MARIA VICTÓRIA E SILVA DIAS

FLUIDITY, CONTINUITY AND RESISTANCE: MULTIGENERATIONAL ASPECTS

OF IDENTITY IN YAA GYASI'S *HOMEGOING*

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Dissertação de mestrado apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestra em Letras – Estudos Literários.

Área de Concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa

Linha de Pesquisa: Literatura, História e Memória Cultural

Orientador: José de Paiva dos Santos

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"Through others we become ourselves."

– Lev S. Vygotsky

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to analyze the novel *Homegoing*, written by the Ghanaian author Yaa Gyasi, primarily focusing on identity matters. Throughout the text, the idea that two fundamental lines permeate the construction of the self is developed: that of *fluidity*, which manifests itself in particular experiences and expressions of individuals, based on their sociocultural context; and that of *continuity*, which is evidenced through the historical maintenance of multigenerational traits. At first, it is argued that diversity is crossed by external contestations, since minority groups are compelled to internalize standardized and stereotyped characteristics fabricated by dominant classes, which incites alterity and feelings of non-belonging; the liquidity of the being, thus, acts in the process of contestation and resistance to social impositions. From the same perspective, it is proposed that the permanence of traditional customs also becomes an ally in this dynamism of defiance, since it directly collides with the constant suppression of ancestral attributes of racialized peoples. It is concluded, therefore, that the usual opposition between the *inconstant* and the *stable* becomes dispensable in the structuring of identity – the self of each character is established precisely in the middle ground between both extremes.

Keywords: identity; diversity; ancestry; fluidity; permanence.

RESUMO

A presente dissertação tem por objetivo principal analisar o romance *Homegoing*, escrito pela autora ganesa Yaa Gyasi, com enfoque nas questões identitárias. No decorrer do texto, desenvolve-se a ideia de que a construção do *eu* é perpassada por duas linhas fundamentais: a da *fluidez*, que se manifesta a partir das experiências e expressões particulares do indivíduo, com base em seu contexto sociocultural; e a da *continuidade*, que se evidencia através da manutenção histórica de traços multigeracionais. A princípio, argumenta-se que a diversidade é atravessada por contestações externas, dado que grupos minoritários são compelidos a internalizar características uniformes e estereotipadas fabricadas por classes dominantes, o que implica na incitação da alteridade e do sentimento de não-pertencimento; a liquidez do ser, desse modo, atua no processo de contestação e resistência às imposições sociais. Na mesma perspectiva, propõe-se que a continuidade dos costumes tradicionais também torna-se aliada nesse dinamismo de oposição, visto que colide diretamente com a constante supressão dos atributos ancestrais de povos racializados. Conclui-se, portanto, que a comum contraposição entre o *inconstante* e o *estável* torna-se dispensável na estruturação da identidade – é precisamente no ponto de intermediação entre ambos os extremos que o *eu* de cada personagem se estabelece.

Palavras-chave: identidade; diversidade; ancestralidade; fluidez; permanência.

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INTRODUCTION

The field of identity studies has become a contested domain in the 21st century, as research continues to grow and take different routes. Pervading throughout Stuart Hall's conceptualization of identity, which considers human particularities as much as cultural assimilations and constructions; Manuel Castells' viewpoints on the subject's building process concerning power maintenance and social hierarchy, and many other endeavors to categorize and explain this singular notion, one can say that this area is far from being considered a non-explored field. Hall himself, through Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique, emphasizes that these ongoing debates may seem unrequired, but that delving into them can still promote deeper articulations and inquiries on subjects and discursive practices. Therefore, as no discussion should be reduced to a single thesis, further research may help us better – and more completely – understand the concept of identity from different angles.

Hall explains that this discussion has become ordinary in the postmodern world mainly since "old identities, which for so long kept the social world stable, are currently declining, making new ones arise and breaking the modern individual into pieces, who, hitherto, was seen as a unified subject" (7)[1]. This shift was set off specifically towards the end of the 20th century, a period in which major social, structural, sexual, and cultural transformations took place, and that eventually and inevitably affected identity constructions at large. The outcome is what Hall calls *subject displacement*: a feeling of being strange to one's own established self (*Cultural Identity* 9); consequently, this feeling or perception of non-belonging in relation to the social and cultural reality culminated in an identity crisis.

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[1] Translations of references in Portuguese are mine.

A usual approach to this question is the one developed by Zygmunt Bauman, which treats identity as an inherent, unsettling characteristic of human beings. For him, given that individuals naturally take part in a myriad of social scenarios on a daily basis, thus being bound to regularly face the most diverse situations, their identity expressions cannot be stable. The philosopher believes that, while we, as individuals, keep questing for stability, tangibility, and longevity, "we struggle to deny or at least to cover up the awesome fluidity just below the thin wrapping of the form; we try to avert our eyes from sights which they cannot pierce or take in" (82-83).

Anthonny Giddens follows a similar track. From his viewpoint, because society has grown past traditional ways of delineating identity, which would automatically standardize all individual expressions and potentialities, people are currently more conscious and self-reflexive. Highlighting the significance of authenticity in this intimate process, he affirms that not acknowledging distinctiveness and peculiarity may coerce human beings to internalize what has been inflicted upon them and merely replicate history, rather than creating one from scratch. The sociologist reinforces the volatile characteristics of identity and pinpoints that this may incite a sense of overwhelming freedom, as one might feel impelled to take a stand instead of relying on what has been conventionally preconstructed. In all cases, Giddens regards this as a positive aspect of the late modern society, since it allows people to democratically develop themselves (qtd. in Buckingham 9).

Naturally, many have built on Bauman and Giddens' accounts. Castells, for instance, defends that the construction of identity relies on the preponderance of plurality. In his view, the wide array of personalities is the result of an interior apprehension a person might experience when attempting to manage the social role sets predetermined for them by supreme and authoritative institutions. Nonetheless, the author declares that these roles are carried out as identities in themselves, exclusively after a process of internalization. Anna

Duszak agrees with Castell's beliefs since she endorses that this multiplicity of scenarios individuals are inserted into requires them to adhere to countless social roles, and as they go along with them, "human social identities tend to be indeterminate, situational rather than permanent, dynamic and interactively constructed" (2-3).

Therefore, a perception of stability, these intellectuals have argued, is restricted to an outside view and may be easily dismantled. A person's biographical experience, when examined from within, directly indicates how fragile any established perspective is when threatened by life unsteadiness. Furthermore, Bauman even defends that "it is the ability to 'shop around' in the supermarket of identities, the degree of genuine or putative consumer freedom to select one's identity and to hold to it as long as desired, that becomes the royal road to the fulfilment [sic] of identity fantasies" (83).

Regardless of their attempts to rebuke social uniformity, what these theories seem to fail to acknowledge is that overlooking certain ingrained human personality traits, by assuming no trace is to be permanent, is too limited a view from a broader perspective. Paul Kroskrity, who focuses on how the linguistic and communicative apparatuses (i.e. "greeting formulae, maintenance of mutual gaze [and] regulation of participation") influence the construction of different social identities, explains that by blindly focusing on this individual freedom, many neglect that social roles are not randomly constructed but rather compulsory, enforced on individuals and levied to become orthodox and habitual (111-113). Castells himself introduces a concept named *primary identity*, which he believes is a consistent and entirely autonomous point of departure, upon which succeeding identities are molded in a network society (7). This refutes the idea that one is originally a *tabula rasa*, merely and idly waiting for outward attributes to be inscribed into it.

On a slightly different note, Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré explain that people are in an incessant state of conflict, diving into this sea of possibilities while attempting to

discover how unique they ought to be, oblivious to the fact that discursive practices of others are equally substantial to shape us as people:

> And it is true we do struggle with the diversity of experience to produce a story of ourselves which is unitary and consistent. If we don't, others demand of us that we do. … Thus we experience these selves as if they were entirely our own production. We take on the discursive practices and story lines as if they were our own and make sense of them in terms of our own particular experiences. The sense of continuity that we have in relation to being a particular person is compounded out of continued embodiment and so of *spatio-temporal continuity* and *shared interpretations* of the subject positions and story lines available within them. How to do being a particular non-contradictory person within a consistent story line is learned both through textual and lived narratives. (Davies & Harré 59; emphasis added)

This problematization of recent identity studies, Eline Versluys pinpoints, happens because, although there is an unceasing urge to showcase that multiplicity is a real issue, it is hard to determine how this would become and remain socially feasible (92). Peter Geschiere and Birgit Meyer explain that this occurs since, as much as the globalized world is composed of constant flow and discontinuity, supreme states impose predetermined identities to institute a sense of loyalty among citizens, hence contributing to the classical anthropological ideas of cultural closure and boundness (605). The reverse is also true, considering that many groups try to fight this enforced normality by creating new expressions of their own, and end up controlling and freezing those as well rather than focusing on their unrestricted facets.

Narrowing the topic down to the African (American) experiences in the context of colonization and the diaspora, the objects of this thesis, additional elements come into play. The Atlantic slave trade, for one, has culminated in the dismantling of cultural traces and

language traditions, and the occupation of the African continent stirred up a loss of individual and collective identity. In the United States, the construction process of Black subjectivity was completely thwarted by bigotry in an overall scale and in an epistemic sense too, as newcomers had to cope with physical violence and verbal abuse, besides tackling different mindsets and unfamiliar socioeconomic structures.

It is necessary, therefore, to bring to discussion some other concepts that will shed further light on the subject of Black identity. A relevant one is that of *kinship*. According to Smith (1981:226), "ties of mutuality are commonly established through concepts of shared blood, shared land, shared exchange and/or shared ancestors who once behaved as 'mutual people'. . . . These ties of mutuality are glossed as 'kinship' by English-speaking Palauans" (qtd. in Sahlins 1). The idea of *kinship* is commonly described as the "culturally defined relationships between individuals who are commonly thought as having family ties"[2], and it may have either a vertical function – jointing consecutive generations and turning them into a continuum –, or a horizontal one – binding individuals from a particular generation altogether. The awareness of how a society's kinship system is organized, therefore, directly assists people who attempt to fathom their sociocultural connections and behaviors.

Likewise, *heritage*, named after the Latin term *patrimonium* – 'that which belongs to the father', in an extended interpretation –, is an idea that encompasses all the traits individuals can associate with their parents and that will eventually be performed by their successors. The one who inherits, as peculiar as they may be, still carries a historical yoke which gathers what can be found back in time and the situations that are coming forward. Francesco Selicato precisely puts it, as he translates Settis' remarks, that "this definition inevitably places attention on the role that heritage must fulfill, a role that varies continuously between the passive deposit of historical memory or cultural identity and the powerful

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[2] See: https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/kinship/kinship_1.htm

stimulus for creativity available for the present as well as for building the future" (7-8).

During the 2003 UNESCO Convention, which was held in Bali, Indonesia, the Intergovernmental Committee designated *intangible cultural heritage* as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and know-how, transmitted from generation to generation within communities, created and transformed continuously by them, depending on the environment and their interaction with nature and history" (4). As shown, this immaterial element allows communities to develop a solid and permanent bond by supporting intercultural exchange, promoting mutual respect, and ensuring social integrality.

Identity processes, hence, are strongly influenced by a flow of continuity across time and space, and by a sense of affiliation to one's reality and the history of humanity. Cultural heritage substantially provides meaning and purpose, while guiding self-discovery search into a more fulfilling – though never complete – path. Similarly, according to Peter Kassebaum, "it has been difficult to generate the same degree of compassion for mankind via governmental agencies, corporations, schools or employers that kinship bonds formerly represent" (5). Disregarding the importance of this profound connection between individuals and their ancestors across successive generations, therefore, conceals and thwarts a more profound analysis of identity issues.

For example, sustaining the idea that all traces are "fragile, vulnerable, and constantly torn apart by shearing forces", may, to a considerable extent, imply that heritage does not play any relevant role whatsoever in one's identity-building process (Bauman 83). Denying the role of kinship, in this regard, might simply be another form of erasing the significance of ancestrality for descendants of countless victims of slavery who were profoundly marginalized and dehumanized to the deepest core. It could be even interpreted, in a sense, as a strategy to restrain the possibility of Black individuals building a profound connection with marginalized past generations and also to prevent them from collectively withstanding

systemic oppression. Whether on a cultural, political, or anthropological level, obliterating identity consciousness by denying the roots of heritage can be hazardous.

Be it clear here, notwithstanding, that the present investigation has no intention of being determinist nor does it have a reductive impulse. As Andrew Smart et al. elucidate, "categorization by 'race' and ethnicity can be simultaneously useful for addressing … inequalities and yet harmful because it reinforces the very notions that may have initially contributed to these inequalities" (31); thus, I certainly do not aim to mitigate the plurality of identity expressions that ought to be valid and acknowledged, especially regarding those who continually need to resist social erasure. What is expected, henceforth, is to combine both concepts – an unrestricted identity construction process, and a valid feeling of connection to peoples' historical roots – in order to delineate to what degree each of them affects the lives of individuals.

As such, the main objective of this research is to analyze selected approaches to identity formations and manifestations, through individual and generational lenses, in relation to the social and cultural contexts created by Yaa Gyasi in her best-seller *Homegoing*. Born in Mampong, Ghana, and raised in Huntsville, Alabama, Gyasi officially began her writing career in 2016, while studying at Stanford University. Her debut novel was motivated by a trip to her hometown in 2009, when she was shown the dungeons inside the Cape Coast Castle and where she realized there were people living freely above the heads of many who strived for the bare minimum[3]. *Homegoing* has been widely praised for its fascinating and multifaceted narrative, and the year after its release it won the PEN/Hemingway Award and the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Prize, also being selected as one of the 100 Notable Books in 2016 by The New York Times[4]. Brazil is among the 20 countries to where *Homegoing* has been translated and published, herein receiving the title *O caminho para casa.*

[3] See: https://youtu.be/IDB0y-dWDOE?si=36Ux91aOzd8_jv0P
[4] See: https://www.carnegie.org/awards/honoree/yaa-gyasi/

The story starts in the 1800s, being set in Ghana and the United States, and portrays the family lineage of the half-siblings Effia and Esi throughout their succeeding generations. As the story covers around two centuries altogether, it is possible to perceive a consistent historical background in each country, starting with the slave trade between the British and the chiefs in the Gold Coast land, followed by the African diaspora to North America, and encompassing all the historical events that were set to unfold in both nations. Accordingly, the book is composed of a large variety of characters. Gyasi chose to arrange their individual stories within each chapter, displaying relevant aspects that influenced the constructions of their individualities. In addition, the author draws a conspicuous line over the course of the narrative, one that connects all the characters, regardless of their backgrounds, and that carries the heavy weight of *ancestry*.

Along these lines, I also aim to contemplate the uniqueness of the personas Gyasi designed, seeing that their psyches are complex and profound, and cannot be reduced to a single shared feature. Therefore, the primary goal of this dissertation is to examine how Gyasi's novel represents the multilayered dimensions of Black identity and experience across the North American and African continents in all their complexities, as neither entirely linear nor completely mutable, but as an ongoing myriad of both instances.

CHAPTER ONE

Blooming Out, Blooming In:
Fluidity, Assortment and Otherness in *Homegoing*

"Bring something incomprehensible into the world."

— *Gilles Deleuze*

1.1. Introduction

On discussing the concept of modernity, Bauman relates its core characteristics to the duality between *fluidity* and *solidity*. Static assets are, undoubtedly, bound to remain endlessly untouched. They exist by persisting, resisting outside onslaught, and even that might be questionable, considering their lack of adaptability to the constant flow of ages:

> … Liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a moment'. (Bauman 2)

Fluidity, thus, is considered to be the ideal form of continuation because, in this state, there is always room for change. As they are fluid, some of the alterations may not even be contested since they constantly assume various shapes – if one begins to feel unfit, change is always an option. All is volatile and measurement or judgment seem unnecessary.

In the second chapter of *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erik H. Erikson, by means of returning to Sigmund Freud's investigation of self-formation, states that the human individual, "in order to remain psychologically alive, constantly re-resolves … conflicts just as his body unceasingly combats the encroachment of physical deterioration" (91). People are built on fickleness, that is, on inconsistency. It has become part of our development to look upon what surrounds as mutable assets, perhaps because their changeability mainly lies in our hands. As these alterations exist and multiply nonstop, inside and outside us, it is only natural that deeper comprehensions of the self become our goal.

Perceiving the way individuals behave, interact with one another and develop a sense of inner growth is what purely entails the majority of human sciences. As it is no easy task, considering that, throughout centuries, it has not been developed any meticulous technique to identify an unquestionable pattern that ties us all, questions will keep arising.

Aiming to do that, might be to try and understand the self in ways that showcase how inconstant it is, as well as prone to adhering different characteristics according to the situations one is part of. Due to the constant exchange of thoughts and feelings between people, and to the certainty that it would not be feasible to patternize anything, what seems to be the way out of this maze is to look back at the *self* itself. That is to say, what makes us who we are not exactly refers to the product of our social interaction, but what blooms and grows inside of our cage, and by being ours, entirely ours, we can turn it into whatever, whenever.

To sound narcissistic was not the intention of all who, for years now, have been defending that one's identity is the product of individual conditions. Individuality, in this sense, is related to the autonomy every person holds in order to build their own senses, defenses and responses to what takes place in the environment that surrounds them, to choose

what fits and to realize that what once made sense can be left aside or converted into a whole other thing.

Homegoing presents two different lineages, both in Africa and in the United States, and expands individual experience in contrasting realities. The story demonstrates that acknowledging this diversity is crucial, for cultural, ethnic and personal differences do coexist in all social systems, although not harmonically. The book explores the complex range of human identities, revealing how unique backgrounds and environments can shape a person's selfhood, particularly when one is compelled to manage social marginalization. Gyasi exhibits characters who come from various regions of both continents, and who have distinct life stories and beliefs.

Hence, this chapter's main goal is to discuss representations of diversity in the novel, delineating how identity is pictured in individual and variable ways. Accordingly, an investigation of the characters through the concept of *otherness* will be conducted; in other words, I am going to analyze how they can be themselves while their existences are utterly strained by impositions from the surroundings. Finally, the autonomy of each persona, which is crucial for the constitution of dissimilar personalities, is going to be correlated with expressions of resistance against categoric portrayals of social minorities.

1.2. Diversity

With the purpose of grasping the outcomes of alterity in *Homegoing* and analyzing them in depth, it is necessary to introduce and distinguish the original manifestations of multiplicity in the novel. Primarily, the narrative portrays the cultural diversity of Africans and African Americans and the way such differences can be sources of both conflict and personal enrichment. Gyasi presents characters who speak various languages and dialects, who have opposite religious beliefs, and who belong to distinct groups; through them, she

explores diversity in terms of social broadening and self-awareness. The author slowly develops the idea that senses of solidarity and unity among individuals facing discrimination and marginalization is essential, in order to expose how empathy and compassion can become tools for resistance and resilience.

In each chapter, Gyasi shows this assortment influencing identity formation. For instance, the book explores how, due to Western colonialism, there has been a mixture of traditions and customs and that this blend affected how people relate to others and view themselves within social circles. Such conditions lead members of certain groups to marginalization and ostracism, especially in the United States, where African Americans have extensively faced social discrimination. As some characters are descendants of Africans and Europeans simultaneously, the story pinpoints the way miscegenation enhances complexity and challenges.

One of the most evident examples is the clash between beliefs and values. Many Africans follow animist religions, while Europeans have been influenced by Christianity. Religious multiplicity has often resulted in conflicts, mainly incited by Westerns, such as the banning of African spiritual practices and racial segregation. On the other hand, this assortment can also promote cultural enrichment, as it allows people to share knowledge and experiences.

For reference, the family tree exhibited by Gyasi in the introductory elements of the book is provided below. Further analysis throughout the following topics will allude to this specific order:

Maame

Cobbe Otcher   +   m. Big Man Asare

Effia Otcher m.   Esi Asare + ?
James Collins

Quey Collins m.   Ness Stockham
Nana Yaa Yeboah   m. Sam

James Richard Collins m.   Kojo Freeman m.
Akosua Mensah   Anna Foster

Abena Collins +   Agnes Beulah Cato Daly Eurias Felicity Gracie H Black m.
Ohene Nyarko   Ethe Jackson

Akua Collins m.   Willie Black   Hazel
Asamoah Agyekum   Eli Dalton   +   m. Robert Clifton

Abena   Ama   Yaw Agyekum m.   Josephine   Carson "Sonny"
"Abee"   Serwah Esther Amoah   Clifton + Amani
                                                            Zulema

         Marjorie   Marcus
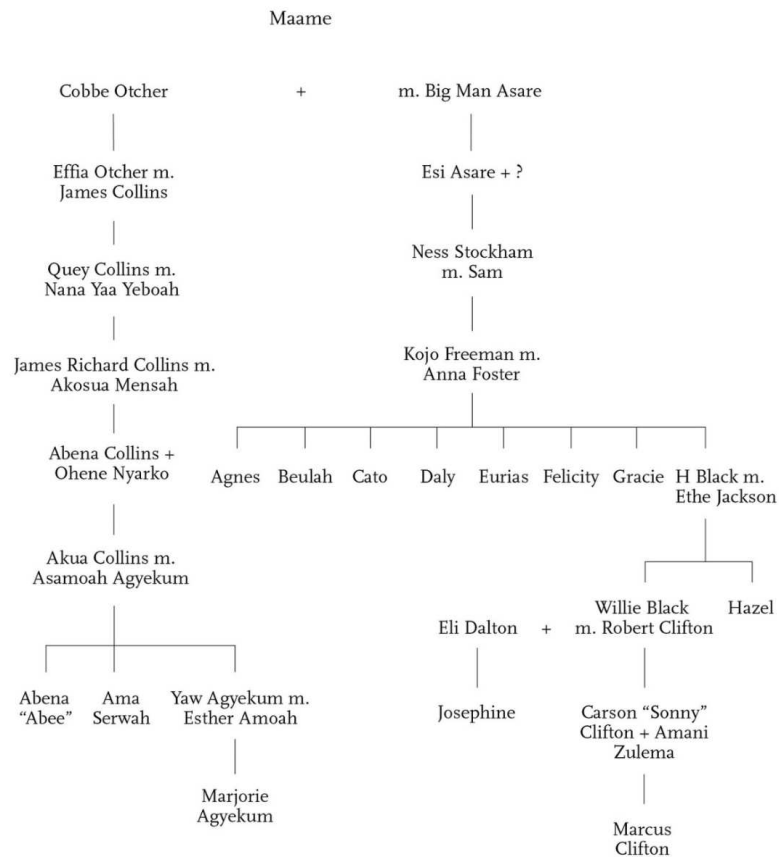   Agyekum   Clifton

Fig. 1. Family Tree. Gyasi, *Homegoing*, p. 7., 2016.

Gyasi addresses religious diversification by narrating the conflict between traditional

African beliefs and the religion imposed by Europeans through the storyline of Akua, who

converts to Christianity, and Kojo, who is censured and ostracized for manifesting his beliefs.

The author shows how faith was used as a tool for domination, as colonizers argued that it

was the divine will for Blacks to serve Whites. They also used religion to control enslaved

people by forcing orthodox doctrines upon Africans and African Americans and banning their

religious practices from public places. Nonetheless, many slaves resisted such impositions

and secretly held onto their own traditional beliefs. Spirituality, in this sense, was

considered a source of hope for enslaved people, who found comfort and solidarity in houses

of worship and religious communities.

Moreover, Gyasi presents factors that demonstrate how sexual diversity can marginalize and exclude individuals in society, especially in conservative ones such as Ghana, where homosexuality has been considered illegal since the colonial period. The author highlights the importance of acceptance and understanding sexual multiplicity, and points out that homophobia can be detrimental to the mental and emotional health of individuals, as it is manifested in various forms, from verbal aggression to physical violence and social exclusion.

The cultural variances addressed in *Homegoing* are not restricted to the ones between Africa and America – Gyasi explores those that exist within Africa as well. Generally, one can see that African values and traditions have a strong bond with nature, spirituality, solidarity, cooperation, and community. However, the author goes further and assesses different perspectives regarding the characters' experiences in the African context during the transatlantic slave trade. This is introduced early in the work with the description of the African tribes Fante and Asante, and of how their cultural differences are accentuated with the arrival of Europeans, who impose their culture on the African population and trigger conflicts between the clans:

> The white man nodded, and looked at James carefully as he spoke. "Your mother's father, Osei Bonsu, has died. The Asantes are saying we killed their king to avenge Governor MacCarthy's death."
>
> "And did you?" James asked, returning the man's stare with force, anger beginning to boil up in his veins. The white man looked away. James knew the British had been inciting tribal wars for years, knowing that whatever captives were taken from these wars would be sold to them for trade. His mother always said that the Gold Coast was like a pot of groundnut soup. Her people, the Asantes, were the broth, and his father's people, the Fantes, were the

groundnuts, and the many other nations that began at the edge of the Atlantic
and moved up through the bushland into the North made up the meat and
pepper and vegetables. *This pot was already full to the brim before the white
men came and added fire.* Now it was all the Gold Coast people could do to
keep from boiling over again and again and again. James wouldn't be surprised
if the British had killed his grandfather as a way to raise the heat. Ever since his
mother had been stolen and married to his father, his village had been
swelteringly hot. (Gyasi 88-89; emphasis added)

Actually, one of the most intriguing ways the author uses to narrate particularities
associated with diversity in *Homegoing* refers precisely to this representation of different
ethnicities that make up Ghanaian society. Although the country is composed of several tribes,
there is a strong presence of the Asantes in politics and economy. The character Akua, a
descendant of the Asantes, represents this elite that has dominated power. Through her
trajectory, the author exposes the complexity and contradictions of this group, which although
fought against colonization at times, also 'benefited' from it.

This idea is highlighted by Henry Gates Jr., as he explains that journalist Henry
Morton Stanley's quest for missionary David Livingstone in 1871 is evidence of how far the
British had gone in their African expeditions. Thereby, the literary critic sorrowfully
concludes that "without complex business partnerships between African elites and European
traders and commercial agents, the slave trade to the New World would have been impossible,
at least on the scale it occurred" (Gates)[5].

It is possible to infer, hence, that although members of both clans were constantly
quarreling and ascribing controversial deeds to the opposite side, Asantes and Fantes were

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[5] See: https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/23/opinion/23gates.html

equally responsible for consenting and facilitating the slave trade in the continent. When Akosua, a Fante, refused to properly greet James, an Asante, during the mourning of their king, Gyasi herself stresses: "... The Asante had power from capturing slaves. The Fante had protection from trading them. If the girl could not shake his hand, then surely she could never touch her own" (96). In any case, this discussion is rather controversial, and will be addressed in depth within the next chapter.

Moreover, diversity is also included in the novel precisely through the representation of traditions and customs of those different tribes in Ghana. Each chapter is devoted to a different generation and a specific family history, allowing the reader to delve into the particularities of such cultures. For instance, in Esi's chapter, Gyasi describes the feast Asantes used to throw during the birth of their members, when "five goats were slaughtered and boiled until their tough skins turned tender" (31).

On another plot, the importance of musicality and how it is used to escape from enslavement is shown, as Ness and Sam "would wait for [Aku's] signal, an old Twi song, sung softly in the woods as though carried by windswept leaves" (85). Using Twi as an example, which was spoken by both Fantes and Asantes, one can see that diversity is also represented through African languages. The characters communicate in native dialects, thus preserving their cultural identity, and Gyasi even explores linguistic differences between Africans and Europeans, who face communication barriers due to a lack of mutual understanding. For instance, in the scene where Effia is showing some dwellings to her future husband, an interpreter is necessary for James to fully understand her.

The heterogeneity of social classes is highlighted as well, such as the one between Effia, who is the daughter of a tribal chief and the wife of a British colonizer, and her sister

Esi, who is captured and sold into slavery. This social division is established with the arrival of Europeans as they exploit less favored social classes for profit by inducing slave markets.

Gyasi offers a wealth of detail when narrating facts in *Homegoing*, and this is emphasized when surveying the contrasting experiences and perspectives within the same community. The characters that appear in the narrative have distinct life stories and points of view, which reflect the separate realities experienced by Africans and African Americans throughout history. Kojo, for instance, feels constantly detached from his surroundings, a result of his traumatic experiences as a former slave in a segregated society. Marcus, on the other hand, the last one in Kojo's lineage, continuously refers to the stories of his ancestors so as to seek justice, attempting to find possibilities of change and better future for African Americans.

The author promotes reflection on sexual diversity through the character Quey, who has a homo-affective relationship with his friend Cudjo. Their story shows how homosexuality has always been a part of various societies across history, despite the lack of visibility and acceptance. The author questions and problematizes power relations that shape the experiences of different social groups, challenging stereotypes and the notion that there is only one way to be Black or African, and stresses the multiple realities and identities that exist within the Black community.

Multiplicity is also addressed in the novel in regards to interracial relationships. In Quey's story, the romance between his parents, a White man and a Black woman, and the consequences of this relationship for their descendants is displayed. Through this plot, Gyasi exposes how ethnicity affects social relationships and how racial hierarchies are perpetuated.

Another aspect of diversity is associated with gender issues, when the unequal way women were treated in the 18th-century Ghanaian society is described. Effia is forced to

marry a man she does not love, while Esi is captured and sold into slavery. Throughout the

following generations, the female characters struggle for autonomy and independence while

dealing with constant sheds of oppression.

Ethnic diversity is further approached when Gyasi shows the effects of the slave trade

on different groups of people. The capture and sale of Africans caused an inevitable

fragmentation of various communities, and the members progressively lost their cultural

identity. Slavery brought people from different parts of Africa to work on plantations in the

Americas, and they faced social restrictions while trying to establish themselves in these

unfamiliar contexts.

Diversity is also tackled in terms of mental health through Akua, who is proven to be a

discrepant character even before she had to withstand actual psychological disorders, being

categorically devoured by trauma. Agonizing episodes can lead to psychic problems such as

depression, anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the National

Institute of Mental Health, in individual terms, PTSD may be developed as a consequence of

witnessing a shocking or dangerous event, and some of the symptoms include having constant

distressing thoughts and mentally reliving the episode through flashbacks or dreams (2-3).

Regarding Akua's experience, Gyasi writes:

> She did remember. She remembered it even as Kofi Poku pointed at the white
>
> man sleeping under the tree and shouted "Obroni!" She remembered as the
>
> crowd formed and as the rage that had been building in the village for months
>
> came to a head. The men awoke the white man by tying him to the tree. They
>
> built a fire, and then they burned him. All the while he was screaming in
>
> English, "Please, if anyone here can understand me, let me go! I am only a
>
> traveler. I am not from the government! I am not from the government!"

Akua was not the only person in the crowd who understood English. She was

not the only person in the crowd who did nothing to help. (181)

Akua's journey is henceforth entirely shaped by this traumatic episode, and her intimate thoughts become totally dominated by disturbing memories. Subsequently, she is ostracized by her own community and starts to be known as the *Crazy Woman*. The author herein accentuates the way mental illnesses are commonly stigmatized and showcases marginalization as a result of it, which leads to feelings of isolation and rejection.

Overall, it can be seen that *Homegoing* enhances discussions on the outcomes of diversity since many societies fail to accept and validate these discrepant realities. The unparalleled aversion to what is different contributes to the reprimand of individuals and groups who do not suit the standards. In this regard, the following sections will scrutinize alterity – or simply *otherness* –, a recurring theme within the narrative that directly affects the identity-building process of several characters. Although Gyasi approaches the idea very often, I have decided to narrow the analysis down to some specific points that are more prominent throughout the novel and that are directly related to the sociocultural investigation I aim to launch.

1.3. Alterity

1.3.1. Race and Ethnicity

Otherness is inserted early in *Homegoing* through the storyline of the siblings Effia and Esi, once the former is promised in marriage to an English officer and taken to a castle built by colonizers on the Gold Coast. Gyasi explores the cultural dissimilarities existing between Europe and Africa, showing how the presence of Europeans in the said region has profoundly altered the culture and society of local people.

Over the chapters, the author introduces people from different African regions, such as Asante and Fante, revealing the wide cultural, ethnic and linguistic array of the area. Some of the characters are also from separate social classes, and the economic and social discrepancies directly affect the perception of the world and of these individuals. Effia, for instance, belongs to the local elite, while Esi is a slave taken to America.

Gyasi describes the way in which alterity can be applied as a mechanism of domination and exploitation by citing a number of historical facts in which she points out otherness was used as a justification for oppression. During the time of slavery, Africans were considered inferior by colonizers, who captured and traded them as property, and this was used as argument for their subjugation and overall repression. Africans were treated as commodities, and such inhumane views allowed slavery to be maintained for centuries on.

As Ryan Frank emphasizes, Europeans supported these deeds based on ideologies of racial and cultural supremacy, which were entirely established through a White-centered view, and argued that African inferiority demanded ventures to civilize and educate them as a moral duty, namely *the White man's burden*[6] (6). Such a perspective was often supported by pseudo-scientific theoretical initiatives, and these attitudes have been deeply rooted in society, regrettably inciting dominant behavior towards Africans and their descendants even after the abolition of slavery.

This certainly had an impact on the African American experience, and hereafter would motivate the victims to express their discontentment. In this regard, the editor of The New York Age, the most influential African American newspaper in the late 19th century, addressed Kipling's terminology, questioning who actually had to carry such weight: "... Take

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[6] An expression first-introduced through Rudyard Kipling's lyricism. In his poem, originally published in 1899, the author tackled the alleged noble responsibility Caucasians attributed to themselves amid the colonization period, as to enlighten inferior nations according to Western doctrines and beliefs. See: https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems_burden.htm.

the continent of Africa, which has been entirely delimitated [sic] and reapportioned among European conquerors, is the burden upon the despoiled black hordes or upon the white conquerors?" (T. Thomas Fortune[7]).

Alterity is associated with the perception of differences among individuals, groups, or cultures, and once there is no positive and respectful recognition of this distinction, marginalization and social exclusion are bound to occur. Marginalization is a concept first presented by Robert E. Park in his essay *Human Migration and the Marginal Man* (1928), and it basically refers to "cross-pressures experienced by immigrants through the overlapping involvement in different cultures", i.e. the exclusion or removal of an individual or group from society, often for reasons such as prejudice, discrimination, or stigmatization (Matthias Bernt & Laura Collini 14).

Ethnic, cultural, or religious groups may be marginalized in societies that consider them different or inferior. This can increase social exclusion, isolation, and shortage of opportunities to the victims. Social exclusion, on the other hand, is a broader process that, according to Ruth Levitas, involves "the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society" (qtd. in Bernt & Collini 5). This can be the result of discriminatory public policies or absence of economic opportunities in a particular area.

Both issues have negative impacts on the lives of individuals, including psychological damage and dilemmas in identity formation. In *Homegoing*, through the stories of characters who do not fit into the dominant cultural and social patterns, Gyasi exposes how alterity can lead to feelings of rejection and belittlement.

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[7] Excerpt of the April 1899 edition of The New York Age, compiled by Jim Zwick and presented by the National Humanities Center. See: https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text7/fortune.pdf.

Slavery, then, functions as the primary example of alterity. Through the story of Esi and her descendants, Gyasi expounds the impacts of enslavement on the characters' relationship with outsiders as well as on their conceptions of themselves. Enslaved people were subjected to inhuman conditions and had no rights whatsoever, thus being treated as *others* by their owners and the general community. The idea that no race other than Caucasian should be given freedom for they were somehow inferior was widely accepted, which justified the treatment captivated individuals received.

Suitably, Gyasi initiates Esi's chapter by highlighting that the smell of the dungeon she was thrown into "was unbearable" (28). In the same paragraph. she continues:

> In the corner, a woman was crying so hard that it seemed her bones would break from her convulsions. This is what they wanted. The baby had messed itself, and Afua, its mother, had no milk. She was naked, save the small scrap of fabric the traders had given her to wipe her nipples when they leaked, but they had miscalculated. No food for mother meant no food for baby. The baby would cry soon, but the sound would be absorbed by the mud walls, subsumed into the cries of the hundreds of women who surrounded it. (28)

The impacts of this current environment on Esi's thoughts were intense to the extent that she would prefer to leave past recollections fall into oblivion. The woman believed that "hell was a place of remembering" and every memory that arose eventually "fell to the ground like a rotten mango, perfectly useless, uselessly perfect" (28). Over the course of the chapter, readers realize that this probably happened due to Esi's previous actions and opinions, which were rather controversial.

Esi grew used to seeing slavery fuel the local economy and, as it did not affect her directly, she failed to pay it much attention. When Abronoma, her house's maid, gets beaten

by Esi's father, she excuses him by saying that, provided he did otherwise, "everyone would think he was weak" (37). Later on, she even assumes her justification was based on her surroundings, that "she had only said what anyone else in her village would say" (38).

Therefore, for a while, Esi was set on the brighter side of the coin, but once she became the *other*, her identity got reshaped. According to Hall, who has made significant contributions to the study of cultural identity in the African diaspora, identity construction is an *ongoing* process of change that is influenced by social, political, cultural, and historical factors. The author argued that identity expressions are not fixed or determined, but rather *negotiated* in relation to others, involving the interaction between personal and collective identities.

Hall even explains that, in the early years of one's life, this negotiation is connected to what Jacques Lacan names *mirror stage*, i.e. when a child does not hold the entire control of their own self-image but only envisions it in the reflection of another (qtd. in *Cultural Identity* 37). Esi's prior beliefs, then, might be linked to the fact that she was still young in age, so the identity negotiation truly begins when otherness becomes an inherent part of her:

> Esi learned to split her life into Before the Castle and Now. Before the Castle,
> she was the daughter of Big Man, and his third wife, Maame. Now she was
> dust. Before the Castle, she was the prettiest girl in the village. Now she was
> thin air. (31)

Enslaved people were often considered as property and treated as such, without regard for their feelings, desires, or needs, usually being deprived of their native languages and cultures, and forced to adopt new names, religions and ways of life. This lack of recognition of humanity and dignity created a fundamental division between masters and slaves, reinforcing the idea that people of different races and cultures were essentially incompatible.

Those completely different realities tore Esi apart and destitute her entire persona. Once external factors become major, identity modification is inevitable. She was once someone fully and thoroughly, and even though at times there are reminiscences of this previous scenario, she gradually loses it all.

The storyline of Kojo Freeman, a descendant of Esi, was also modified on the same account. As his surname suggests, Kojo had been released from slavery under the influence of Ma Aku, who had helped him and his parents, Sam and Ness, escape a cotton plantation. Timewise, Kojo's opening plot is antebellum to the American Civil War, which took place between the years of 1861 and 1865. This and other elements of the narrative imply that Kojo and his family undergo the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, hence, although freed, they were still susceptible to return to incarceration.

Due to experiencing liberty from a very early age, Kojo became an *alien other* among his kinfolk. Even though the character did internalize some harsh sentiments regarding captivity and subjugation for being surrounded by slaves in Baltimore as an adult, he was yet to identify with major collective feelings. Gyasi underlines that "Jo only knew the South from the stories Ma Aku told him. … As stories and nothing more. He didn't miss [sic] what he didn't know, what he couldn't feel in his hands or in his heart" (112). In spite of the author's peculiar phrasing in this quotation, since the reason behind missing imprisonment becomes too thorny to grasp, she fairly explains that Kojo's past is smudged and cloudy enough for him to feel displaced and detached from a common reality.

Disconnection had actually always been inflicted upon Kojo. When he was seven years old, he got expelled from a temple for being involved with "the ways of old African witchcraft" (113). With hindsight, on the basis of Western imperialism and ethnocentrism, his origins were belittled, his presence was unrequested – and alterity emerged once again. Gyasi

now presents the influence of spiritualism, its impacts on the rationalization of divergent religious beliefs and practices, such as traditional African religions and Christianity, and the dilemmas involving social belongingness. Ron Eyerman interprets the infliction of such doctrines upon Black people as a way to turn them into White individuals, in order "to lead them out of the wilderness" (171). In this sense, African descendants would once again be treated as empty gadgets that would be eternally pliant to impositions of the dominant class.

Hence, segregation had weakened Kojo and fortified feelings of displacement in him, which matured within time and led him to other challenging scenarios. As a result of all these setbacks, readers perceive Kojo as an insecure and vulnerable man, who feels the need to knot the strings that had been or might become loose.

To comprehend the way identity is formed through racialized lenses requires dismantling grounded convictions, being open for scrutiny, and most of all, having a careful perception of reality. This kind of analysis, for involving marginalized groups, walks on a quite fragile row and tilting too far a side may slowly adhere to fatalist views. Members are, on a large scale, parts of a chain which is intrinsically complex for starters, but vital to a social reaffirmation. Nevertheless, their personal self hoods, if swept under rugs, might disappear within time, dragging along those communal traits. In case there are no individuals who can preserve history and perpetuate it in their very own manner, general dissolution is an inevitable consequence.

From this perspective, the author points out that slavery impacted not only the individuals forcibly brought to the Americas, but also their families and original communities. The slave trade deprived Black people of any economic opportunity, leaving them in a very disadvantaged position even after the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865, which abolished slavery in the country. This situation was reflected in

higher levels of poverty and unemployment for people of color. Slavery was, then, followed by a culture of prejudice that infiltrated society in deep and lasting ways, and resulted in a system of structural racism that still negatively affects Black people in areas such as education, housing, health care and criminal justice, as well as in the development and establishment of self identities. Gyasi addresses this idea in a dialogue between the character H and a cellmate in prison:

> "Boy, look atcha," his cellmate said, his gaze so spiteful now that H grew suddenly, inexplicably afraid of the smaller, older man. "Don't matter if you was or wasn't. All they gotta do is say you was. That's all they gotta do. You think cuz you all big and muscled up, you safe? Naw, dem white folks can't stand the sight of you. Walkin' round free as can be. Don't nobody want to see a black man look like you walkin' proud as a peacock. Like you ain't got a lick of fear in you." He rested his head against the cell wall and closed his eyes for a second. "How old you was when the war ended?"
>
> H tried to count back, but he'd never been very good at numbers, and the Civil War was so long ago that the numbers climbed higher than H could reach.
>
> "Not sure. 'Bout thirteen, I reckon," he said.
>
> "Mm-hmm. See, that's what I thought. You was young. Slavery ain't nothin' but a dot in your eye, huh? If nobody tell you, I'ma tell you. War may be over but it ain't ended." (158)

The scene touches on the proposition that reminiscences of a traumatic episode cannot vanish that easily. Even though H lives in a period in which slavery is no longer institutionalized, he still endures the consequences of being a descendant of people who had their singularities subdued, especially considering the stereotypes attributed to their

successors as a result of this regimen. Eyerman explains that "in this sense, slavery is traumatic for those who share a common *fate*, not necessarily a common experience" (14; emphasis added).

As mentioned before, there is a common social agreement that involves assembling Blacks in a group and treating them as one accordingly, not granting them the opportunity of becoming distinct from one another. H's particular background is irrelevant for the upper strata, and his existence revolves around otherness as well – whoever diverges from the norm, that is, those that are not Caucasian, shall be outcast and handled as such.

1.3.2. Gender and Sexuality

There are some cultural values, inherited from prior generations, that prescribe what is appropriate or not about people's behavior, and that are mainly supported by the juxtaposition of female and male individuals. In this aspect, gender becomes a determining factor in the analysis of foreseen habits and thoughts. This is most noticeable when one considers the social attributions of men in comparison to women, which basically contrast between power and dependence. In most cases, women are pictured as docile, with inferior attributes, and this understanding turns the female figure into a mere sidekick in heterosexual relationships (Judivan Vieira 47).

Throughout history, mainly in ancient eras, the connotation of the word '*woman*' had been absolutely superficial, devoid of any importance in social terms. Even after phases with significant intellectual progresses such as the Enlightenment, there was no advance regarding female appraisal. This occurred because the *alterity* principle – opposition without complementation – prevailed over the actions and concepts of humanity. Overall, women were seen as "an incomplete state of man for lack of qualities" (Simone de Beauvoir 10).

Considerations about female identity and desire are, thus, quite pertinent. Regardless of set parameters, individuals who step forward and seek unrestrained ways of living have constituted a large part of social hierarchy. Accordingly, Gyasi addresses otherness in terms of gender, through the stories of female characters such as Effia, Abena and Willie, in which she describes the forms of oppression and subjugation against women in patriarchal societies. The novel comprises moments of attempted emancipation and highlights how African and African American women struggle to assert and free themselves from male domination.

Gender issues perpass Effia's storyline the most. She begins to endure female stereotypes while still a child – as she awaits her menarche, the word around the village is that soon the daughter of Cobbe Otcher will be ready for a marital life. Although Effia is often seen coping with what is expected from a woman her age – doing courtships for local villagers or White officers, for example –, the character is also peculiarly inquisitive, usually questioning grounded requirements and actions.

After her wedding with James, the newly assigned governor of the Cape Coast Castle, the situation aggravates. As a female, Effia is primarily responsible for progeny, however, this seems to be quite unattainable as time goes by. For her, due to years of brainwash, it was a curse that "may have been rooted in a lie" but that, perhaps, "bore the fruit of truth" (20). Anxiety is incited on Effia as her friend Adwoa affirms: "If you don't give that man children soon, he will take you right back" (21).

Through a cultural and objectifying perspective, from a very early age, the female gender learns that their body is an element of recurrent observation, judgment, and an object capable of awakening sexuality (Nathalie Noleto 23). From these premises, the woman keeps this reality in her subconscious, developing an analytical view of themselves. Hence, women

emphasize greater attention to their appearance, which is constantly evaluated, a situation that can induce problems in their physical and mental health.

The female figure, conceived as having a certain inability to use reason correctly, is represented as a disharmonious and unbalanced being, since she does not accept the expression of her sexual desires. Therefore, women are subject to the most diverse judgments and prohibitions about sexual practice. Socially speaking, the woman is conceived by two archetypes: that of a sinless woman, mother and wife, in which her responsibility revolves around fulfilling her social role without claims; and, concomitantly, that of a sensual woman, the one destined to give pleasure. Nadia Rosso describes these symbolic stereotypes as indications that one of the main characteristics of womanhood is that of existing "of-and-for-others" (12-13).

Lourenço et al. enlight that the female gender has endured prejudice throughout the entire history of humanity, for society is essentially patriarchal and the assignments of social duties are based on ideals of inferiority (1). This misconception has been consistently strengthened over the centuries, turning women into *voids* that are subservient to men and solely exist to satisfy their needs and impulses.

Effia's identity, hence, although shaped by her own desires sometimes, is predominantly formed by the set of stereotypes imposed on women at large. Since the character is constantly coerced to conform to social expectations, the suppressed demands on her subconscious are manifested nonstop, especially considering the era she was born into. Notably, Gyasi expands this traditional idea in the narrative, particularly towards the end of the book. As the author introduces Marjorie, Effia's last descendant, the readers are allowed to witness some social progress for the female gender. The relationship between Marjorie and

Graham, although affected by interracial matters, is sheathed by passion and its nuances, things Effia could only fancy:

> ... her mother said … "If a boy likes you, you have to make it known that you like him too. Otherwise, he will never do anything. I lived in your father's house for many, many years before he asked me to marry him. I was a foolish girl, hoping he would see that I wanted the same thing he did, without ever making it know. Were it not for Old Lady's intervention, who knows if he would have ever done anything. That woman has strong powers of will." That night, Marjorie tucked Graham's poem under her pillow, hoping she had inherited her grandmother's willpower, that the words he'd written would float up into her ear as she slept, blossom into a dream. (273)

Even Gyasi's writing denotes a wave of change at this point. Apart from being one of the racialized students at her school, Marjorie was also a girl who daydreams and falls in love. This aspect is definitely pertinent, considering that such human feelings were gradually ripped out of Black people. Marjorie's individual experience might sound trivial from a broad view, but it still illustrates resistance.

Through Abena, Gyasi continues to display the unprecedented pressure gender stereotypes have had on women. The author once more metaphorically links female failure in reaching social expectations to some evil fortune:

> As Abena made the journey back to her village, new seeds in hand, she thought, yet again, about how old she was. An unmarried twenty-five-year-old woman was unheard of, in her village or any other on this continent or the next. But there were only a few men in her village, and none of them wanted to take a chance with Unlucky's daughter. Abena's father crops had never grown. Year

after year, season after season, the earth spit up rotted plants or sometimes

nothing at all. Who knew where this bad luck came from? (133)

Being the direct successor of an unfortunate man, the community only saw Abena as a forthcoming misfortune, especially in regards to sterility. Carol Meyers reports that the infertility of the womb and the land were objects of disturbance for some civilizations, and Ashley Maclennan states that such inability might wreck one's identity for "the picture that you imagined for yourself is gone" (qtd. in Maclennan 5;92-96). Abena's inquiring view of herself is instigated by society – she begins to feel unworthy as a woman, an *alien* to her surroundings.

In spite of that, Gyasi occasionally makes Abena subvert such stereotypes, since she plays a leading role throughout the erotic scene between Ohene and her. Women taking any initiative whatsoever, especially in sexual scenarios, was certainly unexpected for that era. Nevertheless, Abena counteracts.

As a descendant of Esi, Willie was based in the United States. Even though she moved from Pratt City to New York dreaming of better opportunities for her family, in this and many other senses, Harlem was not quite delightful. Willie became a cleaning lady after three months of intense job hunting, while her husband Robert was granted a different position so much sooner, due to his gender and White-passing appeal. In fact, these aspects acutely rebranded their relationship, and both would slowly become strangers in public to not jeopardize Robert's image around the city.

Willie, then, is faced with the hardships of marginalization and social exclusion, which turned her into a leading character. In modern societies, crucial decisions are also to be made by females, who begin to assume a completely divergent role:

"We don't need the money," he said. "We're doing all right, Willie. We can get

our own place soon, even. You don't need to work."

"Where would we live?" Willie snapped. She hadn't meant to sound so mean.

The idea was appealing to her: her own apartment, more time to spend with

Carson. But she knew that she wasn't meant for that life. She knew that that

life wasn't meant for them. (211)

Monique Pires explains that women managed to participate more actively in society

due to the gradual expansion of the labor market, even though many of the conventional

grounded principles related to gender, such as job title hierarchy, still withstand under other

arguments (2). Additionally, from the moment women entered the employment field,

functions were established through acts of racial discrimination and peculiar feminine

attitudes.

Mary Del Priore describes the female figure as a model of attitude, balance and social

descent, whose parameter, according to the author, should be an example for the entire global

society. In this regard, the woman, historically, has always had the role of fulfilling a perfect

behavior, being considered a pattern of perfection, known as "*the fabrication of the holy little

mother*[8]" (105). Nevertheless, such portrayal was evidently more inclined to represent White

women, for Black females were commonly viewed as symbols of "animalistic sexual

potency" (Ella Bell 14).

Willie, therefore, partially unsettles such standards as an individual. She firmly

believes that a moral responsibility lies on her hands, and acknowledges that a negotiation is

not up for debate. On the other hand, considering all the deprivations Black females have

endured over the centuries, the decision to not accept tranquility demonstrates that the

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[8] *"a fabricação da santa mãezinha."* (Del Priore 105)

character still feels that there are higher principles she has to comply with. Had Willie been born a couple of decades earlier, bargaining would not even be an option – either way, her desires continue on being left out.

Gyasi goes even further into scrutinizing Willie's labor status by inserting a scene in which she is sexually assaulted by a White man at her workplace. Through this description, it is possible to perceive that when, and if, professional growth occurs, many women, especially racialized ones, still bear male harassment.

All that considered, it is fair to state that Willie is obliged to build her persona through a myriad of social incursions that are notably more extreme for non-White women. In this sense, Sueli Carneiro summarizes:

> Black women have had a distinguished historical experience which the classical discourse regarding women's oppression has not recognized, in addition to not accounting for the qualitative difference that the effect of the endured oppression had and still has on [their] feminine identity. (Carneiro 1)

Gyasi's work also depicts certain challenges involving gender issues in terms of sexuality. The novel indicates how it is a fundamental part of identity and that social norms can be used to marginalize those who do not fit into established standards and rooted stereotypes. Audrei Ferrante pinpoints that *stereotypes* are called as such whenever there is the conception of an imaginary representation about a fact or an individual that can be transmitted among people or even formed inside them (2). In a more precise synthesis, stereotypes are biased representations about certain groups of people and their habits – in the absence of, or intentional disregard for information, most people rely on collective understanding.

The stereotypes referring to the male gender are mainly related to values such as courage, rationality, both physical and moral strength and harmonious character. It is noticeable that feminine and masculine labels are contradictory, since men are conceived as subjects with a broad rationality and minimal control over their emotions. Klysing et al. further explain that "assertions of heterosexuality frequently make use of exaggerations of gender typical behavior, particularly for men", and that, by contrast, "gender atypical behavior is used as a heuristic for classifying individuals as not heterosexual" (2).

These preconceptions are amplified in the story of a quite complex character: Quey, Effia and James' son. As the successor of a colonizer, yet a non-White male himself, Quey already has to endure multiple types of self-deconstructions, as shown from the very first page of his chapter, where Gyasi stresses his discontent in being obliged to deal with the slave trade and its undertones. Although only developed in depth later on, his sexual awakening is initiated by the arrival of Cudjo, the heir of a noteworthy Fante chief.

Both come of age and their ties tighten throughout the years. This process is perpassed by dissimilarities, for "Quey grew four inches in one summer, while Cudjo grew muscle" (58). Accordingly, the impacts of puberty on Quey's thoughts were large, as he begins to endeavor and slowly achieve different kinds of connection with his friend:

> Slowly, Quey relaxed his body, and he felt Cudjo do the same. The boys drank
> in each other's gazes; their breathing slowed; the feeling on Quey's lips grew
> stronger, a tingling that threatened to draw his face up toward Cudjo's
> "Get up right now," James said.
> Quey didn't know how long his father had been standing there watching them,
> but he recognized a new tone in his father's voice. It was the same measured

control he used when he spoke to servants and, Quey knew though he'd never

seen, to slaves before he struck them, but now there was fear mixed in.

"Go home, Cudjo," James said.

Quey watched his friend leave. Cudjo didn't even look back.

The next month, just before Quey's fourteenth birthday, while Effia cried and

fought and fought some more, going so far, once, as to strike James across the

face, Quey boarded a ship bound for England. (61)

As a queer person, Quey already destabilizes presumptions regarding masculine

behavior in a patriarchal society, which are mainly embedded in *compulsory heterosexuality*[9]

and *hegemonic masculinity* acts. Although the former term was coined to emphasize straight

male leverage over women and the erasure of lesbian experience, some consequences are

most definitely found in manhood too, since men who fail to comply with normative behavior

are impinged and ostracized.

R. W. Connell & James W. Messerschmitt mention that "hegemonic masculinity …

embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to

position themselves in relation to it" (832). These virtuous traits include, first and foremost,

heterosexuality itself and every deviant trait shall be expunged. Accordingly, James' parenting

reaffirms his commitment to the criterion, and not even kinship would prevent him to handle

Quey as the *other*.

Considering Cudjo's physical traits, his reaction in the scene might as well function as

a reinforcement of such theories. Gyasi assures the public that these qualities are in the

spotlight by exhibiting the elegance and control the character had over his own movements,

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[9] A social system which regulates sexual desire and romantic attachment: it mandates heterosexuality and punishes, penalizes, or renders invisible those who violate its norms. The social system constituting compulsory heterosexuality will typically be a cluster of related and interlocking social institutions, cultural assumptions, and ideologies which, to varying degrees, presuppose and mandate heterosexuality. (Rachel Fraser 2)

and stressing that "Quey had never challenged him" (58). The growth of an undefeated

personage, one that fulfilled all the mannish requirements, had an impact on Quey's

confidence, particularly because it was directly associated with the consequences of queerness

on his self-esteem.

Such insecurity is most prominent the moment Quey returns from London and, as a

grown man, acknowledges "the danger in himself" (61) and the "mix of fear and shame and

loathing [he] felt for his own flesh, his mutinous desire" (62), when referring to his sexuality.

The phraseology Gyasi chooses to apply here showcases that Quey internalized the otherness

James had inflicted upon him and how it escalated throughout his exile.

1.4. Overcoming Otherness

Sandra Almeida discusses how the concept of *différance*[10], created by Derrida, is

applied to the ideas of signs and traces. This is articulated from the premise that traces exist

and originate from other traces: as they allow these other traces to be produced, and new

memories to be developed and embedded in the human consciousness, they perpetuate and

contribute to the uninterrupted motion of mnemonic cycle throughout history.

Focusing on the representations and approaches of memory in literature, according to

Róbin, the memorial novel is the one:

> … through which an individual, a group or a society thinks about its past,
>
> modifying it, displacing it, deforming it, inventing memories, a glorious past,
>
> ancestors, affiliations, genealogies, or on the contrary, fighting for factual

---

[10] Term coined to fathom the duality of linguistic signs. As elucidated by Carlos Ceia, "we can illustrate the double movement of *différance* with the following example: the word 'infinite' can be defined by what it is (the immeasurable, the unlimited, the absolute, etc.) — which means that meaning is always deferred, since we need other words to define a word —; and it can be defined by what it is *not*, that is, by its differences ('finite', 'limited', 'relative', etc.)".
See: https://edtl.fcsh.unl.pt/encyclopedia/differance.

accuracy, to propitiate the reconstitution of the event or its resurrection. (qtd. in

Zilá Bernd 36-37)

For Walter Benjamin, the narrator can resort to both the individual and the collective

assortment, through the experience of others, in such a way that it becomes part of

themselves. What was heard from reports and testimonies, or what can be visualized on

account of the traces and vestiges of a given episode, form the thought of the active voice in

the literary work. The act of narrating, therefore, constitutes a space of memories in the midst

of a set of traits, also representing the ambivalence of evoking the presence of something that

is already absent. As Jaime Ginzburg says, a writing of losses and rescue is promoted, by

giving voice to erased stories and forgotten characters (qtd. in Almeida 66).

In this sense, Aleida Assman recalls that, for Plato, the written record of a given

situation – or any other element that first manifests itself in the realm of ideas, so to speak –

allows it to be directly altered or erased. The word, being paradoxically preponderant and

fragile, has the power to both bring something to the surface, making it visible and palpable,

and to eliminate it, decimate it forever. In the field of memories, this is manifested in the

question of forgetting: that which "never took the form of a sign, a symbol capable of

remembering, and therefore cannot be denied or forgotten" (280).

When something becomes memorable, affect plays a potential role because it

integrates disconnected and random elements into the individual's storage memory. In order to

come to fruition, that is, for them to become anecdotes, such memories needed to be narrated

and polished as such on a constant basis. This drama and emotion transform the anecdotes

into something alive and promote their maintenance in the social environment.

The author goes on to explain that precisely this effect can be harmful on a large scale,

characterizing what is called *traumatic memory*. This narration process is threatened when

memories become obscure thoughts, making it impossible for their linguistic crystallization to occur and for stories to be passed on to others, cloistering themselves solely in the individual's memory and resulting in fear and silence:

> If affection exceeds a tolerable measure and becomes an excess, then it no longer stabilizes the memories, but destroys them. This is the case with trauma, which directly transforms the body into a recording area and, thereby, deprives the experience of linguistic and interpretive processing. *Trauma is the impossibility of narration*. (Assman 283; emphasis added)

For Freud, as explained by Márcio Seligmann-Silva, in the psychoanalytic study of the theory of the *unconscious*, traumatic neuroses work as a kind of fixation on what happened that caused that disturbance, and considering that such manifestations are involuntary, they are presented in the form of *dreams*, where the individual relives his trauma tirelessly (138). People, therefore, cannot completely free themselves from what affects their thoughts and, because they cannot externalize it satisfactorily, they feel their memories intensely consuming them.

The narrative of memories, the testimonies, would have the functions of creating and establishing this connection with the other, and in doing so, they would break the wall that was built by trauma, "rescue the survivor from the place of *alterity*". By externalizing their ghosts, therefore, individuals would "start their work of reconnecting to the world"; the act of narrating the fears that haunt them "has, in the first place, this primary sense of desire to be reborn" (Seligmann-Silva 66; emphasis added).

Homegoing as whole, in this sense, functions as an ensemble piece. Memoirs are fabricated and unfolded over several chapters, and these recollections are not restricted to the characters only. As seen, Gyasi's schemes are analogous to factual historical issues, and by

conveying them through the narrative, she both pushes the mnemonic cicle forth and vocalizes what, at times, remains in the oblivion regarding downgraded groups. The impracticability of enunciation becomes tangible through the voice of another, and otherness can, thus, be overcome.

In this process of suppression, one of the main techniques the author explores is showing how ethnic differences can be passed down from one generation to the next. By considering the historical facts and peculiarities of each character, Gyasi presents the way a person's identity is impacted by virtue of their cultural heritage, and, more notably, of family history. Through the descendants of Effia and Esi, the writer exposes her point of view in relation to alterity and to how it may become a burden or a blessing to an individual, and highlights the way in which social disparities appear as sources of conflict, while also serving as tools for personal enrichment.

To defeat alterity, Gyasi points to ways such as empathy, compassion and comprehension, as in the symbolic story of Marcus and Marjorie, when the past of ancestors turns into something undeniably substantial to the latest descendants of both lineages, and the ashes of previous pariah statuses start to slowly dissipate. The author emphasizes the importance of understanding and acknowledging historical backgrounds in order to overcome cultural discrepancies and to create social connections between individuals, so as to increase social fairness and equilibrium.

Connecting with one's roots, therefore, is key to breakthrough. Castaways are tied to one another via dissimilitude, and once this common trait is reframed as a mighty instrument, overall control of marginalized existences is reallocated as well. Gyasi reveals this ache for connection with the kindred through Kojo:

> "You're my mother," Jo said, and Ma Aku, with great effort, turned her whole
> body toward him and opened her arms. Jo crawled into bed with her and cried
> as he rested his head on her bosom, as he had not done since he was a young
> child. Back then, he used to cry for Sam and Ness. The only thing that would
> pacify him was stories about them, even if the stories were unpleasant. … Jo
> used to worry that his family line had been cut off, lost forever. He would never
> truly know who his people were, and who their people were before them, and if
> there were stories to be heard about where he had come from, he would never
> hear them. When he felt this way, Ma Aku would hold him against her, and
> instead of stories about family she would tell him stories about nations. The
> Fantes of the Coast, the Asantes of the Inland, the Akans. (130)

After all the hardships Kojo had to endure, this realization seems inexorable. White hostility prevented him from living off freedom for it actually only existed in the realm of ideas. On the other hand, in another particular excerpt from *Homegoing*, Gyasi highlights the importance of Black individuals accepting such liberty, absolutely and concretely, even if inherited trauma drains them inside out, because suffering merely casts a shadow in one's spirit:

> Yaw grew angry again. Why should she be glad she was chosen if she was now
> a ruined woman and he a ruined man? How could she be content with this life?
>
> His mother must have sensed his anger. Old woman that she was, she went to
> him and knelt before him. Yaw knew she was crying by the wetness of his feet.
>
> She looked up at him and said, … "When someone does wrong, whether it is
> you or me, whether it is mother or father, whether it is the Gold Coast man or
> the white man, it is like a fisherman casting a net into the water. He keeps only

the one or two fish that he needs to feed himself and puts the rest in the water,

thinking that their lives will go back to normal. No one forgets that they were

once captive, even if they are now free. But still, Yaw, *you have to let yourself*

be free."

Yaw took his mother up from the ground and into his arms while she kept

chanting, "Be free, Yaw. Be free." (242; emphasis added)

In an undertone, Gyasi relates this search for the main stem by emphasizing the

importance of art as a powerful instrument of expression and resistance, and as a way to keep

culture and collective identity alive. Through artistic resources, people express their emotions,

experiences and ideas in creative and meaningful ways.

Among the many intentions behind art making lies the will to stand against oppression

and injustice. Many social and political movements across history have been accompanied by

imaginative initiatives in order to portray reality as well as to convey messages of great

importance. For one, the iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States,

such as the photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. speaking in front of the Lincoln Memorial,

or Norman Rockwell's painting *The Problem We All Live With*, were instrumental in raising

collective awareness and demanding political amendments.

In Gyasi's novel, such ideas can be detected in one of Willie's flashbacks. Despite the

lack of public investment – as spotted by Victoria Shields in her workshop entitled *West*

African Art and Music in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing –, the character was known as one of the

best singers in Alabama:

Everyone, women and children alike, came to the meetings just to hear that old

world-weary voice come out of her ten-year-old body. … Now Willie sang the

anthem, and the crowd watched, beaming. She imagined that the sound came

from a cave at the very bottom of her gut, that like her father and all the men in

front of her, she was a miner reaching deep down inside of her to pull

something valuable out. (201)

In this passage, Gyasi pinpoints the character's urge to articulate, through her own artistic vein, deep feelings and deliberations; and this is fueled by a will to bond with the community on a certain level. Eyerman highlights that "it was the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art works that grounded African American identity" (2). Art, thus, can be used to encourage underrepresented groups to express themselves and resist. People can tell their stories and present their perspectives in impactful ways, and consequently, art can become a tool to withstand ethnic silencing and erasure, making it possible for individuals to communicate and unite.

At the end of Willie's chapter, the author reinforces this spiritual value music sustains by showing that it was indeed the only way the character could voice her true emotions. After the church minister had preached about him overcoming his difficulties, casting his cross aside, Willie is reminded of her childhood, when her father H, who experienced labor abuse in the mines, "used to say the best part of his day was when he could put that shovel down and walk inside to see his girls waiting for him" (221). With trembling hands, she stood up from her porch and sang, loud and clear.

1.5. Conclusion

In *Homegoing*, *alterity* is displayed as a phenomenon that should be dealt with empathy and understanding. Through narrative support about the characters, the author describes how comprehension and respect for cultural and ethnic differences can lead society towards a more fair and equal future. Gyasi presents individuals who come from different backgrounds, highlighting their particularities and turning these into powerful weapons in

resisting social impositions. Therefore, the novel is a lesson that *otherness* ought to be valued, not diminished.

The writer offers a reflection on the relationship between past and present in the identity-building process. The story portrays characters who struggle to reconstruct their history and culture, seeking to understand the role of their ancestors in the construction of their own selves. *Memory*, thus, is fundamental to build collective identities, and identifying these roots can strengthen pride and foment resistance.

Homegoing presents many plots related to alterity, some of which involve race, ethnicity and gender. It depicts individuals from distinct backgrounds, such as the Asantes, the Fantes, and the Europeans, and describes the impacts of power relations among them. Gyasi points out how colonization and slavery were used to maintain hierarchy, which led to conflicts and tensions between the groups. By approaching these themes, the narrative shows the difficulty that surrounds the process of self-discovery and affirmation.

By considering otherness in light of social issues within several generations, Gyasi demonstrates that the characters, in different eras, struggle to grasp and deal with the impacts of slavery and colonization on their daily lives. In this regard, knowing and connecting with the history and memory of one's ancestors can also act as a source of inspiration and resilience, generating a sense of belonging as well as a deeper understanding of oneself.

In addition, the novel delineates the various ways in which traumatic experiences have affected members of both family lineages at large. Throughout the years, the characters struggle to overcome what separates and ostracize them, attempting to subvert the norm and, thus, progressively becoming as *one*.

CHAPTER TWO

***Blood is Thicker than Water*:**
Kinship, Permanence and Defiance in *Homegoing*

"Our names were made for us in another century."

— *Richard Brautigan*

2.1. Introduction

Throughout history, *mass* equaled *power*. Mighty Greek warriors, Roman gladiators, gigantic Egyptian pyramids, Ultimate Fighting Championships – in a bulky-centered society, there seems not to be a place for mildness. Bauman, for one, pinpointed this perspective, as he mentions that "there are liquids which, cubic inch for cubic inch, are heavier than many solids, but we are inclined nonetheless to visualize them all as lighter, less 'weighty' than everything solid. We associate 'lightness' or 'weightlessness' with … inconstancy" (3).

There is strength in what one cannot hold tightly, but diminishing its existence is far more feasible. Grasping plurality requires patience, persistence, and the understanding that it may be difficult to swim along the tide. Capsules, cocoons, caskets and embodiments in general validate this idea because studies on their inside matters are precise, which gives humans a whole sense of accomplishment.

Abstract systems, then, are hardly normative. To build an identity from scratch, maintaining it alien and independent, would be utopic for social beings. Giddens explains this by highlighting that modern life is constituted by reorganization and removal, given that some mechanisms may "detach social relations from their specific places, rematching them through distances in space and time" (10). In order to detach, a person must be connected to *another* in the first place, and this process incites a wider discovery of the self nonetheless – through new

relationships, the main result is undergoing a psychic breakthrough by finding new and diverse ways of expressing oneself.

Insofar as society is subject to internal shifts, community progress is influenced likewise. Giddens stresses that "social circumstances are neither separated from personal life nor mere background for it. When facing personal problems, individuals actively help rebuild the universe of social activity around them" (18-19). Concomitant alterations in both sides are inevitable, for their historical codependence is unbreakable.

Therefore, identity is built individually and collectively. Socially speaking, many constructions such as gender, sexuality and race have been established and sustained over the years, also having a direct effect on the formation of individualities. Through ethnicity, for instance, peoples are categorized by language maintenance and religious beliefs; thus, members of these groups are set to recognize similarities in others and, by perpetuating such cultural expressions, a sense of belongingness emerges.

This process is not static either, as, for centuries, individuals have been moving to places, getting in contact with various communities and reacting differently to these distinct scenarios. According to Audrey Smedley, regardless of constant relocations, "populations did not necessarily lose any form of ethnic identity, but change was clearly understood as virtually inevitable as each society learned something new from the cultures of others" (692).

In this regard, *continuity* is one of the central themes of *Homegoing*, considering that the narrative presents how the decisions and actions of one generation can affect the lives of forthcoming ones. Each chapter of the story presents a different character – descendants of Effia and descendants of Esi – addressing essential multigenerational aspects of identity, as the story demonstrates the way an one's personality is shaped according to their ancestors' experiences and memories. Gyasi, while approaching key points about ancestry in her novel,

describes that an individual's story does not begin exclusively with the individuals themselves, as each story is influenced by all the people who have preceded them throughout their life. Identity, therefore, is an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction.

Although this chapter follows a slightly different route, my intention is not to oppose what has been said in the previous one – in fact, I propose that permanence and stability in the identity-building process of marginalized peoples can also be embraced as powerful instruments of *resistance*. As the less-privileged, they comprehend the importance of uniting and perpetuating their social and cultural characteristics; the outcomes of alterity are, hence, twisted.

Homegoing depicts blood as the ultimate form of this human colligation. From Effia and Esi's introductions onwards, the relationship among members of both lineages comes through, not despite, but because of exterior elements. Therefore, focusing on the background of the African and African American realities, and by analyzing the invisible string that ties the characters altogether, historically and emotionally, this chapter aims at investigating identity in the novel as related to questions of *permanence* and *continuity*, mainly focusing on understanding the construction process of the self within the family and the community, and the social implications of it.

2.2. Ancestry and Identity

People are immersed in heterogeneous environments which require connection to current and previous surroundings, and because this process involves an *outsider*, the cage is unlocked. Although kinship is usually related to stability, Eduardo Oliveira explains that it is impractical not to consider that this relationship, as any other, is only built on a common ground between more than one person – in this case, the individuals and their ancestors; thus,

it cannot remain unchangeable. Alterity, therefore, assumes a whole new meaning, but it is still very much so, as it continues to include the *other*:

> Ancestry is … more than a concept or category of thought. It is converted into an experience of cultural form which … confers meaning to the attitudes that unfold from their cosmic womb until they become creatures born in the womb-earth of this metaphorical continent that has produced its metonymies in overseas territories, without duplicating, but maintaining a trans-historical and trans-symbolic relationship in which fortune has scattered its children. … Thus, it is a category of relation, because *there is no ancestry without alterity*. Every alterity is first and foremost a relationship, because it is not developed in singularity. The Other is always someone with whom I confront or establish an account. (Oliveira 40; emphasis added)

Considering that the establishment of identities is seen as a historically determined construction, the valorization of African *continuities* becomes an important segment of the identity-building process. If heritages are constantly redefined and recreated with different meanings and senses, the defense of an alleged African *purity* falls apart. At the same time, studies on the experience of enslaved individuals have been increasingly concerned with the *variety* of identity expressions, both of people with African origin or provenance, and of their successors in the United States, who undergo prejudice due to discriminatory ideals being incorporated into society over the years. Overcoming the opacity of sources for this type of information, scholars have been able to recompose various paths taken by Africans and their descendants in the Americas, always taking into account the social and cultural relations between different groups on both sides of the Atlantic (Denise Demetrio 2).

Ancestors represent a direct connection to the historical roots and origins of a community by passing on values throughout the generations. Reverence for ancestors strengthens the bonds between members of a community, and creates a sense of continuity and belonging. Such appreciation is linked to the importance of kinship in the construction of individual and collective identity, and through the preservation of traditions and the transmission of ancient stories and knowledge, communities perpetuate their cultural expressions and distinguish themselves from other groups.

Homegoing offers an in-depth perspective on the relationship between identity and ancestry, and explores the devastating consequences of the Atlantic slave trade in both Ghana and the United States. Through the story of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, who parted ways at a very young age, Gyasi reveals how European colonization and the Atlantic slave trade have profoundly affected the individual and collective manifestations of the communities involved.

In this regard, apart from the nonstop search for the self, which generally applies to all the characters, the novel traces two main responsive behaviors: a constant urge of reconnection to the past; and a firm desire to withdraw from ancestral origins. Generally, one may conclude that the last reaction would be performed by African Americans, considering that the establishment of the following lineages in the United States entail the lasting, intergenerational effects of slavery, which included being portrayed as "culturally backward, primitive, intellectually stunted, prone to violence, morally corrupt, undeserving of the benefits of civilization, insensitive to the finer arts, and aesthetically ugly and animal-like" (Smedley 695).

Nevertheless, Gyasi thwarts these expectations by developing Esi's descendants as individuals who feel impelled to reconnect with their roots, being primarily motivated by a sense of non-belonging. On the other hand, the characters who remain in Africa are more

inclined to reject kinship, driven by a repulsion to historical bad deeds conducted by their ancestors and major hereditary curses.

For the African Americans, the desire to rewind escalates insofar as the narrative moves forward. Kojo, Willie and Marcus are the most prominent names, bearing in mind that Gyasi draws their storylines according to the social changes that were slowly being matured. Being one of the first freed slaves, Kojo could only rely on Ma Aku and her memories. Willie, on the other hand, was able to join the Black community at her church. Marcus, as the last one in line, would achieve an even higher level, becoming what Cary Wintz (1988:31) names the *New Negro* – a contemporary class of Black Americans who had access to more social privileges such as education, for example –, which eventually impulsed his reconnection process with the past.

Another common assumption is that, due to the progress, African Americans would slowly discontinue past experiences, be it for wishing to drift away from painful recollections, or for the desire to fully appreciate the new concessions. However, Eyerman explains:

> For blacks, this rejection after the raised expectations engendered by emancipation and reconstruction forced a rethinking of their relationship to American society. … Many blacks … had believed that reconstruction would, if not eliminate entirely race as the basis for identity, at least diminish its significance, as former slaves became citizens like other Americans and the caste system associated with servitude disappeared. … Once again it would be necessary to attempt to transform tragedy into triumph with the uncovering of new strategies in the struggle for collective recognition, in the face of the threat of marginalization. (Eyerman 24)

Slavery, thus, would remain in the collective memory of many Black Americans for years to come, not only as emotional scars but also as a token for a historically shared struggle that must never be forgotten. Although the individual experiences were multiple, they were all somehow stained by an unfortunate matter, therefore, valuing and understanding ancestry is essential to heal these ingrained and lasting wounds, and to unveil or reinforce identities.

Among Effia's descendants, those who are shown as more prone to revoke ancient traits are James and Yaw. After James' first meeting with Akosua, Gyasi consolidates the idea that he feels ashamed of the actions and decisions of his ancestors. Regardless of being a supporting character, Akosua is portrayed as a brave woman who also refused to comply with Asante chiefs that somehow assisted the slave trade. As she declares she decided to be her "own nation", James reckons he wishes to follow her steps (99).

Later on, following James' marriage to another woman, the author also pinpoints that "the longer he stayed [there] the sooner he wished to get away. To lead a simpler life, as a farmer like Akosua's father, not as a politician like his own father, whose work for the British and the Fantes so many years before had left him with money and power, but little else" (102). If one observes J.F. Ajayi's commentary, it would be possible to infer that James' plot is built upon a misconception that Africans voluntarily assisted colonizers. According to the historian:

> … in the end all Africans and peoples of African descent were victims, not beneficiaries of the slave trade. The technology, capital and competition that characterised the European participation in the Atlantic trade meant that no African peoples could afford to stay aloof from it. Those who could, obtained whatever ammunition was available, so as to protect themselves. The chiefs who participated in the trade were victims at least of unequal exchange. They

exported man and woman productive and reproductive power in return for
ammunition, cheap gin, textiles, mirrors and others which the late Dr Dike
called 'meretricious' goods. *No black African could escape from the racist
burden of being black.* (Ajayi 9-10; emphasis added)

Although it is feasible to comprehend the rebellion of those who witnessed the
situation first-hand and strongly disagreed with it, it is not ideal to overlook the powerful
mannerisms used by Europeans to engrain their doctrines and demands into the African
mindset. Gyasi herself expands this notion a few chapters later by illustrating a Christian
missionary brainwashing Akua. Suffering, thus, was common to all natives on different
scales.

Yaw's reactive behavior is actually based on a different justification. As he grew up,
Yaw wished to be as far as possible from the curse that ruined his mother's life, once firmly
attributed to his ancestors by a stranger. However, the permanent scar he had gotten when
Akua set the hut they lived on fire was a reminder that he would never be completely
detached from his sorrowful past. Gyasi writes:

> He resisted the urge to put his hand up to the left side of his face, feel the raised
> and leathery skin there with its many ripples and lines that, when he was still
> just a child, reminded Yaw of a map. He had wanted that map to lead him out
> of Edweso, and in some ways it had. His village could hardly look at him and
> had collected money to send him to school so he could learn, but also, Yaw
> suspected, so they would not have to be reminded of their shame. In other
> ways, the map of Yaw's scarred skin had led him nowhere. He had not married.
> He would not lead. Edweso had come with him. (227)

Mark Wolynn, relying on Freud's *repetition compulsion* theory, has characterized this continuation of traumatic events throughout generations as an adjustment system; that is to say, it lingers on the family lineage until the issue is properly solved. According to Carl Jung, these sentiments rest on the unconscious and eventually emerge as "fate or fortune" (Wolynn 19). For the majority of Effia's successors, it was karma, and it would only settle at the very end through Marjorie; and for Yaw in particular, the inherited trauma was also coupled with resentment for maternal neglect.

2.3. Collective Memory and Cultural Trauma

The concept of memory itself is ambiguous. As Sandra Almeida explains, there is a constant notion perpassing double meaning for it comprises dichotomies such as presence/absence, past/present, and the very idea of forgetting, which directly parallels it. In her writings, Marta Vieira cites that, for Walter Benjamin:

> … Memory is not … simply a faculty to retain knowledge and facts lived in the past, but the skill to *recognize* the impressions left by those and *resignify* them in the present, producing a new meaning on them and establishing a new relationship with them. (qtd. in Bernd 30; emphasis added)

The remembrance of a particular event – i.e. *anamnesis*, according to Walter Moser –, is coined through traces and stories that are present in the current time of the human being, and this process is developed in order to rescue interrupted or repressed situations.

Paul Ricoeur explains both concepts, 'remembering' and 'forgetting'. Using the metaphor of the *seal in hot wax*, which would culminate in the *creation of a trace even after its removal*, the author states that memory acts as a way of recognizing, interpreting and internalizing these traces. When dealing with forgetting, Ricoeur elucidates that it can act as a

mechanism for the disappearance of such traces in terms of maintenance and permanence, and it can be manifested in different ways, most of the time, involuntarily (qtd. in Bernd 32).

In literature, according to Marc Bloch, this process is outlined from two biases: the trace as emotional and affectionate internalization in the soul, and the trace as a historical apparatus, written and accessed in material data (qtd. in Bernd 31). Novelists, therefore, in order to build characters and develop their memories in delimited frames, ground their works on residues of individual and/or collective experience.

It is relevant to note the way that Jeanne Gangnebin recalls how the original etymological meaning of *trace*, the Greek term *sètnan* – which is translated as sign/word –, was previously interpreted as *tomb*: "this sign or this trace that men inscribe in memory of the dead — those dead that the poet and the historian, in Herodotus' words, cannot 'leave to oblivion'" (53). Not burying, not giving someone else the right to have their own tomb, would culminate in their complete historical disappearance.

In antiquity, this oblivion posed a threat to Greek heroes and important figures in society. Bernd, when comparing the postulates of Freud and Benjamin, explains that, for the latter, the real importance of traces can be attributed to the remembrance of the existence of less important people, commoners at the time, about whom there are no historical records, as these are not as relevant as those of individuals belonging to the upper strata (35).

There is another relevant dichotomy that ought to be explained: memory can be conveyed *individually* and *collectively* as well. In the first place, individual memory encompasses personal experiences, and mainly operates to distinguish one person from the other. By contrast, collective memory assembles people that share similar interests and backgrounds (Maurice Halbwachs 50). It is important to notice that, in these terms, 'collective' does not necessarily imply that members from the same group socially identify

with one another – the September 11th attacks, for example, entail the collective memory of many from a large variety of countries and cultures. Nevertheless, it can surely unite correlated individuals as well, and influence how they perceive life and themselves.

In any case, Halbwachs pinpoints that "individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily *merges* with, the collective memory" (50-51; emphasis added). Personal and common elements are intrinsically mingled once again, which is justified by the notion that, in society, one is barely one of their own, and even the dual character of memory cannot be thoroughly divided. What is going to be assessed down below is, therefore, a way of understanding memory in *Homegoing,* in collective terms that are definitely embedded in individuality.

Throughout the novel, social 'aliens' are given the right to raise inquiries towards diachronic erasure. This primarily comprehends the African American lineage, for Esi's descendants in the United States had experienced the brutality of slavery and its aftermath first hand. By raising their voice gradually through the chapters, Gyasi provides enough background for the reader to examine records through more attentive lenses, and the existence of these very figures, once considered trivial, can now be assessed through the characters and the legacy of collective memory.

Therefore, the novel as a whole functions as an instrument of defiance to the norm. Regardless of its fictional nature, *Homegoing* still contributes to the maintenance and spread of African culture over the course of human history. While giving voice to a commonly mistreated and overlooked group of people, not only through the display of stories that could be similar to theirs but also by turning characters into complex and independent individuals, Gyasi participates in the preservation of collective memory.

On another note, it is important to stress how Gyasi also approaches memory itself in depth in some of the plots, at times linked to certain symbols. In the very first chapter of the story, for instance, the writer already pinpoints that Effia's birth represents the beginning of a turbulent yet allocated connection among her successors. The girl is born into a *fire* that embodied the whole extension of the Fanteland. Her father, Cobbe, a farmer, had to leave his newborn baby in order to witness the damage the fire made to his plantation, only to see he had lost a large part of it. As Cobbe realizes "that the *memory of the fire* that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children and his children's children for as long as the line continued", the symbol is introduced as a metaphor for the hidden string that would tie all generations to one another (3; emphasis added).

This is further explored by Gyasi as she turns the symbol into an essential matter in order to understand the journeys of Akua, Yaw and Marjorie. As mother and son, Akua and Yaw share a connection in this regard due to the woman's incessant dreams of burning flames, which eventually led her to unintentionally set her own house on fire; as a result, Yaw, who was injured during the accident, spent many years trying to withdraw from his family circle in order to discontinue the curse. The whole situation still resonated with Marjorie, Yaw's daughter, as she grew afraid of fire ever since she learned more about the scars on her father's and grandmother's bodies:

> She had only heard about her from her grandmother's stories on those days when they walked to the water so that her grandmother could tell her what she knew of their ancestors, and yet Marjorie thought she could see the firewoman in the blue and orange glow of the stove, in hot coals, in lighters. She feared that the nightmares would come for her too, that she too would be chosen by the ancestors to hear their family's stories. (274)

Mrinalini Thacker pinpoints that even individual perceptions of a symbol rely on "collective mental, spiritual and emotional associations" (34), thus, the negative and destructive aura surrounding the concept of fire that was passed down over generations would certainly imply that kinship might in fact be detrimental to the characters at a certain level.

Notwithstanding, the author dismantles this idea through Marcus and Marjorie's encounter, the last descendants of Effia and Esi, respectively. As Marcus helps Marjorie overcome her fear of fire, she assists him in suppressing his fear of water. Hence, in spite of the colossal wall that was being built within Effia's lineage to transform the members into unrelated beings, the other side of the family would ultimately shatter it down. As independent as one can be, there is always room for external support.

Jeffrey Alexander defines *cultural trauma* as something that strikes members of a collective group, making them "feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). In this regard, fire and its destructive features can also be associated with another component of Gyasi's narrative: the forced erasure of ancestry, a direct consequence of the constant adversity tied to it. Initially, the writer emphasizes this along the last lines of the first chapter, soon after Cobbe had passed away and Effia is talking to her stepmother:

> After she had wiped her tears, Effia walked out of the compound and into the
> sun. Baaba sat on the stump of a felled tree, her shoulders squared as she held
> hands with Fiifi, who stood beside her, now as quiet as a field mouse. Effia
> wanted to say something to Baaba, to apologize perhaps for the burden her
> father had made Baaba carry all of those years, but before she could speak,
> Baaba hacked from her throat, spit on the ground before Effia's feet, and said,

> "*You are nothing from nowhere*. No mother and now no father." She looked at
>
> Effia's stomach and smiled. "*What can grow from nothing?*" (27; emphasis
>
> added)

It can be seen that the aforementioned historical erasure might be stimulated even by members of the same community. Many social reasons may incite this behavior; in Baaba's case, her poor attitude can be traced back to Effia not being her legitimate daughter but the living reminder of Cobbe's side affair. Since there was no valid blood colligation, cruelty permeated Effia's and Baaba's relationship thoroughly. In any case, regardless of such harsh words being said to Effia only, the trauma of insufficiency and loneliness might and does remain in the collective memory of future successors, altering their identity expressions.

From a hierarchic perception, this racial obliteration is further depicted during the scene in which a soldier enters the Cape Coast Castle dungeon and rips a newborn child off an enslaved woman's arms without uttering a word. The author spells it out in the following dialogue – "'Where are they taking the baby?' Esi asked. Tansi spit onto the clay floor and swirled the spittle with her finger, creating a salve. 'They will kill it, I'm sure,' she said." (29).

Annihilation, i.e. ethnic erasure, is a well-planned scheme and it begins by nipping the *evil* in the bud. Collective traces, thus, are gradually destroyed. Likewise, individual recollection is also affected by it all. Esi, for instance, due to being dragged into such a dreadful scenario, came to believe that "hell was a place of remembering" and every memory from her past, although joyful at times, eventually "fell to the ground like a rotten mango, perfectly useless, uselessly perfect" (28).

One of the most relevant points in *Homegoing* dates back to the African diaspora, a term used to refer to the dispersion of people of African origin around the world, often as a

result of the transatlantic slave trade. This process resulted in profound trauma for African communities, who were separated from their lands and cultures, and subjected to inhumane and violent conditions. Slavery and the compelled migration of millions of Africans caused the loss of unique languages, traditions, customs, and cultural practices that were being transmitted to subsequent generations. The trauma of the African diaspora have affected many throughout history, especially considering that identity redefinition was forced repeatedly, and Black people have had to reinvent themselves in order to enable the establishment of Afro-diasporic communities around the globe (Lorena Marques[11]).

Among the various barbarities practiced during this period, Karnal et al. highlight a brief account of a Nigerian who landed in the U.S. territory as a slave, whose report is similar to many narratives of the characters described by Gyasi in *Homegoing*:

> They immediately led us into the yard … like sheep in a sheepfold, without regard to age or gender. Since everything was new to me, everything that came caused me astonishment. I didn't know what they were saying, and I thought that these people were truly full of magic... At a drum signal, the buyers ran to the courtyard where the slaves were kept and chose the lot they liked best. The noise and clamor with which this was done, and the anxiety visible on the faces of the buyers, served to greatly increase the terror of the Africans... In this way, without scruples, relatives and friends were separated, most of them never to see each other again. (Karnal et al. 63)

Throughout the work, Gyasi addresses how slavery has left a lasting legacy of violence, oppression, and trauma for Black people, both on the African continent and in the Americas. The author also shows slavery being justified and perpetuated by racist and

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[11] See: https://www.gov.br/palmares/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/diaspora-africana-voce-sabe-o-que-e

Eurocentric tenets[12], which continue to influence how society views and treats Black people in the contemporary social setting. By exploring the history of slavery, Gyasi challenges the dominant narrative of official history that often minimizes or ignores the experience of Black people, and gives voice to characters who have been silenced, as well as presents the degree of complexity and diversity of experiences associated with the African diaspora.

The dissolution of downgraded classes is, therefore, historically reaffirmed. Eugenic episodes such as the slave trade and nazi-fascism could be settled in large scale to the psychological detriment of their targets, assisted by predetermined actions that grants the alien-other a membership card that cannot be easily revoked. Emotional torments were permanent to whoever was directly involved and, at any rate, are yet to be forgotten.

Reiteration works as a primary instrument of resistance in this regard, bearing in mind the impracticability of easily unraveling from discrimination and its consequences, especially if they remain hidden. Apart from abolition registers or revolutionary discourses, the feeling is there, and it turns affected people into compulsory elements of a bigger game plan.

Thus, Gyasi's goals behind the content structures of her book were not arbitrary. Whilst each chapter concisely developed each person's particularities, the passage of time aided the approach of traumatic episodes that are established according to the flow of the narrative. Eyerman pinpoints:

> There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process. As cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the

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[12] When discussing the structuring of racist theories in the U.S., ideas related to *polygenism* gained prominence. It refers to the belief that there are different human origins and species, and this theory was used for a long period in the South in order to justify the inferiorization of Black individuals and perpetuate the idea of White supremacy. One of the issues addressed in this context is the separation of Whites and Blacks as distinct species, which was supported by 19th century pseudoscientific theories that sought to provide biological justifications for racial hierarchy. By considering Whites and Blacks as originally different species, such hypotheses reinforced racial segregation and contributed to the maintenance of discriminatory practices such as slavery.

reworking of collective memory. The notion of a unique African American

identity emerged in the post-Civil War period, after slavery had been abolished.

The trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will

and whims of another was thus not necessarily something directly experienced

by many of the subjects of this study, but came to be central to their attempts to

forge a collective identity out of its remembrance. In this sense, *slavery was*

traumatic in retrospect, and formed a "primal scene" which could, potentially,

unite all "African Americans" in the United States, whether or not they had

themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa. Slavery

formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent

collective memory. (Eyerman 1; emphasis added)

This 'union' of those who were plainly affected by – or have had any sort of

connection with – slavery and its outcomes, therefore, can be sustained both forcibly and

voluntarily. The idea of a single African American identity was initially conceived by the

dominant White class in order to treat all Blacks in a similar way and to prevent them from

developing individual characteristics, since a homogeneous group was easier to control. On

the other hand, the very same notion can have its meaning twisted in favor of marginalized

people, as they can assemble for sharing a similar background and combine efforts to

withstand oppression.

In *Homegoing*, Gyasi approaches the theme through Kojo, son of Ness and Sam, who

was part of the African American lineage. His family was stricken by enslavement for years,

so he was already born within a merciless course of events:

Jo had been a slave once. He was only a baby then, and yet every time he saw a

slave in Baltimore, he saw himself, saw what his life would have been like had

Ma Aku not taken him to freedom. His free papers named him Kojo Freeman.

Free man. Half the ex-slaves in Baltimore had the name. Tell a lie long enough

and it will turn to truth. (112; emphasis added)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kojo had a hard time connecting with his

family due to gaining freedom at a very young age and for not being able to identify with their

recollections of Baltimore, which inflicted feelings of solitude and displacement upon him.

By contrast – Gyasi's favorite technique –, the very same character comprehends that this

detachment can only reach a certain level, as he was still, and would always be, touched by

the outcomes of slavery. This can be seen more explicitly in the scene where Kojo is looking

for his wife Anna, and is wrongly accused of harassing a White woman and of being a

"runaway nigger" (128). In this regard, Eyerman states:

an almost impossible task faced the first generation of blacks after

emancipation. How could one ever hope to overcome such a picture of oneself,

created by those with political and economic power, and find dignity in a social

order that so firmly denied it. It was not so much the direct experience of

slavery that would prove traumatic, but its aftermath as the hope and promise

of equality and acceptance were crushed. (Eyerman 39)

His existence denotes peculiar experiences inside abstract cages. Although liberty was

the primary collective goal among all, he ended up never fully embracing it as his own,

because his surroundings made it seem untrue and utopic. No special surname would amend

reality – the collective wounds were still fresh and open.

It is relevant to stress once again that a similar example of this dissonance is found on

H's story, since he is falsely accused of intimidating a White woman as well, and ends up

being arrested. Gyasi makes sure readers recognize how effective social changes were

extremely slow at the time, as even for a lineal descendant of Kojo, who grew up years later, racial persecution was still a regular circumstance.

2.4. Continuity and Resistance

According to Hall, identity is a social and cultural construct, which is shaped by different narratives and discourses, and reinforces that identity is not something that the individual possesses but an attribute that human beings are *constantly* constructing and negotiating. The author states the African diaspora is an example of how cultural identities are formed through processes of hybridization and interracial mixing, and emphasizes that African cultures were not simply destroyed by colonialism and slavery, but rather transformed and adapted to new contexts and circumstances. In this context, the African diaspora has generated a unique cultural multiplicity, characterized by the blending of African, European, and indigenous elements (Yang et al. 177-184).

Hall offers a significant contribution to the debate about the representativeness of Black culture, as well as the importance of visibility and appreciation of Black identities in society. The display of Black tradition is fundamental to the promotion of cultural diversity and the construction of a more inclusive and tolerant society, since the negative and/or stereotypical representation of it in the media and popular culture can have a negative impact on the self-esteem and identity of Black individuals. The creation of cultural works produced by Black artists and intellectuals is extremely important, since the appreciation of such works is fundamental to the promotion of cultural diversity, the strengthening of Black identity and social resistance (Yang et al. 177-18).

The traumatic episode of African diaspora created challenges for the identity formation of Black communities worldwide, who had to deal with the loss of their languages, cultures, and traditions, as well as the imposition of a new social identity constructed by the

colonizers. The building process of Black identity, therefore, is complex and multifaceted, and influenced by the historical experience of racial oppression, cultural resistance, and intercultural dialogue. Despite the difficulties, many Black individuals have developed a strong cultural identity and a sense of belonging from their African roots.

There has also been a source of solidarity and cooperation, which has contributed to the construction of global Black identitie*s*. Plurality is relevant in this case because it translates the different experiences and cultural contexts in which Black communities are embedded. This means that Black identity is not homogeneous and can vary significantly in terms of ethnicity, nationality, religion, social class, gender, and sexual orientation, among other factors.

The diaspora has a direct relationship with the migration of Black culture around the world, as the dispersion of people of African origin brought along their traditions, beliefs, languages, and cultural practices into new geographical contexts. Black culture, therefore, is influenced by this dissemination and its diversity, as well as by the accompanying experiences of oppression and resistance. Jazz, blues, and hip-hop are musical genres that have their roots in Black culture. African American literature is also an example of how Black culture migrated to new contexts, and Langston Hughes' poetry and Toni Morrison's prose exemplify true attempts to defy the stereotypes of Black people that got ingrained in the American mindset over time.

The figure of William Tucker, born in Jamestown in 1624, assumes an important significance in this context. As the son of Africans and officially recognized as the first African American, he personifies the experience of slavery and African heritage in America. Tucker's birth represents a milestone in the history of the African American community, which has faced numerous adversities regarding equality and civil rights.

In this sense, one can see that some steady patterns are noticeable in *Homegoing*. Characters face constant challenges to break out of the cycle of oppression that has affected the journeys of their ancestors, but often find themselves trapped in a web of circumstances that prevent them from moving forward. Therefore, throughout the narrative, Gyasi explores the idea of *continuity* in two ramifications – in the broader sense of perpetuating injustices and inequalities, and in the sense of preserving tradition and family history.

In the first place, the author displays issues related to the colonization of Africa and imperialism. The narrative begins on the coast of Ghana, portraying how the arrival of Europeans in the African continent had intensely impacted the lives of natives, and the way slave trade led to the plundering of resources and cultural subjugation. Gyasi addresses the effects slavery and colonialism had on the construction of African identities and highlights that these issues spanned generations. She also shows how the struggles for freedom and autonomy were important in the construction of a post-colonial Africa, stressing the importance of reconnecting with one's ancestral culture and the history of one's people.

Akua, for instance, experiences the subsequent deeds of colonization once she is ridiculed and humiliated by a missionary solely for being African, because "all people on the black continent must give up their heathenism and turn to God [and] be thankful that the British are [t]here to show [them] how to live a good and moral life" (184); a visible example of the continuous maintenance of hierarchical dogmas. On another note, the character H, even after being released from the cotton plantation once the Civil War ended, is falsely accused and gets arrested, and is eventually sold to work in coal mines. H's struggle for freedom is both an example of resistance and perseverance, and an illustration of the continuous oppressive structures that shape the characters' lives.

The construction of Black identities, therefore, involves the recognition of social and racial inequalities. Many Black communities have worked to strengthen their identity by empowering themselves through education, political organizing, and cultural awareness – an ongoing and multifaceted process. Regarding this matter, Gyasi explores how the urge for justice remains over time by showing that Marcus, a Ph.D. student and the last descendant in Esi's lineage, still seeks to examine the life of his great-grandfather H thoroughly, concentrating on the loopholes that entailed the convict leasing system in the United States:

> 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? … Without mentioning his father's heroin addiction—the stints in prison, the criminal record? … And if he started talking 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. And … he'd get so angry that he'd slam the research book on the table of the beautiful but deadly silent Lane Reading Room of Green Library of Stanford University. And … then everyone in the room would stare and *all they would see would be his skin and his anger*, and they'd think they knew something about him, *and it would be the same something that had justified putting his great-grandpa H in prison, only it would be different too, less obvious than it once was.* (289-290; emphasis added)

In this passage, which I believe is the most emblematic one in *Homegoing*, Gyasi describes the difficulty of carrying on your entire family history and honoring everyone that came before you – not surprisingly, this chapter concludes the narrative. The author once again displays the scenario as something that can be interpreted by two means: on the one

hand, this series of demands actually seems to pressure Marcus; on the other hand, the reader sees that such a burden can be attributed to his current scenario as well. As an African American in the 21st century, he is still far from being released from the handcuffs of institutional racism.

Moreover, *Homegoing* highlights the different forms of resistance and survival that the slaves and their descendants developed, from escaping to maroon communities to adopting new forms of culture and religion in the destination countries. Despite the loss of many traditions, the African diaspora has generated a unique and rich cultural diversity worldwide, and this can be seen in music, dance, cuisine, religion, and literature. The appreciation of African multiplicity is crucial for the construction of Black identity and cultural resistance against oppression and marginalization.

As usual, however, Gyasi also exposes the mechanisms endlessly used by the White dominant class in order to isolate Black people and strip them from any major ancestral feature. Willie, for example, although considered a remarkable vocalist, was prohibited from singing at a jazz club for being "too dark", and told that the position was only available "for the light girls" (209). This can be defined as a technique to dodge the real substantiality of an African expression in order to approach it through less racialized lenses progressively, engendering a type of cultural appropriation.

The author approaches colonization and imperialism with the purpose of introducing readers to how these issues have had a profound impact on the history of the continent and the lives of the people who have inhabited it, and she emphasizes the importance of a full connection with ancestral culture and the struggle for freedom and autonomy in building identities in these terms. The loss of cultural identity is a form of interruption of the continuity of an ancestral tradition, incited by dominant classes, and such lack of knowledge about their

roots is one of the factors that instigates people to reject their own origins. Simply put, an essential aspect of the identity-building process is a deep connection to the African continent and the real understanding of one's kinship.

Another way in which continuity is addressed in the work is through the figure of ancestors, as each chapter of the work is dedicated to a family member, with an initial focus on Effia and Esi, the Ghanaian half-sisters who represent the bifurcation of the family lineage. Henceforth, the characters constantly refer to their ascendants, be it in the way of suffering from inherited trauma and undergoing similar discrimination, as already explained, be it in the way of seeking connection with them and keeping their stories alive.

By telling the story of the two siblings and their upcoming lineages, Gyasi brings important reflections on continuity and how the actions and decisions made by ancestors can directly or indirectly impact future generations. Although there were constant attempts to erase African history and culture and conceal their heritage as a whole, the urge for a reunification of Africans and African Americans was slowly increasing behind the shadows, especially in the United States, where injustice and prejudice were at their peak.

The way Gyasi interweaves the characters' stories throughout the book shows us that the continuity of life is an endless story and, amid the past and the present, a complex web of connections and relationships is created. The author deals with the continuity of stories of different generations of families that were affected by hierarchical systems, and addresses issues such as cultural heritage, transmission of knowledge and customs, and preservation of history and memory through the characters' stories.

These transmissions ensure that the tradition, culture and memory of a community are preserved over time, and Gyasi illustrates such identification and maintenance through art, by means of music and literature. A peculiar example is that of Ness, daughter of Esi. The Devil

– as she calls the master of the cotton plantation – only allows her to go to church on Easter

Sunday. Once the day came, in this particular scene, the woman instinctively started to hum a

song in Twi[13], one Esi used to sing after the daily mistreatments of slavery had worn her out.

Although Ness remembered the lyrics by heart, she had never understood their real meaning.

Herein he author pinpoints that cultural erasure had succeeded to some degree, as the

character was illiterate in her mother's tongue but still held onto its social significance; the

knot was loosen but not entirely untied.

Cliffort Geertz considers culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings

embodied in symbols, a system of *inherited* conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by

means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and

attitudes toward life" (89; emphasis added). On a similar note, Simon Frith characterizes

music as something akin to identity, being "both performance and story" and describing "the

social in the individual and the individual in the social" (109).

Gyasi, therefore, showcases cultural meaning as an ingrained feature of expressions

regardless of deep understanding of or conscious attachment to it. For those who compose a

lineage or are part of a social group, it seems as though they embody history; there will

always be something that draws them to their origins, even if they fail to fully comprehend

the details.

The author also approaches creative writing as means of expressing identity,

considering that it translates reality and facilitates its transmission. This is conveyed by

Marjorie, when her teacher requests her to write a poem that encompasses her experience as

an African American. Once Marjorie declares she is not, in fact, *akata[14]*, because she was

born in Ghana, Mrs. Pinkston elucidates that, in the entire country, "it doesn't matter where

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[13] A dialect originated from the Akan language, mainly spoken in the southern and central parts of Ghana.
[14] A term used by Ghanaians to refer to African/Black Americans.

you came from first to the white people running things. You're here now, and here black is black is black [sic]" (273). In this sense, W.E.B. Du Bois highlights:

> … the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this *double-consciousness,* this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 8; emphasis added)

The double-consciousness, thus, refers to the individual's own perception of themselves, and the label imposed on them by external forces. Although only being raised in Alabama, Marjorie is but a shadow in America to whom a stereotype is attributed not taking her background into consideration. Hence, the construction of her existence as well as the outside reactions to it represent the continuous flow of prejudice in the country. This is later on decoded in Marjorie's assignment:

> "Split the Castle open,
>
> find me, find you.
>
> We, two, felt sand,
>
> wind, air.
>
> One felt whip. Whipped,

once shipped.

We, two, black.

Me, you.

One grew from

cocoa's soil, birthed from nut,

skin uncut, still bleeding.

We, two, wade.

The waters seem different

but are same.

Our same. Sister skin.

Who knew? Not me. Not you." (282)

Marjorie lyrically portrays the invisible string that binds the characters altogether, in spite of where they live or who they are. In hindsight, it all started with the sisters in the Cape Coast Castle, as indicated in the opening verse. Their physical connection was torn apart by colonizers, but they could never be thoroughly segregated. Marjorie uses the metaphor of *water* which, as explained by the character Sonny, represents oppression and struggle for Black people since it can function as a reminder of the slave trade ships, and of the many individuals that were captured and saw death, i.e. drowning, as the only escape route.

Gyasi also conveys continuity through another symbol, this time a palpable one – the *black stones*. They are given by Maame to her daughters, Effia and Esi, as a memento of family and kinship. Accordingly, symbols are historical artifacts of identity, "used to install

pride and unity in a nation's population" which "create[s] a resounding mythos" within a group (Thacker 39). Throughout the novel, the stones appear as they are passed down from generation to generation, fulfilling Maame's initial desire in two different manners: to some, the stones did function as a virtuous reminder of their roots, but to others, they represented fear.

James, for one, tells his daughter Abena that he ascribed his accomplishments in life to the necklace his grandmother Effia had once given him, and that he wishes it would serve her just as well. At the end of her chapter, when Abena left for the city of Kumasi, she arrived at a missionary church there, "touched the stone at her neck and said thank you to her ancestors" (153). Akua, on the contrary, believes the stone symbolizes the fire curse in her family lineage. In any case, Gyasi ultimately guarantees that the real meaning behind the symbol was unmistakable:

> "Our family began here, in Cape Coast," Old Lady said. She pointed to the Cape Coast Castle. "In my dreams I kept seeing this castle, but I did not know why. One day, I came to these waters and I could feel the spirits of our ancestors calling to me. Some were free, and they spoke to me from the sand, but some others were trapped deep, deep, deep in the water so that I had to wade out to hear their voices. I waded out so far, the water almost took me down to meet those spirits that were trapped so deep in the sea that they would never be free. When they were living they had not known where they came from, and so dead, they did not know how to get to dry land. I put you in here so that *if your spirit ever wandered, you would know where home was*." (268; emphasis added)

The last statement is even more substantial for those who were forced to live in America, and who constantly engulfed feelings of solitude and confusion, as double-consciousness disarranged their entire identity-building process. In spite of everything, they would always have someone to hold on to and a safe place to return.

The culmination of continuity is displayed in the story of Marjorie still, as she travels to Ghana and discovers her affinity to the country's historical background. Her journey is an example of how cultural pluralism can be the basis of personal enrichment and growth. Over the centuries, people of color have been stripped out of their cultural identity and detached from their legitimate roots, which discontinue history. Such reconnection can help bridge this gap and provide a sense of belonging and pride in personal and collective identities. It can also increase self-esteem and self-confidence, being a source of inspiration and empowerment. In addition, this reconnection can aid the understanding and valuing of cultural diversity, fostering a sense of respect and inclusion.

Reconnecting with African roots can also be an act of resistance against racism and systemic discrimination, which are persistent problems around the world. Through it, Black people are able to reaffirm their identity and culture, while challenging the negative narratives and stereotypes that have been associated with them throughout history. It provides a deeper understanding of social and political issues, such as the African diaspora, colonial history, and the struggle for civil rights and equality. This can help Africans and African Americans become more aware and engaged while walking towards a more fair and equal society.

Homegoing is an intergenerational journey that connects the past and the present, and reveals the persistence of racial injustices African descendants tolerate. It highlights that the maintenance of oppressive structures affects the journeys of the characters over centuries, preventing them from reaching their full realization and liberation, as well as perpetuating

inequality. Gyasi demonstrates how slavery and colonialism left deep marks on the entire family lineage, and through this intergenerational connection, the author reveals that oppression is not an isolated event in the past but a constant force that permeates the lives of individuals in the long run. The narrative, thus, shows that overcoming these barriers is a long and difficult process, and requires effort, perseverance and commitment to social change.

2.5. Conclusion

One of the main contributions of *Homegoing* to identity construction can be seen through its intergenerational approach. The multifaceted portrait narrated by Gyasi allows the reader to understand the complexity of individual identities, and how these are influenced by historical events and collective traumas. The novel also highlights the importance of connecting with ancestral roots, whereas many individuals have lost knowledge of their origins, which directly affects people's perception of themselves. Along the narrative, the author presents the possibility and the advantages of recovering this missing connection, and also describes that the process of reconnecting with one's roots can become a trajectory for building a stronger and more meaningful identity.

The story stresses the commodification of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade, and the numerous reports of abuse and violent acts practiced by the traders as well as the inhumane experiences faced by captives. This brutality left deep scars on the characters' identities, which were passed onto future generations, culminating in intergenerational traumas. The characters face emotional and psychological scars that echo across time, and Gyasi explores the way collective memory impacts individual experiences. The construction of individual identity is shaped by such shared memories and structured by a process of confronting and healing.

As the narrative moves forward, Gyasi presents the effects of slavery on the identity of people of African descent, and by delving into the plot of the two sisters and their families, the work reveals the deep marks that were still left, and how these continued to impact Africans and African Americans. *Homegoing* depicts the pain, loss and disconnection that were transmitted from one generation to the next, where the characters deal with the absence of knowledge about their ancestral roots and undergo challenges in the quest for a cohesive and healthy self-formation amidst the brutality and oppression of the slave system. Through this exploration, the novel sheds light on the importance of recognizing and confronting such painful history in order to heal and strengthen individual and collective identity.

On another note, by giving voice to a wide range of characters and displaying their unique backgrounds, *Homegoing* highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the diversity of identities. It demonstrates to the reader that each individual has a unique journey of self-discovery, and that this process is simultaneously affected by the community. Many experience a disconnection from their African origins and face challenges as they attempt to bridge this gap and finally find a sense of belonging, whether through orally transmitted stories, cultural rituals or research related to their origins. This search for identity is a fundamental journey for the characters, and allows them to claim their African heritage and build a meaningful connection with their roots.

Therefore, one of the most significant contributions of *Homegoing* is the deep connection between identity and kinship, as Gyasi presents the main effects related to the experiences and stories of ancestors on identity formation. In the process of enslavement, African identities were subjected to intense fragmentation because people were uprooted from their lands, separated from their families and subjected to a completely alien cultural and social context. This fragmentation included the prohibition of African religious and cultural

practices; however, despite the attempts to suppress these expressions, Black bodies were able to protect their origins and recreate elements of African tradition in diasporic communities.

In the United States., Black history is intrinsically linked to slavery and the struggle for equality and freedom. However, even in these adverse conditions, African cultural practices were performed as acts of resistance and preservation. Religion is very representative in this regard, as it provides a sense of community, hope and resilience. Black Christianity, for instance, emerged as an amalgamation of the Christian faith imposed by colonizers and African traditional beliefs. Through spiritual songs and preaching, Black individuals found solace and spiritual fulfillment, conveying messages of freedom and emancipation.

In Africa, Black history is linked to the formation of pre-colonial empires. Ghana, historically known as the Gold Coast, was a major slave trade center, from where millions of natives were deported and shipped to the Americas. Slavery has left a massive stain on the country's history, and religion and cultural practices have also been important for the resistance and reconstruction of African identity there. Following Ghana's independence, there was a resurgence of African culture. Traditional African religiosity, such as ancestor worship and spiritual beliefs, gained prominence and was recognized as an essential part of national identity. The awareness movement and the revival of African cultural practices aided the reaffirmation of the importance of African heritage, and promoted self-determination for Ghanaians.

Homegoing is extremely important for understanding the historical and social context related to the structuring of racist theories in the United States, and addresses the consequences of colonialism, the impact of the transatlantic slave trade and the African diaspora. Through the perspectives of different generations of the two main families involved

in the narrative, Gyasi portrays the experiences of racism, oppression, struggles for freedom, and the complexities of ethnic relations in the United States and in Ghana over the centuries. By exploring the historical and cultural ramifications of slavery, the novel contributes to expanding knowledge about the origins and consequences of structural racism in the United States, and underscores the importance of recognizing and confronting the legacy of a continuous oppressive system.

FINAL REMARKS

Identity is undeniably particular to every being. Originally, it belongs to us on a significant scale, considering that particularities are inevitable and infinite throughout the course of life. What exists within us is a set of functionalities developed from our personal experiences, feelings and desires, and these are socially materialized through direct and indirect contact with the other. Identity, therefore, is not a fixed concept but rather influenced by societal, cultural, and individual factors.

Nonetheless, permanence does not necessarily imply extreme steadiness. As we are the product of past generations, kinship and cultural heritage are stable aspects which also play fundamental roles in the shaping of the self. These elements provide a sense of continuity across time and space, aiding identity construction throughout history. Therefore, although we are completely able to trace our own journey, it will inasmuch entail ancestral maintenance.

Considering the intentional erasure of marginalized communities by dominant classes, this inference is even more relevant on the subject of the African and African American realities. Black individualities have been consistently dismantled over the centuries on account of European colonization and the Atlantic slave trade, hence, reconnecting with one's roots holds a deeper social impact from such perspectives.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, in this regard, comes forth as a prime example of how individual experience is shaped by diverse backgrounds and environments, and that these varieties are crucial to thoroughly grasp the particularities of African descendants. It highlights that both individual autonomy and ancestral preservation act in the

identity-building process of all characters, and that the most authentic manifestation of the self is rightly found amid these two circumstances.

At first, Gyasi stresses that otherness can be experienced individually and variably, in accordance to the flow of particularities. Through characters such as Esi, for instance, who both savors welfare and endures adversities; and Kojo, who feels detached from his surroundings and from his own lineage, undergoing double disapproval, readers can vividly see the shifts that inflict alterity upon them. In this regard, the author demonstrates that being an outcast was hardly ever an excuse for idleness. Their immediate reaction is to withstand oppression by reaffirming individualities and advocating for justice, and these processes are mainly sustained by continuity and perpetuation.

In addition, kinship is intensely explored within the novel, representing the basis of subjectivity but also of social conflict and marginalization. Ancestry, particularly for minority groups, is intimately related to alterity as well, and it is brought into play as a mechanism of repression. Africans are stigmatized from the very beginning – their traditions are belittled and weakened as the British occupy the land and impose their principles upon the natives. Black Americans are perpetually mistreated for being related to those inhumane creatures who were undeserving of any rights.

Through this myriad of scenarios, therefore, Gyasi illustrates how otherness can be experienced and overcome in various manners. In both countries, descendants of Effia and of Esi face downgrading and general complications. Those who remained in Ghana are surrounded by an obscure aura which is induced by the aftermath of colonialism and hereditary torments. Those in the United States have to manage ostracism and feelings of displacement and non-belonging. The writer, then, delineates the narrative in a way that

members of the two ramifications feel the urge to rewind and reconnect with the past, mainly searching for solutions to moral dilemmas and struggling for freedom.

In other words, the establishment of identities is crossed by individual reaffirmation – which, in *Homegoing*, is expressed through the assertion of the fluidity of the self, thwarting the presumption that there is a single way to be African (American) – and by the permanence of traditions – which does not oppose the previous idea but rather complements it, as this maintenance can be carried out in multiple manners. All in all, either choosing to be unstable in a society that constantly attempts to standardize marginalized individuals, or deciding to promote continuity within an environment that endlessly erases ancestrality of 'inferior' classes, both nuances act as mechanisms of resistance and defiance.

Ultimately, the authentic essence of beings – *if* there is one – lies within the disarray of the self.

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