

## **Conflict between Faith in Religious and Science in Transcendent Kingdom by Yaa Gyasi**

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**Abstract:** Yaa Gyasi begins *Transcendent Kingdom* with two quotes: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil,” by Gerard Manley Hopkins and “Nothing comes into the universe and nothing leaves it,” by Sharon Olds. These quotes embody the central struggle of the novel: that core dissonance between the urge to find solace in science vs. the urge to find solace in religion.

Gifty, a sixth-year PhD candidate in neuroscience at Stanford, studies reward-seeking behavior in mice and searches for the root causes of mental illnesses such as addiction and depression. She’s immersed in her career, practically existing as a phantom when she’s not floating from lab to sparsely decorated apartment back to lab.

Meanwhile, she struggles with her former faith, battling with the ghost of her childhood self-immortalized in diary entries addressed to God. Young Gifty was devout. Young Gifty was fascinated by prayer and purity. Young Gifty wanted salvation with a special kind of innocent desperation that only a child can have. However, she turned away from religion for a reason and Gyasi’s own experience and perspective comes into play when she makes a point to emphasize the effects of Gifty’s upbringing in a predominantly white Alabama church.

**Keywords:** conflicts, gifty, experiments, religious, science, solace, ghost, childhood, church.

### **INTRODUCTION**

These inner conflicts come from Gifty’s deep yearning to explain two deeply traumatic, unforgettable events: her older brother’s overdose after years of substance abuse and her mother’s subsequent depression and suicide attempt. Nana, Gifty’s brother, was a talented high school athlete who became hooked on painkillers and spiraled into the depths of addiction. Gifty’s research reflects the central question one asks when someone they love falls into the patterns Gyasi illustrates with such raw accuracy. How much control do they really have? Ultimately, the answer to the question isn’t found through her experiments, but through the anecdotes she reveals from her childhood.

The question of what makes an addict and how much of addiction is actually illness is explored throughout her story. Gifty’s mother, a stern, steel-forged woman, traveled from Ghana with her husband and newborn son. While still in the throes of adjustment during their first few years in America, they had a daughter they couldn’t afford. Gifty was made intimately aware of that fact from a young age. However, her mother worked as hard as she could and then some to provide for her family.

Their father, a man Gifty does not once refer to as such, left and returned to Ghana. He was a large man made small in a country he did not know. Gyasi emphasizes the difference between the true nature of Gifty's parents and the meek nature they showed to the outside world. When they were home and speaking their native tongue to their children, they were strict and demanded respect. They raised their children as they were raised and as their parents were raised. However, when the outside world was peering in on their foreign customs and unfamiliar ways of life, they bent. They did not break, nor did they conform, but they shielded themselves from the accusing, ignorant stares and made themselves as inconspicuous as they could. It was too much for the Chin Chin Man, the name Gifty refers to her father as, but her mother endured and built a life.

Gyasi is from a family of Ghanaian immigrants herself and was raised Christian, a unique experience that she recreates and explores through Gifty's character. She lived in Huntsville, Alabama, the same town Gifty grew up in. She has a uniquely holistic view of Christianity and one whose many different facets she embodies in different characters. Gifty's mother is the unwavering faith, the healing touch of religion, whereas Anne, one of Gifty's few former lovers, personifies the sect that finds religion damaging and bigoted by nature instead of through corruption. Gifty, a scientist at heart and a Christian in spirit, must reconcile this duality over the course of the book and it teaches a valuable lesson about the nature of duality itself. [1]

You can be a religious scientist. You can be a kind addict. You can be hardworking and depressed. You can be and you will be multitudes. Gifty's research with mice is contingent on the small group that continues to exhibit the risky behavior because they deem the reward worth the pain. There are answers for temptation nestled inside our skulls as well as between the pages of our Bibles. There are answers everywhere, but which do we acknowledge? Which interpretations do we dismiss and which do we rely on?

Gyasi tells Gifty's story through a collection of flashbacks interspersed with current events. The writing is impeccable; the reader never goes so far between chronological chapters that they forget what's happening. Each event feeds into the next, springing from her childhood in rural Alabama to her summer in Ghana to her failed relationships to now—her mother stagnating in her bed and their altered relationship an almost tangible weight on Gifty's chest. The distance that's so prevalent between herself and everyone she's ever known and loved is defined by each new piece, each new event.

Transcendent Kingdom is a thousand-piece puzzle, a masterpiece, a work of grit. It is painful and beautiful but, ultimately, it is human. This book is about Gifty's journey to discover the answers to the questions her brother and mother left her with and the fact that, without realizing it, she was seeking transcendence. Her work seeks to dismantle the crippling aspects of humanity and though it is an admirable goal, it never gave her the true answers she was searching for. There are some things that religion or science can't provide the answers to, and Yaa Gyasi's Transcendent Kingdom illustrates the processes and pain that accompanies searching for those answers inside yourself.

Transcendent Kingdom by Yaa Gyasi explores the intersection between faith and science. It tells the story of Gifty, a young Ghanaian woman, who finds herself at a crossroads when her brother, Nana, dies from opioid overdose. Having believed, worshipped, loved, and relied on God in her childhood, Gifty drifts away from the faith, unable to understand why an all-powerful God would allow such tragedy. When Gyasi introduces her, she is a sixth-year PhD candidate in neuroscience at Stanford University. Haunted by her brother's death, her research seeks to understand the truth behind drug addiction. In the course of the novel, she interrogates the capacity for science and faith to give an account of the mind and the body.[2,3]

## DISCUSSION

As she negotiates her present life as a scientist, we get glimpses of her past as a believer through flashbacks. In the course of her childhood, Gifty establishes the undependability of religion. As a researcher, she finds that science too is not always reliable. But, in spite of these disappointments, Gifty gives up on neither. She graduates with her PhD and goes on to publish a paper on pleasure and punishment in spite of reservations about scientific writing. She also frequents the church long after acquiring her doctorate even though she still doubts God. Gift remarks:

I grew up around people who were distrustful of science, who thought of it as a cunning trick to rob them of their faith, and I have been educated around scientists and laypeople alike who talk about religion as though it were a comfort blanket for the dumb and the weak.

This statement exemplifies how much Gifty's worlds conflict in the novel. While to most of her friends it seems improbable for science and religion to coexist, Gifty, who simultaneously faults and reveres both, views them not as mutually exclusive.

Transcendent Kingdom's structure manifests Gyasi's artistic skill. The author infuses the text with the life of the characters in such a way that their experiences feel tangible to the reader. In her use of flashbacks, Gyasi uses a plot structure that mirrors Gifty's family's life. She tells the story not in an orderly succession but in alternating loops of past and present. At some point in the seemingly arbitrary narration, Gifty says, "I miss thinking in terms of the ordinary, the straight line from birth to death. The line of those drug-addled years of Nana's life is not so easy to draw. It zigs and it zags, and it slashes." This "zigging and zagging" is on display as the novel unfolds. Additionally, the author captures the jumbled progress of Gifty's family in her structuring of the novel. Gifty reports that "While Nana was sick, our lives moved in slow motion and at great speed simultaneously." Mimicking this, some of Gyasi's chapters are as brief as a few sentences, even as the novel expresses the weight of the opioid crisis in the US and the difficulty of dealing with such crises whether through religion or science.

Transcendent Kingdom couldn't be timelier. Anyone interested in finding the truth about life's difficult issues has much to benefit from this book. The novel would also make a wonderful companion as one struggles to make sense of suffering.[4,5]

The conflict between religion and science has existed through ages. Science has frowned upon blind faith. Story of creation does not stand a chance before Darwin's theory of evolution backed by hard facts. Yet, this does not shake the faith of the devout. When we speak of miracles, one naturally tends to think of divine interventions, out of the ordinary occurrences. But miracles can be found in the most mundane act of living, if only one has the eyes to see it. And this is what Yaa Gyasi's Transcendent Kingdom does. It gently nudges the reader towards witnessing the miracles of life that we often overlook. It tries to bridge the chasm between faith and science and shows that both can coexist, for both have the power to alter lives profoundly and intimately. The canvas of the novel is expansive and encompasses in its bosom topical issues like racism, bigotry, substance abuse, depression. Nothing can be a better choice than the story unfolding in USA, a country of contradictions where religious evangelism exists alongside scientific advances, a land of opportunities, yet one that still carries the cross of racism.

This is Gifty's journey as she tries to come to terms with her broken family, an absentee father, unhappy childhood, her mother's prolonged depression following her elder brother's untimely death from drug overdose, her mental conflict as she tries to reconcile her childhood faith with her scientific disposition. The age old tussle of science and faith and trying to find a middle ground has driven Gifty for answers ever since God failed her at the age of ten and she lost her brother to

heroin overdose. That was the day when Gifty, the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants, decided to stop believing in God and turned her mind to science because logic never fails you.

Now years later, a brilliant scientist pursuing a PHD in neurosciences in Stanford, with her research aimed at understanding neural pathways that can be manipulated to control reward seeking or addictive behaviour, Gifty is still chasing the same questions about God and faith. The day Gifty lost her brother is the day she lost her mother too in the dark lanes of depression. Over the years, time and again the depression has returned and along with it, Gifty has lost a piece of her mother forever.

Gifty's mother had arrived in America from Ghana, armed with the optimism of every immigrant looking for a better life. She wanted the best for Nana, her only son. Years later, Gifty was born in America, an unwanted child for her mother, who by then was quite content with the idea of having only Nana. But the optimism was short lived. The realities of life in America proved to be too harsh. Gifty's mother ended up losing more than she had bargained for. In an alien land with no friends and family, she turned to the one constant in her life, her unwavering faith in Jesus. Eventually she demanded the same level of commitment from Gifty and her brother, who were regular church goers. Unlike Nana, Gifty was steadfast in her devotion. The rigours of life, the sly racist slurs, the little disappointments did not dent her faith and fidelity towards the church they visited. But when Nana was found dead by the police in a park from heroine overdose, Gifty turns determinedly agnostic and turns towards science, a subject she felt was governed by logic. Nana's addiction and her inability to comprehend the full extent of it is what crystallised her desire to do her PHD research in the field of neurosciences, particularly in the area of addiction. After moving out of her hometown, Gifty has always tried to keep her past at bay. But after a particularly scary mental health episode, when her mother comes to stay with her in California, Gifty finds herself tormented with questions she has tried so hard to bury for so long. The past comes rushing back to her in tidal waves and Gifty is once again thrown off balance by the sheer force of it.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Her research is her pursuit to understand, from the perspective of neuroscience, the entire spectrum of her brother's addiction, which she had once, in the ignorance of childhood, and eventually later in life, basking in the vanity of her brilliant academic career, subconsciously attributed to the fallibility of a weak man who did not try hard enough to conquer his impulses.

Gifty the neuroscientist realizes that she had oversimplified the reason behind her brother's addiction for "there is no case study in the world that could capture the whole animal of" her brother, "that could show how smart and kind and generous he was, how much he wanted to get better, how much he wanted to live".[6,7]

As Gifty sifts through her past and present in search of answers on religion, addiction, depression – issues that have plagued her since childhood, the universal nature of it compels the reader to confront questions on miracles, faith, redemption, healing and its pertinence in today's world driven by science and technology.

A brilliant take on faith, miracles, piety, forgiveness, redemption and the emphasis on the ability of each life to transcend their limitations and experience the sublime is what makes Yaa Gyasi's Transcendent Kingdom so appealing. It is an ode to life – the truest testament of all that is divine, holy and miraculous. ".to be alive in the world, every day, as we are given more and more and more, as the nature of "what we can handle" changes and our methods for how we handle it change, too, that's something of a miracle."

Since the author has extensively referred to the Bible, it may pose some challenge for the uninitiated to understand the references used in *Transcendent Kingdom*. This is the only hiccup one may face while going through an otherwise flawlessly executed narrative.[8]

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