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**REVISITING THE SHADOW OF SLAVERY: WOMEN AND TRAUMA IN  
ATTAH'S *HUNDRED WELLS OF SALAGA*****Lydia Apio**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to explore how women recount the pains slavery subjected them to in Attah's *Hundred Wells of Salaga*. Women who were enslaved in pre-colonial Ghana were seen as chattel by their slave masters and were exploited by slave raiders. This paper argues that Attah's novel presents women who were captured in slavery and subjected to a series of oppressions. The findings of the study indicated that women who were captured in slavery were faced with sexual exploitation and hard labour. Also, women were normally subjected to physical torture and forced to walk long distances from one town to another, thereby putting them in agony, which led to the death of many. The study employs the psychoanalytic theory of trauma as the lens for the study.

**Keywords:** Hundrens of Wells of Salaga, Slavery, Women and Trauma.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Ayesha Harruna Attah's *Hundred Wells of Salaga* remains one of the most significant literary works, showcasing the shadows of slavery in northern Ghana. Attah's novel exposes the dark activities of slave raiders in pre-colonial Ghana, thereby offering a source of memory to the painful past and highlighting the voices that were silenced in the past in her novel to rekindle a collective trauma and hope to the people of northern Ghana. Also, *Hundred Wells of Salaga* interrogates the past and gives scholars a mechanism to compare the slave trade that happened from the northern part of Ghana to the southern part. Further, Attah's novel exposes the consequences of the activities of slave raiders on the lives of enslaved women and communities to showcase the traumatic nature of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Slavery was one of the most oppressive cancers that ever existed in the history of mankind in the entire world. As Canellas (2018) asserts, "slavery has gone down in history as one of the major catastrophes that men have ever done and the one that existed for the longest period since it began in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Slavery has tortured millions of people around the world for almost four centuries, becoming one of the greatest horrors of humanity" (p.5). To expand further, Canellas' argument shows that slavery has dehumanised and traumatised humans more than any canker that the world has ever known due to the inhuman treatment that slavery subjected its victims to. Similarly, Kasur (2019) demonstrates that slavery inflicted severe physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual harm on its victims. He contends that slavery led to the erosion of one's sense of self and self-esteem. Consequently, the individuals who were enslaved, mostly of African descent, were not seen as human beings but rather as commodities that were exchanged for profit by their slave owners. Kankan (2020) added his voice to the oppression of slavery when he argues that enslaved individuals from Africa, who were traded as slaves elsewhere, endured various types of sexual assault and torture. He contends that the majority

of these sexual activities were perpetrated with aggression, causing significant pain, anxiety, and trauma, particularly for enslaved women. Moreover, the apprehension among slaves intensified as they were being transported to an unfamiliar location, rendering the voyage across the sea to toil on their slaveholders' estates very distressing for several slaves. The slavery that occurred in Africa was a purposeful choice made by those of European descent to subjugate individuals of African descent to a continuous condition of inferiority, frustration, and scorn via the use of torture and mistreatment, with their skin colour being the target of mockery.

## 2. AUTHOR AND TEXT

Ayesha Harruna Attah is a young Ghanaian writer who gained prominence through her novel *Hundred Wells of Salaga*. According to Attah's interviews, her parents have been her primary source of influence throughout life. Also, Ayesha encountered Morrison at the age of thirteen and became deeply engrossed in all of her literary works. Ayesha has three novels to her credit: *Harmattan Rain* (2008), *Hundred Wells of Salaga* (2018) and *The Deep Blues Between* (2020). Her novel, *Hundred Wells of Salaga*, launched her to the literary scene as one of Ghana's young authors. Attah's *Hundred Wells of Salaga* is set in Salaga, a bustling town in Northern Ghana noted for its slave trade activities in pre-colonial Ghana. It's hundreds of wells where slaves were given a final birth before being transported to the coast. The story is told from the perspective of Aminah and Wurche. Aminah is the main character; unfortunately for her, she and her family are the victims of slavery, and they are subjected to inhuman treatment and all sorts of brutalities. On the other hand, Wurche comes from a royal family; her father is a paramount chief, and her family is the beneficiary of the slave trade.

Critics who have examined African feminism in Attah's novel, such as Dolores & Hidalgo (2019), argue that the theme of African feminism in Attah's novel explores the connection between the historical context of Ghana and the lived experiences of the key individuals. Attah's text is deeply grounded in Ghanaian history, with her female protagonists exhibiting resilience, strength, and a defiance of patriarchal standards. Additionally, they analyse the significance of African feminism in Attah's novel and assert that certain women's movements in Ghana's post-independence history have had an impact on Attah's characters. On the other hand, a scholar like Hidalgo (2020) asserts that Attah's novel *Hundred Wells of Salaga* is set in pre-colonial Ghana. Despite the official abolition of slavery, Hidalgo suggests that the slave trade continued to flourish in the northern region of Ghana during that time. She contends that Attah explores the internal slave trade industry, the position of women in Muslim civilisations, and the interaction with indigenous religions. Attah's work effectively illustrates that despite the abolition of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, it persisted for some time until its eventual eradication in Ghana. Similarly, Brookman-Andoh (2022) posits that the novel *Hundred Wells of Salaga* provides proof that slavery, as an economic association, has been an inherent African notion, and Ghana is not an exception to this. She observes that Attah's work effectively portrays the pre-colonial Ghanaian society of the 19th century by using a parallel narrative that revolves around two female characters, Aminah and Wurche. The narrative depicts Salaga as a vibrant town in Northern Ghana, housing both the infamous slave trade market hub and the hundred wells. Additionally, she contends that the wells at Salaga were intended to provide the slaves with a concluding cleansing before departing from the slave market towards the Coast for subsequent transportation across the Atlantic Ocean. However, the significance of this current study lies in the brutality, dehumanisation and oppression that enslaved women were subjected to, which traumatised them, is an aspect that is missing from (Hidalgo & Dolores 2019, Hidalgo 2020 and Brookman Andoh 2022) studies.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The psychoanalytic theory of trauma is the theory underlying this paper. The theory has become significant in analysing literary works. Scholars such as Lenherr (2019) have been able to establish a connection between the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and literature by highlighting the extensive and mutually influential relationship between psychoanalysis and literature. Lenherr notes that many of Freud's essays are employed to analyse literary works, and emphasises that the psychoanalytic theory itself originated from the concept of trauma. Similarly, Caruth (1996) argues that Freud has been able to connect trauma theory with literature by defining trauma as a bodily or psychological injury experienced by a character in a work. Consequently, this implies that trauma refers to the suffering experienced not only physically but also mentally. Heidarizadeh (2015) agrees with early trauma scholars when he posits that trauma is defined as a distressing occurrence that can be a single event or experience, impacting emotions. On the other hand, the psychoanalytic theory of trauma focuses on the enduring and detrimental effects of past trauma and the lingering memories that influence the psychological well-being of individuals. The causes of these abuses could be sexual abuse, employment discrimination, brutality, bullying and domestic violence. Other scholars like Hossain (2017) view the psychoanalytic theory of trauma in the re-narration of a person's life as giving much importance to the significance of the unconscious and thought process; they believe that an awareness of this is therapeutic and vital to a healthy mind. Psychoanalysis emphasises motives; it focuses on hidden or disguised motives that help to clarify literature on two levels, the level of writing itself and the level of the character's action within the text. Thus, the Psychoanalytic theory of trauma emphasises the relationship between meaning and identity as it relates to the psychic and cultural forces in a text. Psychoanalysis holds great importance in contemporary understanding, as it interprets meaning in literature and seeks a psychological explanation of abnormality, shaping the identity and behaviour of characters in a text. The idea of trauma has been used in fictional novels to conceptualise and imbue more significance to distressing situations depicted in the texts. Canellas (2018) argues that the immense psychological impact of slavery on millions of individuals worldwide is immeasurable. However, the emergence of Trauma Theory in literary studies has provided writers with a means of conceptualising a distinct genre known as trauma fiction. Balaeu (2014) argues that the word "trauma novel" pertains to fictional works that depict significant loss or severe dread experienced by individuals or groups. The trauma novel is characterised by the profound change in one's identity triggered by an external, often horrifying event. This transition sheds light on the journey of reconciling with the intricate workings of memory, which shape one's newfound understanding of oneself and the world. He further asserts that the novels illustrate how an experience disturbs an individual's understanding of themselves and their relationships with family and society, as well as the values associated with the traumatic event. Canellas (2018) argues that the immense psychological impact of slavery on millions of individuals worldwide is immeasurable. However, the emergence of Trauma Theory in literary studies has provided writers with a means of conceptualising a distinct genre known as trauma fiction. Trauma theory is used to examine the concealment of physical trauma, such as rape, the harrowing experiences endured by slaves throughout their voyage, beatings, torture, and the deaths of slaves, as well as other types of deprivation to which slaves were exposed.

### 4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Attah explores exploitation and deprivation in slavery in her novel through the characters of Aminah and Husseinah. Both of them symbolise the many enslaved Africans who were forcefully torn apart from their beloved families and forced into a life of servitude. Attah's work emphasises the torment endured by female characters upon their capture. Aminah and her sister are emotionally overwhelmed, symbolising the helplessness of enslaved individuals who are silenced due to the restriction of their rights. Aminah and Husseinah are caught in a distressing manner. Aminah's anguish stems from witnessing the incineration of her grandmother, mother, and nursing infant when slave raiders attacked their household. Aminah's anguish is evident in her persistent contemplation of the incident when her loved ones got lost in the fire. Aminah consistently displays signs of despair and melancholy throughout her regular interactions with her siblings. She is plagued by a persistent sense of guilt for her inability to save her family members from the fire, which always puts her in a state of emotional distress. However, Aminah has not yet experienced the most excruciating death of her younger brother Issa, who perished as a result of the oppressive shackles placed around his neck by the slave raiders. Issa's corpse is liberated from the restraints and thrown into the open, intended as sustenance for the vultures. The extract below depicts Aminah's pain.

The sun ascended to its zenith in the sky and radiated intense heat onto them, like a manifestation of fury. The rain clouds swiftly converged, releasing their contents onto them before dissipating just as quickly as they had appeared. What was the identity or nature of this location? For what reason had they all been subjected to such punishment? That was the one rationale Aminah could conceive of for their predicaments. Each individual had committed an offence against someone, prompting the question of whether death was preferable to continuing to live in their current state. This existence did not qualify as a life. "Not a predetermined fate (794).

The above vividly depicts the extreme cruelty inherent in the slave trade, to the point that enslaved individuals would rather die than endure the horrors of slavery. This serves as a poignant illustration of the profound despair experienced by those who are enslaved. Aminah and her sister Hassanah witnessed the scene with anguish as the birds voraciously consumed the remains of Issa. At the age of nineteen, Aminah has experienced the loss of all her family members. She recounts to Jaji the events of her father's abduction, being abducted by horsemen, the tragic loss of her siblings, her time spent in the jungle, and ultimately finding herself at the Salaga market. The woman's tears had caused her eyesight to become blurry, and she brushed them away using the edge of her veil". (184). Consequently, Aminah's whole family is eradicated as a result of the actions carried out by the slave raiders. Aminah emerges as the only survivor in her family, which accounts for the profound anguish that permeates her existence. Hence, Attah's work illustrates the agonising demise of several slaves. The surviving descendants of deceased slaves also experience profound psychological distress, since it is often hard to accept the untimely death of a family member. Aminah is immersed in anguish as she not only lost a single family member, but her whole kin is eradicated due to the actions of slave raiders. Aminah, therefore, experiences depression and tension, longing for death to relieve her suffering. Aminah's scenario exemplifies the anguish of trauma.

Attah's *Hundred Wells of Salaga* exposes how Wofa Sarpong exemplifies those rich men who exploit the labour of slaves to build their wealth. Wofa Sarpong buys Aminah and her sister as domestic slaves and puts them on his farm to work in the field for long hours with little food for them to eat. Other slaves like Sahada are used to pay the debt his father owed Wofa and could not pay. Sahada will have to work for Wofa to set his father free from debt.

Aminah and the other slaves in Wofa's house are exploited with hard labour on the farms to cultivate the soil for him. Wofa subjects Aminah and Hassana to hard labour both at home and on the farm while his wife and children live in luxury, enjoying the hard labour of the domestic slaves. These slaves normally worked themselves to death. "People like Wofa were the greedy folks who wouldn't let the slaves go scot-free; 'people aren't allowed to buy, sell or own slaves here'" (98). Attah portrays how Wofa has to change all the names of the slave women in his house to Asante's names; he adopted all these slaves and gave them his surname, even at a time when it was unlawful to keep slaves. Wofa had to lie that they were his distant relative's children just to cover up when he was confronted by a Police Inspector. When Hassana was questioned by the inspector and she could not speak Wofa's language, this exposed Wofa to the police Inspector, and when the Inspector left, Hassan was beaten nearly to death by Wofa. 'He hesitated before unleashing the next lash. Aminah watched motionless as Wofa Satpong continued to whack Hassana. When he stopped, he was drenched in sweat, his clothes bunched at his feet. Gruffly, he pulled up the cloth...Aminah dashed to Hassana, coiled on the ground, blood soaking through her wrapper'" (101). These inhuman treatments are to serve as a deterrent to the other slaves. Hassana felt half dead after such a beating; her young body at twelve could not endure such physical torment. Her sister Aminah, on the other hand, seems as if she is losing control of herself; she thinks of going insane. Aminah thinks suicide is the only way to escape the physical pains of being a slave.

Deprivation is another canker sore in *Hundred Wells of Salaga*. Aminah and her family are deprived of a father due to their father's disappearance as a result of slave-raiding activities in Botu. Aminah, as a child, was loved by her father, but his disappearance troubled and traumatised her. According to Wan (2018), trauma can be caused by the separation of parents from children. Aminah becomes an embodiment of physical trauma in Attah's novel. The greatest outcry that the slave trade caused in the lives of people is the physical trauma it subjected people to, as reflected in this statement, ".....And while she was grieving Baba's absence" (49). Aminah grieves over her father's absence; the thought of who will take care of the family makes Aminah depressed since her mother, grandmother, and siblings look up to her to shoulder the responsibility of her father in his absence. Aminah, at the age of fifteen years, is mandated by her grandmother, Eeyah, to take care of her mother, who is nursing a baby and her siblings as a result of her father's disappearance. Aminah welcomes this unpleasant new role in grief, as her life is characterised by stress. Aminah and her entire family live in fear and trauma, not knowing where their father is. Attah discloses this information via a sequence of nightmares experienced by Aminah's siblings regularly, which revolve around their father's vanishing. The loss of Baba causes significant stress to Aminah's family. This leads to a detrimental impact on their lives. Aminah's mother has regular bouts of weeping and adamantly abstains from nourishment and rest, resulting in a transformation of the formerly joyful household into a despondent one where communication is avoided by everybody. Aminah's family experiences the trauma of paternal deprivation, which leads to a profound and enduring feeling of grief and hopelessness. Aminah's trauma is shown in symptoms such as decreased appetite, sleeplessness, anhedonia, anxiety-driven restlessness, apathy, obsessive thoughts of suicide, a desire for death, and a general lack of interest in all activities.

The Traumatic Journey of Slaves exposes slaves to hardship and torture in Attah's novel. The long distance that slaves had to walk was normally a harrowing experience endured by enslaved women in the process of their journey. Enslaved women often endured physical harm while being transported from one place to another, sometimes restrained with chains. The slaves' trip, whether it is by foot or by sea, is often marked by excruciating agony. Attah reveals how the horsemen, sometimes referred to as slave raiders, inflict bodily harm on their captives

upon their abduction. The female characters who are enslaved are restrained with chains as shown in the following passage: "The horsemen raided villages and brought their captives to an undisclosed location, where they were bound with shackles and chains around trees" (107). Children and women are tightly bound together, with their hands unrestrained. Slaves are subjected to the same treatment. "According to his account, more than fifty per cent of the enslaved individuals aboard the vessel perished and were normally disposed of in the ocean. Upon reaching their destination, they endured the painful process of being marked with a heated brass instrument and subsequently sold, akin to the sale of livestock." Most raiders don't take people who are very old, or babies. 'His voice was a whisper.' They leave them behind and then set everything on fire" (108). This dehumanisation by slave raiders injured enslaved women and their children. Slave raiders did not regard enslaved women as human; they treated them as sub-humans in Attah's *Hundred Wells of Salaga*.

Attah's text once again reveals the plight of female slaves who are shackled and forced to endure arduous journeys on foot. This undoubtedly inflicts physical damage on the slaves, since these journeys might linger for months before they eventually reach their intended destination. The anguish experienced by males who are forced to see their wives and children being subjected to agony by slave raiders is profoundly distressing. During their voyage, when the horsemen reach a location where they need to attack other towns, they often restrain the captives by tying them to trees in circular formations, looking like offensive jewellery in the wilderness. This occurs when they return to the villages to capture further slaves, as depicted in Attah's novel, *Hundred Wells of Salaga*. Undoubtedly, this caused immense suffering for enslaved women.

Further, Aminah and her siblings are subjected to a distressing expedition, compelled to travel from Botu to Kitampo on foot while restrained with chains. The voyage is often marked by anguish and humiliation, since slaves are shackled without clothing, regardless of their gender or age. Attah depicts the systematic raiding and enslavement of whole villages, where families are chained together. This results in immense suffering, as some families see their relatives struggling to endure the arduous trek. The enslaved ladies find the slave's trip excruciating due to the restrictive shackles that impede their mobility and cause many injuries. Aminah and her two other siblings had been restrained to the point that their skin adhered tightly to their bones. Additional women and children are tightly bound together, causing several slaves, particularly youngsters, to suffocate when their physical abilities cannot keep up with the adults they are shackled to. The slave raiders often traverse on their steeds, brandishing their whips to incessantly strike indolent slaves who get fatigued and are incapable of swift movement. Rebellious slaves are subjected to severe beatings, as shown in the case of Aminah's sister Hassana, who is almost beaten to death by horsemen when she refuses to eat. She endures days of excruciating agony and anguish. From this, her sister Aminah becomes helpless, as she finds out that she cannot help her younger sister, leaving both of them in pain. The slave raiders use chains, shackles and iron cuffs to restrain slaves and impede their escape and also cause many slaves to be unable to withstand the weight of these metallic restraints.

Furthermore, Attah reveals the cruel and dehumanising behaviour of the slave pirates towards their enslaved captives. The slaves are expected to consume food and relieve themselves while being restrained by chains fastened around their necks. The majority of enslaved individuals are compelled to simultaneously excrete urine and faeces, so endangering their lives while in bondage. Aminah and the other slaves undergo significant weight loss during their arduous weeks-long voyage, since there is normally little opportunity for respite. The following paragraph effectively portrays Aminah's anguish. Aminah becomes fatigued by the arduous river crossing, prompting her to vociferate at the riders and question their motives.

She ambulated, but had a sense of detachment from her physical self. She desired to be summoned by the ground, just as it had summoned Issa, due to her weariness (78). The arduous forced march endured by Aminah and her fellow slaves instilled in many of them a desire for death, since the walking is physically exhausting and compounded by the cruel lashings inflicted by their slave-holders. A significant number of these enslaved individuals often perished before reaching their intended location, while those fortunate enough to survive have profound scars, lacerations, and ulcers as a result of certain chains, iron restraints, and shackles being embedded in their flesh. Despite surviving the walk, Aminah and her sister experienced significant bodily stress.

## 5. CONCLUSION

What this study sought to do was to assess the physical trauma that female characters were subjected to in Attah's *Hundred Wells of Salaga*. The study was subjected through the lens of the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and contextualised trauma in this study to mean anything that brought pain to enslaved women's bodies. The paper argued that slave masters used rape and sexual violence to demean female characters and subject them to silence and domination. Also, slaves were captured painfully since slave raiders were given deadly weapons by the chiefs for their slave raiding expeditions. The analysis indicated that there were massive deaths of people during raiding because the slave raiders invaded whole communities, set people's huts on fire, and those who ran out were captured into slavery; the vulnerable who were unable to run out were burned to ashes. Again, it shows the physical suffering experienced by slaves during their journeys between towns as they were shackled with iron chains around their necks, wrists, and ankles that impeded the progress of the enslaved individuals, leading to the death of many.

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