Violence and Trauma in Two African Women's Autobiographies

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Abstract

This study examines representations of trauma, violence, and resilience in two African women's autobiographies: *A Toast to Life* (2018) by Ghanaian actress and philanthropist Juliet Ibrahim and *Brutal Legacy* (2019) by South African broadcaster Tracy Going. Using a qualitative narrative case study design informed by Judith Herman's trauma theory and a transcultural perspective, the study explores how the authors construct and make meaning of traumatic experiences across different socio-cultural contexts. Thematic analysis revealed three interconnected themes: trauma as a lifelong and multidimensional experience; violence as both a personal experience and a social reality; and the intergenerational and cultural transmission of trauma. The findings show that trauma is cumulative and enduring, manifesting through childhood abuse, war-related displacement, intimate partner violence, grief, and psychological distress. Violence is represented not only as physical harm but also as emotional, psychological, cultural, and structural oppression sustained by patriarchal norms, silence, and institutional failures. The narratives further reveal how trauma is transmitted across generations through family histories, collective memories, and cultural expectations. Despite these experiences, both autobiographies foreground resilience, recovery, and identity reconstruction through storytelling. The findings imply that African women's autobiographical writing functions as a powerful form of testimony, resistance, and healing that transforms private suffering into collective awareness while challenging gendered systems of oppression and silencing.

Keywords: trauma, violence, resilience, autobiography, African women's writing

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Introduction

African women's autobiographies constitute powerful testimonial spaces through which experiences of violence, trauma, and survival are narrated and preserved. These life narratives offer intimate insights into how women negotiate suffering within social environments shaped by restrictive cultural norms, gendered power relations, and historical inequities. As Samir and Manqoush (2020) observe, women's autobiographical writings frequently expose the psychological consequences of prolonged trauma, particularly in contexts where patriarchal traditions limit women's autonomy and decision-making. Such narratives do not merely recount individual hardships; they situate personal pain within broader socio-historical and political frameworks, including colonial domination, postcolonial state violence, and entrenched systems of gender oppression.

The prevalence of violence against women across African societies is inseparable from historical injustices such as colonial rule, civil wars, and enduring political instability (Bazaanah & Ngcobo, 2024). Colonial regimes institutionalized racialized and gendered forms of violence that fractured families and communities, while post-independence struggles often reproduced cycles of militarization and repression. In many conflict and post-conflict contexts, women have been disproportionately affected, becoming targets of sexual violence, forced displacement, and psychological terror (Bazaanah & Ngcobo, 2024). African women's autobiographies document how these macro-level forces penetrate everyday life, transforming collective trauma into deeply personal experiences of fear, loss, and survival.

Through autobiographical writing, African women articulate a wide spectrum of traumatic experiences, including physical abuse, sexual violence, emotional neglect, and psychological distress. (*Black Women and Trauma*, n.d.; Emecheta, 1986; El Saadawi, 1975). These texts function simultaneously as records of suffering and as critiques of the social, cultural, and political structures that normalize violence against women. By naming and narrating what is often silenced, women's autobiographies challenge dominant narratives that marginalize female pain and render women's trauma invisible. They make the invisible visible.

This paper examines the representations of violence and trauma in two autobiographies by African women: Going's *Brutal Legacy* (2019) and Ibrahim's *A Toast to Life* (2018). Written from South African and Ghanaian contexts respectively, these autobiographies recount harrowing experiences of childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, war-related trauma, and systemic neglect. Despite differences in historical and cultural contexts, both narratives reveal how gendered violence operates across diverse African settings, while also illustrating distinct strategies of meaning-making and survival.

Autobiography, as a form of life writing, provides a unique window into the "inner world" of the narrator, offering access to personal reflections, memories, and self-understandings that are often inaccessible through other forms of documentation (Shertzer & Stone, 1976). As introspective accounts, autobiographies allow survivors to reconstruct fragmented experiences and articulate emotions associated with trauma (Richman, 2006). Trauma itself is a universal human phenomenon that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, affecting individuals and communities worldwide. In Africa, trauma is frequently linked to histories of conflict, forced

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displacement, interpersonal violence, poverty, and limited access to psychosocial support services. (Musisi & Kinyanda, 2020; Sheikh et al., 2014).

Empirical evidence underscores the disproportionate exposure to trauma in sub-Saharan Africa. Ng et al. (2020) Reports indicate that populations in the region face heightened risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to repeated and prolonged exposure to armed conflict, mass-casualty events, and everyday violence. The lack of population-level data and limited access to mental health care further complicate efforts to assess and address trauma-related disorders. Within this context, autobiographical narratives offer an alternative and culturally grounded archive of trauma, illuminating lived realities that are often absent from clinical or epidemiological accounts (*The Reimagined Past*, n.d.).

By foregrounding African women's autobiographical voices, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of trauma as both a psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon. It highlights the role of narrative in making sense of violence, reclaiming agency, and advocating for social change, while emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to trauma and mental health on the African continent.

Theoretical Framework

Judith Lewis Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) remains foundational to trauma theory, particularly for its expansion of trauma discourse beyond war to include domestic and gender-based violence. Herman defines psychological trauma as an encounter with events that overwhelm ordinary coping mechanisms, producing "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation" (Herman, 1992: 7). She distinguishes between trauma arising from natural disasters and that produced through human-designed systems of violence, emphasizing that women's experiences of domestic abuse parallel those of political prisoners. This intervention destabilized masculinist and militarized conceptions of trauma by situating women's suffering within legitimate frameworks of psychological injury.

Central to Herman's theory is the claim that when neither resistance nor escape is possible, "the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized" (Herman, 1992: 34). Survivors exposed to prolonged oppression, such as women experiencing sustained domestic captivity, sexual abuse, and emotional violence, are therefore more likely to develop complex forms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the autobiographies of Going (2019) and Ibrahim (2018), trauma is represented not as a concluded past event but as a persistent condition. Trauma exists in a *nunc stans*, an eternal present in which "the past is never past," continually intruding through flashbacks, nightmares, and hypervigilance (Herman, 1997; Caruth, 1995). Their narratives exemplify how trauma disrupts linear temporality and challenges conventional distinctions between past and present.

Post-structural trauma theory further illuminates this temporal and narrative rupture. Traumatic experience resists coherent representation, often producing psychic fragmentation that impedes integration into a unified life story. (Køhlert, 2015). Healing, therefore, requires the reconfiguration of traumatic memory through narrative reconstruction. Herman (1992) emphasizes testimony as a crucial mechanism for recovery, a position elaborated by (*Learning to Listen*

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Differently, n.d.) and Henke (2010), who argues that autobiographical writing facilitates a transferential process in which survivors imagine a receptive and empathetic audience.

Kaplan (2000) and Henke's (2000) concept of *scriptotherapy*, derived from Freud's "talking cure" and grounded in Herman's work, conceptualizes writing as a method of organizing fragmented memories into structured narratives. Trauma theorists note, however, that traumatic memory is frequently encoded in visual and sensory registers rather than linguistic ones. van der Kolk et al. (1995) describe trauma as producing a state of "speechless terror" located at a somatosensory level. Literary theorists such as Kaplan, Gilmore, and Henke similarly emphasize the imagistic and non-verbal dimensions of traumatic memory.

This tension reveals a central paradox within trauma studies; while language is essential for meaning-making and recovery, it remains insufficient for fully representing the embodied and visual nature of trauma. From a post-structural perspective, this paradox underscores the instability of language and the impossibility of complete narrative closure. Meaning remains deferred, fragmented, and contingent, yet narrative persists as a necessary, if imperfect, mode of survival.

A transcultural framework further situates these autobiographies beyond nationally bounded or culturally essentialist readings. Although Going and Ibrahim write from distinct South African and Ghanaian contexts, their narratives reveal shared structures of gendered violence, silence, and survival. Trauma emerges as both culturally mediated and universally resonant, shaped by specific historical conditions yet transcending them. This transcultural lens resists homogenizing African women's experiences while enabling comparative insight into how trauma circulates across cultures, histories, and narrative forms. Trauma transcends borders, unites identities, and reveals the shared human vulnerability that links individual suffering to collective histories, emphasizing Archbishop Tutu's words that "all South Africans are, to some extent, 'a wounded people'" (Grzęda, 2015).

Existing scholarship on trauma and autobiography has largely focused on African men's narratives. (Mthatiwa, 2021; Tembo, n.d.) or non-African women's life writing (Henke, 2010; Roscan, 2019a; 2019b), leaving African women's autobiographies under-theorized. In tandem with Henke (2010), William (2016) asserts that in a world where women are frequently silenced or erased, the fundamental demand is "to be seen, to be heard and to be acknowledged." Autobiographical writing thus functions as a transcultural and political act through which African women reclaim narrative authority, confront violence, and resist epistemic marginalization.

These theoretical considerations inform the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. What forms of trauma and violence do African women narrate in their autobiographies?
2. To what extent do trauma experiences converge or diverge across cultural contexts in the two texts?

Methodology

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This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological case study design to examine representations of violence and trauma in two African women's autobiographies: Tracy Going's *Brutal Legacy* (2018) and Juliet Ibrahim's *A Toast to Life* (2019). A brief vignette of each author and text is provided to guide readers and situate the narratives within their respective socio-cultural contexts.

The two autobiographies were purposively selected from different national and cultural settings, South Africa and Ghana, based on their rich autobiographical detail and the public visibility of the authors. Both writers are prominent media figures and philanthropists whose personal narratives intersect with broader public discourses on gender, violence, and resilience. This purposive sampling enabled a comparative, transcultural exploration of trauma narratives across distinct yet interconnected African contexts.

Data were generated through an in-depth desktop review involving close, iterative reading of the autobiographies. Content and thematic analysis were employed to identify patterns in the construction and representation of pain, abuse, trauma, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships. An inductive analytical approach guided the process, allowing themes to emerge from the texts rather than imposing predefined categories.

The analytical procedure involved multiple stages of coding, re-coding, and thematic regrouping. Passages relating to violence, abuse, and trauma were systematically identified, compared, and refined across both texts. Through this iterative process, emergent themes were synthesized to produce an integrated interpretive narrative that captures both shared and divergent experiences of violence and trauma. This methodological approach foregrounds lived experience and narrative meaning-making, enabling a nuanced understanding of how African women articulate trauma and resilience through autobiographical writing.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

The researcher acknowledges her interpretive role in the analysis of autobiographical trauma narratives. As a scholar engaged in African literary and psychosocial research, my readings are informed by sensitivity to gendered violence, cultural context, and the ethical representation of survivors' voices. I recognize that interpretations of trauma are shaped by positionality, disciplinary training, and theoretical orientation. To mitigate interpretive bias, I prioritized close textual engagement, iterative coding, and reflexive dialogue throughout the analytical process. Emphasis was placed on allowing the authors' voices to remain central, while situating their narratives within broader transcultural and theoretical frameworks rather than imposing prescriptive meanings.

Results

To address the research questions, the findings are organized into two sections. First, brief author vignettes situate the narratives within their socio-cultural contexts. Second, the results are presented anchored on three major themes, focusing on lifelong and multidimensional experiences of trauma, violence as both personal experience and social reality, and intergenerational and cultural transmission of trauma.

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Author Vignettes: Situating the Narratives

Despite originating from different countries and cultural contexts, Juliet Ibrahim (Ghana) and Tracy Going (South Africa) recount strikingly intense experiences of violence and adversity spanning childhood and early adulthood. Both narratives are situated within environments shaped by war, patriarchal power relations, sexual and social abuse, and cultural silencing.

Tracy Going, a South African media professional and public figure, narrates a childhood marked by domestic instability and exposure to paternal alcoholism and violence. Although she vowed to escape such abuse, she later found herself trapped in a similarly violent intimate relationship. In *Brutal Legacy* (2018), Going documents severe domestic violence that culminated in a near-fatal assault and a highly publicized legal trial. Her narrative extends beyond personal testimony to interrogate the social and institutional systems that enable gender-based violence in South Africa.

Juliet Ibrahim, a Ghanaian actress and philanthropist, recounts a life shaped by transnational displacement and war. Born in Liberia and raised across Lebanon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana, Ibrahim narrates experiences of civil war, forced migration, childhood emotional neglect, abusive relationships, and public scrutiny. In *A Toast to Life* (2019), she traces her trajectory from silence and self-doubt to healing and self-affirmation, framing resilience as an ongoing process rather than a final resolution.

Theme 1: Trauma as a Lifelong and Multidimensional Experience

The autobiographies of Juliet Ibrahim and Tracy Going reveal trauma as neither a singular event nor a temporary disruption. Rather, trauma emerges as a cumulative, evolving, and deeply relational phenomenon that shapes how individuals understand themselves, relate to others, and navigate the world. Across both narratives, traumatic experiences accumulate over time, intersecting with gender, family relationships, social structures, and historical circumstances. The women do not describe trauma as something that happened and ended; instead, they portray it as an enduring presence that reverberates across different stages of life. Childhood experiences merge with adult relationships, personal suffering intersects with cultural expectations, and private pain becomes inseparable from broader societal realities. These narratives collectively suggest that trauma is not simply experienced; it is lived, remembered, embodied, and continually negotiated.

Trauma as Enduring and Relational

A prominent finding across both autobiographies is the understanding of trauma as an enduring condition embedded within relationships and social environments. Trauma is not presented as an isolated incident but as a continuous psychological and emotional presence that shapes everyday life.

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For Going, trauma exists long after the violent events have ended. Her reflections reveal that the effects of abuse remain psychologically active, influencing memory, identity, and emotional well-being. She acknowledges that:

“The scars of my past are not just memories; they are reminders of battles fought and lost.”

This statement demonstrates how trauma transcends chronological time. The "scars" are not confined to the past but continue to influence the present, illustrating the enduring nature of traumatic experiences. Going's narrative further suggests that trauma is sustained not only by individual acts of violence but also by social silence. She reflects that:

“We live in a world where silence is often louder than screams.”

This powerful observation highlights the relational dimension of trauma. The suffering is intensified when communities, families, and institutions fail to acknowledge or respond to violence. Silence becomes an active participant in the traumatic process, allowing pain to persist unchallenged.

Similarly, Ibrahim situates trauma within unstable family and social environments. Her experiences of conflict, displacement, and emotional neglect reveal how trauma develops through interactions with people and circumstances rather than through isolated incidents. Reflecting on her childhood, she writes:

“I grew up in an environment filled with chaos; it was hard to find peace within myself.”

The external chaos of her surroundings becomes internalized as emotional turmoil. Trauma therefore appears as a relational phenomenon in which environmental instability disrupts the development of inner security and psychological peace.

Together, these narratives challenge narrow understandings of trauma as an event-based phenomenon. Instead, trauma emerges as a relational experience shaped by ongoing interactions with family members, intimate partners, communities, and social institutions.

Childhood Trauma and the Foundations of Vulnerability

Childhood represents the earliest site where trauma takes root in both autobiographies. The findings suggest that experiences during childhood create emotional frameworks through which later relationships and life experiences are interpreted.

Going's narrative provides a particularly vivid account of growing up in an atmosphere of fear. Home, a place typically associated with protection and comfort, becomes a site of anxiety and uncertainty. She recalls:

“Every creak of the floorboards sent shivers down my spine; home was not a safe place.”

This statement encapsulates the profound disruption of childhood security. Ordinary household sounds become sources of terror, demonstrating how trauma transforms everyday experiences into reminders of danger.

The emotional intensity of this fear is further illustrated when she reflects:

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“I would lie there holding my curtain tight in my small hand... mostly the fear in my tummy distracted me.”

The image of a child clutching a curtain while overwhelmed by fear evokes a profound sense of vulnerability. Fear becomes embodied, residing not merely in thought but within the physical experience of the body. Such accounts reveal how trauma infiltrates the developmental years, shaping perceptions of safety, trust, and belonging.

The findings suggest that these early experiences establish patterns that may increase vulnerability to subsequent victimization. When violence and instability become normalized during childhood, harmful relationship dynamics may later appear familiar rather than alarming. Childhood trauma therefore serves not only as an early wound but also as a foundation upon which future experiences are interpreted.

War, Displacement, and Loss of Belonging

Unlike Going's narrative, which centers primarily on domestic and interpersonal violence, Ibrahim's autobiography is deeply shaped by experiences of war and forced migration. Her story reveals how large-scale political conflict can penetrate the intimate spaces of family life and personal identity.

Having survived multiple civil wars and periods of displacement, Ibrahim describes a life marked by uncertainty and instability. She notes:

“I've survived three civil wars.”

Although brief, this statement carries enormous weight. Survival itself becomes a defining feature of identity. The wars are not distant historical events but lived experiences that fundamentally shape her worldview.

Her account of witnessing death during conflict provides one of the most emotionally powerful moments in the narrative:

“One minute we were sitting in the canoe... the next minute, people were screaming... My cousin drowned. It was the first time I saw death face-to-face.”

This passage captures the sudden and unpredictable nature of traumatic loss. Everyday moments are transformed into scenes of tragedy, illustrating how war destabilizes the basic assumptions that make life feel predictable and secure.

Beyond physical danger, displacement produces a profound loss of belonging. Constant movement across Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Lebanon disrupts continuity and identity formation. Home becomes fragmented, memory becomes unstable, and belonging becomes elusive. Trauma, therefore, extends beyond exposure to violence and encompasses the psychological consequences of losing rootedness and continuity.

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Sexual Violence and Violations of Trust

Sexual abuse emerges as another deeply significant manifestation of trauma, particularly within Going's narrative. Unlike physical violence, which often leaves visible injuries, sexual violence creates wounds that are frequently hidden, silenced, and misunderstood.

Going's reflections reveal how abuse distorts fundamental understandings of love, trust, and intimacy. She writes:

“I felt trapped in a cycle of pain, where love was twisted into something unrecognizable.”

This statement highlights one of the most devastating consequences of sexual violence—the corruption of emotional meanings. Relationships that should provide safety become sources of harm, creating confusion and mistrust that can persist into adulthood.

The narratives further reveal how silence intensifies the effects of sexual abuse. Social stigma, shame, and family secrecy prevent victims from openly processing their experiences. As a result, trauma becomes internalized, often manifesting through self-blame and emotional isolation.

The findings suggest that sexual trauma is not limited to the moment of violation. Rather, its consequences continue through disrupted trust, fractured self-worth, and difficulties forming healthy relationships.

Intimate Relationship Trauma

Both autobiographies reveal how trauma re-emerges within adult intimate relationships. Emotional manipulation, coercive control, physical assault, and betrayal characterize many of the relationships described by the authors.

Going's account of domestic violence is particularly graphic and emotionally compelling. Reflecting on the abuse she endured, she recalls:

“As I stood before him, all I could see … the screaming, the threats, the terror, the hostage-holding, the keeping me up all night, the dragging me through the house by my hair, the choking, the doors locked around me …”

The accumulation of violent acts within this single recollection communicates the overwhelming nature of abuse. Violence appears not as isolated incidents but as a sustained system of domination and control.

Similarly, Ibrahim describes the emotional devastation caused by partner violence:

“Every time he raised his hand, I felt my spirit break a little more.”

This statement shifts attention from physical injury to psychological harm. The violence damages not only the body but also the victim's sense of self, dignity, and hope.

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For both women, intimate relationships become spaces where earlier vulnerabilities are reinforced and intensified. Love becomes intertwined with fear, dependency, and emotional pain, demonstrating the complex ways trauma can shape adult relational experiences.

Psychological Distress as a Consequence of Trauma

Across both narratives, trauma manifests through profound psychological distress. Anxiety, fear, hypervigilance, emotional exhaustion, and depression emerge repeatedly as responses to prolonged exposure to violence and instability.

Importantly, the autobiographies do not portray these struggles as evidence of personal weakness. Instead, psychological distress is represented as a logical and understandable response to extraordinary adversity.

The fear Going experienced during childhood evolves into a persistent sense of vigilance and insecurity. Similarly, Ibrahim's experiences of war, displacement, and abuse create emotional burdens that continue long after the traumatic events themselves.

The findings suggest that trauma leaves traces not only in memory but also in emotional functioning, shaping how individuals perceive risk, trust others, and regulate their emotions. Mental health challenges thus emerge as an extension of trauma rather than separate phenomena.

Grief, Bereavement, and Emotional Loss

Loss constitutes a recurring thread running throughout both autobiographies. Experiences of death, separation, abandonment, and fractured relationships compound existing trauma and deepen emotional suffering.

For Ibrahim, the death of her cousin during wartime represents a pivotal moment in her understanding of mortality and vulnerability:

“My cousin drowned. It was the first time I saw death face-to-face.”

The experience marks a loss of innocence as well as the loss of a loved one. Death becomes personal, immediate, and unforgettable.

Beyond bereavement, both women experience losses related to relationships, trust, security, and belonging. These losses accumulate over time, creating layers of grief that intersect with other traumatic experiences.

Rather than occurring independently, grief and trauma become mutually reinforcing. Each new loss reawakens earlier wounds, creating a cumulative burden of emotional pain. Consequently, the narratives portray trauma not as a single injury but as a complex web of losses that reshape the course of a person's life.

Theme 2: Violence as Both Personal Experience and Social Reality

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The narratives of Juliet Ibrahim and Tracy Going reveal violence as a pervasive force that operates simultaneously within intimate relationships, families, communities, and broader social institutions. Rather than portraying violence as isolated acts committed by individual perpetrators, both autobiographies expose it as a complex social phenomenon sustained by cultural norms, gender inequalities, institutional failures, and collective silence. Violence emerges not only through physical assaults but also through emotional degradation, psychological control, social exclusion, and structural injustice. Across both narratives, the personal becomes political; the violence experienced by the individual woman reflects larger systems of power that normalize abuse, silence victims, and perpetuate cycles of suffering.

The autobiographies therefore challenge individualized explanations of violence and instead position it as a deeply embedded social reality. Through their stories, both women demonstrate that violence extends beyond physical injury to shape identity, relationships, opportunities, and life trajectories. Their narratives illuminate how violence infiltrates the most intimate aspects of life while simultaneously reflecting broader societal structures.

Physical and Emotional Violence as Assaults on Human Dignity

One of the most striking findings across both autobiographies is the recognition that violence extends far beyond bodily harm. While physical abuse is prominently described, the narratives repeatedly emphasize that the deepest wounds often occur at the emotional and psychological levels.

Going's account of intimate partner violence provides some of the most graphic descriptions of physical abuse. Recounting the terror she endured, she writes:

“As I stood before him, all I could see … the screaming, the threats, the terror, the hostage-holding, the keeping me up all night, the dragging me through the house by my hair, the choking, the doors locked around me …”

The accumulation of experiences within this passage creates a powerful sense of entrapment. Violence is not presented as a single event but as a relentless pattern of domination. The repeated actions of screaming, threatening, dragging, choking, and imprisoning collectively strip away autonomy and create an atmosphere of perpetual fear.

Yet Going's narrative repeatedly suggests that the physical injuries represented only part of the damage. Reflecting on the impact of abuse, she states:

“Each blow was not just an attack on my body; it was an assault on my very existence.”

This statement shifts the analysis beyond physical injury to questions of identity and humanity. Violence becomes a mechanism through which a person's worth, dignity, and sense of self are systematically eroded. The body may heal, but the assault on personhood leaves deeper and more enduring scars.

Similarly, Ibrahim's narrative highlights the emotional consequences of physical abuse. She recalls:

“Every time he raised his hand, I felt my spirit break a little more.”

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The metaphor of a breaking spirit illustrates how violence penetrates beyond the body into the emotional core of the individual. The act of being struck becomes symbolic of repeated messages of worthlessness, powerlessness, and rejection.

Across both autobiographies, violence emerges as a process of dehumanization. Physical assaults are intertwined with emotional manipulation, humiliation, fear, and psychological control. The findings therefore suggest that violence should not be understood solely through visible injuries but through its broader capacity to damage identity, self-esteem, and psychological well-being.

Gendered Violence and the Operation of Patriarchal Power

A second important finding concerns the deeply gendered nature of violence. Both autobiographies reveal how women's experiences of abuse are situated within patriarchal systems that privilege male authority while constraining female autonomy.

The violence described by both women is not random. Rather, it is embedded within gendered power relations that normalize male control and female submission. The abusive men in their lives exercise power not merely through physical force but through entitlement, intimidation, and coercion. Their actions reflect broader societal beliefs about gender, authority, and ownership.

Ibrahim explicitly links women's suffering to patriarchal expectations. Reflecting on the experiences of women around her, she observes:

“Many women suffer in silence while their voices are drowned out by fear.”

This statement highlights the gendered dimensions of violence by emphasizing how women are socialized to endure suffering quietly. Fear becomes both a personal emotion and a social mechanism that maintains existing power structures.

Similarly, Going's narrative reveals how abusive relationships are often sustained by cultural assumptions about femininity, loyalty, and endurance. Despite severe abuse, leaving the relationship is neither simple nor straightforward. Emotional dependency, societal expectations, and fear of judgment create barriers that trap women within violent situations.

The findings suggest that patriarchal power operates not only through individual perpetrators but also through social norms that legitimize control over women. Violence therefore functions as both a personal act and a broader expression of gender inequality.

Cultural Silence and the Normalization of Abuse

Perhaps one of the most pervasive themes across both narratives is silence. Violence flourishes within environments where speaking out is discouraged, ignored, or punished. Both authors demonstrate how silence functions as a social mechanism that protects perpetrators while isolating victims.

Going reflects on this phenomenon when she writes:

“We live in a world where silence is often louder than screams.”

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This powerful observation suggests that silence is not merely the absence of speech but an active force that perpetuates violence. The screams of victims become drowned out by societal indifference, institutional inaction, and cultural discomfort surrounding discussions of abuse.

Similarly, Ibrahim repeatedly highlights the ways in which women are expected to endure suffering without complaint. Her reflections reveal how silence becomes embedded within cultural definitions of womanhood, where speaking openly about abuse may be interpreted as weakness, disloyalty, or shame.

The narratives further reveal that silence often originates within families. Secrets are protected, uncomfortable truths remain hidden, and painful experiences are left unspoken. Such environments create conditions in which violence becomes normalized rather than challenged.

Importantly, the authors suggest that silence is transmitted across generations. Young girls learn early which experiences can be discussed and which must remain hidden. Over time, silence becomes internalized, making it increasingly difficult for survivors to seek help or validate their own suffering.

The findings therefore indicate that cultural silence functions as a form of violence in itself. By denying recognition and validation, silence prolongs suffering and reinforces existing power inequalities.

Institutional Failure and Structural Violence

Beyond interpersonal abuse, both autobiographies expose forms of violence embedded within social institutions. The narratives reveal how legal systems, social services, and public structures frequently fail to protect vulnerable individuals, thereby contributing to the continuation of trauma.

Going's narrative is particularly critical of institutional responses to gender-based violence. The foreword to her memoir recounts:

“The rosy love cloud burst just five months after meeting her ‘Prince Charming’ when she staggered into the local police station, bruised and battered. A short relationship became a two-and-a-half-year legal ordeal played out in the public eye… through the harrowing court process – a system seeped in injustice.”

The description reveals how survivors often experience a second layer of victimization through institutional processes. Rather than offering protection and healing, legal systems may subject victims to prolonged scrutiny, disbelief, and emotional exhaustion.

For Going, the court process becomes an extension of the original violence. The trauma does not end when the physical abuse stops; instead, it is reproduced through bureaucratic delays, public exposure, and institutional indifference.

Ibrahim similarly alludes to broader social failures in responding to women's suffering. Her experiences suggest that societal structures often lack the resources, awareness, or willingness necessary to address trauma effectively.

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The findings demonstrate that violence cannot be fully understood at the interpersonal level alone. Structural violence operates when institutions fail to provide safety, justice, and support. Such failures reinforce survivors' feelings of vulnerability and contribute to the persistence of trauma.

Violence as a Collective Social Problem

While both autobiographies contain intensely personal stories, they consistently move beyond individual experiences to examine the societal conditions that make violence possible. The narratives portray violence as a collective problem rooted in inequality, power imbalances, and social norms.

Going explicitly connects violence to broader societal realities, arguing that social conditions often prioritize survival over compassion and accountability. Her reflections suggest that violence thrives within environments characterized by inequality, inadequate education, and weak social support systems.

Similarly, Ibrahim's account demonstrates how broader cultural expectations shape individual experiences of abuse. The suffering of women is not portrayed as an exception but as a recurring pattern embedded within social structures.

The autobiographies therefore challenge the tendency to frame violence solely as the result of individual pathology. Instead, violence emerges as a social phenomenon maintained by collective beliefs, institutional shortcomings, and cultural practices.

Perhaps most importantly, both women reject narratives that portray violence as inevitable. By publicly documenting their experiences, they expose the social mechanisms that sustain abuse and call for greater accountability. Their stories transform private suffering into public testimony, encouraging readers to recognize violence not as a personal misfortune but as a pressing social issue requiring collective action.

Ultimately, the findings reveal violence as a multidimensional phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of individual experience. Physical assaults, emotional abuse, cultural silence, patriarchal norms, and institutional failures are shown to be interconnected elements of a broader system of harm. Through their narratives, Ibrahim and Going demonstrate that understanding violence requires attention not only to what happens behind closed doors but also to the social structures that make such violence possible. Their autobiographies expose the intimate and societal faces of violence, revealing how personal suffering is often rooted in collective realities.

Theme 3: Intergenerational and Cultural Transmission of Trauma

Beyond their accounts of personal suffering and interpersonal violence, Juliet Ibrahim and Tracy Going reveal trauma as a phenomenon that extends across generations, families, and communities. Their autobiographies challenge the assumption that trauma belongs solely to the individual who directly experiences it. Instead, both narratives illustrate how pain can be inherited, remembered, reproduced, and normalized through family histories, cultural practices, and collective memories. Trauma emerges not merely as a personal wound but as a social legacy that shapes identities long before individuals fully understand its origins.

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Across both texts, the women repeatedly return to questions of inheritance: What pain do we carry that did not begin with us? How do families transmit fear, silence, and suffering? How do cultural narratives influence the ways individuals experience and respond to adversity? Their stories reveal that trauma often survives beyond the original event, embedding itself within relationships, social expectations, and historical consciousness. Consequently, the autobiographies illuminate the complex ways in which personal suffering is intertwined with collective histories and cultural realities.

Inherited Pain and Family Legacies

A central finding emerging from both autobiographies is that trauma is often inherited rather than solely experienced firsthand. The narratives suggest that individuals carry emotional burdens that originate in previous generations, often without fully recognizing their source.

Ibrahim reflects on the ways unresolved family histories shaped her understanding of herself and her place within the world. She observes:

“We carried our secrets like burdens; each generation added its own layer of silence.”

This statement encapsulates the cumulative nature of inherited trauma. The metaphor of burdens suggests that each generation contributes additional layers of unresolved pain, creating an emotional legacy that descendants must carry. Trauma is transmitted not only through direct experiences but also through what remains unspoken. Silence itself becomes an inheritance.

The quote further reveals how secrecy functions as a mechanism of transmission. Families may believe they are protecting future generations by concealing painful histories, yet the silence often perpetuates confusion, fear, and emotional distance. The absence of discussion does not erase trauma; rather, it allows its influence to persist in subtle but powerful ways.

Similarly, Going reflects on the enduring impact of ancestral suffering when she writes:

“The scars of our ancestors are etched into our very being; they whisper their pain through our actions and choices.”

This powerful imagery suggests that trauma becomes embedded within family identities. The "whispering" of ancestral pain implies that inherited trauma often operates beneath conscious awareness, influencing behaviours, relationships, and emotional responses without being explicitly acknowledged.

Across both narratives, inherited pain is not portrayed as a biological destiny but as a relational and social process. Family histories, unresolved conflicts, and patterns of silence create emotional environments that shape how individuals interpret themselves and the world around them. Consequently, the autobiographies suggest that understanding present suffering often requires examining the histories that preceded it.

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Cycles of Violence Across Generations

Closely related to inherited pain is the reproduction of violence across generations. Both authors reveal how exposure to violence during childhood can contribute to patterns that persist into adulthood, affecting relationships, parenting, and self-perception.

Going's narrative is particularly explicit in examining this phenomenon. Reflecting on the legacy of abuse within families and communities, she states:

“Violence begets violence; it is a legacy we inherit whether we choose to accept it or not.”

This observation captures one of the most troubling dimensions of intergenerational trauma. Violence is presented not merely as an isolated act but as a pattern capable of reproducing itself across time. Individuals who grow up surrounded by aggression, fear, and instability may internalize these experiences as normal aspects of relationships and family life.

Importantly, Going does not suggest that survivors inevitably become perpetrators. Rather, she highlights the profound challenge of breaking cycles that have become deeply embedded within family and social systems. Exposure to violence leaves emotional and psychological imprints that can influence future behaviour unless actively confronted and transformed.

The autobiographies reveal multiple mechanisms through which these cycles operate. Children learn relationship dynamics by observing adults. Fear becomes normalized. Silence becomes habitual. Emotional wounds remain unaddressed. Over time, these experiences shape expectations about intimacy, trust, authority, and conflict.

For Ibrahim, the cycle is less explicitly connected to interpersonal violence and more closely linked to inherited suffering and emotional suppression. Her reflections suggest that trauma reproduces itself not only through violent actions but also through unresolved grief, emotional neglect, and cultural expectations that discourage open discussion of pain.

The findings therefore indicate that intergenerational trauma operates through both action and inaction, through what families do and what they leave unsaid.

Collective Memory and Historical Trauma

Both autobiographies extend beyond family histories to explore the broader historical forces that shape individual lives. Trauma is situated within larger contexts of war, displacement, social conflict, and collective suffering, revealing how personal experiences are inseparable from historical realities.

For Ibrahim, historical trauma is deeply connected to civil war and forced migration. Her childhood was shaped by political instability and violent conflict, experiences that became part of both her personal memory and the collective memory of her community. The deaths, displacements, and losses associated with war extend beyond individual suffering to become shared historical experiences.

The impact of these events is evident when she recounts:

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“One minute we were sitting in the canoe... the next minute, people were screaming... My cousin drowned. It was the first time I saw death face-to-face.”

Although deeply personal, this experience reflects the broader realities of communities affected by conflict. Individual memories become intertwined with collective histories of violence and displacement. The trauma therefore belongs not only to the individual survivor but also to a wider social group that has endured similar experiences.

Going similarly situates personal suffering within broader historical and social contexts. While her narrative focuses primarily on domestic and gender-based violence, she repeatedly highlights how these experiences are shaped by larger social structures and cultural histories. Her reflections suggest that present-day violence cannot be understood independently of historical patterns of inequality, power, and oppression.

The findings demonstrate that historical trauma operates across multiple levels. It affects individual emotions and memories, shapes family narratives, influences community identities, and contributes to broader cultural understandings of suffering. Trauma thus becomes both personal and collective, linking individual biographies to historical processes.

Cultural Expectations and Women's Suffering

The autobiographies further reveal how cultural norms and gendered expectations play a significant role in the transmission and maintenance of trauma. Both women describe social environments in which women are expected to endure hardship, suppress emotions, and prioritize the needs of others over their own well-being.

Ibrahim explicitly reflects on these expectations, noting:

“There were unspoken rules about what it meant to be a woman in my family; these rules were rooted in traditions that often felt oppressive.”

This statement highlights the subtle yet powerful ways culture shapes women's experiences. The rules are "unspoken," suggesting that they operate through everyday practices and assumptions rather than explicit instruction. Nevertheless, their influence is profound, determining what women can say, how they should behave, and how they are expected to respond to suffering.

The findings suggest that these cultural expectations often encourage endurance rather than resistance. Women learn to tolerate discomfort, conceal pain, and maintain family harmony even when doing so comes at high personal cost. Such expectations contribute to the normalization of suffering and create barriers to help-seeking and self-advocacy.

Going's narrative similarly reveals how societal expectations surrounding femininity, relationships, and loyalty can trap women within abusive situations. The pressure to preserve relationships, avoid public shame, and remain silent about abuse often intensifies survivors' isolation.

Importantly, the autobiographies do not portray culture as inherently harmful. Rather, they demonstrate how certain cultural norms and traditions can inadvertently perpetuate trauma when

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they discourage disclosure, validate inequality, or prioritize social appearances over individual well-being.

The narratives therefore illuminate the dual role of culture as both a source of identity and a potential mechanism of oppression. Cultural expectations shape not only how trauma is experienced but also how it is understood, expressed, and transmitted across generations.

Synthesis: Trauma Beyond the Individual

Taken together, the findings reveal trauma as a phenomenon that extends far beyond the individual survivor. Through inherited pain, cycles of violence, collective memory, and cultural expectations, trauma becomes embedded within families, communities, and social structures. Both autobiographies demonstrate that suffering is rarely confined to a single moment or person. Instead, trauma travels across generations, shaping identities, relationships, and worldviews in ways that are often invisible yet profoundly influential.

At the same time, the narratives suggest that recognizing these intergenerational and cultural dimensions of trauma is an essential step toward healing. By uncovering family secrets, questioning inherited patterns, and challenging oppressive cultural norms, both authors begin to disrupt the transmission of trauma. Their stories reveal that while trauma may be inherited, it is not immutable. Through reflection, storytelling, and conscious resistance, inherited legacies of pain can be transformed into opportunities for understanding, resilience, and change.

Thus, Theme 3 reveals trauma not merely as an individual psychological experience but as a social and historical phenomenon that connects past, present, and future generations. The autobiographies of Ibrahim and Going demonstrate that to understand trauma fully, one must look beyond the individual and examine the familial, cultural, and historical worlds in which suffering is created, sustained, and ultimately challenged.

For a journal article, the discussion should be more concise than the findings because the detailed evidence has already been presented. A good discussion is usually 30–40% of the length of the findings. Below is a condensed version.

Discussion

Trauma as a Lifelong and Multidimensional Experience

The findings reveal trauma as a cumulative and lifelong phenomenon that extends beyond isolated events. Across *Brutal Legacy* and *A Toast to Life*, trauma emerges through childhood abuse, war-related displacement, intimate partner violence, loss, and psychological distress. This supports Herman's (1992) argument that trauma overwhelms ordinary coping mechanisms and persists long after the original event. Both Going and Ibrahim portray trauma as an enduring psychological reality that continues to shape identity, relationships, and well-being.

The findings further affirm Caruth's (1995) notion that traumatic experiences disrupt linear understandings of time. Memories of abuse, war, and loss remain psychologically present, illustrating Herman's claim that trauma often exists in an "eternal present." Consistent with Musisi

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and Kinyanda (2020) and Ng et al. (2020), the narratives demonstrate how conflict, violence, and instability contribute to long-term emotional suffering within African contexts. The autobiographies therefore highlight trauma as both a personal and socio-historical experience, shaped by family relationships, political instability, and gendered violence.

Violence as Both Personal Experience and Social Reality

The findings demonstrate that violence operates simultaneously at personal, cultural, and structural levels. Beyond physical abuse, both autobiographies reveal emotional manipulation, psychological degradation, coercive control, and institutional neglect. This supports Herman's (1992) assertion that trauma resulting from human systems of domination fundamentally threatens survivors' sense of self, safety, and agency.

The narratives further illustrate the gendered nature of violence. Consistent with Bazaanah and Ngcobo (2024), violence against women is shown to be embedded within patriarchal structures that normalize silence, obedience, and endurance. The expectation that women should suffer quietly reinforces the invisibility of abuse and limits opportunities for intervention. Going's critique of legal and institutional responses also highlights how structural inequalities can perpetuate survivors' suffering through secondary victimization.

A significant finding is the role of silence in sustaining violence. Supporting Herman's (1992) argument that trauma thrives in conditions of secrecy and denial, both autobiographies demonstrate how cultural silence protects perpetrators while isolating victims. By narrating their experiences publicly, the authors challenge these silences and transform private suffering into collective awareness and social critique.

Intergenerational and Cultural Transmission of Trauma

The findings reveal trauma as an intergenerational and cultural phenomenon that extends beyond individual experience. Both autobiographies show how unresolved pain, family secrets, and inherited patterns of behaviour shape subsequent generations. This supports emerging scholarship on intergenerational trauma and extends Herman's framework by demonstrating that trauma operates within families, communities, and cultural systems.

The narratives also reveal how historical experiences such as war, displacement, and systemic violence become embedded within collective memory. Consistent with Bazaanah and Ngcobo (2024), the findings illustrate how broader historical and political forces continue to influence contemporary experiences of suffering. Trauma is therefore both personal and collective, linking individual biographies to wider social histories.

Cultural expectations surrounding womanhood, silence, and endurance further shape the experience and transmission of trauma. In line with Samir and Manqoush (2020), the findings suggest that patriarchal norms often constrain women's ability to express suffering and seek support. However, culture also emerges as a source of resilience through identity, belonging, and ancestral strength. This dual role highlights the complexity of cultural influences on trauma and recovery.

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Overall, the findings support the transcultural perspective that trauma is simultaneously culturally situated and universally recognizable. Despite differences in national and historical contexts, Going and Ibrahim narrate similar experiences of violence, silence, and survival, demonstrating how trauma transcends borders while remaining shaped by specific socio-cultural realities.

Summary of Key Findings

Analysis of *Brutal Legacy* and *A Toast to Life* revealed three interconnected themes that illuminate the nature of trauma and violence in African women's autobiographical narratives.

First, trauma emerged as a lifelong and multidimensional experience, encompassing childhood abuse, war-related displacement, intimate partner violence, grief, and psychological distress. The findings demonstrate that trauma is cumulative, enduring, and relational, shaping identity, well-being, and interpersonal relationships across the lifespan.

Second, violence was constructed as both a personal experience and a social reality. Beyond physical abuse, the autobiographies highlighted emotional, psychological, and structural forms of violence embedded within patriarchal systems, cultural silences, and institutional failures. Violence was shown to erode self-worth and agency while reflecting broader gendered inequalities within society.

Third, trauma was found to be intergenerational and culturally transmitted. Family secrets, inherited silences, collective memories, and cultural expectations contributed to the continuation of trauma across generations. At the same time, cultural identity and ancestral strength emerged as important resources for resilience and healing.

Overall, the findings reveal that trauma in African women's autobiographies is not merely an individual psychological experience but a complex phenomenon shaped by personal histories, family legacies, socio-cultural norms, and historical forces. Through autobiographical storytelling, both authors transform private suffering into testimony, resistance, and pathways toward healing and empowerment.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that trauma and violence in *Brutal Legacy* and *A Toast to Life* are multidimensional, intergenerational, and deeply embedded within socio-cultural contexts. Through autobiographical storytelling, Going and Ibrahim reveal how personal suffering intersects with gendered oppression, historical instability, and cultural silence. Their narratives also highlight resilience, agency, and the transformative power of testimony in challenging violence and fostering healing.

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Recommendation

Mental health practitioners, educators, and policymakers should promote trauma-informed, culturally responsive interventions while encouraging narrative-based approaches that empower survivors to voice experiences, facilitate healing, and challenge harmful social norms.

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