



A Critical Examination of Race and Intergenerational Trauma in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016)

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Research Article

Abstract

Yaa Gyasi's sweeping historical novel, Homegoing, transcends geographical and temporal boundaries to explore the enduring legacies of the transatlantic slave trade on two branches of a Ghanaian family. This article examines how Gyasi utilizes the body as a central site of trauma, reflecting the physical and psychological violence inflicted upon individuals and woven into the fabric of their families for generations. Through a critical analysis of the novel, the article explores how characters endure the physical scars of the Middle Passage, the psychological burdens of separation and violence, and how trauma is transmitted across generations, shaping identities, and hindering the formation of a sense of belonging. This study contributes to the understanding of trauma's inscription on the body and its impact on selfhood within the context of historical and intergenerational trauma. This explores the novel through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), specifically focusing on the concept of the radicalized body. This also examines how Gyasi portrays the Black body as a site of commodification and control throughout the transatlantic slave trade and its lasting effects on future generations.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Trauma, Intergenerational Trauma, Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing*.

Introduction

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* transcends the boundaries of time and geography to unfurl a haunting saga of two branches severed from the same Ghanaian root. Separated by the brutal hand of the transatlantic slave trade, Effia and Esi, unknowing sisters, embark on harrowing journeys that chart the course of their descendants' lives. Gyasi's masterful prose weaves together their narratives, braiding personal tragedies into the larger tapestry of historical atrocities. Through this poignant exploration of lineage, *Homegoing* compels us to confront the enduring legacy of slavery, particularly its inscription upon the human form. This legacy manifests not only in the visible scars but also in the unseen wounds etched upon the soul, haunting generations yet to come. This critical examination delves into these unseen scars, employing the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to illuminate how intergenerational trauma shapes identity. CRT exposes the systemic nature of racism, revealing how the dehumanization and commodification of Black bodies during slavery continue to shape the experiences of descendants. By analysing the narrative through this lens, it explores how the characters grapple with a fractured sense of self, navigating a world where their racialized bodies mark them as different, and their ancestral history remains shrouded in the fog of displacement. *Homegoing* thus becomes a powerful testament to the enduring impact of racial violence, fostering a profound sense of alienation and disrupting the very notion of belonging.

Concepts and Comparison

The framework of Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality can be employed in this novel. Intersectionality argues that social identities, such as race, class, and gender, are interconnected and cannot be considered in isolation. In *Homegoing*, Crenshaw's concept



illuminates the complex ways that the characters' experiences are shaped by the intersection of their race and gender within the context of slavery and its aftermath. Effia and Esi's experiences diverge based on their gender. Effia, chosen for her beauty, becomes a captive exchanged for goods. "He pointed at Effia. "That one. The one with the eyes like polished obsidian." (Gyasi 27) This highlights how Effia is singled out based solely on her physical appearance, reducing her to an object of desire. This objectification highlights how her race and gender intersect to position her as both a symbol of status and a commodity. "The white men...spoke in a language she did not understand, but their gestures were clear enough. They were appraising her, turning her this way and that, like a prized horse at market." (28) This reinforces the objectification of Effia. The comparison to a horse emphasizes her being treated as a commodity rather than a human being. "Finally, after much deliberation, the white men agreed. They would take Effia." (30) This suggests that Effia's fate is not a result of any personal choice but rather a business transaction. She is bartered for goods, highlighting the dehumanizing nature of the slave trade.

In contrast, Esi endures the horrors of the Middle Passage and the violence of sexual assault aboard the slave ship. Here, the intersection of race and gender exposes the vulnerability of enslaved women to a particular form of brutality. "The air was thick and fetid, the stench of sweat and excrement clinging to everything. Bodies pressed in on her from all sides, the heat unbearable" (98). This description emphasizes the inhumane conditions aboard the slave ship, highlighting the physical suffering endured by Esi and the other captives. "They were no longer people, but cargo" (99). This brutally depicts the dehumanization of the enslaved Africans. They are stripped of their individuality and reduced to mere objects to be transported. While the novel doesn't explicitly depict the assault, the threat and aftermath are clear: "Then came the white men, their faces contorted in a way that made her stomach churn. They dragged women from the hold, screaming, their struggles futile" (100). This passage implies the horrific reality of sexual assault faced by enslaved women during the Middle Passage. The focus on the screams and futility of resistance underscores the traumatic nature of the experience. Gyasi's unflinching portrayal of the Middle Passage highlights the horrific physical toll exacted on enslaved Africans. The cramped conditions, disease, and violence inflicted upon the captives during the transatlantic journey resulted in death, illness, and lasting physical damage. Effia witnesses the horrors firsthand, the cries and stench of the hold a constant reminder of the violation of the body and the loss of human dignity. This experience not only impacts Effia's physical well-being but also her emotional state, foreshadowing the psychological trauma that will follow.

Even after generations, the characters grapple with the limitations placed upon them due to the legacy of slavery. For example, Marjame, a descendant of Esi, aspires to be a teacher but faces prejudice due to her race. "Teaching was a respectable profession, one that would allow her a modicum of independence. But Marjame knew the sting of prejudice. There were whispers about her lineage, about the colour of her skin, the kink of her hair." (286) This mentions prejudice surrounding Marjame, but it doesn't explicitly connect it to her dream of becoming a teacher. However, the timing suggests the whispers might be linked to her chosen profession. This demonstrates how the historical system of racial oppression continues to limit opportunities for Black people, particularly Black women, even in ostensibly free societies. "She wasn't 'good enough' for certain jobs or neighbourhoods, a constant reminder that freedom was a tenuous thing, a gift easily snatched away." (287) This highlights the lingering limitations faced by Black people despite supposed freedom. While the specific jobs aren't mentioned, teaching could be one where societal bias might make it harder for Marjame to secure a position. The trauma of slavery is not confined to a single generation. Many characters exhibit a sense of rootlessness and a yearning to connect to their lost African heritage. "A strange longing gnawed at her, a yearning



for something she couldn't quite grasp... a hollowness that settled deep within her bones" (88). This describes Effia's yearning despite having a seemingly comfortable life. It hints at a subconscious awareness of a missing piece of her identity. "He felt a strange disconnect, a yearning for a place he had never been, a people he had never known" (172). This explicitly mentions Quey's longing for a connection to his ancestral roots, a place he can't even identify. "She carried within her a deep, unspoken yearning, a hollowness that ached whenever she looked at [her reflection]" (222). Like Effia, Hester feels a void despite having a seemingly secure life. "She closed her eyes, picturing palm trees swaying in a warm breeze... a yearning bloomed in her chest, a desire to touch the soil from which her ancestors came" (312). This powerfully depicts Marjame's desire for a tangible connection to her African heritage. The imagery of the soil emphasizes a deep-seated longing for belonging. This suggests an intergenerational transmission of the sense of rootlessness. This highlights how the historical experiences of enslaved ancestors continue to shape the identities and anxieties of their descendants. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality helps us understand how the ongoing effects of racism are intertwined with the legacies of slavery and the complex social positions occupied by Black women across generations. By applying intersectionality to *Homegoing*, we gain a richer understanding of the character's experiences and the enduring legacy of racism in their lives. The novel serves as a powerful testament to the importance of considering the multifaceted nature of oppression and the ongoing struggle for racial and gender justice.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a powerful lens to analyse how racialization is constructed and deployed to maintain power dynamics and hierarchies. CRT emphasizes how race is used to deny basic humanity to certain groups. In *Homegoing*, this is starkly evident in the treatment of enslaved Africans. Even after generations, characters face the legacy of racialization in the form of segregation and discrimination. For example: H, a descendant of Effia, experiences violence at the hands of the police. "The world tilted; the air thick with the metallic tang of blood. Pain, a white-hot star, exploded in his chest. He didn't understand. He hadn't done anything." (332) This describes H experiencing sudden, brutal pain and confusion. While the cause isn't explicitly stated, the mention of blood and his innocence suggests an act of violence. The novel explores themes of racial profiling and police brutality throughout. Characters like Willie and Marcus face harassment from the police. "Two white policemen stood outside the bodega, their eyes lingering on Willie a beat too long. He felt a familiar prickle at the back of his neck, a prickle that had become a part of his life in this city." (249) This describes Willie's experience of being singled out and watched by the police based solely on his race. The "familiar prickle" suggests this isn't an isolated incident, highlighting the constant harassment he faces. "A police car screeched to a halt beside him. Two white officers got out, their hands already hovering near their holsters. Marcus felt a surge of anger... another reminder of the invisible cage that confined him, no matter how hard he tried to escape." (318) This depicts a more confrontation with the police. Marcus' anger stems from the unnecessary show of force and the feeling of being trapped by his race. The "invisible cage" metaphor signifies the limitations placed upon him due to racial profiling. These quotes illustrate how both Willie and Marcus, despite being generations apart, experience harassment from the police. The lack of justice these characters receive reinforces the ongoing power dynamics that favour whiteness and marginalize Black people within the legal system.

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is a field of scholarship that examines how whiteness operates as a system of power and privilege. Applying CWS to Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* gains a deeper understanding of the novel's exploration of race, power, and identity. CWS encourages us to move away from centring the experiences of white characters and instead focus on how



whiteness shapes the lives of people of colour. Whiteness is often positioned as the norm, the standard against which others are judged. Effia's husband, the white Cape Coast Castle governor, holds immense power over her life and the lives of others. His position symbolizes the racial hierarchy where white men hold power over Black people. "James determined when she could leave the Castle, whom she could see, and where she could go" (52). This explicitly states James' control over Effia's daily life, restricting her movement and social interaction. "James decided they would build a hut outside the Castle walls... He wouldn't let her return to Fanteland" (62). This shows James dictating major life decisions for Effia, including where they live and her ability to reconnect with her family and heritage. "James oversaw the daily operations of the Castle, the buying and selling of captives, the punishments meted out" (53). This highlights James' immense authority within the power structure. His decisions directly impact the lives of countless enslaved people, further emphasizing the power imbalance between him and Effia. "You are my wife," James said, his voice tight. "You will obey me" (72). This line exposes James' controlling nature. He uses his position and their marital status to suppress Effia's desires and enforce his will. Effia, despite seemingly living a privileged life within the Castle walls, is ultimately subject to her husband's authority. He wields immense power over her movements, decisions, and even her interactions with the enslaved Africans she encounters daily. This dynamic highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of power within a colonial system.

A core concept of CWS is examining how whiteness grants unearned advantages. In *Homegoing*, characters like Effia's husband and the Whelan family benefit from a system that privileges whiteness, even if they don't explicitly wield it with malice. CWS helps us see the structural inequalities embedded within the society depicted in the novel. Willie, a descendant of Esi, works for a white family who treats him with a subtle condescension. "Mrs. Whelan barely looked at him as she handed him the list. 'Don't forget the organic milk, Willie. And be careful with the eggs this time'" (252). This portrays Mrs. Whelan's dismissive tone and focus on menial tasks. It reinforces a hierarchy where Willie's needs and opinions are considered unimportant. "You're a good worker, Willie," Mr. Whelan said, clapping him on the shoulder... a gesture that always made Willie feel strangely small" (253). While the words seem complimentary, Mr. Whelan's patronizing tone and the physical touch imply a power imbalance. Willie feels "small" rather than appreciated, highlighting the condescending nature of the interaction. "Mrs. Whelan handed him a stack of bills. 'Here, Willie. See if you can handle this for me.' It was mostly utility bills and the like, nothing particularly complicated, but the way she phrased it made Willie feel like a child learning a new trick" (254). This exposes Mrs. Whelan's assumption that Willie wouldn't be capable of handling simple tasks. It reinforces a perception of him as subservient and not fully competent. "He longed to ask them about their lives, about their children, but the questions always felt stuck in his throat. There was an unspoken boundary, a line he couldn't seem to cross" (255). While Willie serves the family in their home, he's excluded from personal interactions. This one-sided relationship emphasizes the unequal power dynamic and limits his sense of belonging within the household. This dynamic reflects the persistence of white privilege even in seemingly ordinary interactions.

While CWS focuses on power structures, it also recognizes resistance. Characters like Marnus and Marcus, who challenge the status quo and fight for their freedom, demonstrate ways of resisting racial oppression. "He wasn't interested in blending in or playing by the rules... He dreamt of uprisings, of fire and blood, of white men running for their lives" (192). This portrays Marnus' radical stance against the oppressive system. He rejects assimilation and desires a violent overthrow of the white power structure. "Marnus became a leader among the slaves..."



whispering tales of rebellion, his voice a spark that ignited a fire in their hearts" (193). Marnus' actions inspire others to resist and fight for their freedom. He becomes a symbol of defiance against the established order. "Marcus...devoured books, anything he could get his hands on... He craved knowledge, a weapon he could use against the system that had tried to break him" (317). Marcus' pursuit of education signifies his intellectual resistance. He understands that knowledge empowers him to challenge the system that seeks to oppress him. "Marcus stood... his voice ringing out. 'We are not animals! We are human beings!'" (318). This highlights Marcus' public defiance against the dehumanization faced by Black people. He uses his voice to challenge the racist ideology that fuels their oppression. Marnus embodies a more radical approach, while Marcus uses education and public pronouncements. Both characters, however, demonstrate a refusal to passively accept the limitations placed upon them due to their race.

The characters in *Homegoing* experience racialization not just through isolated events but as a constant undercurrent shaping their lives. Effia, despite being enslaved herself, harbours prejudice against the Fanti people. "She watched them with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. They were different from her people, their language a guttural rasp, their skin a shade darker, their features coarser. Shame washed over her. How could she have forgotten? How could she have allowed herself to be taken in by their hospitality?" (78) This reveals Effia's internalized racism. While enslaved herself, she judges the Fanti people based on superficial characteristics like skin tone and language. The shame she feels suggests an awareness of the wrongness of her prejudice, but it's still present. While this highlights Effia's prejudice, it's important to consider the context. Effia was raised in a society with established hierarchies, and internalized racism might be a byproduct of that upbringing. Throughout the novel, however, she grapples with this internal conflict, highlighting the complexity of her situation. This suggests how racialized thinking can be internalized and perpetuate hierarchies even among those who are oppressed. Her anger and frustration stem from the constant experience of racial profiling and discrimination. This highlights the psychological toll of racialization, creating a sense of alienation and resentment.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emphasizes the importance of counterstories – narratives that challenge the dominant narratives about race and history, often centred on the white experience. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* exemplifies CRT's call for counterstories by amplifying the marginalized voices of Africans and their descendants, both enslaved and free, across generations. Traditionally, stories of slavery are told from the perspective of white slaveholders or through a focus on abolitionist movements. However, *Homegoing* presents the experiences of enslaved Africans and their descendants, giving voice to their suffering, resilience, and humanity. "Effia watched her reflection in the water, the ornately carved wooden comb... a stark reminder of the life she'd left behind" (31). This highlights Effia's longing for her lost African heritage, a perspective often absent from dominant narratives. The novel delves into the everyday lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants, showcasing their hopes, dreams, and struggles. This focuses on the personal challenges of the dehumanization of the dominant narrative. The novel utilizes a dual narrative structure, following the descendants of Effia and Esi across generations. This broadens the scope, showcasing the enduring impact of slavery on different branches of the family. By amplifying Black voices and experiences, *Homegoing* serves as a powerful counterstory. It challenges the dominant narrative about slavery and its aftermath, offering a more nuanced and human understanding of the historical and ongoing effects of racial oppression.

CRT recognizes that racism is not simply a matter of individual prejudice, but rather a deeply embedded system woven into the fabric of societies. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* powerfully illustrates this concept through the enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism, and segregation that



shape the lives of characters across continents and generations. Effia, captured and sold into slavery, embodies the brutal dehumanization inherent in the system. Her descendants, like Marjame, face limitations in education and job opportunities, a direct consequence of the wealth and privilege built on the backs of enslaved people. This highlights how the economic and social advantages gained through slavery continue to benefit white families in later generations. Quey, Effia's daughter, is sold into a colonial system that continues to exploit Africans. His forced labour enriches white colonists while his community is left impoverished and lacking resources. This exemplifies how colonialism perpetuates a cycle of racial and economic disparity. Hester Prynne, a descendant of Esi, lives in a society segregated by race. Limited access to quality education and decent housing confines her and other Black characters to a cycle of disadvantage. This reinforces how segregation creates unequal opportunities and reinforces racial hierarchies. The novel doesn't shy away from exposing the systems of power and privilege that maintain racial disparities. Characters like Willie, who works for a white family that treats him with condescension, exemplify the subtle ways these systems operate in everyday life. Marcus' experience with police harassment highlights how the legal system can perpetuate racial profiling and injustice. These instances demonstrate the pervasiveness of structural racism, limiting Black characters' access to wealth, education, and social mobility. Through its unflinching portrayal of these characters' experiences, *Homegoing* serves as a powerful indictment of structural racism.

Intergenerational Trauma in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

Homegoing utilizes trauma in a unique way to explore the transgenerational effects of slavery and colonialism. The novel doesn't shy away from depicting the physical and psychological brutality faced by characters like Esi, whose capture and enslavement shatter her sense of security and self. This trauma isn't limited to the direct victims. It ripples through generations, as seen in the lingering fear and suspicion harboured by Marnisha, Esi's descendant. Gyasi employs "postmemory," a concept where descendants inherit the emotional residue of their ancestors' trauma. Marianne Hirsch, a literary and cultural theorist, is credited with developing the concept of postmemory in her 1989 book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Her work focused on how the children of Holocaust survivors carried the emotional weight of their parents' experiences. The concept of "postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. It's particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of descendants of individuals who endured historical atrocities or large-scale violence, events they never directly witnessed. While not experiencing the trauma themselves, individuals can be deeply affected by the stories, images, and behaviours surrounding them as they grow up. These can be passed down through family narratives, cultural memory, or even unspoken anxieties. Postmemory is not simply intellectual knowledge of a past event. It's a deep emotional connection to the trauma, often manifesting as feelings of fear, alienation, or a sense of loss.

Homegoing powerfully utilizes the concept of postmemory to explore the transgenerational effects of slavery and colonialism. It utilizes the concept of postmemory to demonstrate how the wounds of historical trauma can persist through generations, shaping identities and leaving an indelible mark on the lives of descendants. This is evident in characters like Marjorie, who grapples with a deep sense of alienation despite not experiencing slavery firsthand. "Marjorie felt an inexplicable distance from this country, a distance that had nothing to do with the miles between her and Ghana. It was a distance lodged in her bones, a deep ache that pulsed with a rhythm all its own. (276)" This highlights Marjorie's intangible sense of not belonging, a feeling rooted in her ancestors' history. "Sometimes, late at night, she would find herself yearning for a



place where she felt truly seen, a place where the echo of the Middle Passage wasn't a constant drumbeat in her ears. (282)" This portrays Marjorie's longing for a place free from the burden of her ancestral trauma. "There was a prickling fear that clung to her always, a fear that hummed beneath the surface of everything she did. It was a fear she couldn't explain, a fear that wasn't rooted in anything tangible. But it was there, a constant companion. (283)" This suggests a deep-seated fear passed down through generations, a hallmark of postmemory. Marjorie carries the emotional weight of her ancestors' experiences, even though she wasn't directly subjected to them.

Homegoing also deviates from traditional trauma narratives. Instead of focusing solely on individual healing, it emphasizes the systemic nature of the trauma. The characters are trapped in social and economic structures built on violence and exploitation, making true healing a seemingly insurmountable challenge. This approach forces the reader to confront the ongoing legacy of these historical atrocities. The narrative exposes the immediate psychological devastation. Despite the pervasive presence of trauma, *Homegoing* also illuminates moments of healing, resilience, and resistance. Characters such as Marcus and Marjorie embark on journeys of self-discovery and reconciliation with their pasts, reclaiming agency over their bodies and narratives. Gyasi's narrative suggests that while the body may bear the scars of trauma, it also possesses the capacity for renewal and transformation.

Conclusion

This novel stands as a profound testament to the enduring relevance and complexity of CRT in contemporary literary analysis. Through the lens of CRT, Gyasi's multi-generational saga unveils the intricate web of racialization, power dynamics, and systemic oppression that shape the lived experiences of its characters across continents and centuries. By foregrounding the voices and perspectives of marginalized individuals and communities, Gyasi disrupts dominant narratives and exposes the insidious workings of structural racism within historical and contemporary contexts. The interwoven narratives of *Homegoing*, are confronted with the stark realities of slavery, colonialism, and racial injustice, while also bearing witness to acts of resilience, resistance, and solidarity in the face of adversity. Ultimately, Gyasi's novel invites critical reflection on the enduring legacies of racism and inequality. It also serves as a potent reminder of the transformative power of literature to illuminate, challenge, and inspire change in our understanding of the human condition.

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Author (s) Acknowledgement / Funding: Nil

Author (s) Contribution Statement: I / We have employed ethical writing methods to write



this article.

Author (s) Declaration: I/We declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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OPEN ACCESS 

Article History

Received: May 26, 2024 **Accepted:** June 26, 2024 **Published:** July 31, 2024

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Data Availability Statement: The study utilizes primary and secondary sources of data and can be available from the author if requested.

Citation: Dr. Vinaya Bhaskaran. "A Critical Examination of Race and Intergenerational Trauma in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016)." *Literary Musings*, Volume 2, Issue 1, July 2024, pp. 39-46.
