

Echoes of the Forgotten: Expressions of Historical Trauma and Intergenerational Transmission in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground*

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Abstract: This research article explores the devastating psychological and sociological impacts of systemic oppression as depicted in Caryl Phillips's novel *Higher Ground*. By synthesising contemporary research on historical trauma, intergenerational transmission, Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), and Holocaust survivor psychopathology, this paper analyses how Phillips's characters embody the legacy of mass trauma. The novel connects three distinct narratives: an African collaborator during the slave trade, a Black prisoner in solitary confinement in the United States, and a Jewish woman haunted by the Polish ghettos, to illustrate the universal and enduring nature of trauma. Through the lens of theorists such as Michelle M. Sotero, Joy DeGruy, and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, the researcher demonstrates that historical trauma is not merely a past event but an ongoing cycle of subjugation that strips individuals of their humanity and requires profound truth-telling and culturally sensitive interventions for healing.

Keywords: Historical Trauma, Intergenerational Transmission, Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Holocaust, Psychopathology

Introduction

Literature has long served as a vital repository for human memory, capturing the deep suffering of marginalised populations when historical records fall short. In his novel *Higher Ground*, Caryl Phillips masterfully narrates the stories of the abandoned and the forgotten, focusing on individuals who are stripped of the only thing they have left: their humanity. The novel is structured in three distinct parts, spanning different continents and eras. Yet, it is unified by a singular, haunting theme: the internal impact of oppression and its numbing effect on the individual spirit. The characters, an African collaborator escaping the horrors of slavery, a Black man named Rudi Williams facing life imprisonment in solitary confinement, and a Jewish woman named Irene who cannot forget the childhood ghettos of Poland, serve as literary case studies for the psychological phenomenon known as historical trauma.

Historical trauma theory is a relatively new concept in the fields of public health and psychology, providing a macro-level temporal framework for examining how populations exposed to mass trauma compare with unexposed populations. The premise of this theory posits that populations historically subjected to long-term mass trauma, such as colonialism, slavery, war, and genocide, exhibit a higher prevalence of disease and psychological distress even several generations after the original trauma occurred. By applying clinical frameworks regarding Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Holocaust trauma psychopathology, and the epigenetic inheritance of early-life stress, this research paper will analyse how *Higher Ground* illustrates the inescapable grip of mass trauma. Ultimately, Phillips's novel validates that whether trauma originates on the shores of West Africa, within the carceral system of the United States, or in the ghettos of Europe, it ruins populations from their natural historical course and leaves an inheritance of physical, psychological, and social disparities that persist across generations.

The Theoretical Framework of Historical Trauma

To thoroughly analyse the characters in *Higher Ground*, one must first understand the clinical and sociological dimensions of historical trauma. Unlike psychic trauma, which typically focuses on an individual's exposure to a single traumatic event, historical trauma involves a massive group trauma experience. The literature identifies four distinct assumptions that underpin this theory: mass trauma is deliberately and systematically inflicted upon a target population by a subjugating dominant population; the trauma is not limited to a single event but continues over an extended period; traumatic events reverberate throughout the population, creating a universal experience of trauma; and the magnitude of the experience disrupts the population from its natural course.

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, a foundational researcher in this field, conceptualised historical trauma as the cumulative and collective psychological and emotional injury sustained over a lifetime and across generations. In her research, she identified a cluster of events correlated with massive group trauma, which she categorised into stages such as "1st Contact," characterised by life shock and genocide,

"Economic competition," "Invasion/War Period," "Subjugation/Reservation Period," and periods of forced relocation. These stages of deliberate subjugation mirror the exact historical forces that shape the lives of the characters in Phillips's novel. The dominant group enforces this subjugation through various means, including military force, policies of genocide, imprisonment, enslavement, and laws that prohibit freedom of movement and cultural expression. Although the clear legitimisation of this subjugation may be rescinded over time, its toxic legacy remains in the form of systemic racism, discrimination, and deep-seated socioeconomic disadvantage.

Slavery, Institutional Racism, and Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome

The first two narratives in *Higher Ground* focus heavily on the trauma of the African diaspora. The novel opens in West Africa, where a collaborator manages to escape the immediate horrors of slavery but is forced to live a life despised by his masters and detested by his peers. This character embodies the initial stage of historical trauma, the "1st Contact" and "Invasion periods", where forced dependency on the oppressor is formed and a profound lack of security occurs. The narrative then shifts across time to Rudi Williams, who lives in solitary confinement while facing life imprisonment and is degraded and brutalised by prison guards. Rudi's storyline illustrates the modern, downstream consequences of centuries of subjugation.

Rudi's psychological state can be deeply understood through the lens of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). PTSS is a term coined by researcher Joy DeGruy to describe the multigenerational trauma and injustices experienced by African Americans, from the dawn of chattel slavery to modern-day systemic violence. PTSS shares many similarities with the more widely recognised post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but it includes specific cultural components related to racial socialisation and internalised racism. Individuals suffering from PTSS may appear emotionally numb or experience what is termed "vacant esteem," which encompasses feelings of hopelessness, depression, and a general self-destructive outlook. Rudi, brutalised by his guards and confined in an isolating cell, is a victim of an institutional system designed to break him. He is kept alive only by his belief in the beauty of his colour, a bold coping mechanism that ultimately contributes to his tragic end.

Rudi's solitary confinement is a direct continuation of the segregation, displacement, and physical violence that characterise the historical trauma model. As Michelle M. Sotero explains in her comprehensive analysis of intergenerational trauma:

The model posits that historical trauma originates with the subjugation of a population by a dominant group. Successful subjugation requires at least four elements: (1) overwhelming physical and psychological violence, (2) segregation and/or displacement, (3) economic deprivation, and (4) cultural dispossession... The dominant group enforces subjugation through various means including military force, bio-warfare, national policies of genocide, ethnic cleansing, incarceration, enslavement, and/or laws that prohibit freedom of movement, economic development, and cultural expression. (99)

In *Higher Ground*, Rudi's imprisonment is not merely a reflection of individual criminality but is fundamentally a representation of this ongoing systemic incarceration and forced displacement. The prison environment is a miniature of the subjugation period, where confinement and translocation occur, the family system is destroyed, and the individual is subjected to beatings and exploitation. Rudi's trauma response, his trust in the beauty of his colour in the face of brutalisation, demonstrates both resilience and the tragic reality of existing in a system where the legacy of trauma continues to threaten basic assumptions about an orderly, just world and the core freedom of the individual. Furthermore, African Americans have sustained traumatic psychological and emotional injury as a direct result of slavery, which is continually extended by social and institutional inequality, racism, and oppression. Phillips captures this reality vividly, showing that the physical chains of the intercontinental slave trade have transformed into the iron bars of the modern carceral state.

The Holocaust, the Psychic Hole, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Grief

The final narrative in *Higher Ground* introduces Irene, a woman who cannot forget the childhood ghettos of Poland and whose past constantly returns to haunt her, transforming her present into a nightmare of stifling isolation and terrifying loneliness. Irene's story plunges the reader into the profound psychological aftermath of the Holocaust, an event that deeply ruptured the concept of human safety and unleashed a legacy of unresolved grief. The psychological wounds inflicted by the Holocaust are severe and multifaceted. Following World War II, early investigations of Holocaust survivors evaluated for psychiatric treatment revealed significant affective, cognitive, and behavioural impairments. Survivors frequently suffered from persistent anxieties, a fear of renewed persecution, chronic depression, sleep disturbances with terrifying nightmares, and alexithymia, a profound inability to verbalise their traumatic emotions. Irene's suffocating loneliness in *Higher Ground* is a literary manifestation of this clinical profile. Her inability to escape the haunting memories of the Polish ghettos reflects the enduring nature of mass trauma, where traumatic events become embedded in the collective and individual social memory of the population, preventing survivors from ever truly feeling safe.

In psychoanalytic literature regarding Holocaust trauma, theorists discuss the conspiracy of silence, a phenomenon in which survivors repress their pain and avoid discussing their experiences due to the evasive discomfort of society at large. This silence perpetuates the shame associated with cultural trauma and subverts the healing process. Irene's isolation is representative of this silence; her trauma is internalised, creating what psychoanalysts refer to as a psychic hole, a gap in emotional understanding characterised by conscious ignorance of trauma on one side and an unconscious, overwhelming knowledge of it on the other. The magnitude of such suffering is difficult to quantify, but clinical literature captures its essence perfectly:

Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care

that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning...They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (Lauren 1)

Irene's experience in the Polish ghettos was an atrocity that overwhelmed her ordinary human adaptations to life. The focus of Phillips's narrative here, as noted by critics, is not explicitly on the macro-politics of racial and religious hatred, but rather on the internal impact of oppression and its numbing effect on the individual spirit. Irene's spirit has been numbed by the sheer extremity of helplessness and terror she was forced to endure.

Moreover, research indicates that trauma of this magnitude does not terminate with the survivor; rather, it is transmitted biologically, socially, and psychologically to future generations. Central to historical trauma theory is the understanding that psychological and emotional aftermaths are inherited through interconnected physiological, environmental, and social pathways, culminating in an intergenerational cycle of trauma response. Supporting this, epigenetic studies demonstrate that early postnatal trauma can induce behavioural alterations such as depression-like symptoms and increased risk-taking that persist across multiple generations in the absence of continued environmental stressors. In these studies, subjects with a history of ancestral stress exhibited slower gain of passive avoidance, demonstrating a dampened sensitivity to predictive aversive cues and an impaired ability to form clear social preferences. The biological mechanism, transgenerational epigenetic inheritance, provides a scientific basis for understanding how characters like Rudi and Irene are trapped by the inescapable weight of their respective histories. The trauma is literally encoded into their physiological and psychological frameworks.

Conclusion

Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* is a profound meditation on the enduring scars of systemic oppression, bringing together the disparate yet inseparably linked histories of the intercontinental slave trade, the American penal system, and the Holocaust. Through the African collaborator, Rudi Williams, and Irene, Phillips illustrates that historical trauma is an affliction that reverberates across time, disrupting populations' natural historical course and creating a universal experience of profound grief. The characters' psychological struggles align closely with contemporary clinical understandings of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, PTSD, and the epigenetics of intergenerational trauma. If these populations are to recover from the numbing effect on their individual spirits, healing must occur at a collective, holistic level. As advocates for Stolen Generation survivors have profoundly stated, 'If we are to heal... we must tell the truth about the [past]. Our stories have been denied and need to be heard, because without the truth we cannot heal.' Acknowledgement, recognition, accountability, and justice are prerequisites for recovery at the individual and community levels. By weaving together these narratives of abandonment and brutalisation, Phillips demonstrates the necessity of confronting the truth, highlighting the urgent need for therapeutic processing, meaning-making, and a deep, culturally sensitive understanding of the invisible threads that tie past evils to present suffering.

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