


Research Article

Names We Never Spoke: A Multigenerational Family Saga Exploring Inheritance, Secrets, and Redemption

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Abstract

This paper offers a sustained critical reading of the multigenerational family saga as a literary form that transforms private inheritance into public cultural history, with particular attention to the intertwined themes of kept secrets, suppressed names, and the possibility of redemption across time. Drawing on narrative theory, trauma studies, and postcolonial kinship theory, the study argues that the family saga's central tension — between the imperative to remember and the compulsion to forget — enacts, in miniature, the broader dynamics of collective cultural memory. The paper traces how names function within the saga as nodes of compressed history: to withhold a name is to suppress a lineage; to recover it is to perform an act of restitution. Through close readings of representative texts spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the paper examines how authors deploy formal strategies — non-linear chronology, multiple first-person narrators, the interrupted letter, the misread document — to render the experience of transgenerational haunting and the slow, costly work of redemption. It concludes that the family saga, at its most ambitious, does not offer reconciliation as comfort but as an ethical demand: the obligation of the living to those whose names were taken from them.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Name as Archive

A name is the first inheritance and, in many families, the first thing withheld. To be given a name is to be inserted into a history — a lineage of ancestors, a community of speakers, a network of expectation and meaning that precedes the named individual by generations. To have a name suppressed, changed, anglicized, or simply never spoken is to experience an archival erasure at the most intimate scale: the self becomes a document from which the identifying information has been redacted. The multigenerational family saga, as a literary form, has made the recovery of such redacted selves one of its primary preoccupations. From the great Victorian family chronicles through the postcolonial reinventions of the genre in the twentieth century and into the contemporary era, writers have returned again and again to the question of what families conceal from themselves, why they do so, and what it costs — across generations — to keep or to break the silence.

This paper takes as its starting point the claim that the family saga is not merely a domestic form but an epistemological and ethical one. By stretching narrative time across multiple generations, the saga creates a structure in which consequences outrun intentions: choices made in one era produce suffering in another, and the connection between cause and effect is obscured by the very passage of time that the form traverses. This structural feature gives the family saga a unique capacity to represent a phenomenon that trauma studies has brought to wider attention: the transmission of psychic wounds across generational lines, a process variously theorized as transgenerational haunting, postmemory, or inherited trauma. Within this framework, the secret functions not simply as a narrative device — the hidden truth that the plot will eventually reveal — but as a psychic structure, a wound that cannot heal because it cannot be named, and that reproduces itself in the behaviour of those who never consciously knew of it.

The theme of redemption in the family saga is correspondingly complex. It is rarely the simple revelation of a secret followed by emotional reconciliation; such a resolution would underestimate the damage that decades of suppression can cause. Rather, redemption in the most searching examples of the genre involves a sustained, often painful process of historical reconstruction: the gathering of fragments, the consultation of survivors, the reading of documents against their grain, the willingness to be changed by what one learns. It is, in other words, an archival and hermeneutic practice as much as an emotional one. The redeemed character in the family saga is one who has been willing to disturb the family's official narrative of itself, to sit with the discomfort of what she finds, and to bear witness to those whose names were never spoken.

The analysis that follows proceeds in five sections. The first examines the formal properties of the multigenerational saga that make it a distinctive vehicle for the themes of inheritance and secrecy. The second section theorizes the secret within the framework of trauma studies and psychoanalytic kinship theory. The third addresses the figure of the name — both proper names and the names that families assign to their own histories — as the site at which inheritance and suppression are most

intimately joined. The fourth section reads the narrative strategies employed by saga authors as responses to the formal challenge posed by transgenerational trauma: how to render an experience that, by definition, its survivors could not fully articulate. The fifth and final section considers what the genre means by redemption, and whether that meaning is adequate to the losses it contemplates.

2. The Saga Form: Time, Consequence, and the Architecture of Inheritance

The multigenerational family saga occupies an unusual position in the taxonomy of narrative forms. It shares with the epic the ambition to account for a community's origins and transformation, but its scale is domestic rather than heroic: the battles it chronicles are fought in parlours and kitchens, around inheritance disputes and dinner tables, in the silences between sentences. It shares with the novel of character the commitment to interiority and individual consciousness, but it distributes this interiority across multiple subjects separated by time, creating a collective psychology that no single character can fully grasp. And it shares with history the obligation to render the past accurately, or at least faithfully, while acknowledging that the past is available only through the distorting medium of memory, document, and retrospective interpretation.

Georg Lukács's distinction between the epic and the novel is instructive here. For Lukács, the epic represents a world in which the individual and community are in harmony; the novel, by contrast, represents a world of alienation, in which meaning must be sought rather than given. The family saga, as a hybrid form, stages this tension within the family unit itself. In the idealized version of the saga — the version that families tell themselves about themselves — the family is an epic formation: coherent, purposeful, held together by shared values and a stable lineage. The saga as literary form persistently subverts this self-image, revealing the family to be a site of contradiction, concealment, and contested authority. The family story, when written honestly, is always already a novel rather than an epic.

The formal mechanism that enables this subversion is non-linearity. The multigenerational saga almost never proceeds in strict chronological order. Instead, it typically begins in the present — or at a moment of crisis that disrupts the present — and works backward, forward, and sideways through time, revealing connections that the characters themselves could not have seen. This temporal disorganization is not merely a stylistic choice; it is a structural enactment of how family history actually works in lived experience. We do not inherit the past as a coherent narrative; we inherit it as fragments, gaps, contradictions, and uncanny repetitions. The saga's non-linear form mirrors this experience of inheritance, positioning the reader as a detective of family history rather than a passive recipient of a story already fully known.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope — the characteristic fusion of time and space in a given genre — helps to specify what is distinctive about the saga's temporal architecture. The family saga's chronotope is one of threshold: doors between rooms that stand for doors between generations, houses that accumulate the sediment of the past in their very

walls, attics full of documents that no one has examined for decades. The house as chronotope in the family saga is not merely a setting but a mnemonic structure, a physical archive whose rooms organize different temporalities. To move through the family house in such narratives is always already to move through family time; to clear out the attic is to disturb the archive.

3. The Secret as Wound: Trauma, Transmission, and the Psychic Life of Families

The psychoanalytic tradition has long recognized that families transmit more than property and genetic material across generations. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, writing in the 1970s, developed the concept of the "transgenerational phantom" to describe the way in which unprocessed trauma in one generation can produce symptomatic behaviour in the next without the second generation being consciously aware of the source of their disturbance. The phantom, in their formulation, is a presence in the psyche that does not belong to the individual who bears it: it is, in the most literal sense, an inheritance, something passed on without the recipient's knowledge or consent.

This theoretical framework has been taken up and extended by literary scholars working in the field of trauma studies, most notably Marianne Hirsch, whose concept of "postmemory" describes the relationship of children of survivors of traumatic historical events to their parents' experiences — experiences that the children did not live through but that nevertheless shape their identity, behaviour, and imagination as deeply as if they had. Hirsch's work draws extensively on literature and visual art as the cultural forms in which postmemory is most sensitively registered, and the multigenerational family saga is, across her analyses, a central genre. The saga's capacity to render both the original trauma and its reverberations across subsequent generations makes it an ideal form for the representation of postmemory.

Within the saga, the secret is both the mechanism of trauma transmission and its primary symptom. A family keeps a secret — about an ancestor's origins, a hidden marriage, a child given away, a crime committed, a shame incurred — and the keeping of that secret produces a pattern of affect and behaviour in subsequent generations that is causally related to the original event but phenomenologically disconnected from it. Descendants experience anxiety, compulsive repetition, or inexplicable aversion without knowing why; the source of their disturbance has been carefully removed from the family's official record. The literary saga stages the process of reconstruction: the living character who begins, through accident or determination, to excavate the family history, gradually assembling the hidden narrative from its scattered traces.

The ethical dimension of this process is considerable. To excavate the family secret is not a neutral act; it inevitably disturbs living people who may have chosen, or been compelled, to maintain the silence. The saga consistently dramatizes the resistance that the investigative protagonist meets from family members who have organized their emotional lives around the secret's maintenance. This resistance

is not simply villainy — the saga at its most sophisticated understands that the suppression of painful history is itself a form of survival, a psychic strategy that served a purpose even as it caused harm. The redemptive arc in such narratives must therefore reckon not only with the original trauma but with the secondary architecture of concealment that has grown up around it.

Judith Herman's clinical framework for understanding trauma is also pertinent here, particularly her insistence that recovery requires, above all, the restoration of the capacity to bear witness — to have one's experience acknowledged by another person as real, significant, and legitimately painful. The family saga translates this clinical insight into narrative terms: redemption arrives not through the revelation of a secret to a neutral audience but through its acknowledgement within the family itself, by those who had the power to suppress it. This is why the revelation scene in the multigenerational saga is rarely simply cathartic. It is a confrontation with the violence of silencing, and the emotional register is typically one of grief as much as relief.

4. What the Name Holds: Lineage, Erasure, and the Politics of Naming

The name, in the multigenerational family saga, carries a weight that extends far beyond its practical function as a means of identification. Names in these narratives are palimpsests: they retain traces of the histories they have passed through, even — especially — when those traces have been deliberately obscured. An anglicized name marks the colonial encounter on the body of its bearer; a name changed at immigration marks the negotiation between survival and identity; a name withheld from a child marks the family's judgment that the source of that name is too shameful or too dangerous to be acknowledged. The recovery of the original name in such narratives — the grandmother's given name before it was anglicized, the name of the child who was adopted out, the father's name that appeared on no official document — is never merely genealogical. It is an act of restitution, a recognition that what was taken was not simply a word but a history.

This insight has been most powerfully developed in postcolonial literary scholarship, where the politics of naming has been recognized as one of the primary arenas in which colonial power operated. The imposition of names — on people, on places, on cultural practices — was among the most intimate forms of colonial violence, because it substituted the colonizer's categories for the colonized community's own self-understanding. Chinua Achebe's reflection on the politics of the name "Things Fall Apart" — itself a colonial literary reference repurposed — illuminates the way in which the recovery of indigenous naming practices is inseparable from the recovery of indigenous subjectivity. The multigenerational family saga in postcolonial contexts inherits this insight and gives it a domestic scale: the struggle over family names re-enacts, in miniature, the larger struggle over cultural identity that colonialism and its aftermath have generated.

The figure of the unnamed or misnamed ancestor is a recurring presence in the saga. This ancestor — a woman whose married name appears in records but whose given name has been lost; a

man who changed his name so thoroughly that his descendants cannot trace the original lineage; a child who died in infancy and whose name was subsequently taboo — functions as both a plot engine and an ethical figure. The protagonist's effort to recover this ancestor's name is the narrative's central quest, and the meaning of that recovery is never purely personal. To restore a name to the historical record is to insist that the person who bore it was real, valuable, and worthy of being remembered.

It is significant that the names in question in such sagas are frequently feminine. The multigenerational saga has, across its history, been a form in which the experiences of women — whose names have been systematically subsumed by marriage, whose contributions to family history have been rendered as domestic background rather than active agency, and whose suffering has been categorized as private rather than historical — receive belated but sustained attention. The recovery of a grandmother's name, in this context, is also the recovery of her subjectivity: the recognition that she was not merely the medium through which others passed but a person with her own desires, judgments, and losses. This feminist dimension of the saga's archival project is one of its most important and least adequately theorized contributions.

5. Narrative Strategies: Rendering the Unspoken Across Generations

The formal challenge facing any writer of a multigenerational family saga is considerable. How does one render, in narrative, an experience that its survivors could not or would not articulate? How does one give voice to ancestors who left no voice recordings, whose letters were burned, whose stories were deliberately untold? And how does one convey to a contemporary reader the texture of a life lived in historical circumstances that differ radically from the present — circumstances in which certain things could not be said, certain feelings could not be named, certain choices were not available?

Writers of the multigenerational saga have developed a repertoire of formal strategies in response to these challenges. The most common and most discussed is the use of multiple narrative perspectives. By distributing the narration across different characters at different points in time, the saga creates a cumulative portrait of the family that no single narrator could provide. Each narrator has access to a portion of the truth — the portion available from her particular historical position — and the reader assembles the complete picture from these overlapping, sometimes contradictory, partial accounts. This structure is epistemologically honest: it acknowledges that family history is never available from a single, authoritative vantage point but is always a construction from multiple, interested perspectives.

The interrupted or fragmentary text — the letter that was never finished, the diary that was deliberately damaged, the recording that cuts off at a crucial moment — is another key strategy. These interruptions do not simply generate suspense, though they do that; they enact the experience of archival incompleteness, the reality that family history does not arrive as a complete and readable text but as a series of fragments from

which coherence must be painfully assembled. The reader's experience of frustration at the interruption is itself educational: it produces, in a controlled fictional environment, something of the affect of working with an archive that has been intentionally or accidentally impoverished.

Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" — developed in *Beloved* (1987) and elaborated in subsequent essays — offers a crucial theoretical contribution to understanding how the saga handles the temporality of trauma. Rememory, for Morrison, is not simply memory in the conventional sense but a form of psychic inscription so deep that it produces quasi-material residues: places and objects that retain the emotional charge of past events and can transmit that charge to people who encounter them without any direct connection to the original experience. The family house, in the saga that takes Morrison's insight seriously, is not simply a setting but an active participant in the transmission of family history, a space that makes the past present in ways that exceed the conscious intentions of its inhabitants.

The use of second-person narration — addressed to an ancestor, or occasionally to a descendant not yet born — appears in some of the most formally innovative saga texts. This mode of address performs, grammatically, the act of bearing witness that is the saga's ethical aspiration: it posits a relationship across time between a speaker and a listener separated by decades or centuries, insisting on the reality of that connection even when every practical medium of communication has failed. To write "you" to an ancestor who cannot read the word is to perform the very recognition that the family's silence had denied: the acknowledgement that this person existed, mattered, and deserves to be spoken to.

6. Redemption and Its Costs: What the Living Owe the Dead

The concept of redemption, as it operates in the multigenerational family saga, requires careful examination. In popular usage, redemption implies a restoration to a prior state of innocence or wholeness — a return to before the fall. But the saga form, which is constitutively aware of the irreversibility of time, cannot sustain this notion. What has been lost in the saga — the names that were not spoken, the stories that were not told, the lives that were damaged by secrets kept for decades — cannot be restored. The dead remain dead; the damaged do not become undamaged; the years of alienation and confusion and inexplicable suffering do not un-happen. Whatever the saga means by redemption, it cannot mean this.

What the most searching examples of the genre mean by redemption is something closer to what Walter Benjamin described as the redemption of the past through historical recognition: the act of attending to those who were overlooked, suppressed, or forgotten by the official record, not in order to restore what was lost but in order to honour the reality of what was lost. In Benjamin's formulation, every generation has an obligation to its predecessors — not to complete their projects or to avenge their defeats, but to bear witness to them, to refuse the comfortable amnesia that dominant historical narratives encourage. The multigenerational saga translates this philosophical obligation into narrative: the living character who

excavates the family history is fulfilling a Benjaminian duty, one that costs her something personally but that discharges an ethical debt that has accumulated across generations.

This understanding of redemption has important implications for how the saga handles its endings. The conclusive happy ending — the family united, the secret absorbed and forgiven, the wound healed — is available to the genre but is typically bought at the cost of honesty about what has actually been lost. The more searching saga endings are characterized by a mixture of grief and clarification: the protagonist knows more than she did, and knowing more she grieves more precisely, for named people and specific losses rather than for an undifferentiated sense that something is wrong. This is not a comfortable resolution, but it is an honest one. The recognition of what was lost, and the willingness to grieve it properly, is itself a form of redemption — perhaps the only form that is not sentimental.

The question of who can be redeemed, and from what, is also important. In the family saga, redemption is typically sought by the living for the dead — by a granddaughter for a grandmother who never had the opportunity to speak her own history. But some sagas also explore the redemption of the living: the family member who maintained the silence, who participated in the suppression of a name or a story, who chose the comfort of not knowing over the discomfort of knowledge. The redemption of such figures is the most morally complex achievement of the genre, requiring the reader to hold simultaneously the understanding that suppression was a form of violence and the recognition that it was, in many cases, a survival strategy that operated under conditions of genuine coercion. The saga at its most morally serious neither excuses nor simply condemns these figures but attempts to understand them in the full complexity of their historical circumstances.

The names that were never spoken return, at the end of the most ambitious family sagas, not as triumphant revelations but as quiet insistences: this person existed, this is what happened, this is what it cost. The act of speaking the name — in the novel's final pages, in the dedication, in the character's private acknowledgement — does not undo the history of its suppression. But it refuses the suppression's logic. It insists that the name, and the person who bore it, was real and remains real in the memory of those willing to speak.

7. CONCLUSION

Naming as Ethical Practice

The multigenerational family saga, at its most ambitious, is a form of ethical practice disguised as entertainment. Its pleasures — the intricate plotting, the rich characterization across generations, the satisfactions of pattern recognition as the reader begins to see how the pieces fit — are real and should not be dismissed. But these pleasures are in the service of a more demanding project: the project of attending, with honesty and care, to the people whom the family's official story had written out. The names that such sagas recover — the names that were anglicized, changed, suppressed, or simply never spoken — are, in the end, the measure of what the form can do. This paper has argued that the family saga's formal properties — its non-linear temporality, its distribution of narrative authority across multiple perspectives, its preference for

fragmentary and interrupted texts — are not merely aesthetic choices but ethical instruments. They create, in the reader, an experience of inheritance that is both intellectually demanding and emotionally honest: the recognition that the past arrives not as a coherent story but as a collection of fragments from which one must painstakingly assemble the truth. The reader of the multigenerational saga is, in this sense, herself a practitioner of the archival and hermeneutic skills that the form celebrates.

The theme of redemption in the saga, finally, must be understood as an aspiration rather than an achievement. No novel can undo the damage that decades of silence cause; no act of narrative recovery can restore what was lost. But the willingness to attempt recovery — to speak the names that were never spoken, to grieve the losses that were never acknowledged, to insist on the humanity of those whom the family's own story had rendered marginal — is itself a redemptive act. The last page of the family saga is not a destination but a beginning: the starting point of the reader's own obligation to the history she has inherited.

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