

THE POSTCOLONIAL ARCHIVE: FICTION AS A TOOL OF HISTORICAL RECOVERY IN YAA GYASI S HOMEGOING

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1 **THE POSTCOLONIAL ARCHIVE: FICTION AS A TOOL OF**
2 **HISTORICAL RECOVERY IN YAA GYASI'S *HOMEGOING***

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5 **ABSTRACT:**

6 The present article examines Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) from a postcolonial
7 perspective that acts as a literary archive to recover the silenced history of Africa and
8 African diaspora. With the multi-generational narrative, the novel traces the divergent
9 lives of two half sisters and their descendants, one lineage in Ghana and the other in
10 America. *Homegoing* re-establishes the fragments of erased histories in the colonial or
11 transatlantic era. The paper also argues that Gyasi's novel inherits the Postcolonial
12 archive oral histories, cultural memory, and personal narratives into the broader story
13 of colonial and diasporic trauma. Drawing on postcolonial theory, this study analyzes
14 how *Homegoing* offers a place for recovering identity and healing while also
15 reclaiming ancestral voices and destabilizing colonial history. The paper also sheds
16 light on how, Gyasi's work demonstrates the unique ability of the fiction to serve as a
17 de-colonial archive, making visible invisible and restoring agency to histories once
18 silenced.

19 **Keywords: Postcolonialism, History, Memory, Erasure, Recovery, Revisiting**

20 The notion of the archive in postcolonial studies is closely related to power,
21 knowledge, and memory. Colonial archive like the official documents, histories and
22 the narratives were presented by the imperial regimes in order to control both the
23 lands and information about colonized people and concealed it by silencing
24 indigenous voices and legitimizing colonial domination. Gayatri Spivak emphasizes
25 in her concept of the "epistemic violence" the colonial discourse have marginalized

26 and erased subaltern perspective (Spivak, 1988). Thus the process of recovering,
27 reconstructing marginalized histories turns into an act of resistance and
28 decolonization.

29 Similarly, the Ghanaian descendants wrestle with the legacies of British colonialism,
30 tribal conflicts, and post-independence challenges. This is evidently reflects through
31 the characters like, Quey and Akua as they confront the cultural hybridization and
32 trauma brought by colonialism. The present text recovers history that official archives
33 ignores and does not amplify the visibility of their struggles and resilience. These
34 suppressed histories are further individualized and revitalized into new life by using
35 first person narration to its characters. Gyasi emphasizes memory transmission as a
36 means of cultural survival through their dedication to layered story telling echoes oral
37 traditions.

38 The novel recounts ³the story of two African sisters, Effia and Esi, who are separated
39 at birth. Effia, known as "the beauty," is sent as a concubine to a British slave trader at
40 a slave castle, where as many Africans are kept in dungeons below for weeks, prior to
41 being shipped and enslaved in the West. While at the castle, Effia hears screams from
42 the dungeons below but, after inquiring, she is told there is simply "cargo" there. Effia
43 does not know that down there in a dungeon, soon to endure the Middle Passage, is
44 her sister Esi, whom she has never met. The entire novel follows the lineage of the
45 descendants of Effia and the descendants of Esi over the span of six generations,
46 going back and forth between the two families, in a series of chapters. The story hops
47 from character to character through varying times, different geographic areas, and
48 from Ghana to the U.S., through to the present day. The epic story encapsulates over
49 250 years of change in the African diaspora, starting with present-day Ghana,
50 covering tribal rivalries and colonial involvement.

51 Yaa Gyasi received widespread critical acclaim for her work as a post-colonial writer
52 whose debut novel, *Homegoing*, critically examines the enduring legacies of
53 colonialism and slavery on African and African diaspora communities. Scholars and
54 critics have lauded her for her meticulous storytelling and profound exploration of
55 how colonial histories undermine kinship networks, erode cultural identities, and
56 perpetuate systemic inequalities across generations. Gyasi's ability to reclaim
57 marginalized African voices and histories has been particularly praised for
58 contributing meaningfully to post-colonial discourse, emphasizing the importance of
59 recognizing and deconstructing colonial power structures. Her work has been
60 recognized as a powerful act of resistance that promotes awareness, healing, and
61 decolonization. This critical acclaim affirms her place as a pivotal voice in
62 contemporary post-colonial literature, highlighting her influence in reshaping
63 narratives about Africa's history, identity, and ongoing struggles with colonial
64 legacies.

65 *Homegoing* systematically destabilizes the colonial historiography. It not only
66 retrieves forgotten histories but also critiques the colonial historiographical
67 approaches that led to their erasure. Colonial records often provide a Ethnocentric,
68 clean, or pragmatic portrayal of African and its inhabitants, bolstering imperialist
69 ideologies while minimizing violence and exploitation. These archives depicted
70 African bodies as commodities or colonial subject, categorizing them as cultural
71 "others" stripped of nuance. The novel actively challenges these narratives by by
72 portraying the brutal realities of the slave trade and colonialism from African and
73 diasporic perspective. The depiction of Cape Coast Castle, both physical site and a
74 symbolic element, is pivotal. The castle, historically a significant centre for the
75 transatlantic slave trade, is shown as a place of immense suffering and trauma, with

76 the dungeons underneath starkly contrasting colonial governor's experience residence
77 above. This spatial symbolism highlights how colonial histories often suppressed or
78 concealed the violence that enabled their existence. As it is evident in excerpt from
79 the novel;

80 After that first day in the Castle, James never spoke to Effia about the slaves
81 they kept in the dungeon, but he spoke to her often about beasts. That was
82 what the Asantes trafficked most here. Beasts. Monkeys and chimpanzees,
83 even a few leopards. Birds like the king crowns and parrots that she and Fiifi
84 used to try to catch when they were children, roaming the forests in search of
85 the one odd bird, the bird that had feathers so beautiful it seemed to be set
86 apart from the rest. They would spend hours on end looking for just one such
87 bird, and most days they would find none. (31)

88 The above passage vividly states that, for European slaver or a colonial master.
89 Humans and non-humans and space are their slaves, a commodity to be utilized. And
90 they also try to conceal their brutalities by controlling its narration. Additionally, the
91 novel highlights that the effects of colonialism endure even after official
92 decolonization. Esi's descendants (who were deported to America as slaves) with
93 systematic racism and mass incarceration demonstrate how mechanism racial and
94 economic exploitation are continuation of colonial oppression. This ongoing narrative
95 challenges that treat colonial as a singular historical event instead of an extended
96 process. By intertwining African and American histories, *Homegoing* also contests
97 nationalist or regionally confined historical perspective. It illustrates the transatlantic
98 dimension of colonial violence and its repercussion on the identity and memory,
99 providing a more holistic view of understanding traditional historiographical
100 boundaries.

101 **Memory, Trauma, and Healing**

102 In *Homegoing*, memory plays a crucial role as tool for reclaiming history and identity.
103 Postcolonial theorist and trauma studies scholars point out that memories of trauma
104 caused by colonial encounter and slavery are frequently fractured, repressed or
105 disputed (Caruth, 1996). These recollections may be processed, represented and
106 conveyed through literature. Gyasi portray this in her novel; by use of recurring
107 motifs like that represent trauma and its inter-generational transmission, such as fire,
108 water and ghosts. The tale of Akua (descendant of Effia) who becomes a “Crazy
109 Women” and is tormented by the ghost of her past, exemplifies who trauma effects
110 descendants. Her insanity symbolizes the psychological strain of past violence that
111 spans generations. She narrates her dream in the novel;

112 In my dreams I kept seeing this castle, but I did not know why. One day, I
113 came to these waters and I could feel the spirits of our ancestors calling to me.
114 Some were free, and they spoke to me from the sand, but some others were
115 trapped deep, deep, deep in the water so that I had to wade out to hear their
116 voices. I waded out so far, the water almost took me down to meet those
117 spirits that were trapped so deep in the sea that they would never be free.
118 When they were living they had not known where they came from, and so
119 dead, they did not know how to get to dry land. I put you in here so that if
120 your spirit ever wandered, you would know where home was. (244)

121 The memory of past haunts even through her dreams. Additionally, the novel’s
122 cyclical structure concludes with the meeting of the descendants of Marjorie and
123 Marcus in the present-day Ghana, implying the potential for reunion and healing. As a
124 result, this text bridges the gap created by colonial violence. *Homegoing*

125 acknowledges trauma and centers marginalized memories, offering pathways for
126 identity reconstruction and cultural recovery.

127 **Fiction as Decolonial Archive**

128 Gyasi's *Homegoing* ultimately lauds for the unique ability of fiction to heal and
129 recover the postcolonial history. While traditional archives are bounded by
130 institutional, political and ideological constraints, fiction is fluid, imaginative, and
131 capable of embodying complex, contradictory histories. Gyasi's work also contends
132 the binaries of history and fiction, suggesting that storytelling--- from the perspective
133 of a marginalized section---is an essential form of knowledge production.

134 **Conclusion**

135 Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* is a debut ¹ novel that follows the descendants of two
136 half-sisters in 18th-century Ghana, Effia and Esi, who are separated at birth. The book
137 traces their lineage through centuries of history, with one branch of the family
138 experiencing life in a slave fort while married to an Englishman, and the other sold
139 into slavery and sent to America. The story moves through both Ghanaian and
140 American history, covering the slave trade, the Civil War, ² the Great Migration, and
141 20th-century Harlem.

142 Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* exemplifies the power of postcolonial fiction as tool
143 for historical recovery and the creation of alternative archives. By recreating silenced
144 history across the continents and centuries. This literary text challenges the epistemic
145 violence of colonial archives and reinstates the voice of those erased by empire or
146 slavery. As postcolonial societies continue to grapple with legacies of colonial
147 violence, literature serves as illuminating and vital archive-- one that not only protects
148 historical memory but also transforms and empowers.

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