
**ROOTS, ROUTES AND RUPTURE: POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY,
DIASPORA AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA IN YAA GYASI'S
*HOMEGOING***

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Abstract:

Literature from the Global South serves as a critical lens for examining the enduring psychological and cultural fallout of colonialism. This research examines how postcolonial narratives engage with the concept of hybridity, where individuals in both the homeland and the diaspora must navigate competing cultural identities. This tension frequently manifests as a dual sense of longing and alienation. Central to this study is the concept of intergenerational trauma, wherein the collective scars of displacement, violence, and oppression are transmitted across lineages, shattering communal bonds and fragmenting individual identities.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* provides a seminal framework for this analysis. By tracing the disparate paths of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, Gyasi maps the divergent yet interconnected legacies of the Atlantic slave trade and British colonialism. The narrative illustrates a profound sense of unbelonging. In Ghana, characters grapple with the systematic erosion of native cultures and the manipulation of local societies by European powers. On the other hand, the characters and their descendants in the diaspora face systemic racism and the trauma of severed heritage.

Utilizing postcolonial and trauma theory, this paper argues that *Homegoing* functions as a sophisticated literary device that bridges historical oppression with contemporary identity crises. The novel's innovative generational structure highlights that the diaspora is not a static state, but an ongoing process of migration and negotiation. By documenting family breakdowns, mental health struggles, and societal instability, Gyasi's work seeks to heal colonial wounds. Ultimately, the research demonstrates how the interconnected fates of Gyasi's characters advocate for the recognition of historical injustices and the persistent quest for belonging and justice in a postcolonial world.

Keywords-colonialism, intergenerational trauma, identity crisis, oppression, diaspora

Introduction:

The integration of postcolonial theory and trauma studies provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how the legacies of imperial rule continue to shape the contemporary human psyche. Postcolonialism transcends the view of colonialism as a mere historical event, treating it instead as a persistent force that imposes power structures and creates lasting inequalities between the colonizer and the colonized. By focusing on hybrid identities, the concept of the ‘other’ and subaltern voices, this theory seeks to destabilize binary oppositions and reclaim marginalized narratives that were previously silenced by Western dominance.

Within this theoretical framework, African literature serves as a vital tool for “writing back” (Ashcroft 110) against colonial misinterpretations, allowing authors to assert African agency and offer authentic portrayals of their societies. As Bill Ashcroft notes in *The Empire Writes Back*, this literature involves “a grounding of the literary work in a distinct and consumable sense of place” (Ashcroft 110), reclaiming the geography stolen by imperial maps. Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* exemplifies this by employing a narrative structure that grants equal importance to the descendants who remained in Ghana and those forcibly moved to America, making a radical statement on the shared yet diverse nature of colonial trauma across the entire African lineage.

Central to this exploration is the evolution of trauma studies, which, when paired with postcolonial theory, analyzes how extreme experiences disrupt the emotional organization of the self. While early trauma theory focused on individual experiences, it has expanded to encompass intergenerational or transgenerational trauma—the process by which the psychological effects of massive traumatic events are transmitted from parent figures to subsequent generations. In the context of the slave trade and colonialism, this transmission leaves deep psychological wounds, originating from the complete uprooting of individuals from their land, kin, and customs.

As scholar J.P. Gump notes, the most heinous aspect of this subjugation was the attempted “annihilation of that which is uniquely human—the self; the replacement of personhood with objectification” (197). This historical trauma is further compounded for descendants by contemporary stresses such as institutionalized racism and economic inequality, resulting in a persistent sense of internal fracture and an unbridgeable historical gap.

The resulting quest for identity often unfolds within the “Third Space” (Bhabha 38), a concept defined by Homi Bhabha as a “liminal space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (38) -an area where the merging of ancestral and host cultures creates hybrid identities. While this hybridity can foster productive cultural interactions and defy rigid categorizations, it frequently leads to psychological alienation-a feeling of belonging to no particular culture. Characters in postcolonial and diasporic literature are often caught in this struggle, navigating the difficult process of negotiating selfhood while feeling like an outsider or ‘the other’. This search for a stable, coherent self involves a complex desire for assimilation and the integration of cultural values from both the colonizer and the colonized. Ultimately, the interconnected themes of alienation and hybridity highlight the enduring struggle for recognition and belonging in a world still defined by the aftershocks of colonial rule.

Building upon this theoretical intersection, this paper employs a postcolonial and traumatic framework to analyze Yaa Gyasi’s debut novel, *Homegoing*. The study traces the divergent lives of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, and their descendants across eight generations, as the narrative oscillates between the Fante and Asante nations of Ghana and the plantation-to-prison trajectory of African American history. For Gyasi, the liminal space of hybridity described in postcolonial theory is not merely a point of cultural merging, but a battlefield of identity where characters must navigate systemic persecution and the erasure of their heritage.

By utilizing the novel as a map of intergenerational trauma, the analysis illustrates how the lifelong legacy of the slave trade and colonialism manifests in the psyches of successive generations. These descendants grapple with profound alienation, yearning for a unified history that might bridge the historical gap created by the forced displacement of their ancestors. Ultimately, Gyasi positions the quest for identity as a relentless struggle against the psychological shadows of a colonial past, seeking to reconstruct a sense of self from the fragments of a shattered communal memory.

Gyasi’s narrative is geographically and symbolically anchored in the Cape Coast Castle, a site of profound historical trauma where the lives of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, irrevocably diverge. The novel opens with the birth of Effia Otcher, marked by a wildfire that ravaged Fanteland and reached an Asante village before vanishing. Her father, Cobbe, instinctively understood that the fire would “haunt him, his children, and his children’s children for as long as the line continued” (Gyasi 3), leading Effia to be known as “the child of the night’s fire” (4). Although Cobbe intended to marry her to a native chief, her mother Baaba’s avarice led her to manipulate the situation, convincing Cobbe and the chief Abecku

that Effia was cursed and barren. Consequently, Effia was sacrificed to a marriage with a British official named James. As she departed for the castle, Baaba gifted her a black stone pendant-her final, fragile connection to her maternal roots-as she was cast out from her village, realizing there was no return from the cursed stone walls.

Directly beneath Effia's quarters, Esi is imprisoned in the castle's dungeons, where the human condition is reduced to its most pathetic state. Prisoners like Afua suffer without adequate clothing or food, and the air is thick with the stench of death and survival on mushy porridge. Esi describes the dungeon as a place where "darkness was day and night and everything in between" (30) and bodies were stacked so densely that women "had to die, stomach down, so that women could be stacked on top of them" (31). Esi's life is bifurcated into two distinct eras: her time as the daughter of the Asante warrior Kwame Asare and his wife Maame, and her subsequent existence as a slave. Her father's familiarization with the forest and his raids on neighboring villages-where he himself took slaves-complicates the moral landscape. Before her capture during a raid, Maame gave Esi a black stone, identical to the one left for Effia. During her forced march to the castle, Esi witnesses the visceral brutality of the trade, where feet "split open and blood seeped out, painting the leaves" (43) as traders bound them together like cargo.

Gyasi masterfully subverts the colonizer/colonized binary by detailing the complicity of the Fante and Asante nations in the slave trade. Abeeku, the Fante chief, facilitates trade with the British, insisting, "We work with the British...not for them" (8), an alliance that eventually involves selling Asante slaves to the Europeans. This shared involvement underscores the complexity of West African history. Both sisters face alienation from their heritage in divergent ways: Esi is physically severed from her lineage and loses her black stone, while Effia is culturally alienated, with her descendants becoming cogs in the colonial machine. Her son Quey, educated in England and raised among whites, experiences deep shame while surveying slave trades in his mother's village, witnessing his own relatives selling children for profit.

The trauma of physical alienation extends to Esi's daughter, Ness, who endures the horrors of American cotton plantations. The narrative depicts slaves being treated like "anchors attached to nothing" (70), stacked ten high in "the Big Boat" (70). The systemic cruelty is so pervasive that even children of masters treat slave children with malice. Ness's attempt at companionship with Sam ends in tragedy; they are caught trying to escape, Sam is killed, and their baby is lost in the chaos. This cycle of suffering continues through Kojo's life in Baltimore, where the Fugitive Slave Act fractures his family, and through H, who is

arrested on a pretext and forced into the brutal convict leasing system of Alabama's coal mines.

The psychological scars of the mission schools are explored through Akua, who is subjected to a 'civilizing' missionary education that erodes her native identity and replaces it with a fear of fire—a trauma linked to her mother Abena's death at the hands of missionaries. Similarly, Willie faces the transition to the North, only to find that Harlem offers a different brand of discrimination; she is forced into cleaning jobs while her husband Robert, unable to cope with the racial pressures, eventually abandons her.

The narrative threads eventually converge in the modern era through Yaw, Akua's son, and his daughter Marjorie. Yaw carries a literal scar from a fire set by his mother, while Marjorie faces a contemporary hybridity in America, where she is mocked for "sounding white" (Gyasi 84) but feels she doesn't belong in Ghana. The resolution arrives through Marcus-Esi's descendant—who is a researcher studying the convict leasing system. Marcus is plagued by an ancestral fear of the sea, just as Marjorie fears fire. When they meet and return to Ghana, they exchange the black stone and step into the ocean together. By accepting their black identity and confronting their inherited phobias, they finally bridge the historical gap created eight generations prior, transforming their trauma into a reclaimed sense of self.

For the majority of Gyasi's characters, the contact zone with the colonizer functions not as a site of celebratory cultural fusion, but as a persistent source of alienation. Those living with hybrid identities navigate a state of profound unbelonging, caught in a liminal space where they are neither fully African nor fully Western. This alienation manifests in distinct ways across the two ancestral lines. In the Ghanaian branch, characters experience the erosion of native cultures while traversing a modern nation-state that remains tethered to its colonial architecture. Conversely, the diasporic line endures the dual weight of alienation and extreme racism. Having lost all tangible connections to their African lineage, characters like Jo and Ma Aku struggle for basic human rights, living under the constant threat of the Fugitive Slave Act, which empowered the police to arrest runaway slaves in the North and return them to the South.

Homegoing serves as a comprehensive map of these two family journeys, originating from a common source but branching into differing expressions of postcolonial trauma. Effia's lineage, remaining in the Gold Coast and later Ghana, initially benefits from the slave trade through her marriage to a British trader and subsequent colonial collaboration. However, the trauma in this line is characterized by deep-seated guilt and the disintegration of communal harmony through internal conflict.

For example, Effia's son Quey is forced into a supervisory role in the slave trade—a position he loathes—where he must witness the torture of people from his mother's own village. He watches his uncle Fifi actively participate in the capture and sale of human beings for profit, a betrayal that haunts the family's conscience. This predatory environment is described through the lens of a trade that has spiraled out of control:

Trade has increased so much, and the methods of gathering slaves had become so reckless, that many of the tribes had taken to marking their children's faces so that they would be distinguishable... Most of the slaves brought to Quey's village outpost were those people captured in tribal wars, a few were sold by their families, and the rarest kind of slave was the one that Fifi captured himself in his dark night missions up north. (64)

This inherited guilt finds its most destructive reflection in the life of Akua, the “crazy woman” (113) haunted by nightmares of a fire woman clutching two infants. In a state of traumatic delusion, Akua eventually burns her own children, a psychological manifestation of how unresolved historical remorse can transform into a lethal force. It represents the sins of the ancestors being visited upon future generations.

The subsequent struggle to reclaim agency is evident in Yaw, Akua's only surviving son. As a history teacher, Yaw dedicates his life to teaching authentic pre-colonial history to heal colonial wounds, authoring a book titled *Let the Africans Own Africa*. This title directly challenges the oppressive chains of the colonizer. However, Yaw's intellectual resistance is constantly met with the practical remains of colonial bureaucracy, particularly regarding the loss of indigenous languages.

Yaw taught students who were mostly fourteen or fifteen years old who had already learned to speak and read English in their lower classes. This linguistic displacement was a battle he fought from the start: “When Yaw had first gotten the post as a school teacher, he had argued with the headmaster that he should be able to teach in the boys' regional tongues, but the headmaster had laughed at him. Yaw knew it was a foolish hope. There were too many languages to even try” (225).

Yaw's facial scar, a physical remnant of his mother's trauma, becomes a powerful symbol of a scarred national history. Despite the “foolish hope” (225) of linguistic restoration, he represents the effort to reclaim a narrative agency that was systematically suppressed, teaching his students that “History is Storytelling” (225) and urging them to question whose story is being told.

In contrast, Esi's descendants experience trauma rooted in physical brutality, systemic racism, and the total eradication of cultural memory. Esi's severance from her heritage begins with her capture; the black stone given to her by her mother Maame—her only link to her past—is lost amidst the sexual abuse and torture of the castle dungeons. This loss symbolizes the emptiness that fuels the search for identity in her American descendants. Throughout their history, Esi's line faces relentless oppression, as seen in the life of H, who is imprisoned for a supposed relationship with a white woman. In prison, H is sold into the "convict leasing system" (122), forced to work in coal mines under the pervasive slogan "NO FREE NIGGERS" (125). Even when he escapes, he cannot return to a truly free world, illustrating the terrifying permanence of racialized oppression.

This historical trauma frequently leads to family breakdowns and mental health crises. Sonny, H's grandson, falls into drug addiction—a manifestation of intergenerational despair born of poverty and segregation. Similarly, Willie, a talented singer, is denied professional opportunities due to her race. Gyasi illustrates this intersection of race and misogyny through Willie's failed audition:

"She was too dark to sing at the Jazzing. That's what they told her the night she'd come in ready to audition... Too dark... Jazzing's only for light girls" (299). When Willie noted that she saw a man "dark as midnight" walking in with a trombone, the boss at the audition told her, "I said girls, honey. If you were a man, maybe" (299).

Her husband Robert, a light-skinned man who chooses to pass for white, eventually abandons her and their son Carson because he cannot reconcile his life with a Black woman in a racist society. Gyasi presents these fractured relationships and societal instabilities as the direct result of historical injustice, where the physical trait of skin color becomes a tool for both economic exclusion and domestic abandonment.

The theme of dual identity remains a central psychological conflict, particularly for Quey. As the son of a British official and a Fante woman, his identity is inherently liminal. Educated in England and raised among whites, he is viewed by the English as a useful tool for supervising the trade due to his familiarity with local customs. Quey's internal struggle is defined by a profound sense of displacement. He perceives his hybridity as a prison of conflicting desires and impossible loyalties, further complicated by his silenced homosexual affinity for his friend Cudjo. This paralysis of identity is best captured by his realization that: "He knew that he was one of the half-caste children of the Castle, and, like the other half-caste children, he would not fully claim either half of himself, neither his father's whiteness nor his mother's blackness. Neither England, nor the Gold Coast" (56).

The quest for belonging culminates in Marcus, the final descendant of Esi's line. A sociology student researching the convict leasing system that destroyed his ancestors, Marcus feels emotionally displaced from a definitive home. His research is an attempt to map his own intergenerational trauma, a process that reveals the confounding scale of his family's erasure: "Originally he'd wanted to focus his work on the convict leasing system that had stolen years off of his great grandpa H's life, but the deeper into research he got, the bigger the project got. How could he talk about Great Grandpa H's story without also talking about his grandma Willie and millions of other black people who had migrated north, fleeing Jim Crow?" (289).

His eventual journey back to Ghana represents a longing to reclaim a lost narrative. This reclamation is also linguistic; Gyasi highlights how the forceful stripping of African languages and names severed cultural ties. Yaw's insistence on using the Ghanaian language and encouraging his house girl to speak her native tongue acts as a vital form of cultural resistance.

Ultimately, Gyasi completes the circle of historical trauma by bringing together the final descendants, Marcus and Marjorie, at the Cape Coast Castle. Their meeting at the site where their lineages originally split symbolizes the reunification of fragmented histories. Through this innovative intergenerational structure, Gyasi advocates for an empathetic understanding of the long-delayed justice owed to the victims of the global slave trade and colonialism, offering a model for how historical trauma continues to resonate within the individual and the community.

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