

Unfolding the Intersection of Trauma and Misogyny: A Black Feminist Critique on Forna's The Gilded Ones

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Abstract: This study takes the reader on an expedition in the realm of *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna for a detailed analysis of trauma and misogyny concerning the black feminist outlook. As the narrative unfolds in the novel the protagonist, Dekka redefines herself after being severely betrayed and discriminated against because of her gender, sex, race, and class. But once the reader starts exploring the galaxy of *The Gilded Ones* it's hard not to notice the misogyny, discrimination due to gender and class, racism, and sexism endured by marginalized communities and how this narrative catches up to the real-world scenario of Black African American Women. The theory of Maria Root about insidious trauma and misogyny by Bell Hooks refers to harsh degradation directed to subjects whose identity, class, status, gender, and color are not valuable in the eyes of authoritative individuals of society and do not align with the concepts of power, this acts as an authentic pillar for analyzing the work of Namina Forna under the lens of black feminism as the incident and situations of the female characters are put into and how they face these changing circumstances in *The Gilded Ones*.

Keywords: Trauma, Misogyny, Racism, Discrimination, Black Feminism

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1. Introduction

The Gilded Ones [1] by Namina Forna is a novel packed with suspense, action, thriller, empowerment, and chilling experiences for readers who are curious enough to read this thought-provoking piece of literature. This study delves into the life struggles of Western-African black women they face in various aspects of day-to-day life just for the sole purpose of being equally respected and treated as white women. This study highlights the challenging situation of black women as they go through excruciating incidents in the novel, *The Gilded Ones* [1] by Namina Forna, which is an embodiment of the black feminist outlook, and how these incidents happen in

the fantasy realm is a glimpse of the actual world where black women survive. Keeping in view the definition of trauma and misogyny, the researcher explores the circumstances faced by black women that are ignited by varied rules and policies unjustly forced onto them. Lastly, the work focuses on the analysis of elements such as racism, class discrimination, and gender inequality in the selected novel.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To investigate the issues of racism of black women in the selected novel towards their social domain in Western Africa.
- To analyze the distinctive aspects of feminism, and consider how feminism delivers support in actual illuminations of the lives and experiences of black women in *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) How do the issues of racism against black women affect their lives (socially, emotionally, and mentally) in *The Gilded Ones*?
- 2) How do the trauma experiences of black feminism affect the productive life cycle of women in the novel *The Gilded Ones*?

2. Literature Review

Trauma is a term used for those individuals who in their life faced situations that challenged them emotionally, physically, and mentally, due to which they become triggered later on and develop survival mechanisms related to that trauma. Traumatic events have a huge impact on a person's psychological state of mind which is hard to crack later on in the future because they have coped with the harsh conditions of their life making them stern of their beliefs. The psychological impact triggers issues with identity, the capability to regulate emotions, and navigating associations. Trauma is a state of mind that is different for each individual, it's because every person has his capabilities to navigate through harsh circumstances of their life. Some individuals might not care about being discriminated but for some, it is a huge deal that many times result in psychological distress (What is Trauma? 2023 by Mathew).

While trauma is common in males and females and is considered challenging for both, misogyny is a term exclusively for women. The concept of misogyny traces its roots back to ancient Greeks, where it gets its meaning, "hatred for women". Now, misogyny is not only portrayed

through verbal language for belittling women, but major and severe actions contribute to subjecting women to this philosophy, for instance, women have been oppressed, their human rights violated, they are viewed as inferior members of society, and their tasks are limited to childbirth and home chores. Long-term oppression gave rise to a multitude of voices and, taken together, gave rise to the concept of feminism, which launched the longest-running movement in history to this day (Misogyny, feminism and sexism, 2017 by Dr. Suprakash Chaudhury, Dr. DY Patil, Dr DY Patil Vidyapeeth).

Delineating, establishing, and achieving political, economic, personal, and social equality for women is the shared objective of a wide range of sociopolitical movements and philosophies collectively referred to as feminism. Black Feminism has more rigorous conditions to have been raised than the actual feminism of white women. Black feminism not only fights for their right to equality to men in the sphere of life but also to have the same equality as white women as well. The focal point of this revolves around the experiences of African American women, analyzing and interpreting the interrelation between sexism, racism, classism, and lastly other social identities. Black feminism not only sheds light on the aspects of gender inequality, which is the center for white feminism, rather it deals with racial inequality with gender inequality (Exploring the History of Black Feminism, [2] by icadvinc).

When one grapples with the contents of the history, it gives evidence that black females have encountered obstacles related to the interrelation concerning their gender and race. From the moment they were brought to the colonies of European North America, without their will, that's the point black females were tied to a history of racial injustices and suffering. Black Females were considered amenable to power, prime conduits, and perfect concerning slavery, through which economic attainments were achieved by white men.

Alexander [3] conducted research regarding the relationship that exists among partner violence, symptoms of psychological health, and reproductive coercion among black females. This study evaluated the relationships between young black adult females and black adolescents. In this research, scholars evaluated symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Sexual and physical violence and reproductive coercion were demonstrated in the sample. About more than 10 percent of young adult women reported facing reproductive coercion without facing IPV, and more than 35 percent of the sample executed the reports regarding dual sorts of violence.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (47%) and depression (70%) symptoms were more marked among black females having reproductive coercion as compared to women without reproductive coercion.

Jones [4] conducted a study to evaluate depression and racism among black women and also examined the roles endured by social assistance and identity. This study explored the experiences of black females regarding racism comprising of the implications for their psychological health. The existing study evaluates the relations among social support, racism, and depression, then analyzes whether racial centrality shielded the influence of racism on the consequences of psychological health. In this study, data was attained from about more than 200 black females studying at the college level, and data was gathered utilizing an online survey methodology. The results attained throughout the study explored that social support interceded in the association between depression and racism.

Loewen [5] conducted a study to explore considerations regarding misogyny. The study attempts to inform that misogyny is a substantial term. The affective power associated with this term tends to invoke specters associated with sexual assault, rape, gas-lighting, and hate-fuelled. The presence of misogyny against black females had an impact on their culture in the past and even in the existing frames of the present. The term exploring misogyny for black females is used to deliberate how anti-blackness and racism impact the facings of black females regarding misogyny, while *noir* in this term delivers meanings of black.

Noble [2] conducted a study regarding misogyny and provided some evidence associated with anti-blackness practices. This study tends to reveal a debate regarding a concept of black feminism termed as misogyny and its employment for confronting politics regarding gender within the black communal domain. The research provides information that despite the color of skin, age, social class status, or money, misogyny has an undesirable impact on the entire black females. A black female of about twenty-six years named Breonna Taylor [6], who was killed by white police officers in her own house, explores the fatal consequences associated with misogyny. In contrast to the assassination of George Floyd, the case of that black female has come to a stop with no evidence regarding advances. The study also provides information that

this discrimination is also faced by a numeral of celebrities who are categorized as black females, rather than being powerful and independent from financial complications.

Rosenthal [7] investigated racism and the reproductive and sexual health of black females. For considering the disparities regarding health complications of black females, it is significant to utilize an intersectional structure that evaluates certain facings of oppression experienced by certain collectives due to intersecting recognitions and standards in the social domain connected to societal frameworks. The findings of the study delivered suggestions that racism may endure a significant role in current ethnic disparities in reproductive and sexual health consequences of women, and interventions related to racism at several levels are required to promote equality of health.

Williams [8] conducted research on intersectional modes for interventions with black females. The research offered considerations that impetus for this certain problem associated with women and therapy initiated with an expectation to emphasize and demonstrate the influence of stereotypes that provide shape to psychological health and lively experiences associated with black females. Black females comprised of huge articulation of their black ethnic or racial identity and facings as female for informing the modes they endure in the domain. In this certain problem, researchers have designed and drawn fifteen articles for the articulation of intersectional, womanist/feminist replies to address and name the requirements and concerns of black females.

Maxwell [9] conducted research for theoretical exposition regarding womanism and feminism in the context of Africa. This study acknowledges that several researchers and scholars delivered arguments that feminism is tailor-made for serving a certain collection of entities and it does not accomplish or resolve the requirements of entire women in society. Feminism as a term adopted and conceptualized by white women from America, tends to entail a standard with a purpose developed for completing the requirements and expectations of the mentioned collective.

The historical circumstances associated with black feminism through the expression of the logic that gender is complexly considered intersectional. Class and race deliver shape to gender and work in deep reasonableness, and that concurrently tends to underpin the reasonableness of gender, nation, class, sexuality, and race. That is entire of these structures or systems are in

participation in a similar instance. The historical circumstances associated with womanism which based on black culture found in existing experiences and private determination.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Black Feminism, yet, centers on the facings of black females, specifically the black females enduring their lives in American societies, considering intersectionality among racism, also other identities of societies. Black feminism tends to mark and engage with several aspects associated with discrimination and inequities along with inequality of gender. Following black feminism, gender, race, and class discrimination are entire aspects of the similar system associated with hierarchy, which Bell Hooks tends to call the imperialist white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Due to the interdependency of dominating entities of society, they collaborate or combine to develop something more than facing racism independently.

2.2 Ain't I a Woman by Bell Hooks

The theory that is concerned with this study is Ain't I a Woman. Bell Hooks is most famous for her theory regarding black feminism. Ain't I a Woman is a feminist theory by Bell Hooks in the era of 1984, in which she tends to argue that Friedan doesn't comprise the lives, requirements, or facings women without men, women without homes, women without children, poor women or non-white women. In this theory, Bell Hooks tends to evaluate how black females, from the 17th century to the present day, were and are browbeaten or oppressed by black men, white men, and white women. In her theory, Bell tends to challenge the view that gender and race are two distinct perspectives or phenomena, persevering that the efforts for accomplishing or ending sexism and racism are inextricably entangled.

Ain't I a Woman is considered as the speech conveyed extemporaneously in among era of (1797-1883) by Bell Hooks in her theory, who was born into slavery in the United States (New York). Some instances after attaining her freedom in the year 1827, she became a famous speaker for her anti-slavery speeches. Her speech was conveyed at the *Women's Convention* in 1851, at Akron (Ohio). In 1851, her speech was not titled Truth, [10].

2.3 Theory of Trauma (1992) by Maria Root

Maria P.P. Root, a scholar, and psychologist, is famous for their groundbreaking effort regarding cultural trauma and its influences on marginalized communal domains. In the year of 1992, she delivered an introduction to the theory regarding cultural trauma in her impactful article *Racial/Cultural Identity Development and People of Color: Therapeutic Implications*. Root calls insidious trauma referring to the increasing degradation directed towards entities whose recognitions, including class, color, and gender, distinguish from what is considered and valued by those comprising authority and power. Insidious trauma tends to refer to the regular incidents associated with objectification, marginalization, dehumanization, and intimidation that are faced by entities of collectives targeted by racism, ageism, and other sorts of oppression, and collectives influenced by poverty. Exposure to such sort of trauma is thought to develop both certain strengths and certain vulnerabilities.

Root's theory of cultural trauma assesses how people from different ethnic and cultural origins are faced as well as the psychological effects of systematic oppression and discrimination. A concept of "insidious trauma" was given by Maria Root, a feminist psychotherapist, which refers to the progressive abasement aimed towards people whose identities, such as gender, color, and class, differ from the valued ideologies by those in authority. The concept of insidious trauma alludes to the day-to-day incidents of marginalization, dehumanization, intimidation, objectification, and much more that are acquainted by individuals or groups singled out by racism, heterosexism, ageism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, and groups affected by poverty.

The theory of Root regarding cultural trauma evaluates the facings of entities from cultural and racial backgrounds and the psychological influences of discrimination and systemic oppression. These facings are not restricted to entity instances regarding trauma but are hugely rooted in societal frameworks and authority dynamics.

3. Data Analysis

The writer takes the reader to a realm of fantasy through a protagonist named, Deka who resides in a place named Otera that is filled with patriarchal methodologies. The story revolves around the narrative of Deka, who is persistent on the notion of being accepted by her society, that very

circle in which women are considered to serve men for their glory. Dekka is a sixteen-year-old girl who is waiting for a ritual, which girls of her age will go through to be labeled as pure and impure. Yet, when the blood of Dekka appears gold, a demonstration of the heritage of the demon, Dekka is labeled as Gilded One, an ostracized and feared collective believed for bringing destruction and death. After being chained, tortured, used, and gone through multiple deaths by various methods, Dekka is employed by a mysterious female named White Hands and connects with a collective of similarly highlighted girls known as Alaki. Forna described the damage in a way that gives information regarding violence, abuse, mutilation, torture, bloodletting, rape, barbarous sadism, and huge subjugation Woodson, We all have a choice right now. Are we girls or are we demons? Are we going to die or are we going to survive? (Forna, pg.34) [11].

Dekka and her friends learn that having golden blood gives them some very special powers to kill the death shrieks—dangerous and scary creatures that fill their ground—under the support and direction of that enigmatic woman. The Alaki uncovers long-kept mysteries about the origins of the Gilded Ones and the repressive patriarchal social realm as they train and develop their talents. During the whole training process, Dekka formed close bonds with her colleagues Alaki, who included Britta, Ixa, and Belcalis. Together, they engage in navigating the difficulties associated with their social domain, combating discrimination, and coming to terms with their agency and capability. In addition to battling her own internalized demons, the main character Dekka fears losing control of her newly acquired talents. Forna adopted a very sensible and productive style to explore such sort of issues that are associated with the social domains of America. When death shrieks attacked the village of Dekka, a collective came to save them, and after that, Dekka also joined them due to her impurity. Similarly, black females are facing and having a battle with issues to attain equality. While, white females are generally involved in promoting racism, sexism, and classism in societies. “My face may be the spitting image of his, but that's not enough. I need to be proven for the village to accept me, and for Father's family to accept us. Once my blood runs pure, I'll finally belong.” (Forna, Pg 65) [11].

But once after gaining and understanding their power, the Alaki thought that everything might go smoothly, they are struck by the betrayal and danger. They realize that they are caught in a web of conspiracy of politics and the enemy is none other than a person in their ranks. Dekka summons

her courage, refusing to put her fellows and herself in danger as she fights through the challenges of an oppressive system that is determined to step over them.

“My heart rises to my throat with each step the recruits take. Please don’t match me with a cruel boy, or one who hates alaki, I silently beg Oyomo. Ionas’s face flashes in my memory, and I push it away, praying even harder. Please, please, please...” (Forna, ch.08) [11]

These lines represent the state of mind of Deka, how frightened and worried she becomes when there is a slight chance that she might be paired up with a male who hates alike (impure) like her. This is a clear manifestation of the insidious trauma she dealt with her last person of interest, Ionas. At first, Ionas stood up for her and liked her, just as she was. But after the ritual of purity, when he found out that she was impure due to golden blood, he was the person to strike her with a sword across her stomach. Though it’s a simple act that is being conducted between opposite genders Deka became terrified about the idea, what if she gets someone like Ionas, who at first might seem okay but later on betray her and might be cruel just like Ionas? The concept of Insidious Trauma can also be highlighted through the lines; Ionas’s face flashes in my memory, and I push it away, praying even harder. Having disturbing flashbacks of people or incidents that caused some sort of damage to a person is a trigger warning of insidious trauma, which the main protagonist faced in the narrative. Every time something happened similar to her previous experience she made decisions or got terrified, indicating insidious trauma. “Rights? The word circles in my mind, shimmering and unbelievable. Rights are the domain of men and boys – not women, and certainly not alike. Even so, the word blossoms, like a distant hope I'm afraid to even touch" (Forna, ch.07). [11]

These lines portray the height of misogyny presented in the narrative. Deka is considered inferior, belittled, a tool to be used by men, and all the things that are told to her by a man and women (women of men) that when she hears the word "right" be directed to not only women but an impure woman, Alaki, she fumbles entirely. The word carries hope because, in that very pace of the empire, someone used this for Alaki, which means that things were different, but she doesn't linger on that thought for very long and shoves it aside because she was betrayed by her father, Ionas, and her people with whom she spent her entire life and then when they found out they treated her most brutally, going so far of killing her with the brutal methods possible. Considering that this novel is written in the 21st century, and rights are a crucial part of every human being, whether it is man or woman, at least that's what's told to people. Here the writer

opened a new gate to the reality of misogyny that shows hatred towards African American women isn't entirely through verbal abuse but also manipulation. Deka was presented with hope through the words of a man, but she still refused to grasp that hope because of the trauma she faced with the people whom she trusted the most and who told her things similar to this.

The other is the girls with torn robes and hooded eyes that shuffle beside us, their movements slow and stiff as if their souls have been snatched right out of their bodies. (Forna, 2021, ch.07)

[11] When Deka and Britta arrived at Jor Hall they witnessed other girls that also arrived with them but had worse condition than them. Their robes were torn and their movements were slow, like carrying souls that were ripped and then snatched apart from their bodies, they both though thanked them that they didn't face what those other girls endured. Here both the lakes were engulfed in gratitude for white hands just because they saw the physical conditions of the other lake which were brutal than them. The difference drawn in the narrative is that insidious trauma isn't evident at first just like here, Deka isn't aware of her suffering because she healed physically but not psychologically. Later on, the narrative makes it self-clear when the symptoms of insidious trauma present themselves to the readers. Here the cultural Trauma is also highlighted, that marginalized Alka faced similar situations of misogyny and discrimination Deka faced.

“This is unnatural, Deka.

Unnatural... There it is, that word again.

I know Britta didn't mean to hurt me, but the word still stings. Even worse, it's true.” (Forna, ch.09) [11]

The theory of trauma is presented here through the reaction of Deka to a word directed towards her from another lake. Throughout the novel Deka, is persistent in living by the rules set forth by the men of Otera, not even realizing or questioning whether they are correct or wrong. She is determined to be just like the people from Otera. Even though those people did horrible things to her she still wants to become someone they will accept and live a normal life. So, when Britta says that her condition is even unnatural for an alaki, Deka gets hurt badly. Her condition was putting her on the scale of being un-ordinary while she wanted the extreme of ordinary because that was the information, desires, thoughts, and perceptions she was fed up with from the very beginning, even by her father. The aspect of trauma is called to attention, that individuals, specifically, African American women, have distorted sense of self and recognition that no

matter how much they have succeeded in life, a part of them is always tied to the words and situations they once were referred to. In the opposite to Dekka, Britta accepted and was a bit more reassured than Dekka, it's because her parents didn't betray or dislike her for the fact that she is impure, so her intensity of feeling Britta was comparably less to Dekka, who faced severe betrayal, and misogyny and discrimination due to her race and gender.

“There it is, the condition. Yes, we can flee here, but once we leave Hemaira's gates, we return to our old lives – to the Death Mandate, the constant threat of death shrieks... Keita is just like all the rest, giving us impossibilities and calling them choices.”

The manipulation is dealt with in these lines by looking into the thoughts of Dekka as she witnesses a situation going around Jur hall in Hemaria. Though the boy is telling the lake that she has a choice in this that's not the case since she will return to her old world where she would be sentenced to death, so in fact, she doesn't have a choice in this matter at all. Fornia predicted to execute entities specifically the young ones, concretely what to seek so that they wouldn't be victimized or bamboozled by certain patriarchal systems. In actuality, patriarchal systems are proven very brutal certainly for black females. It is because it is identified that some secret societies are operating that do FGM (female genital mutation) on young women and girls. In regions of Sierra Leone, most of the population of black females has faced it. There also exists casual misogyny, the prediction that females are only meant to be servants for men.

We're monsters, and they're going to treat us like monsters. They're going to use us, bleed us, and when they're done, they're going to find whatever our final deaths are and execute us one by one (Fornia, 2021, pg. 14). [11]

In this statement, Namina Fornia in her novel reflects the persuasive fear and the expectation regarding mistreatment that the Gilded Ones face within the novel and it is nearly connected with concepts of misogyny and trauma. Here the circumstances of black females are presented as how they have no choice but to accept and adapt to the unjust rules and changing situations.

4. Conclusion

Overall, summing up the entire analysis, it is fair to say that the narrative of Namina Fornia, *The Gilded Ones* [1] is a clear and real picture of what exactly happened and is still happening with Black African American Women. Just like in the fiction, the character of Agda is one of the

characters that in the very first two chapters drives the action related to class, race, gender, and misogyny, especially towards Deka.

Analyzing the reoccurring racism, class, and gender discrimination in the novel that are delivered to the types of Deka, an Alaki, gives us an answer to one of the research questions mentioned above, when Deka faced these challenges directed towards her just because of her race, skin color, gender, and class by her very own life was turned upside down. The height of these issues faced by Deka is a manifestation of the fact that, at times a person's very own family betrays the person on these mere stereotypes, without assessing the reasons or asking the question, to why have a different skin color is considered wrong? Why does belonging to a different race than the majority of the society, gives them the right to hold an upper hand on that very individual? Just like in the narrative, Deka's father and her society label her the monster. Later on, she finds out that they already knew she was impure they were just waiting for the right moment to disclose with evidence and then execute her. When comparing her situation with Britta, another Alaki it's noticed that she indeed suffered the consequences of misogyny and discrimination but the impact on her wasn't as severe as on Deka. That's how she was dependent on the intensity of the racism, classic, gender discrimination, and sexism that define the impact on the victim.

Cultural and Insidious Trauma as per Maria Root backs up the story of the narrative taking it from the fiction world of Alaki to the real world of humans. Especially when Deka was on board and slept for four days straight, which was considered unnatural even for an awake, later on, it was suspected that due to the intense torture she endured at Otera in a cell, she was traumatized. So, it can be interpreted that the narrative of *The Gilded Ones* [1] by Namina Forna is a spitting image of the unjust challenges and suffering African American Women face in the real world.

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