His loss renders him invisible and a lesser human with his existence unnoticed by those around him. It is the devastating effects of loss that sees the narrator's mother bundled up in bed, still and silent.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the various mechanisms employed by the characters in surviving through suffering. From the analysis, one can argue that human suffering is indeed inevitable and an integral part of human life. Through an examination of strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom*, I argue that individuals react differently to different forms of suffering around them, with an ultimate objective of surviving through it all. An examination of the life experiences, thoughts and actions of the characters like Gifty, her mother, Nana and Alice among others in the novel bring closer under-addressed subjects of death, drug addiction and depression for scrutiny. Literature therefore has been used to provide agency to these issues mostly ignored in our real life discourse.

It is evident that there are various forms of loss, from emotional, physical to communal, all of which affect people's normalcy. These forms of suffering call for different or even similar strategies of navigating through to restore normalcy or subside their negative effects for survival. This chapter also (re)narrates the immigrant experience as a key cause of identity loss among migrants in the new host community. However, some characters strive to adopt the culture of the host state. Andrew Smith in *Reading Against the Post-colonial Grain:;Migrancy and Exile* in the Short Stories of Kanchana Ugbabe, argues that, 'culture is a world of meaning with determining force for the individual'(1). This implies that exposure to a new culture may produce a common ground, linking different individuals in their specific shared situations.

The reconstruction of identity is another mechanism employed by characters in an attempt to fit 'in their adopted home. The narrator's wish to be a 'scientist' rather than being termed as 'a black woman in science' is way of surviving the double prejudice that comes with being black in a white dominated state and a woman in a male dominated career. In the novel, the characters' various reactions to loss, grief and despair are different, depending on the characters will and endurance.

CHAPTER THREE
NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN EXPLORING MECHANISMS OF DEALING
WITH LOSS, GRIEF AND DESPAIR IN YAA GYASI'S *TRANSCENDENT*
KINGDOM

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims at interrogating the effectiveness of the artistic technique employed by the author in narrating mechanisms of dealing with loss, grief and despair. Narrative strategy refers to the different techniques the author employs in presenting the different mechanisms of coping with loss, grief and despair. In this chapter, plot non-linearity, focalization, language, epistolary, characterization and the narrative order will be scrutinized in regard to enunciating loss, grief and despair. Mieke Bal argues that narratology entails the study of how narratives make meaning. In *Transcendent Kingdom* Yaa Gyasi artistically crafts a narrative that explores various experiences in different times and spaces. This chapter mainly focuses on how the author through narration, unravels the survival mechanisms of loss, grief and despair

Human beings express their emotions, past and present experiences through different ways. Storytelling/narration has been one of the oldest platforms of conveying different messages concerning our life experiences. Narration brings concrete meaning to issues that may not be part of our common daily discourse. Loss and grief are such inevitable subjects that need to be elaborated and expressed. In *Daily News; Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*, Lule, J states that 'people use narratives to make sense of the world'(273). This implies that through narration issues are brought closer, made understandable and relatable. Narrating involves packaging, ordering events and experiences in a logical manner sensible to universal readers or listeners. According to Robert Shank in *Tell me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence*, 'It is as if nothing has happened unless a story is told about it'(114). This emphasizes the significance of narration in regard to validating experiences.

Loss, grief and despair are an integral part of our lives with their narration involving knitting experiences together 'as part of distinctive memory segments' (Lule, 270). Loss and grief narratives are believed to 'perform a cathartic feeling to the individuals' (Shank,

5). This implies that the more a painful episode is told the more relief it causes to the affected. Narration of loss, grief and despair is at the core of Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*. This is manifested through the narrator's account of her own experiences, her family members' and those of other characters, all told from the first person narration.

The narrator's mother is at the centre of it all as her expectations of the American dream fails to materialize on arrival in America, following attainment of the Green Card Lottery. As an immigrant she can only get menial jobs and has to work overtime to make ends meet. Her nerve-racking determination to survive the unfriendly experiences in her adopted country contributes to her whole life of suffering. She refuses to accompany her husband back to Ghana clinging to the hope that things would change for the better.

Through narrating loss and grief, the subject can (re)member, regain and (re)collect segments of the lost one or objects through words. According to Kamila Junk in *Loss and Remembrance in the Works of Two Hindi Writers*, creative works, whether fictional or non-fictional 'would be the only possible means for the subject to remember a lost one or an object through restructuring their image'(11) by use of words. Narrating restructures what we have lost through words. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the narrator's description of her late brother, Nana, keeps him alive through memory. Nana's passion and perfection in basketball skills are narrated in a vivid description, (re)creating his image to both the narrator and the readers.

Most people perceive the themes of loss and grief as resulting from death, but this is not always the case. There are many non-death losses encountered in our daily lives such as illness, family separation and failure to achieve our life targets among others. In *All Our Grievs: An Arts-based Narrative Inquiry*, Joy Manning acknowledges that 'some forms of loss may seem more significant than others'(76) but narration helps make sense of what has happened regardless of its magnitude. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Nana's dream of shinning in basketball is lost after an injury in the court during a tournament. He later resorts to drug and substance abuse to ease the disappointment, the pain of his injury and unachieved dreams. Loss encountered in our lives may completely alter our normal lives thus the need to find mechanisms of dealing with whatever challenge comes our way. Melinda Smith in *Coping with Grief and Loss* acknowledges that 'there is not a typical

response to loss and grief as there is no typical loss'(4). This asserts that there are no standardized patterns of grieving any kind of loss. This mirrors in *Transcendent Kingdom* where characters react variedly to various forms of loss.

The act of narrating painful episodes helps in maintaining the internal conflict in an individual. It can also be an essential way of releasing emotional pressure. In the case of Gifty, her long silence about her private life keeps her isolated and a social misfit while in the company of her colleagues. The moment she opens up about Nana's death and her mother's depression to a few of her colleagues at the university marks a turning point in the search for the self. She finds it easy building relationship with others and accepting the reality of what her family is going through.

3.2 The narrator and the narrative perspective

Gerard Genette gives emphasis to the three basic components of a narrative. These includes the story (the signifier), the narrative and the narrating, the real action in which the plot of the narrative takes place (27). The manner in which the content is presented is very important according to Genette. He distinguishes between focalization and the narrative voice. Narrative perspective is also known as the focalization while the narrator refers to the narrating voice. Narrating voice is 'how' narrative is conveyed to the narratee from the person telling the story, what Genette refers to 'who speaks,' or the speaker, the narrator, the voice of the narrative text. Various narrative perspectives can also be employed to present a narrative, what Maria Magher refers to as multiperspectivity or polyperceptivity in *Multiperceptivity*. This involves multiple narrating voices in the same narration. The character's urge to find solutions to her family suffering is enhanced by the retrospective first person narrative employed by the author in this novel .Echoing Jacinta Matheka in *Interactive Narrative Technique in the Depiction of Societal Disintegration in Abdulrazzaq's Gravel Heart*, 'multiple narrating voice enhances themes as well as creating a strong story arc or deepening characterization' (30).

Transcendent Kingdom adopts a multiple narration and multiperceptivity mirroring the uncertainties and anxieties involved in surviving loss, grief and despair . These various narrative voices enrich the narrative in content and subject for explorations. *Transcendent*

Kingdom begins with the narrator's account of her first visit to Ghana at eleven years of age. She had been sent to stay with her aunt as her mother recovered from a severe depression attack after Nana's death. Throughout the novel, by closely following the narrator's voice, it is easy to point out the deviation from the regular narration of events. For instance, the narrator's description of the bridge from SFO to her apartment in California is constructed from her personal imaginative opinion. She suggests that the bridge 'brought everyone to their personal edge' (7). Notably, this is a thought that represents her personal opinion.

The narration voice keeps changing from the protagonist's, her aunt and other characters throughout the novel through direct questions and dialogues. This provides more information on various issues tackled in the novel, such as the subject of madness which the young Gifty may not be conversant with in order to enhance believability. "This is what crazy looks like" (4) is what encodes in the young narrator's mind when her aunt points out the crazy man to her at Kejetia market, probing more questions in her young mind. This helps connect the mysterious nature of loss, grief and despair. *Transcendent Kingdom* is told within a two time frame; the protagonist as a young girl and as a young neuro-science student at Stanford university. The events between these two phases are presented through flashbacks and flash forward by the narrator. The loss, grief and suffering from her childhood propel her urge to find the causes and solutions to them. Her brother's death from heroin addiction and her mother's depression are the driving force into finding solutions to various life puzzles such as loss, grief, addiction and depression.

Gifty re-narrates her parent's life in Ghana long before she was born as narrated to her by her mother. That is what Genette (1980) refers to as external focalization where the narrator relies on others to reveal experiences and occurrences unknown to the narrator. Her parents physical migration to America due to the fact that 'Ghana had started to feel cramped' (23), her parents' struggle with infertility, her unexpected birth and her father's return to Ghana when she was four years are all told by Gifty as narrated to her by her mother. The experiences in both nations, some told through flashbacks retell a mixed reaction of the immigrant narrative, for instance The Chin Chin man exposes the stereotypic tale of othering crowned by mistrust and disrespect towards the black

immigrants while TBM experiences mild negativity from her white employers, but she is treated as part of the family. Her choice never to go back to Ghana, in spite of her husband's abandonment and the unpleasant life in America extrapolates the idea of resilience and the will to survive.

This (re)narration unravels the incorporation of first and third person narration in this novel. There are multiple narrative voices (speakers) and multiple perspectives in this narrative as the protagonist, who is the main speaker seems to rely on other characters for information on their thoughts and experiences.

Through this voice multiplicity, the author reveals the uncertainties of survival loss, grief and despair and the urge to make their narration clear through employing multiple voices. Gifty's urge to find solutions to the suffering faced by her family begins from childhood when she questions God on her brother's death and her mother's sickness. She has been in search of solutions since her childhood up to her adult years at Stanford. At the end of the novel, her quest seems not to bear fruits. The path of religion and science fail to answer her questions; she thus adopts both for survival. 'I never pray, I never wait to hear Gods voice , I just look, sit in blessed and I remember, try to make order, make sense, make meaning of the jumble of it all. Always, I light two candles before I go' (264). The multiple voices and perspectives reveal the fractured lives of the characters in the novel. The emotional instability and anxieties caused by loss and grief reflects in the fragmented narrative structure resulting from various narrating voices in the novel.

3.3 Plot non-linearity and the expression of loss and grief

A narrative structure is basically about the event, incident or the content of the story and the form in which the story is told. According to Genette, a story is the actual order of event as they occurred, following chronology. In *Transcendent Kingdom* the author explores the navigation through loss, grief and despair by using a complex artistry in presenting the events in the novel. The relationship between the narrative structure and the narrative content is significant in understanding the navigation of loss and grief in my study. The fragmentariness of the structure mirrors the disordered nature of experiencing loss and grief.

Gennette defines plot as the order of narration. It entails the manner in which the author sequences the events to compose a narrative. In *Transcendent Kingdom* the plot is unpredictable as the author employs flashbacks, flash forwards and multiple perspectives, all linked to narrate various strategies of dealing with loss, grief and despair.

Gyasi introduces the first chapter of the novel with a flashback, an account on Gifty's first and only visit to Ghana as an eleven-year old. She links this 'past event to the present to achieve the fullness of time' (Matheka 29). This flashback also foregrounds the subject of loss and suffering tackled in the rest of the novel as it poses the puzzle of loss after Nana's death and his mother's sanity. According to Gennette, happening back and happening forward in a narrative are meant to alter the order of narration (27) for artistic reasons. The events in chapter one are narrated by the young Gifty in a mostly vague way as she struggles to come to terms with new experiences: her mother's illness, the new environment in Ghana and Nana's death. "I didn't understand, but I did" (Gyasi, 4). This portrays a child's non-linear thoughts and narrations, though behind the young Gifty narration is an adult trying to recall. The narrator's next episode is an account of when she received her sick mother at SFO airport in California where she was studying neuroscience at Stanford University. This back and forth narration between Gifty's childhood and her life at the university creates a fragmented plot.

The novel's main episode or the climax is Nana's death. The novel's intense grief and despair emanate from Nana's death which is narrated towards the end of the novel, as opposed to the reader's expectations. The incidents in the prior chapters draw a lot from the narrator's family past, the life in Ghana and their migration to America. Nana's birth and the narrator's are narrated from flashing back to the past events. This non chronological order of events, is what Gerard Genette refers to as 'anachrony'. It changes the main cause of the plot as the events do not follow the order in which they happened. This expresses how loss, grief and despair can alter an individual's thoughts as they strive to express everything randomly to the reader. The author's choice to have the climax, Nana's death, narrated towards the end of the novel gives more depth to the story, creating suspense in the narrative. Suspense keeps the reader glued to the story with the

urge to unveil the actual occurrences causing grief and despair to the characters in the novel.

Genette distinguishes between the narrative time and the story time by breaking the 'narrative movement' (94) into four basic forms. Descriptive pause, is the slowing down of a narrative to give further highlights on certain events/issues, ellipsis (a break in the story time), scene, which exists when the narrative and the story are in close execution, as in a dialogue' (Salmoise, 203) and 'summary which speeds up the narrative to convey a longer stretch of story time' (Genette, 95).

Descriptive pause is a common aspect of narrative time employed to bring the experiences in the narrative/story closer to the readers for memory idealization. Adaptation of the present tense can have the slowdown effect on a narrative. The narrator narrates her sick mother's relocation to California before narrating her parents initial immigration to America, propelled by her mother's intent of 'giving Nana the world' (Gyasi,25). This alteration of chronological order of events as they happened gives attention to the supportive characters in the story who at some point help in developing the main issues in the narrative. Gifty's encounter with the mad man at Kejetia market in Ghana foregrounds the concept of insanity and loss of self-conscience to the young Gifty. 'My aunt was saying, "That. That is what crazy looks like". But instead what I heard was my mother's name'(4). The incident of the madman intrigued the young narrator deeply into understanding what it was to be insane. It deepened the need to understand what was ailing her mother. This encounter marks the genesis of Gifty's search of solutions to her mother's depression.

Other supportive characters, whose attention is drawn to the reader through the non-linearity of the plot, include Gifty's grandmother and The Chin Chin man. They remind the reader of the lost identity, native culture and the strong desire to hold on to lost memories. Grandma's 'ochomos', a traditional snack also known as The Chin Chin is an image of the lost immigrant freedom in the adopted community. Racism, hatred, discrimination and the feeling of 'not belonging' is what fuels The Chin Chin man's return to Ghana. His return contributes to the family disintegration, affecting the narrator, Nana and their mother greatly.

In *Transcendent Kingdom* the narration bounces from the present to the past and vice versa across the chapters. Most of the narrator's present situations stimulate her past experiences, which contribute to the back and forth narration throughout the novel. For instance, the narrator's mother's presence in her apartment in California stimulates the narration on her very first experiment in her middle school's physical science class: the Naked Egg Experiment (33). The unexpected outcome of the experiment is related to the uncertainties of having her mother sick and curled up in bed all day. She questions herself, 'Are we going to be okay?' (33). The narrator's present life as a neuro-scientist is pegged to her intent of finding solutions to her past experience of losing her only brother to drug addiction. The movement to the past is therefore triggered by the need to connect to the root of her search for solutions. This back and forth narration reflects the disruptive nature of dealing with loss, grief and despair in the characters' lives.

3.4 Characterization and the response to loss and grief

This is a literary device in which an author gradually brings out a characters' details in a story; character development. In *Characterization in Fiction*, Jack Reams defines characterization as 'any action by the author or taking place within a work that is used to give direct or indirect description of a character' (4). Characterization remains an instrumental agent in a plot-driven narrative because characters create conditions that move the story. The plot is basically about what happens to characters, thus writers should use characterization to foreground their thoughts and histories without drifting from the actions. The plot springs from the actions of characters in conflict. Characterization is therefore key in any narrative, fictional or non-fictional, as they 'give the story a purpose, a reason for the reader to care about what happens' (Reams,2). This asserts that characters enhance the development of a story line and without which the story would be incomplete.

In her article *Transcendent Kingdom; A Triumphant Meditation on Loss and Grief* Kenyi, M. argues that Gifty is a 'revelatory character, layered, introspective and human'(2) speaking in the sense of being invested within her as an individual instead of a secondary response to what is happening to characters around her.

My study, in this section scrutinizes various categories of characters' personalities, actions, thoughts and experiences in *Transcendent Kingdom* and how they relate to mechanisms of handling loss, grief and despair. In this section, I examine varied categories of characters in the novel and how they contribute to developing the themes of loss, grief and despair. I focus on religious escapees, fluid sexual orientations and gender identities.

Gender and sexual identity have been controversial subjects in the global literary arena. Many contemporary literary writers have addressed these subjects from varied angles and perceptions. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler states:

Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, gender and desire, only when sex can be understood in the same sense to necessitate gender-where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self and desire-where desire is heterosexual. The internal coherence or unity of gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable oppositional heterosexuality (30).

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, characters portray the fluidity of gender identity through adopting various sexual orientations as they seek tranquility from the emotional and psychological pain they encounter. Gifty's years in high school, college and premier years at Stanford were lonely and uneventful as she felt 'not cool enough, white enough'(22) to be part of her peers. Part of her final year at Stanford University is marked by self- isolation in the lab and experimenting mice for reward –seeking behavior, shutting her out of an interactive social life. She however narrates her gradual opening up to several random sexual intimacies, just to feel part of her peers' circles. '...the men, most of whom I had slept with once and never see again. It made me feel powerful' (22).

This sexual pleasure gives the narrator some sort of freedom and power to release her emotional distress without attachment. It is her own way of coping with her internal pain from loss and grief faced in her family. At some point towards the end of her sixth year at Stanford University, the narrator is involved in a romantic relationship with an old girlfriend, Anne. She narrates:

By the end of that semester, Anne and I were in the thick of a friendship so intimate, it felt romantic; it was romantic. We had kissed and a little more, but I couldn't define it and Anne didn't care to' (233).

This variance in the narrator's sexual orientation, associating with sexual partners from both male and female sexes, expresses the performativity of sexual identity, true to Butler's argument that sexual orientation is 'produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms' (23). At the end of the novel, the narrator ends up in an established union with Han, her former male colleague at Stanford experimental labs. Gifty's sexual fluidity/variance symbolizes the various paths taken in search of the self, as a black woman in science and an immigrant in the course of dealing with her brother's death among other losses and pain shouldered by her family.

In *Human Sexuality in a World of Diversity*, Rathus Spencer, associates gender roles with any widely accepted societal expectations about how males and females should behave' (447). These prescribed roles have stereotypically placed men and women in different positions in the society. For instance, the normative perceptions that women are softer, fragile and emotional while men are bold and strong. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the narrator's mother may be considered to subvert the norm by playing the masculine roles due to the demands of life. She fends for her children singlehandedly when her husband flees to Ghana by doing several menial jobs in America. She plays the roles of both the mother and father to her children. The hardships in her life render her unemotional and harsh to her children, unlike 'what is considered feminine' (Ruth,447). While retelling a story to Gifty, Nana refers to his mother as a rock, 'If Pop was a tree, then Ma was a rock' (41). This is in attempt to match his mother's firmness and endurance in the tough situations they face as a family.

Most female authored novels address issues pertinent to women with the aim of bringing to light some women sensibilities ignored by their male counterparts. Contemporary feminists' works express different perceptions pertaining to womanhood. In *The Rhetoric of the New Woman* Rachel Stroup defines the term 'new woman' as a symbol that represents a comprehensive compilation of the new choices women are making' (1). The

‘new woman’ connotes a redefinition of women contrary to the prior traditional ‘domestic worker’ depictions.

Transcendent Kingdom harbors the ‘new woman’ sensibilities in the characters that make various choices in life regarding their womanhood for survival. Some female characters may choose to follow life paths different from the ‘traditional paths laid to them –that is to get married, to have children and to stay quietly at home’ (Welter, 21). The choices made by some of the characters regarding their womanhood are for their convenience, means of finding solutions to the problems they are facing. In the novel, Katherine, a PhD neuroscience student and the narrator’s friend, expresses her husband’s invasion of her womanhood space. She reveals her husband’s secret tracking of her ovulation cycle to get her pregnant, something she disapproves. Her womanhood guides her life choices of not bearing children. This is a symbol of freedom as the ‘new woman’ contrary to the traditionally-dictated woman. She stands out as a woman in science whose choice is to be a married but not bear children.

The narrator’s mother uses her womanhood to fulfill her yearning to bear children. Her battle with infertility in her early years of marriage sees her cling to religion for solace. Her wish to prove her viable womanhood was weighing down on her and had become a sort of grief, loss of her identity as a woman. Gifty narrates that:

They prayed for a baby, but month after month, year after year, no baby came. It was the first time my mother ever doubted God. My mother spent three days fasting and praying in the living room of my grandmother’s house...Nine months to the day later, my brother Nana, my mother’s Isaac was born’(15).

The narrator’s mother’s choice of perceiving childlessness as a form of loss may contradict the modern feminists’ ideology of associating a woman’s identity with her ability and choice to bear or not to bear children. TBM relies on her womanhood to survive through grief of fulfilling her motherhood desire. Her contradictory choice of not having more children reflects the new economic status in America, where everything is money-oriented. Gifty happens to be an unwanted pregnancy due to the expensive life in America. This change of desire literally depicts the deceptive nature of the ‘American dream’, the confusion and anxieties typical of an immigrant life.

Womanhood has been used as a mechanism of dealing with various challenges encountered by the characters. The depiction of women as custodians of their destiny is portrayed in this novel as a way of navigating loss and grief. The narrator's childhood mantra of 'abstinence till marriage' takes a turn after her high school years. In the first year at university, Gifty chooses to shed off her conservative nature and explore her sexuality as a way of finding the self. She indulges in sexual relationships with both male and female partners in the course of coping with the suffering around her. This phase of life portrays achievement of sexual liberty after a long deprivation by religion from her sexuality, her 'inner world' (133). She narrates:

'Not too long after the eight hour session...I started my period...it wasn't until my freshman's year in college in a biology class that I learnt what and where a vagina truly was...the secret world, an inner world revealed'(133).

This realization of the self comes with the urge to survive through the death of her brother and her mother's illness. Shukla in *Depiction of Women in Literature* echoes Garg's sentiments that that in 'most literature, female sexuality has got reduced to freedom of the body functions such as menstruation, sexual desires and sexual assault. The real independence which stems from taking decisions without deference to the canons of discourses, religious, social, patriarchal or feminists missing (Garg,13). The assertion is that the general freedom of women should not be limited to the female body and its functions rather should be extended to their life choices and their complete liberation to make decisions pertaining to sexuality, regardless of external social normative expectations. Women should be without guilt express their sexuality choices. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Yaa Gyasi explores the various choices made by characters rendering the subject temporal and fluid. These choices are adopted as coping mechanisms to the persons experiencing the pain of loss.

Various belief systems seem to be pivotal in dealing with human suffering as 'religion is often seen as a way of coping with the unpredictable' (Jefwa, 200). In *Transcendent Kingdom* religion is depicted as a refuge, a coping mechanism to the unpleasant experiences faced by the immigrant family. The narrator's mother is a devout member of a First Assemblies of God church, a white dominated church in the South. Her complete

trust in the belief systems to heal her grief and despair compels her to seek solace in religion. To the believers especially, the narrator's mother and the young Gifty, religion symbolizes peace, safety from earthly tribulations. The protagonist narrates her mother's unquestionable trust in religion;

"...she would object, say something like, God is the only science we need" (42).

This devotion is an escapist move from the hostility, unhomely experiences faced by the immigrant family in the host community. The racial prejudice, hatred and unequal treatment in public spaces ignite a feeling of 'not belonging', and a lost identity. TBM's devotion in religion throughout the novel is therefore a mechanism of surviving the new life in America as an African. In spite of the unpleasant experiences faced in the midst of the white dominated community, some characters such as TBM remain resilient and hold on to her faith for redemption. Nana's death, The Chin Chin man's flight to Ghana among other daily challenges affects the narrator and her mother who both seek different ways in dealing with the same. Through the recount of religion, especially for a black African in a white dominated church in Alabama, readers can deduce from the character development of the involved individuals in the novel.

In the beginning of the novel, Gifty's devotion in her childhood evangelical faith is as unshakable as her mother's. She loyally accompanies her mother and brother to church services every Sunday. This devotion comes to a halt when Nana dies, with the pain of loss and grief digging deep into her senses, compelling her to question the presence of God. She narrates:

'I trembled, and in the one second it took for the tremble to move through my body, I stopped believing in God. A tremble-length reckoning. One minute in life here was a God with the whole world in his hands; the next minute the world was plummeting, ceaselessly, toward an ever-shifting bottom' (31).

This experience marks the point of self-realization, a new self-driven identity different from the blindly guided child. It is an epiphany in the quest for her self-identity and the inquiry to coping with loss, grief and despair. To Gifty, religion becomes an experimental specimen alongside her scientific experiments to find mechanisms of coping with her

brother's loss and her mother's illness. At the end of the novel, her quest to find solutions to depression and addiction ends up with no definable answers. She adopts duality as way of life. She narrates:

'I am no longer interested in other worlds or spiritual plane, I have seen enough to understand transcendence, holiness, redemption...I never pray, never wait for God's voice, I just look.'(264).

The young preacher, Pastor Tom who the narrator calls P.T. uses religion as a platform to reach out to the contemporary youth in his church. He chooses to preach about issues relevant to the teenagers and in a slang language. The narrator describes him as the 'kind of youth pastor who wanted to make God hip in a way that almost felt exclusionary...His was the God of punk rock' (98). P.T's interpretation on various religious ideologies was mostly from a contemporary point of view in order to remain relevant with the teenage congregation.

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, religious belief systems symbolize the characters' search for peace, hope and a mechanism of surviving the pain of loss and grief faced. It also exposes the double standard and pretentious traits beneath religion, where leaders pose as judgmental rather than offer consolation to those suffering. This is expressed when a church deacon stereotypically associates blacks with drug abuse and crime upon learning of Nana' death.

3.5 Embedded epistolary in articulating loss, grief and despair

Letter forms can be employed in literary works in various ways and purposes. They can be employed dominantly in a literary piece or have the whole work presented in a letter form. In a MA dissertation, *Interactive Narrative Technique in the Depiction of Societal Disintegration in Abdulrazzaq's Gravel Heart*, Matheka explores how the 'letter form is used as a mnemonic device'(32) .In *Transcendent Kingdom* the author makes use of embedded epistolary form as a strategy of narrating characters' coping mechanism with regard to loss, grief and despair. The author creates an introverted protagonist who is naturally predisposed to expressing her thoughts and feelings through journaling. The narrator's journal is in the form of letters addressed to God, written in the period before she was eleven years. The letters which obviously go unresponded are filled with

questions, worries and anxieties clouding the young Gifty's mind regarding the pain, loss and suffering around her.

'Epistolary form of writing adds realism to the narrative by mimicking workings of daily life' (Matheka, 32). Through young Gifty's journal, the daily happenings are captured as well as her emotional mysteries as a child facing loss and grief. Her attempt to understand God from her childhood religious beliefs is expressed through the rhetoric questioning of why things happen the way they do and the role of God in it all. She expresses her inner emotional turmoil by pleading with God to restore her family's happiness. She writes;

'Dear God,

Please hurry up and make Buzz better. I want the whole church to see.'

I knew, even as I was writing that entry, that God didn't work like that, but then I wondered, how exactly did he work?'(175).

The narrator's confusion as a child regarding God's role in her life and that of her family is expressed as she doubts His efficacy. The many letters seem to be in vain to the young Gifty as nothing changes regarding her brother's addiction and her mother's illness. This has a great impact on Gifty's perception of God and religion in her life. Her brother's ultimate death amidst her pleas to God to restore his health influences her later decision of giving up on religion as an escape from the pain of loss and grief befalling her family.

The author portrays the innocence of a child as the young Gifty writes to God to save and change a neighbor's noisy dog. This further expresses the naïve nature of a child's mind and the inability to fathom complex life concepts such as death, grief and illness. This embedded epistolary style captures the narrator's childhood up to when Nana dies that she stops writing to God as she had started 'doubting Him'(175). This symbolizes the point of self-realization regarding her perception of religion as a potential solution to the suffering around her. It depicts her urge for identity shift from a religious personality to a scientist in the course of seeking relief from the loss and despair faced by her family.

The unfulfilled quests to God pertaining to her family loss and despair pose more questions than answers to the young narrator's mind. She writes:

Dear God,

I've been wondering where you are. I mean, I know you're here, with me, but where are you exactly? In space?(12).

These questions open up her inquiry realm, she starts seeing religion from a different lens, one that saw 'the damage of going to a church where people whispered disparaging words about 'her kind' causing a spiritual wound' (174). The embedded epistolary style with questioning letters to God portrays the fragmented nature of confusion and anxieties faced by characters as they strive to survive through loss of loved ones, family disintegration and illness.

The narrator keeps her childhood journal even after she stops writing and believing in God. The older Gifty reads these letters to reconcile her past with her present life as a scientist in the course of finding solutions to the loss, grief and despair faced by her family. This depicts the concept of duality and transcendence in human existence. At the end of the novel the narrator sees both 'science and religion as valuable ways of seeing but ultimately failed to satisfy their aim: to make clear.to make meaning' (264). She adopts multiplicity in ideology and identity as ways of coping with loss, grief and despair.

The embedded epistolary style plays a key role in enabling readers to understand the mindset of the narrator. It unveils the confusion amidst struggle for identity in a disjointed family set up as the characters attempt to navigate through it all. In *Women, Letters and the Novel*, Ruth Perry argues that an 'epistolary form in literature speaks to the deeper truth that people are locked into their own skins, into their own consciousness' (107). Through the narrator's letters addressed to God, readers are exposed to the deep buried feelings following Nana's addiction then death, the racial based betrayal by the religious leaders and her doubt in God. The embedded epistolary is therefore used as a medium of exposing the characters' struggles and the extent in which they are trapped within this conflicting world.

Embedded epistolary style in this novel, gives the narrator a platform to unpack her internal emotions. She is by nature a loner and an introvert, always keeping to herself until later in her sixth year at Stanford University when she attempts to open up. Writing these letters is therefore a way of navigating silences in her life, for instance the reason of her father's absence, her mother's long hours away from home and Nana's drug addiction. Her diary keeping and letter writing are an attempt to fill the void caused by the physical and emotional loss she encounters from childhood

In *Epistolary in Young Adult Literature*, Emily Wasserman argues that 'the personal thinking and private worlds of letter writing are well suited to the reflection and construction of identity which take place in young people's literature' (1). The assertion is that, through letter forms, whether partial or dominant in a literary work, readers get a platform to explore the characters experiences directly without the author's interruption. The narrator's emotions and perceptions regarding the concept of religion, loss, grief and despair can directly be captured from her letters. The letter forms embedded in the narrative have suitably been used as a strategy of dealing with traumatic effects of loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom*.

3.6 The Language of loss and grief

Language plays a crucial role in peoples' daily lives as it's through language that emotions, ideas and thoughts can be expressed. How an author uses words and literary elements is key for the purpose of understanding the underlying meaning in a text. Language style can be felt in in the writer's creative choice of words in a work of art. According to Elaine Chaika in *Language: The Social Mirror*, 'the style of language in a communication mainly focuses on the intended social message' (31). The language used in conveying this social message is not always directly coded rather requires a critical eye in responding to it.

In *Language of Loss: A Journey through Grief*, Sarah Bates argues that, 'in spite of the inevitability of loss and grief, the subject is often viewed as an untouchable mountaintop that one must overcome alone' (1). Creative writers have however strived to normalize such taboo subjects such as death, grief and despair. They do so by employing various language styles to ease the dull nature of loss, grief and despair. In *Transcendent*

Kingdom, the author exercises her creativity in conveying the characters' response to loss, death and grief as she strives to 'find humor and light amidst the depressing, confusing reality' (Bates, 1).

Gyasi presents agonizing characters, struggling to cope with various forms of suffering around them. Through various styles of language the author makes some reactions and emotions feel normal. According to Sarah Bates, a fictional writer may 'give permission for all the feelings and offer various methods of dealing with them' (1). Addiction, suicidal attempts and sexual pleasures are some of the normalized means of coping with suffering in the characters' lives in the novel. The characters' struggle in trying to find 'balance of keeping the memories of their lost loved ones alive while simultaneously exploring new ways of being without them' expressed through different language styles. Language style may attract different interpretation in a literary work. This is as a result of the varied thoughts and ideas that each individual possess. Readers can extract the meaning from a text as the 'style forms a communication system in its own right telling how to interpret a message' (Chaika, 3).

In her MA Dissertation on *Language Style in Love Rosie; A Sociolinguistic Analysis*, Irene Walter argues that 'language style is the way to convey the same information by using different expression and related to different variations of language that are used in varied situations and needs'(1). In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the author presents various language styles to convey various artistic and social effects in the novel. These elements speak to the navigation of loss, grief and despair which is the signature topic in my study.

The author's word choice in *Transcendent Kingdom* display the artistry in the text while giving a clue to the meaning of loss and grief encountered by the characters throughout the novel. The deliberate use of the native Ghanaian Twi language by some characters such as the narrator, her mother and aunt speak to the cultural identity loss and the characters' efforts to restore it. The Ghanaian immigrants' attendance at Elks Lodge for Nana's funeral is marked by native songs and prayers in the native language. It serves as a reference to the characters' cultural roots to which they cling when facing problems in the host community. For instance the narrator's mother prefers mourning her son in her native language at the funeral. She sings:

Ohunu mu nni dua bi na maso mu
Nsuo ayiri me oo,na otwafoo ne hwan?
(There is no branch which I could grasp
I am in swamped waters, where is my savior?)(186).

The author's choice of native language indicates the characters' urge to identify with their roots especially in times of sorrow and grief. The narrator's mother breaks into a desperate prayer when she first encounters Nana's fury as a result of drug abuse. The realization that she was indeed losing her son to addiction sunk deeply into her conscience. She mumbled in prayer:

Awurade,bo ba barima ho ban.Awurade bo me ba barima
(O Lord protect my son. Lord protect my son)(20).

The author's use of native language is an instrumental tool of bringing the fictional characters to life along with their cultural identity and their history as Ghanaians throughout the novel. The writer uses swear or curse words on characters such as the addicted Nana and his circles of friends. Profanity in this case speaks to the indignity caused by drug abuse, Nana's means of escaping the pain of losing his physical health after the injury. He transforms into a bitter individual, hurling insults at her family members. '..You nosy cunt, get the fuck out of here' (45). This portrays the extent to which Nana's loss of health and his unfulfilled dreams in his favorite sport push him to seek relief in drugs. The indecency of losing the self in the course dealing with loss and despair mirrors in the use of curse words by Nana.

Coded language has been used in naming of some characters in the novel. The narrator's mother is referred to as The Black Mamba, abbreviated as TBM throughout the novel. Nana is referred to as Buzz in the narrator's journal while the father is referred by his nickname The Chin Chin Man. The use of code names especially on the narrator's parents creates suspense, an unanswered urge of why the parents who are also among the lead characters in the novel would remain unidentified by their real names. This suspense epitomizes the confusion and uncertainties experienced in the novel as characters strive to navigate loss and grief. The unnamings speak to the anxieties accompanied by loss and

grief in the characters' lives. The Chin Chin's man return to Ghana leaves his family in great turmoil; desperation of witnessing their family disintegration. Gifty narrates:

That this man, my father went back to Ghana in such a cowardly way, leaving his two children and wife alone to navigate a difficult country, a punishing state. That he let us, let her, believe that he might return' (70).

The separation of the family members from their father weighs down on them. Each one of the strives to navigate through it all individually.

Figurative language involves using ordinary sentences to convey messages indirectly. Fictional writers employ figurative language to creatively engage the addressees in forming their own interpretations. It makes creative works more lively, interesting and thought provoking than when a literal form of language is used. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the characters' experience as they maneuver through loss is symbolically portrayed. Gifty's journal is a symbol of her childhood naivety as she writes letters to God. The young Gifty's naivety, fascinated by prayer and religious beliefs is felt through the letters she addresses to God. From a childhood perspective, Gifty may have expected instant replies from God. It also represents her unquestionable faith in her evangelical faith to solve all problems around her.

'The lab coat is a metaphor of the new self, Gifty's new identity as a researcher and a revealer of her sexual orientation(queer). Gifty's lab coat represents her new ideology of seeking solutions to her family's problems in science. Her inner conflicts are as a result of Nana's death and her mother's severe depression attack. Her gradual loss of hope in religion hits the climax after Nana's death. Her unanswered prayers propel the urge to seek for solutions to the pain facing her family elsewhere. Her new identity as a neuroscientist, always in the lab running experiments on mice brains is represented by her lab coat which she wears for the many hours spend at the laboratory.

The bridge between SFO and California is a metaphor of the transition into a new responsibility for the narrator; she would be her sick mother's care giver till her demise. The reverse role of having to take care of her mother fuels her urge to find quicker solutions to her depression attack. Seeing her mother's curled up body in bed, always

facing the wall brings back Gifty's past memories of her healthy mother, when 'there used to be four of them, then three, two'(11). The physical journey from Alabama marks the ideological shift from a reserved individual to a liberal one in quest for solutions to her family suffering. The protagonist's isolation from her peers, keeping her worries and suffering to herself takes a turn as she starts opening up, fostering romantic relationships.

The bridge is also portrayed as a point of meditation as passengers peep out to the far stretched waters beneath it in the course of the heavy traffic jam. It is narrated:

I've always found that traffic on a bridge brings everyone closer to their personal edge. Inside each car, a snapshot of a breaking point, drivers looking out towards the water and wondering, what if? Could there be another way out? In the scum of cars, the man seemed to be close enough to touch. What could he do if he could touch me? If he didn't have to contain all that rage inside his Honda Accord, where would it go? (7).

The narrator's thoughts bouncing from the landscape, her mother, to the next car's driver, to the bridge and its deep waters beneath portray non-linearity of pain faced after losing her brother to addiction and her mother's traumatic depression. The imagined serenity of the waters beneath this bridge provides consolation to the grieving Gifty as she strives to navigate through it all. The short juncture chanced by the heavy traffic connects her grieving self to other travellers who she imagines are too lost in thoughts as they vacantly stare beyond the bridge.

3.7 Expressing loss and grief through intertextuality

Any literary work reflected in the creation of a new textual piece should be considered intertextual. Intertextuality creates out literary interrelationship between texts. This can be manifested through direct quotations, allusions, translation or even parody. Maria, Martinez in *Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept* emphasizes that texts should be understood 'not as self-contained systems but as differential, historical as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures (268). This emphasizes on the dynamism of a text and the importance of focusing on others' interpretation on related textual concepts. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the author artistically uses intertextuality in tracing the

characters' experiences, thoughts and understanding various concepts, meant to be potential sites of solving problems around them.

Through the narrator, prior textual ideologies are brought into life by direct quotation, allusions and vague referencing, all which bring out the extent in which they influence this novel. The prologue is a direct quotation from two poems; Gerard Hopkins, *God's Grandeur* and Sharon Old's, *The Borders*. The deliberate choice of having these two poems at the beginning of the novel mirrors the narrator's search for solutions from religion and science. The narrator's confusion of whether to stick to religion or science, in understanding her brother's loss to addiction and her mother's depression, matches Hopkins's sentiments in the said poem. The narrator finds resonance between her own life and the poet's ideology. She narrates:

I felt a strong sense of kinship with Hopkins every time I read about his personal life, his difficulty reconciling his religion with his desires, thoughts, his repressed sexual desires' (96).

The author creates the interrelationship between these texts to foreground the characters', especially the narrator's, confusion as she pursues her quest to find solutions to her family's loss and grief. Gifty's doubt in religion and the shift to science for solace fuel her gradual realization of her identity as a black immigrant, a woman in science and her queer sexual orientation.

The characters' interpretation of religious scriptures reflects in the regular mosaic of quotations from the bible. Nana's birth is alluded from the biblical Isaac's birth. This is after his mother's long battle with infertility. 'They prayed for a baby...no baby came. Nine months to the day later, my brother, Nana, my mother's Isaac, was born (16). The infertility spell saw the parents, especially the mother turn to religion for aid, through prayer and fasting. It is through biblical allusions and direct quotations that the author foregrounds religion as a viable strategy employed by characters in navigating loss, grief and despair.

A direct quotation from Bennet and Hacker's *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* sheds more light on the narrator's views on her experiments on the brain for reward seeking behavior. She quotes:

The brain and its activities make it possible for us – not for it to perceive and think, to feel emotions and to form and pursue objects (196).

This quotation reveals the relevance of science in understanding the brain and its influence on individual's behavior. It foregrounds the protagonist's choice of neuroscience as a viable ground for seeking solutions to addiction and depression. Through quotation, the narrator brings closer the concepts in neuroscience as an approach to dealing with loss and grief and despair. The quotations express the influence of other prior texts in the creation of this novel, 'the internal relation of a text with other relating texts' (Halliday, 23).

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the various narrative techniques employed in presenting the mechanisms of dealing with loss, grief and despair in *Transcendent Kingdom*. I have examined how the author's choice of words, characterization, narrative structure, language style and intertextuality speak to the broad issue of navigating loss and grief. In this chapter I argue that the narration strategy employed prove a viable ground for presenting various mechanisms of navigating loss, grief and despair.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

4.1 Conclusion

This section consists of a review of my findings and conclusion deduced from the research questions and research objectives indicated in the first section of my study. My study ascertains that different people react variedly to issues of loss, grief and despair. These varied responses reveal the characters attempt to cope with the pain of experiencing loss, grief and despair in the novel.

My study reveals that the manner in which an individual responds to loss, grief and despair can be greatly influenced by external factors such as one's background or even their past experiences. The backgrounds which we come from tend to socialize us in ways which are particular and inseparable from who we become. Nana's background, for example, is one that values hard work and success. He has seen his mother work for long hours during the day and night to make ends meet. His success in sports meant a lot to his family, thus losing this achievement shatters his life. His indulgence in drug abuse is symbolic of the internal war within his conscience thus chooses to intoxicate his body for failing to conform to his family expectations. The heroin intake represents a kind of punishment to his body as his hope of being a successful basket baller is lost.

Gender can also influence how people react to episodes of loss and grief. How individuals perceive gender can affect the way they respond to loss, grief and despair. For instance, the Chin Chin man's flight to Ghana is fueled by his gender-his African masculinity in particular. The fact that his masculinity is perceived as a threat to peace in his adopted home renders him humiliated and a loner. He wishes to restore his lost identity by returning to Ghana where his defined masculine features are glorified and his height associated with the ability 'to grasp fresh air in the midst of crowds at the airport in Accra' (104). It is his masculinity that attracts mistreatment and racial prejudice during his stay in America. He has to literally shrink his size while walking in order to appear harmless. His African masculinity is considered dangerous in this white dominated community. This pushes him to return to Ghana to find his freedom and peace, leaving

his family behind. His return may portray him as a faint-hearted, irresponsible and egocentric as his absence affects his family negatively.

The influence of religion on how individuals react to episodes of loss, grief and despair is demonstrated in this where characters like the narrator's mother cling to the belief in divine healing to an extent of denying clinical assistance. Her choice to isolate in bed and starve is effects of her strong belief that the loss she is facing is all God's will and soon she would be well. This religious belief hinders her from seeking medical attention until her grief transforms into severe depression which claims her life. Acceptance to speak up to clinical experts after facing the loss of her son could possibly save her situation.

Loss and grief can have great impacts on individuals' personality and gender identities. This is demonstrated through the narrator's mother whose femininity and motherly tenderness has been suppressed by the rigid personality developed as a result of long resilience against loss and grief. The need to steel herself against loss and grief renders her rigid and short of the motherly love towards her own children. She also denies herself the love and care she needs for her health which eventually leads to severe depression.

My study has demonstrated that fiction can be a fertile ground for addressing various strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair. My study's significant contribution to literature is tackling under-addressed taboo subjects such as drug addiction, death, depression and sexual orientation.

Narratology theory has provided analysis tools that reveal the effectiveness of narrative technique in depicting loss, grief and despair From this research, it's my argument that the fragmented structure in this narrative speaks to the turbulent and unstable nature of loss, grief and despair encountered by the characters in the novel. The author's artistry in addressing most mundane of peoples' experiences attracts the readers' curiosity to direct their attention into the story as it unfolds. Subjects that are never given enough agencies in our daily discourse are brought closer through narration. This develops a deeper desire and emotional attachment on the readers as their quest to capture the subsequent happenings in the novel intensifies.

Loss and grief are inescapable and inevitable in the normal life of humans. Their presentation through narration provides a closer platform to the reader to interact with. It also provides agency, a voice to the rarely heard victims of grief, depression and addiction. *Transcendent Kingdom* therefore, aids understand the link between non-linearity of form and non-linearity of content. My study further explores the narrative techniques deployed by the author in presenting this narrative. The fragmentariness in the narrative structure is a deliberate move by the author to connect the form with the content. This is evident through the alteration of the plot, perspectives and focalization throughout the novel. My study argues that the narration in *Transcendent Kingdom* is presented in a back and forth manner which mirrors the uncertainties and complexities of pain of loss, grief and despair in the novel.

I further explore the author's use of characterization in epitomizing the navigation through loss and grief throughout the novel. The character's actions, experiences and thoughts portray a strong will to survive through it all.

I explore epistolary as a narrative strategy aiding in the presentation of navigating loss, grief and despair in the novel. The protagonist's yearn for solutions to the problems facing her family reflect in the regular letters addressed to God by the young narrator, all kept in her diary. Her obvious doubt developed towards her childhood evangelical faith is expressed in these letters. In one of her letters she writes;

Dear God,

Would you show me that you are real? (101)

This confusion of whether the belief in God was real for her as a believer, speaks to the anxieties of coping with loss and grief, which is the topical issue in my study. The unanswered prayers and plea to God, especially after Nana's battle with addiction, cast a cloud of doubt in the narrator's whole ideology on religion.

This research revealed the effectiveness of the language style in narrating loss, grief and despair in the novel. I explore various styles that relate to my topic of study. Symbolism, diction, intertextuality and metaphors stand out in presenting my study's topic.

Using narratology theory, my study revealed how fictional writers can employ various techniques to address sensitive subjects in human lives such as death, grief, drug addiction, depression and sexual orientation. These are subjects rarely given a voice in our daily lives in the society. This proves literature to be a reliable reference to real issues in our societies. It is through narratology that form and content are pegged to the social realities, a license legible to fictional works.

Death, loss, grief and depression are phenomena readily associated with fields of psychology, medicine, theology and philosophy. However, my study has revealed that literature has the power to address these phenomena in a creative and incisive manner because it presents them as lived experiences. The power and paradox of literature to express such phenomena is captured by Sigmund Freud in *Uncanny*, where he argues that creative literature has in it ‘something that cannot be found in real life’ (950). This points to the ability of literature to render lived experiences with clarity because it goes behind the scenes to show and tell what one may never access in real life. This is true of literature dealing with any subject, but it is more tangible in literature dealing with enigmatic and ‘taboo’ subjects such as grief, depression and despair as in the case in *Transcendent Kingdom*. My study has portrayed the power of literature in addressing and explaining enigmatic subjects rarely addressed in our real discourse. This further reveals that fictional ‘writers have the license to imagine and document event that which cannot be seen or discussed in normal circumstances’ (Jefwa, 217).

Different individuals also adapt to various mechanisms of dealing with human suffering. My study adds knowledge to a wide range of discourses as it captures experiences, emotions, events and survival tactics in human life. Literature therefore poses as a reliable platform of reference to inevitable phases in life such as loss, grief and despair. It extends to bringing closer, experiences on drug addiction and sexuality as coping mechanisms to loss, grief and despair. Readers are given a chance to relate to, judge and even empathize with the characters’ experiences. My study of *Transcendent Kingdom* revealed that not every loss and grieving process ends in despair, as the narrator ends up in a new marital union with Han, even after losing and grieving over her family members.

This relation to social realities makes literature an integral part in shaping people's way of life in the society in which they live.

This study has focused on the various strategies of navigating and narrating loss, grief and despair. This novel can also be studied from a gender perspective, scrutinizing the manner in which African masculinity is portrayed in the narrative and the consequences of such depiction. Similarly one can seek to study this text as a woman's story, told from a feminist perspective.

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