

Two Souls, One Blood: Examining Identity Fragmentation in the African American Experience through Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

Djawida REBAA¹

University of Oran1 (Ahmed Ben Bella) Algeria

ORCID iD: [0009-0004-0140-7061](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0140-7061)

rebaa.djawida@univ-oran1.dz

Submission : 20.08.2025 | Acceptance : 01.11.2025 | Publication : 21.02.2026

Abstract

Emerging from colonial displacements, the African diaspora uncovers the rich and complicated patterns of a long history of migration that was shaped by centuries of colonial influence and oppression. Far beyond the mere physical dislocation of populations, the African diaspora emphasizes the long-term social, cultural and mainly psychological effects of colonial systems on identity, memory and resistance beyond geographic boundaries. Its main and interconnected themes revolve around the lasting quest for identity, belonging amidst displacement, cultural hybridity and multigenerational trauma reflecting the complex experiences of people of African descent living outside the continent. Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* serves as an excellent case in point. The novel profoundly examines the persistent influences of colonialism and the African diaspora, thereby securing its position in the literary canons of Postcolonial and African diaspora studies. This research paper seeks to examine Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* through a postcolonial lens. It takes as its chief concern to illuminate that the African American diasporic experience is one of fragmentation and is marked by a rupture of identity. What is more, the divide is not simply physical but it also manifests as a deep psychological wound for individuals who seek to navigate their African roots with their adopted American or European reality represented by the new order. Gyasi eloquently illustrates this conflict, passed down through various generations, through her successful selection of characters that are not portrayed as whole selves but rather as two souls, a condition that arises as a result of their arduous efforts to reconcile their past with their present.

Keywords: African American fragmentation, dislocation, double consciousness, duality, intersectionality

Introduction

It is commonplace to note that diaspora studies is a modern interdisciplinary field. It is concerned with voicing the realities of people as well as communities displaced from their country of origin due to migration, forced relocation or historical events like slavery or colonialization. This academic field has flourished in the late twentieth century as scholars started to investigate how these communities maintain strong ties to their roots while adapting to life in novel environments. Central themes in diaspora studies include identity formation,

cultural hybridity, memory and the ongoing negotiation between home and belonging that are strongly rooted in the immigrant experience.

The African diaspora, more specifically, refers to the movement of African peoples across the globe, characterized by forced migration, cultural adaptation, and persistent connections to ancestral homelands. This typical field of study illuminates how the relocation of people of African descent, largely initiated by the slave trade, has influenced history, culture and society. Through this movement, interconnected societies emerged across continents, fundamentally shaping senses of self and contributing to the emergence of hybrid identities. Central to the African American diasporic experience are themes that deeply engage with the challenges of displacement, migration, colonialism, cultural memory, generational trauma, adaptation, survival and the ongoing quest for belonging across generations and continents. Yaa Gyasi's body of work, especially her acclaimed novel *Homegoing* provides a vivid exploration of this reality.

The literary arena of African diaspora is shaped by a multitude of literary voices whose works collectively elucidate common threads and complexities of this global phenomenon. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison holds a preeminent position within this literary landscape. Her quintessential novel *Beloved* illuminates the deep scars of slavery and its multigenerational trauma and impact on the African American identity. Additionally, Chinua Achebe, though rooted in Nigerian narratives, provides a solid framework for understanding the African societies destabilized by colonialism, a historical disruption that was at the origin of their displacement. Contemporary authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with novels like *Americanah* addresses modern transnational experiences struggling with immigration, cultural assimilation and identity crisis for diasporic Africans in the modern world.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, using Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* as the primary source to explore themes of identity, memory, and diaspora. Selected academic articles on *Homegoing* serve as secondary sources, providing critical and theoretical insights that deepen the analysis. This research paper seeks to examine Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* through a postcolonial lens. It takes as its chief concern to illuminate that the African diasporic experience is one of fragmentation and is marked by a rupture of identity. What is more, the divide is not simply physical but it also manifests as a deep psychological wound for individuals who seek to navigate their African roots with their adopted American or European reality represented by the new order. The main research questions that set the study are:

- 1) How does Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* illustrate W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness through its portrayal of characters negotiating identities between African heritage and Western modernity?
- 2) How does *Homegoing* depict the fragmentation of identity, particularly through the motifs of dual selves and divided souls, across multiple generations within the African American diasporic experience?
- 3) In what ways do traumatic experiences, forced migration, and cultural displacement influence the formation and evolution of bifurcated or divided identities among the characters in Gyasi's narrative?

1. Ya Gyasi's *Homegoing*: A Glimpse

The critical reception of *Homegoing* has been notably varied, encompassing studies that examine the novel through the lenses of trauma, multigenerational narratives, post memory, ecocriticism, the function of sexuality in healing and a host of other critical lenses. According to Fedeli (2024, p.02), a widely accepted perspective on Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) posits that the novel serves as a literary platform, articulating the experiences of individuals frequently marginalized and subjugated by white supremacist and patriarchal structures. Correspondingly, Van Rens (2023, p.768) suggests that *Homegoing* moves beyond typical trauma literature, describing the novel instead as a post-memorial family saga that redefines how we understand such narratives. Van Rens' (2023) study emphasises the central role of postmemory within the novel in the process of transmission of experiences from one generation to another.

Additionally, Rogers Asempasah et al. (2022) use an ecocritical lens to analyze *Homegoing*, asserting that the novel exposes the destructive environmental consequences of colonialism alongside its human cost. They argue that Gyasi portrays a destructive interaction between people and the natural world, showing how the exploitation driven by colonialism endangers human health and makes protecting the environment essential.

Mohamed Adil Mahmoud's (2023) article entitled *Gender Discrimination Against Women in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing* uses feminist and transnational frameworks to reveal the hardships faced by the novel's female figures. The study details how these women encounter diverse types of gender inequality, including marginalization, victimization, and sexual violence, in both their Ghanaian and American experiences depicted in the text. Adding to the examination of gender in *Homegoing*, Jweid (2023) offers a feminist perspective, suggesting that Gyasi portrays the severe oppression of Black women throughout history. He argues the novel gives voice to their overlooked experiences whereby Gyasi uses her narrative writing style to illuminate the specific challenges and ordeals faced by Black women.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* unfolds through interconnected chapters that trace the lives of descendants of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, illuminating key themes and a plethora of concerns across generations. In fact, *Homegoing* tells a multigenerational narrative story about the lasting effects of the slave trade, tracing the divergent lives of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi from eighteenth century Ghana and their descendants across Ghana and the United States. The opening chapters highlight how the paths of both protagonists split, with Effia remaining in Africa, while Esi sent to America as a slave.

Born in the Fante village of Ghana, Effia is married to a British governor stationed at Cape Coast Castle. She lives a life of relative comfort on the upper floors, unaware of the horrific trade occurring beneath her. Effia's half-sister, Esi, is captured and brutally imprisoned in the dungeons of the very same Cape Coast Castle. She is soon sold into the transatlantic slave trade, destined for the crushing reality of slavery in America. Through their children and grandchildren, Gyasi creates two separate family lines that deeply explore the connected yet different lives of those who stayed in Africa and those who were forced to move to other lands. Indeed, the protagonists' separate journeys are of importance because they create two distinct family lines, showing how slavery's pain, questions of who you are,

and the search for a place to belong continued through many generations in both Africa and America.

Esi's descendants in America consistently strive for better lives, yet face insurmountable obstacles, frequently obstructed by forces beyond their control. This reflects how the abolition of slavery merely transmuted the nature of oppression, leading to sustained marginalization despite individual efforts to establish a more prosperous future for their successors as exemplified by H's capture under convict leasing and subsequent generations' struggles with systemic marginalization. In stark contrast, characters remaining in Africa struggle to escape the deep consequences of British colonial entanglement, often depicted symbolically. James' rejection of his lineage results in a life of utmost difficulty that spans three generations. Following the accidental and tragic loss of his daughter Abena, his granddaughter Akua struggles with a fractured self. Her persistent nightmares serve as evidence that the fragmented identity of the African-American subject appears on the surface when past tragedies and traumas are not healed.

2. One Blood: Two Souls, Two Thoughts

Double consciousness, introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), serves as a crucial framework for understanding fragmented identity within the African American diasporic experience. It articulates the internal conflict experienced by African Americans as they navigate a society that imposes a dual identity upon them. In other terms, the concept of double consciousness describes the inner conflict faced by African diasporic individuals who see themselves through their own cultural identity and through the lens of a dominant, often oppressive, society. This dual awareness creates a tension between pride in ancestral heritage and the struggle to confront racial prejudice and social exclusion. Du Bois's concept highlights the challenge of balancing these two selves without fully losing either, revealing the complex psychological experience of living between worlds. He famously describes this phenomenon as:

One ever feels his twoness, 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, 1903, p. 38).

This statement by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) introduces his enduring concept of double consciousness, a core idea in understanding the African American identity. Du Bois explains the constant inner divide felt by black individuals in a society marked by racial divisions. This twoness, in Du Bois's words, means always being aware of oneself as both an American and as a black person, with these two parts often pulling in different directions and creating warring ideals. This internal struggle comes from being a citizen while consistently being viewed and judged by the prevailing white society, causing a divided soul within one person. Accordingly, the excerpt conveys the mental burden of facing systemic racism, where maintaining a sense of self demands persistent strength to avoid being torn apart by these opposing forces.

Scholars have expanded upon Du Bois's insight, highlighting its enduring relevance. By way of illustration, Meer (2019) interprets it through recognition theory, underscoring the need for social acknowledgment in forming racial identity. On the other hand, Gordon (2017) analyzes how racial visibility and invisibility complicate self-perception for marginalized groups. With an eye to Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, the notion of two souls, two selves captures the duality and internal conflict experienced by characters living in the African diaspora. This specific theme reflects how individuals embody divided identities shaped by a variety of factors including history, cultural displacement, and inherited trauma. The idea of having two souls or two selves demonstrates the existence of contrasting forces within one person or self, a tension between past and present, heritage and adaptation, memory and survival.

Homegoing brings to the surface a selection of characters that carry within them a split identity formed by being caught between two opposing forces. One self is deeply connected to ancestral roots, traditions, and collective history, while the other self must adapt to new environments shaped by colonialism, slavery, or migration. This duality creates a persistent internal struggle as characters negotiate who they are in the face of cultural loss and relocation. The two souls or in Du Bois's eyes the twoness also symbolize the tension between private, emotional experiences and public identities shaped by external forces like racism, oppression, and social expectations. Characters live with this divide, rarely fully able to merge the two selves, leading to feelings of alienation, confusion, but also resilience in the face of loss.

The shaping of fractured and evolving identities across generations in the African diaspora is widely influenced by a plethora of interconnected factors. Indeed, a contemporary literature review on African diasporic identity negotiation foregrounds the complex interplay of displacement, colonialism, cultural loss, generational memory, systemic oppression, and hybrid identity formation as crucial shaping forces. These interwoven elements are eloquently highlighted in diasporic literary writings, illustrating the characters' perpetual negotiation of fractured and evolving identities across generational divides.

Correspondingly, scholarship emphasizes displacement not only as a physical rupture caused by the transatlantic slave trade and migrant movements but also as a deep-rooted psychological and cultural dislocation that destabilizes traditional collective identities. Paul Gilroy (1993), in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, conceptualizes the transatlantic slave trade as a foundational disruption that creates fragmented and hybrid identities characterized by cultural displacement and ongoing negotiation between ancestral and diasporic experiences. Similarly, Hartman (2007) explores displacement as a traumatic rupture in his influential work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* emphasizing how the psychological scars of forced migration sever individuals from historical roots and cultural continuity.

As a matter of fact, colonial legacies as Nwabara (2018) posits continue to influence identity formation by enforcing nationalist and racial hierarchies that marginalize African-derived cultures and disrupt intergenerational transmission of heritage. Additionally, the loss of culture is actively challenged through remembering. Hall (1990) argues that generational

memory serves as a crucial means for cultural survival and opposition, ensuring the preservation of diasporic narratives that are indispensable for communal unity.

In addition to this, hybrid identity formation is central in contemporary diasporic fiction analyses, and is framed through the notion of the third space by Homi K. Bhabha (1994). It emphasizes the fluid and liminal nature of selfhood that challenges fixed notions of identity. Bhabha (1994) posits that this third space emerges as a site of negotiative hybridity, where conflicting cultural identities intersect, producing a space for resistance and redefinition. In diasporic fiction, this notion is often reflected through narratives that portray fractured or divided selves, as characters navigate between their ancestral origins and the host society, embodying a continuous process of negotiation.

3. Fractured Selves in *Homegoing*

As formerly highlighted, within the canon of diasporic writing, a foundational basis is the demonstration of identity fluidity. Literary creations reveal that diasporic subjects occupy a liminal space, unable to be fully defined by either their origins or their adopted cultures, resulting in identities that are not static but rather adaptable and evolving. This conceptual framework is vividly mirrored in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, as the novel's thorough characterization of divided selves brings to the surface critical questions regarding belonging, the spirit of resistance and the ongoing negotiation of cultural ties.

From the novel's opening pages, the themes of rupture and separation are central to the narrative. Maame's escape from Fante territory into Asante land initiates a generational divide, positioning her as the archetypal mother of a fractured lineage. The brutality of slavery not only severs her immediate family ties but also mirrors the broader historical division of Africa into those who remained and those who were forcibly taken. Gyasi captures this duality through a unique structural choice. The novel alternates between the two-family lines, gradually bringing these separate stories together in the final chapters.

In a similar spirit, Abronoma, the captive slave girl in Esi's household, vividly mirrors the metaphorical separation and duality of Esi and Effia as separated sisters in her words: "*And in my village we have a saying about separated sisters. They are like a woman and her reflection, doomed to stay on opposite sides of the pond*". (Gyasi, 2016, p.39) Abronoma's words do more than just capture the themes of separation and duality; they also foreshadow Esi's forced journey across the Atlantic into slavery. Much like the sisters mentioned in the proverb, Effia, Esi, and their descendants remain on opposing shores of history until Marcus and Marjorie finally meet.

Within the opening chapters of the novel, Gyasi establishes a contrast between two sisters, whose different destinies serve as a reflection on trauma of the Atlantic slave trade. By starting with a birth and ending with a death, Effia's journey symbolizes the transformation of Africa. It illustrates the move from traditional life to a new reality marked by conflict and the lasting effects of family trauma. As a matter of fact, Effia Otcher, one of the main characters in the novel, was born during a fire that destroyed much of her father's village. While her parents kept the details of her birth a secret, the villagers believed the fire was a sign that the "*baby was born of the fire*" and she was cursed (Gyasi, 2016, p.03). This superstition creates

a sense of isolation for Effia from the very beginning of her life as she is rejected by her own community. Effia's beauty leads James Collins, a British officer, to propose a marriage and offers an incredibly high price "*more than had been offered for any other Fante woman in this village or the next*" (Gyasi, 2016, p.03).

Strategic marriages were often used to build strong ties between African tribes and European slave traders. For Effia, this union is not a personal choice but a systemic imposition; her life becomes a testament to the fragmented self. She is forced to live in a state of internal division, existing as a link between two worlds—one of her ancestors and one of her oppressors—while belonging fully to neither. Effia's life changes from a period of trauma to a more stable one where she is loved by James. But her comfort is built on a terrible reality: the slave trade operating beneath her feet. She struggles with the fact that her husband is part of a system that sells women who "*looked like her and smelled like her*" (Gyasi, 2016, p.25). This creates a deep internal conflict, as she finds herself enjoying a lifestyle supported by a trade she is unable to challenge.

When Effia reappears as a grandmother, she acts as the moral guide for her grandson, James. Recognizing the blood and violence that have built their family's status, she encourages him to "*make a new way*" (Gyasi, 2016, p.107). This moment is a direct confrontation with the divided self that has haunted her since she first entered the Castle. By encouraging James to walk away from the past, she is attempting to bridge the gap between their family's ancestral roots and the reality they inhabit, hoping to finally heal the fracture caused by their complicity in the trade. Indeed, Effia knows her family has lived two different lives, one of wealth and one of guilt, and she believes that by leaving the past behind, James can finally become a whole person again. In doing so, Effia seeks to end the state of being divided that has defined them. She recognizes that true peace is impossible as long as their success is tied to the suffering of others.

Moreover, Effia's half-sister Esi represents the tragic division of the self-caused by the slave trade. Once a beloved daughter in a happy home, she is suddenly cast into a filthy dungeon to await transport to America. This sudden shift from safety to the misery of capture and sexual violence fractures her identity. When Tansi shares her fears of the captors' cruelty in her words: "*white men are going to eat them like goats*" (Gyasi, 2016, p.35) it emphasizes Esi's total loss of control. Her life becomes split between the memory of her African home and the traumatic reality of her enslavement. In fact, Esi's family is known for their fear of the deep blue ocean. This fear started with the long, terrible journey on slave ships to America. Millions of people died on these ships from sickness, hunger, or violence, and were buried at sea. Marcus's father words elucidate this reality as follows: "*What did a black man want to swim for? The ocean floor was already littered with black men*" (Gyasi, 2016, p.284) The tension of enslavement and rape created a divided self for Esi. She was no longer the whole person she was in Africa; instead, she was split between her old life at home and her new life as a slave. By being forced across the water, Esi's sense of self was fractured. Indeed, part of her remained with the family she lost, while the other part had to survive a brutal new reality in America.

Another fictional instance of the fractured self in Gyasi's *Homegoing* is eloquently rendered in the mixed identity crisis of Quey as well as his lack of a clear sense of belonging. He is born to Effia and James Collins. As a character of mixed heritage, his identity is split by the demands of his British and African roots. Quey's internal struggle as a fruit of two worlds, caught between his Fante heritage and his British upbringing, is vividly captured in his reflections on belonging. Gyasi illustrates this tension through Quey's own words, which highlight his deep sense of isolation thusly:

Quey had wanted to cry, but that desire embarrassed him. He knew that he was one of the half-caste children of the Castle, and, like the other half-caste children, he could not fully claim either half of himself, neither his father's whiteness nor his mother's blackness. Neither England nor the Gold Coast. (Gyasi, 2016, p.65)

Quey experiences a profound sense of isolation as a child, largely because he feels alienated from both his English and Fante roots. While he briefly discovers a sense of community within his mother's village, this newfound vulnerability allows Fifi to exploit Quey's dual heritage and makes of him an easy target. To this end and by taking advantage of Quey's connection to both worlds, Fifi pushes him into an unhappy marriage for political gain, causing Quey to lose touch with who he truly is.

This was how they lived there, in the bush: Eat or be eaten. Capture or be captured. Marry for protection. Quey would never go to Cudjo's village. He would not be weak. He was in the business slavery, and sacrifices had to be made. (Gyasi, 2016, p.69)

By the end of the third chapter, Quey's future is no longer his own, as Fifi has forced him into an arranged marriage. Quey eventually accepts his position in the slave trade, adopting the identity of a powerful village leader. While he finally gains a sense of belonging, this moment highlights a painful sacrifice: to be a part of this system, Quey must enslave his own heart. He gives up his love for Cudjo to maintain an appearance of strength required by the system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has attempted to illuminate the fragmentation of the African American subject with an eye to Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. In this novel, the protagonists are portrayed as embodying two souls or divided selves, reflecting their connection to African ancestral roots and their lived realities shaped by displacement and colonial histories. Yaa Gyasi uses the lives of Effia and Esi to elucidate how trauma can split a person's identity in two halves. For Effia, the divided self is born from the guilt of living a comfortable life built on the suffering of her own people. For Esi, the split comes from the pain of being stolen from her home and losing her connection to her past. This duality reveals

the fragmented nature of identity strongly rooted in the diaspora which becomes a shadow that follows their family lines across the ocean and through the centuries.

References

- Asempasah, R., Sam, C. A., & Abelumkemah, B. A. (2022). A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) and Kwakuvi Azasu's *The Slave Raiders* (2004). *Cogent Arts and Humanities*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2145669>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. A. C. McClurg & Co.
- Fedeli, S. (2024). *Revising the Trauma of Slavery and its Legacy: An Analysis of the Function of Dreams in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing*.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press.
- Gordon, L. R. (2017). Racializing Visibility and Double Consciousness. *Social Dynamics*, 43(1), 12-29.
- Gyasi, Yaa. (2016). *Homegoing*. YNG Books
- Hall, S (1990). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed).
- Hartman, S. (2007). *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Jweid, A. N. a. A. (2023). Mind of Darkness: Social Equality and Self-Autonomy as Feminist Premises of the Concept of Courageous Code in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. *English Language and Literature Studies*, 13(3), 29. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n3p29>
- Mahmoud, M. A. (2023). Gender Discrimination Against Women in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. *Iconic Research And Engineering Journals*, 6(12), 307-315.
- Meer, N. (2019). W. E. B. Du Bois, Double Consciousness and the Spirit of Recognition. *Sociology*, 53(6), 1117-1133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118765370>
- Nwabara, O. (2018). Nigerian Diasporic Transformations of Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 12(1), 67-85.
- Van Rens, D. (2023). "This ain't the way it's s'posed to be": Negotiating trauma through postmemory and implication in Yaa Gyasi's *homegoing*. *English Studies*, 104(5), 766–788. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838x.2023.2234218>