



*The Concept of Home in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing*

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مفهوم المنزل في رواية يا جياسي "عودة للوطن"

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## Abstract:

*This research analyzes the novel "Homegoing" by Yaa Gyasi through the lenses of intergenerational trauma and the quest for a sense of belonging. The purpose is to examine the manner in which the book's characters confront the enduring consequences of trauma that has been transmitted across generations, as well as their unyielding quest for a sense of identity and belonging. The study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the characters' experiences in relation to significant historical occurrences, including slavery, colonialism, and the African diaspora. The study investigates the psychological and affective consequences of these distressing occurrences on the lives, relationships, and self-perception of the characters. By employing critical textual examination, thematic analysis, and theoretical frameworks pertaining to trauma and identity, this research elucidates the manner in which intergenerational trauma influences the characters' perception of what constitutes home. This work delves into the challenges they faced in terms of displacement, cultural alienation, and the yearning for a permanent residence. The results of this research illuminate the significant impacts that historical trauma has had on both individuals and communities, underscoring the criticality of recognizing and confronting intergenerational trauma. The text underscores the characters' fortitude and fortitude as they traverse their intricate paths to restoration, self-realization, and the quest for a genuine sense of belonging. This study makes a valuable contribution to the extant literature concerning intergenerational trauma and its ramifications for both communities and individuals. Furthermore, it sheds light on the capacity of narratives to confront and mend historical traumas, as exemplified in "Homegoing" by Yaa Gyasi. The overarching objective of this research is to enhance our comprehension of the enduring consequences of trauma and the inherent human longing for a secure abode.*

**Keywords:** Intergenerational Trauma; Home; Yaa Gyasi; Homegoing; Race; Slavery

## الملخص:

تحليل هذا البحث لرواية "العودة إلى الوطن" للكاتبة يا جيسي من خلال عدسات الصدمة عبر الأجيال والبحث عن الانتماء. الغرض من البحث هو فحص الطريقة التي يواجه فيها شخصيات الكتاب عواقب الصدمة المستمرة التي تم نقلها عبر الأجيال، بالإضافة إلى بحثهم الجاد عن الهوية والانتماء. تستخدم الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً لفحص تجارب الشخصيات فيما يتعلق بالأحداث التاريخية الهامة، بما في ذلك العبودية والاستعمار والشتات الأفريقي. تحقق الدراسة في النتائج النفسية والعاطفية لهذه الأحداث المؤلمة على حياة الشخصيات وعلاقاتهم وتصوير الذات. من خلال استخدام الفحص النصي النقدي والتحليل الموضوعي والإطارات النظرية المتعلقة بالصدمة والهوية، يوضح هذا البحث الطريقة التي يؤثر بها الصدمة عبر الأجيال على إدراك الشخصيات لما يشكل الوطن. يتناول هذا العمل التحديات التي واجهوها فيما يتعلق بالتهجير والاعتراق الثقافي والحنين إلى مأوى دائم. تسلط نتائج هذا البحث الضوء على الآثار الهامة التي تركتها الصدمة التاريخية على الأفراد والمجتمعات على حد سواء، مؤكدة على أهمية التعرف على الصدمة عبر الأجيال ومواجهتها. يسلط النص الضوء على إرادة الشخصيات وصمودهم أثناء مرورهم بمساراتهم المعقدة نحو الاستعادة وتحقيق الذات والبحث عن شعور حقيقي بالانتماء. تقدم هذه الدراسة إسهاماً قيماً في الأدب الحالي المتعلق بالصدمة عبر الأجيال وتداعياتها على الفرد والمجتمع على حد سواء. علاوة على ذلك، يسلط النص الضوء على قدرة السرد على مواجهة وإصلاح الصدمات التاريخية، كما يُظهر في رواية "العودة إلى الوطن" لـ يا جيسي. الهدف العام لهذا البحث هو تعزيز فهمنا للعواقب المستمرة للصدمة والشوق الإنساني الأصلي إلى مأوى آمن.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الصدمة عبر الأجيال؛ الوطن؛ يا جيسي؛ العودة إلى الوطن؛ العرق؛ العبودية

## 1. Introduction

Slavery is widely recognized as among the most significant calamities perpetrated by humanity and endured for an extensive duration throughout history. Slavery, which emerged during the 15th century, inflicted immense suffering upon countless individuals worldwide over a span of almost four centuries, thereby attaining the status as one of humanity's most profound atrocities. The enduring impact of slavery on many individuals globally is immeasurable. However, the emergence of trauma concept in the field of literary studies has provided novelists with a means of conceiving trauma and giving birth to a distinct genre known as "trauma fiction" (Whitehead 2004). The portrayal of the tragedies and enduring pain experienced by millions of Africans and African Americans through several generations has captured the attention of numerous writers. This is evident in literary works such as Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016).

Yaa Gyasi, who was born in Ghana and reared in Alabama, is a member of the contemporary cohort of Black authors. This group engages in innovative approaches to literary structure in order to examine the enduring impacts of enslavement, as well as the growing conceptions of Black identity and the experience of trauma. The book *Homegoing* (2016) by Gyasi depicts the

multi-generational journey of a single family, spanning from eighteenth-century Ghana to contemporary United States. The utilization of shifting focalization allows Gyasi to effectively depict the emotional experiences of diverse Black characters, while also shedding light on the long-lasting impact of trauma and resiliently for those who are descendants of enslaved Africans. These individuals continue to face different kinds of racial discrimination that have their origins in the legacy of enslavement (Mikić, 2023).

Intergenerational trauma pertains to the transfer of historical subjugation and its subsequent psychological and societal repercussions over successive generations. This study examines the enduring consequences experienced by descendants of those who have endured traumatic events, such as slavery and its subsequent effects. The novel *Homegoing* explores this phenomenon by delving into the experiences of its protagonists who struggle with homelessness, social exclusion, the erosion of their cultural heritage, and other challenges stemming from their ancestral history of dispossession and trauma (Cañellas i Bosch, 2020).

The novel *Homegoing* chronicles the profound impact of the transatlantic slave trade, resulting in the forced separation of two sisters and subsequent generations of their progeny. The narrative begins with the introduction of Effia Otcher, who

came into being amidst the sweltering climate of Fanteland (Gyasi 2016, 3). Subsequently, the genealogical lineage diverges into two distinct branches. Both branches of the family will be confronted with their unique challenges, ranging from the ordeal of being abducted and transported over the Middle Passage to the distant shores, to striving for a future devoid of involvement in the slave trade.

The novel begins in the early 1760s, with the characters Effia, and thereafter unfolds through a span of fourteen chapters, culminating in the late 1990s, when the focus shifts to Marcus and Marjorie. The intergenerational repercussions of slavery, colonialism, and racism manifest themselves in both Africa and America. In addition, *Homegoing*, though being a work of fantasy, effectively portrays significant historical occurrences such as the conflict between the Fantes and the Asantes, the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, and the consequential Great Migration to the Northern regions. The many occurrences discussed in the novel *Homegoing* have their influence on the fourteen distinct persons that the narrative encompasses.

Despite the advancements made in resolving historical injustices, the enduring effects of racism, colonialism, and slavery persistently influence the construction of identity, interpersonal connections, and the pursuit of a sense of

belonging among communities of color through generations. Nevertheless, the existing body of work pertaining to comprehending these intergenerational consequences from a multigenerational perspective is still rather scarce. Therefore, this study aims to examine the portrayal of intergenerational trauma transmission in Gyasi's book *Homegoing*, specifically focusing on African descendants affected by the Atlantic slave trade.

The analysis will explore how this trauma influences their continuous quest for identity, belonging, and a sense of home. Moreover, this research aims to enhance comprehension of the influence of historical trauma on the formation of identity and sense of belonging across successive generations, using literary analysis as the primary methodology. This study delves into the many aspects of memory, the loss of cultural roots, and community alienation that arise as a result of relocation, and examines their lasting effects on the quest for a sense of belonging. The study presents significant findings about the multifaceted experiences of the African diaspora throughout several generations.

The main question posed by *Homegoing* is to the origins and progression of racialized trauma, specifically in terms of its spatial and temporal dimensions. How does Yaa Gyasi's book *Homegoing* illustrate how trauma is passed down through

generations and affects how African descendants feel about themselves, their community, and where they belong? The study will use a qualitative approach to conduct a literary analysis that aims to critically explore the themes of intergenerational trauma, identity, and home in *Homegoing*. The theoretical framework will be informed by pertinent notions derived from the fields of memory studies, trauma theory, and diaspora/cultural studies. The study issue will be addressed via an analysis of character arcs and the examination of particular passages that portray these themes throughout several generations. This analysis will use a close reading approach.

## **2. Racial and Emotional Trauma in *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi**

The concept of race is a construct shaped by society; however, instances of racism may have tangible and often distressing impacts on both the psychological and physiological well-being of individuals. Hence, it is unsurprising that extensive psychological research has consistently shown that individuals of color may experience substantial psychological and physiological harm as a consequence of racial trauma, which may include the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Williams et al., 181). Several prevalent symptoms associated with PTSD include dread, anxiety,

recurring dreams that induce traumatic reliving during sleep, a perception of a diminished future, as well as an array of mental and physical health complications (180).

The enduring trauma faced by individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups in a society that upholds white supremacy can be triggered by personal encounters with racial violence and the indirect trauma resulting from pervasive racial discrimination against people of color. Additionally, these individuals may also be affected by the long-lasting effects of historical trauma. The user's text is too short to be rewritten academically. According to Ron Eyerman, the significance and recollection of slavery and the lack of success in achieving freedom is seen by Black Americans as a fundamental experience of cultural trauma (98).

Resmaa Menakem observes that several factors, including genes, historical events, cultural influences, legal systems, and familial ties, have all contributed to the perpetuation of a prolonged lineage of trauma inside the bodies of African Americans (Menakem, 11). Menakem also highlights the presence of an additional aspect that is consistently transmitted across individuals and throughout generations, apart from trauma, which is resilience (50). Menakem notes that through 400 years of achievements and failures, African Americans have attempted to contrary both recent and past trauma with a



combination of endurance that we were created with and resiliency that we have grown and showed others to develop. This observation is based on neuroscience outcomes that "reveal that the human brain always has the capacity to learn, change, and grow" (Menakem, 51).

This stresses that Black Americans have always reacted to racial injustice with resistance and tenacity, even though racial injustice has traditionally been the source of great loss and suffering. Through an examination of the emotional and distressing hold of historical racial events on contemporary racial dynamics, the novel *Homegoing* brings attention to the manner in which socially created beliefs about race influence the mental and physical well-being of those who are marginalized based on their race, spanning many generations. In an interview conducted by The Guardian, Gyasi stated: "I think trauma is inheritable ... Suffering changes and stays the same. In America, the worst was never over, just made new. That was something I was trying to trace in the novel –the trail of trauma reinvented."

The story starts in eighteenth-century Ghana, using a focalization technique in the first two chapters to present the perspectives of the half-sisters, Effia and Esi, whose life trajectories diverge significantly. While the first individual enters into matrimony with the British governor of the Cape

Coast Castle, the second individual is confined in the subterranean women's jail under the castle, prior to being coerced into embarking on a transatlantic voyage aboard a vessel dedicated to the transportation of enslaved individuals. The narrative proceeds to alternate between the two-family lineages, depicting the long-term consequences of slavery and colonization on the relatives of Effi ah in Ghana and Esi in the United States. This study primarily focuses on Esi's tale and examines how the neo-slave narrative portrays the dungeon as a significant site of suffering.

All chapter's protagonist's personal traumas seem to be representative of more significant traumas; these more significant traumas, which the protagonists represent, are probably best described as cultural traumas; however, trauma research has not yet been able to come up with a consensus or well-defined term to confirm that trauma can be felt in ways that proceed beyond the individual (Madigan, 2020). In a manner reminiscent to Nyman's examination of *Salt and Saffron*, the novel *Homegoing* utilizes the concept of the family as a mechanism to establish a connection between the political and the personal realms (Nyman, 112).

The aforementioned statement aligns with the findings of Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué, who have noted a recurring tendency in anglophone postcolonial studies to blend

cultural and personal pain as a deliberate narrative approach for addressing ethnic and cultural traumas (Herrero and Baelo-Allué, xi). The main protagonists in Gyasi's book exhibit a shared Ghanaian background, which suggests that the novel incorporates the concept of the family as a metaphor for the country to a certain degree. In the text, a minor character expresses a desire to establish an independent country (Gyasi, 93). Simultaneously, *Homegoing* seems to endorse the concept that the diaspora experience is characterized by several locations and extends beyond national boundaries, as seen by its exploration of diasporic themes (Stein, 65). Therefore, one may posit that in Gyasi's work, the representation of family serves as a metaphor for the diasporic community, as opposed to the country.

*Homegoing* effectively conveys its thematic themes by structuring its chapters around significant historical tragedies and examining their lasting impacts on subsequent periods. An excerpt from James's chapter, occurring shortly after the cessation of the transatlantic slave trade, serves as an illustrative example. It highlights the notion that although slavery had ostensibly ceased, it merely underwent a transformation, wherein physical shackles encircling wrists and ankles were replaced by intangible ones that ensnared the psyche (Gyasi, 93).

One particular paragraph in the book "*Marcus*" well captures Gyasi's direct and confrontational handling of trauma in "*Homegoing*." This passage intricately and directly explores the many traumas that are handled throughout the novel, emphasizing their enduring significance in contemporary society. Marcus, a doctoral candidate in sociology, contemplates the challenges he faces in narrowing down the focus of his study to the criminal leasing structure. He acknowledges that this system, which had unjustly deprived his great-grandfather H of precious years of his life, cannot be examined in isolation. Marcus recognizes the intricate interplay between various systems of black oppression and racism, which are deeply ingrained in historical contexts.

How could he talk about Great-Grandpa H's story without also talking about his grandma Willie and the millions of other black people who had migrated north, fleeing Jim Crow? And if he mentioned the Great Migration, he'd have to talk about the cities that took that flock in ... He'd inevitably be writing, too, about the "war on drugs." And if he started to write about the war on drugs, he'd be talking about how nearly half of the black men he grew up with were on their way either into or out of what had become the harshest prison system in the world. (Ibid., 289)

The above extract demonstrates the manner in which *Homegoing* diverges from conventional methods in the

conceptualization and portrayal of trauma. Instead, then proposing that the traumas of slavery and its enduring consequences are unrepresentable and unavailable, *Homegoing* explicitly addresses these matters. The aforementioned section serves as a notable illustration, since Marcus clearly acknowledges the distressing consequences of slavery endured by his forebears (each of whom is prominently featured as the central figures in their respective chapters earlier in the book).

Marcus's observations further demonstrate that *Homegoing* goes beyond the conventional understanding of trauma as an isolated occurrence resulting from a singular incident. Instead of seeing trauma just as an individual and isolated occurrence, the novel *Homegoing* vividly illustrates the interconnection between personal traumas and underlying systemic problems. The book delves into the exploration of small-scale assaults and their contribution to insidious trauma via Marcus's interaction at the museum, among other instances. While the conventional method neglects to adequately consider the influence of supra-individual elements pertaining to the trauma being discussed, *Homegoing* effectively addresses these aspects via its narrative format.

Marcus's research serves as a prime example of *Homegoing's* explicit exploration of the manner in which traumas are deeply embedded within socio-political

frameworks of black oppression. The previously mentioned sentence emphasizes the combined influence of these structures as well as their interconnectedness. By establishing a connection between the suffering experienced by the protagonist's grandfather, referred to as H, as previously described in a prior chapter, and other systems of oppression faced by the black community, the novel *Homegoing* explores the realms of personal and collective trauma. This narrative further exemplifies how the institution of slavery and its enduring consequences have a profound impact on the consciousness of not only individuals, but also the wider community (Durrant, 4)

Another prominent characteristic of the assertive strategy used in *Homegoing* is its ability to place not only the reader, but also various characters, as involved subjects. This signifies a deviation from the conventional framework of psychiatrist/empathic listener interaction often seen in traditional literature on trauma. The utilization of the involved topic, coupled with its refusal to acknowledge the unspeakable, enables *Homegoing* to challenge the tendency of conventional trauma aesthetics to provide an opportunity to divert attention from the themes presented in the text. Consequently, this approach complicates the process of confronting and grappling with these themes (Stampfl, 18).

The novel's method might be seen as an endeavor to challenge society's resistance in recognizing and confronting the enduring impact of slavery and its consequences, and instead promote a process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In a similar vein, the novel *Homegoing* may be compared to Kennedy and Wilson's examination of a testimonial from the Stolen Generation. In this study, the narrator does not explicitly seek empathy from the audience, but rather urges them to develop a critical awareness of their own roles within the persistent acts of denial (Kennedy and Wilson, 128-9; LaCapra, 83).

In contrast to texts like Morrison's *Beloved*, which have been interpreted as potentially evoking a sense of "empathic unsettlement" in readers, *Homegoing* distinguishes itself by positioning the reader, along with multiple protagonists, as an involved subject (LaCapra, 83). In Gyasi's book, the use of the involved subject aligns with Eaglestone's concept of "engaged literature" in a revitalized Sartrean sense. This refers to emotive works that are openly targeted at arousing Western consciences (Eaglestone, 82).

However, it will be seen later in this section that *Homegoing* diverges from the works described by Eaglestone. Unlike these works, Gyasi's book does not just target the West, but instead broadens its critical viewpoint to include Africa,

including the West African region. Gyasi's story has several instances when the arrangement of characters and the involvement of the reader as an entangled subject are prominently emphasized. At a gathering of Asante peasants in "Abena," the father of the title character abruptly stands out when the subject of the slave trade is raised:

Asante traders would bring in their captives. Fante, Ewe, or Ga middlemen would hold them, then sell them to the British or the Dutch or whoever was paying the most at the time. Everyone was responsible. We all were ... we all are.

Interestingly, the story exploits (physical) scars as a tool to confront African complicity in the slave trade. Scars serve as a tangible symbol of the historical African engagement in the slave trade, as seen in the character "Yaw." Yaw's scar was inflicted upon him by his mother during a state of trance-like nightmare involving the firewoman. The firewoman, Yaw's scar, and Akua's burnt hands, which were a consequence of her actions, are all linked to the historical context of slavery. Akua elucidates that a practitioner of fetishism expounded upon her nocturnal visions, attributing them to the presence of malevolent forces inside her ancestral heritage (Gyasi, 241). She informs her son that the fetish priest's assertion about the presence of malevolence inside their family heritage was accurate. Certain individuals have engaged in wrongful actions



due to their inability to see the consequences of their actions. The individuals in question did not possess these charred hands as a kind of forewarning (Ibid., 242).

The transgression that Akua references is to the historical practice of the slave trade, in which her ancestors were actively involved. The physical scars serve as a tangible manifestation of the implications associated with trauma, hence reinforcing the notion that trauma might potentially be transmitted between generations (Heinz, 128; Motahane, 24)). By confronting the culpability for slavery via utilization of both a direct approach ("we all are") as well as symbolism (scars), Gyasi's story seems to span several literary techniques of recalling the slave trade. Laura T. Murphy asserts that West African writing employs the technique of "metaphorization" as a primary means of addressing the slave trade, in contrast to the more explicit narrative forms often seen in African American literature. Similar to the transnational structure of the book, *Homegoing* utilizes narrative techniques from both African and American traditions to depict the role in the slave trade.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, this research has examined the thematic elements of intergenerational trauma and the nostalgia for one's place of origin in Yaa Gyasi's "*Homegoing*." By conducting a phenomenological examination of the experiences of the characters, the research has unveiled the profound ramifications that historical trauma has had on their personal lives, interpersonal connections, and collective consciousness. The tenacious quest for a residence by the characters is emblematic of the lasting consequences of intergenerational trauma and the inherent human desire for a sense of belonging.

The results of this research emphasize the criticality of recognizing and confronting intergenerational trauma within societies. Through an analysis of the characters' challenges pertaining to displacement, cultural alienation, and the longing for a sense of belonging, this study emphasizes the critical nature of providing assistance and recovery to communities and individuals impacted by historical trauma.

Moreover, this research underscores the efficacy of narratives as a means of confronting and recuperating from intergenerational trauma. "*Homegoing*" by Yaa Gyasi exemplifies how literature can constructively illuminate the enduring consequences of trauma while also serving as a

medium for compassion, understanding, and restoration. The characters' personal development and healing trajectories exemplify the fortitude and determination of people when confronted with hardship.

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