

# Intergenerational Negotiations of In-Betweenness, Mimicry and Ambivalence in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

Dr. Hanane Boumaraf  
ISILC Laboratory, Biskra  
Mohamed Kheider University of Biskra, Algeria

## Abstract

This paper examines the construction of postcolonial subjectivities in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* through Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity. Focusing on the intergenerational trajectories of the descendants of Effia in Ghana and Esi in America, the study investigates how colonialism, slavery, and diaspora shape complex modes of identification that resist fixed notions of identity and belonging. Employing a qualitative textual analysis, the paper explores the way acts of mimicry generate ambivalent forms of identification, creating liminal spaces in which inherited cultural values, colonial legacies, and diasporic experiences intersect and are renegotiated across generations. Within these in-between spaces, hybrid subjectivities emerge not as mere combinations of cultures but as dynamic processes of cultural translation and negotiation that unsettle stable categories of selfhood. The analysis demonstrates that *Homegoing* destabilizes binary oppositions such as colonizer and colonized, African and American, and tradition and modernity by portraying identity as historically contingent, relational, and continually reconfigured. Ultimately, the paper argues that Gyasi's novel reveals how colonial encounters and their enduring aftermath produce intergenerational forms of hybridity and ambivalence that simultaneously expose the instability of colonial authority and open new possibilities for cultural identification and belonging.

**Keywords:** Ambivalence; hybridity; mimicry; postcolonial subjectivity; unbelonging

## 1. Introduction

At the heart of twenty-first century African-American literature lies a sustained interrogation of identity, particularly the tensions that arise between cultural erasure and the pursuit of self-definition. Through her fiction, Yaa Gyasi traces the intergenerational impact of colonial encounters, depicting how mimicry and ambivalence shape the formation of hybrid identities amid enduring structures of racial and cultural inequality. Gyasi's debut novel *Homegoing* (2016) chronicles the diverging fates of two half-sisters and their descendants across seven generations, revealing slavery's legacy through episodic stories about systemic oppression that reshapes memory and remaps home. These oscillations in identity formation align closely with Homi Bhabha's notions of mimicry, ambivalence, and cultural hybridity. Accordingly,

this paper argues that *Homegoing*, with its diasporic and postcolonial dimensions, depicts identity not as fixed or singular but as a fluid and negotiated construct shaped by mimicry, cultural ambivalence and hybridity.

Acclaimed for its innovative narrative structure, expansive historical scope, and emotional depth, Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* has gained considerable critical attention within contemporary Black diasporic fiction. Spanning more than two centuries and tracing the divergent lineages of two half-sisters, the novel offers a transgenerational meditation on slavery, colonialism, and diaspora. Recent scholarship has increasingly engaged with themes such as intergenerational trauma, internalized racism, and the enduring legacies of displacement.

Notably, Nathaniel Welnhof, in "The Shadow of Slavery: A Look into How *Homegoing* Depicts the Structural Oppression Apparent in American and Ghanaian Society" (2017), examines the persistent historical and cultural legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery in shaping African American experiences. Welnhof reads Gyasi's text as a representation of systemic oppression operating across both American and Ghanaian contexts. He contends that Western institutional structures, such as education, Christianity, and legal systems, function as mechanisms of domination that reinforce racial hierarchies and perpetuate Black subjugation (pp. 7-10). His analysis situates *Homegoing* within a broader socio-historical framework, emphasizing how structural inequalities are reproduced across generations, thereby constraining the possibilities of mobility and belonging.

While Welnhof's approach is primarily thematic and historically grounded, Phyllis Taoua's "The Chance of Freedom: Of Storytelling and Memory in Neo-slave Narratives" (2021) shifts attention to the novel's narrative form and its engagement with memory. Taoua identifies *Homegoing* as a distinctive neo-slave narrative, foregrounding its use of multiple interlinked storylines that trace the lives of enslaved individuals and their descendants. Unlike more conventional neo-slave narratives that follow a singular protagonist's linear trajectory toward emancipation, as exemplified by Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, Gyasi's text resists narrative centralization. Instead, it constructs a polyphonic narrative that reflects the dislocations of diasporic history. Taoua argues that the novel's emphasis on collective memory, rather than individual experience, enables a reimagining of historical continuity that is both fragmented and interconnected (p. 194).

Adopting a psychoanalytic lens, Dirk van Rens, in "This Ain't the Way It's S'posed to Be: Negotiating Trauma through Postmemory and Implication in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*" (2023), conceptualizes the novel as a "postmemorial family saga." Drawing on theories of postmemory, van Rens suggests that trauma is not confined to direct experience but is transmitted across generations through affective and narrative

means. He emphasizes the novel's dual focus on roots and routes, arguing that this dynamic complicates conventional trauma narratives by foregrounding both origin and movement. Furthermore, van Rens highlights what he terms an "aesthetics of confrontation," wherein characters engage in acts of storytelling and confession as mechanisms of self-recovery. The study argues that Gyasi's narrative challenges Cathy Caruth's influential assertion that trauma is fundamentally unspeakable, illustrating how fragmented and incomplete acts of narration can serve as meaningful strategies for negotiating and working through traumatic experience (pp. 766–772).

Finally, in "Welcome Home: The Unhomely in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*," Wegerbauer (2025) examines the novel through a psychoanalytic and decolonial framework, drawing on Freud's concept of the uncanny and Bhabha's notion of the unhomely. The study argues that home functions as a contested space shaped by colonial violence, displacement, and inherited trauma while also offering possibilities for healing and reconciliation. Although Wegerbauer's analysis provides valuable insights into the psychological dimensions of belonging, its primary focus remains the concept of the unhomely (pp. 69-70). Building on this scholarship, the present study extends the application of Bhabha's postcolonial theory by examining the roles of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence in the construction and negotiation of postcolonial identities in *Homegoing*.

Despite these rich and varied contributions, a significant critical gap remains in postcolonial readings of *Homegoing* that engage substantively with Homi K. Bhabha's cultural theory. While concepts such as hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry are highly relevant to the novel's exploration of identity and displacement, they have not been sufficiently applied to address the complexities of Gyasi's characters. In particular, there is a need for a more nuanced analysis of the characters' oscillations between past and present, as well as their negotiation of in-betweenness within culturally hybrid spaces. Such a perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how identities in *Homegoing* are not fixed but are continuously produced through processes of negotiation, translation, and transformation.

## **2. Locating the Third Space: Key Concepts in Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Thought**

Postcolonialism is, at its core, a critical examination of the power relations, cultural consequences, and enduring legacies produced by colonial domination. Rather than viewing colonialism as a historical event confined to the past, postcolonial theory investigates how colonial structures continue to shape political systems, social hierarchies, cultural identities, and modes of representation in formerly colonized societies. Among the most influential theorists in this field, Homi K. Bhabha challenges conventional understandings of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the center and the periphery, and the self and the Other. In his landmark

book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduces key concepts in postcolonial theory, most notably colonial ambivalence and cultural hybridity. Adopting a deconstructionist perspective, Bhabha argues that such oppositions function as “false binaries” because they are neither naturally fixed nor entirely stable. These binaries depend on the privileging of one term over another, yet the superiority of the dominant side can only exist through its constant dependence on what it excludes or marginalizes. Consequently, colonial authority is revealed as unstable and ambivalent. Furthermore, influenced by poststructuralist theory, Bhabha conceptualizes postcolonial identity as a “hybrid construction” emerging within the “Third Space” (Guerin et al., 2011, p. 364). This liminal space between cultures unsettles rigid definitions of identity and assumptions of cultural purity or authenticity.

Bhabha’s contribution to the development of postcolonialism lies in his focus on the “psychic mechanisms” underlying processes of colonial representation. From a psychological angle, he argues that the colonized fails to replicate the colonizer’s culture and becomes an ambivalent image, “almost the same but not quite.” This ambivalence of mimicry destabilizes the colonizer’s hegemony and disrupts the so-called project of civilizing the Other (Selden et al., 2005, 226-227). The imperfect imitation produces a fractured sense of self and fosters the internalization of inferiority and otherness. As a result, the colonized individual becomes trapped between two identities, belonging fully to neither culture.

In this context, the very failure of mimicry paradoxically becomes a source of resistance against colonial authority. According to Bhabha (2004), this “misreading” of the colonizer’s codes constitutes a source of weakness for colonial power (p. 95). Because imitation is inevitably incomplete, colonial authority can never fully control the colonized subject. Instead, mimicry exposes the instability of colonial dominance by revealing that colonial identity itself depends on repetition and performance. As Loomba (2015) argues, colonial identities are unstable and marked by contradictions that undermine the authority colonial discourse seeks to establish (pp. 149–150). Colonial power thus becomes vulnerable to contradiction, as the colonizer simultaneously desires and fears resemblance in the colonized subject.

Building on this argument, Homi Bhabha asserts that colonialism should not be understood as a one-sided process in which power merely transforms the colonized subject, but rather as a reciprocal encounter in which both the colonizer and the colonized are reshaped within the colonial contact zone. This cultural dislocation affects both parties: the colonizer, like the colonized, experiences forms of alienation and instability within the colonial contact, as Guerin et al. (2011) observe, becoming “alienated from their essence, thus destabilizing colonialism” (p. 364). The colonial relationship therefore produces identities marked by anxiety, dependence, and mutual incompleteness. Within this dynamic, interactions between the Self and the

Other are also structured through racialized stereotyping, which plays a central role in identity formation under colonial discourse by reducing the colonized to inferior images while reinforcing colonial superiority. However, because these representations are inherently repetitive and internally paradoxical, they ultimately expose the fragility and instability of colonial ideology itself.

In a related vein, Bhabha's adoption of the Bakhtinian notion of hybridity destabilizes the understanding of cultural purity and even colonial superiority. Bakhtin's hybridity means the presence of different voices in the same story which challenges "univocal forms of authority." In a postcolonial context, this formalist conception indicates that the dominant discourse is flawed with the cultural hybridization which is a form of counter-colonial resistance in the sense that the product of this encounter reflect neither identity. Rather, these hybrid forms occupy an in-between space where neither the colonizer nor the colonized can preserve or even claim cultural purity (Selden et al., 2005, p. 227).

Thus, Bhabha's postcolonial theory offers a productive framework for examining the fractured and negotiated identities that emerge throughout Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. His conception of hybridity challenges essentialist understandings of identity by emphasizing that subjectivity is constituted through encounters with cultural difference and shaped within unequal relations of power (2004, p. 2). In colonial and postcolonial contexts, this process often produces a condition of unbelonging, as subjects find themselves estranged both from the cultural structures imposed by colonial authority and from a precolonial past that can no longer be fully recovered. The in-between condition that characterizes such subjectivities is therefore not merely a site of loss or exclusion; it is also the space in which new forms of cultural meaning and selfhood are continually produced.

### **3. Neither Here, Nor There: Negotiating In-Betweenness in Gyasi's *Homegoing***

In *Homegoing*, identity is not inherited as a stable cultural essence but produced through a fractured genealogy that exposes the impossibility of recovering an unmediated origin after colonialism and slavery. Such a representation closely resonates with Bhabha's argument that cultural identity emerges in the "in-between" spaces of negotiation, where meanings remain fluid and cultural boundaries are continuously rearticulated (2004, p. 56). Rather than depicting hybridity as the fusion of separate cultural traditions, Gyasi presents it as a condition of ambivalent becoming, marked by displacement, discontinuity, and the persistent negotiation of histories that neither fully disappear nor cohere into a singular identity.

The earliest articulation of this condition appears as spatial and existential in-betweenness in Esi's story. Her capture and confinement in the Cape Coast Castle

dungeon place her in a threshold space where previous categories of belonging are violently suspended. The dungeon appears to function not merely as a site of physical imprisonment but as a symbolic structure of dislocation, where identity is stripped of communal anchoring and reduced to uncertainty. Esi learns to divide her existence into a rigid temporal opposition: "Before the Castle" and "Now." This splitting of selfhood signals the collapse of identity as continuity, replacing it with a fractured consciousness structured by historical rupture. In her recollection, she moves from being "the daughter of Big Man and his third wife, Maame" and "the prettiest girl in the village" to a situation in which she is reduced to "dust" and "thin air" (Gyasi, 2016, pp. 46-47). This temporal division constructs Esi as a subject who exists between two irreconcilable states of being: a remembered past that can no longer be inhabited and a present defined by erasure. In this sense, in-betweenness is not only spatial but deeply temporal, as identity becomes suspended across a rupture that cannot be repaired or unified.

Esi's selfhood is produced through a perpetual oscillation between memory and annihilation, where neither "Before" nor "Now" can fully contain her existence. Esi's case therefore establishes the foundational logic of in-betweenness in the novel: identity is not preserved through memory or origin but continuously destabilised by historical violence that reorganises subjectivity itself. The "Before/Now" structure becomes emblematic of a broader genealogical pattern in *Homegoing*, where each successive generation inherits identities marked by fragmentation, negotiating inherited histories and present realities within an ongoing condition of cultural in-betweenness.

Extending the spatiotemporal rupture first established in Esi's episode, Kojo's experience demonstrates how the condition of in-betweenness is transformed from an initial moment of violent displacement into a sustained juridical and psychological state of existence. While Esi embodies the fragmentation of identity through the division between "Before the Castle" and "Now," Kojo inherits the aftermath of this rupture in the form of a freedom that is structurally unstable and perpetually under threat. Kojo's life in Baltimore illustrates a form of precarious freedom, where emancipation is never fully secured but remains contingent upon racialised legal structures such as the Fugitive Slave Act. Although he is legally a free man in Baltimore, his sense of self is continually disrupted by the presence of enslaved individuals, as "every time Jo saw a slave in Baltimore, he saw himself, saw what his life would have been like had Ma Aku not taken him to freedom" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 173). This moment establishes a form of psychological doubling in which Kojo's identity is split between his present condition and an imagined enslaved version of himself. In this sense, subjectivity becomes a site of constant comparison rather than stable belonging.



Kojo gradually realizes that freedom is not an inherent state but a constructed designation, as his “free papers named him Kojo Freeman. Free man. Half the ex-slaves in Baltimore had the name.” The repetition of “Free man” exposes the contradiction between legal naming and lived reality, suggesting that freedom functions as a discursive label rather than an ontological condition. The final assertion that “tell a lie long enough and it will turn to truth” further destabilises the boundary between truth and fabrication, indicating that identity itself can be constructed through repetition and social acceptance (Gyasi, 2016, p. 173). This awareness forces Kojo to inhabit a space between legal categories, neither enslaved nor fully free, where identity is continuously negotiated under the pressure of surveillance and racial violence.

Kojo's experience of loss further intensifies the condition of in-betweenness by exposing the instability of emotional and familial belonging within a racially structured world. This is evident in his reluctant recognition that “Jo didn't want to accept what he was already starting to know in his heart. Anna and Baby H were gone” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 195). The coexistence of denial and growing awareness produces a fractured psychological temporality, placing Kojo in an in-between state where emotional resistance and historical recognition remain unresolved. The disappearance of Anna and Baby H marks not only a personal tragedy but also a disruption of familial continuity, where domestic life becomes a fragile structure exposed to the forces of racial violence and displacement. In particular, Baby H embodies the possibility of generational futurity, and his absence signals the interruption of historical transmission within the family line. Kojo's inability to fully process this loss reflects a deeper condition of suspended subjectivity, where the self remains trapped between attachment to a stable past and the irreversible collapse of that past into absence.

A similar negotiation of in-betweenness emerges in Quey's story though his liminal position is rooted less in displacement than in his uneasy mediation between African and colonial worlds. As a “half-caste child of the Castle,” he is unable to “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. 86). This articulation does not suggest hybridity as synthesis but rather the breakdown of colonial binaries that fail to secure a coherent positional identity. Quey is therefore not situated between two cultures as a balanced subject; instead, he emerges from their mutual failure to contain him. This instability is further reinforced through the colonial discourse surrounding “half-caste” identity, which frames mixed descent as inherently illegitimate and socially unstable. These narratives, along with the myths attached to children of mixed racial ancestry, shape Quey's understanding of himself from an early age. He grows up caught between different worlds, unable to fully identify with either one, and his sense of self becomes marked by uncertainty and division rather than coherence. In this respect, in-betweenness is not only an inner conflict but also a social condition that continually shapes and complicates his identity.

This instability is intensified through Quey's exposure to colonial spaces beyond the Gold Coast, where he witnesses the degraded conditions of racialized subjects in England. Observing how "black people lived in white countries," he encounters a global system of hierarchy that renders colonial violence visible and embodied. Yet this knowledge does not resolve his uncertainty; instead, it deepens it, as he recognizes both "the danger that waited across the Atlantic" and "the danger in himself," indicating that threat is no longer external but internalized (Gyasi, 2016, p. 95). His subsequent composure before his uncle, marked by silence and withdrawal, underscores a subject who navigates awareness without resolution. Quey's trajectory reveals a subject whose sense of belonging is continually destabilised by the inability of colonial categories to fully contain his divided position between inherited ties and institutional demands. Rather than achieving coherence through either identification or resistance, his experience is marked by ongoing disjunction between external performance and internal hesitation, exposing the limits of colonial systems in producing stable subjectivities.

As the descendant of histories marked by displacement and cultural fragmentation, Willie inherits an in-between condition that shapes her understanding of race, belonging, and selfhood. This condition becomes particularly visible in her encounter with Robert, whose mixed-race identity unsettles the binary categories through which she has long perceived the world. Observing him, Willie notes: "His father was the color of coffee, but Robert was the color of cream." She had "never seen both things in one family, both in one person" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 309). The significance of this moment lies not simply in Willie's surprise at racial mixture but in her recognition of an identity that exceeds established categories. The phrase "both things in one person" challenges the rigid separation between black and white that has structured her social reality, revealing identity as relational, unstable, and resistant to fixed classifications. The distinction Willie draws between seeing "white and black together" and seeing "both things in one person" is especially revealing: the former preserves boundaries between identities, whereas the latter dissolves those boundaries and exposes the limitations of binary thinking itself. Robert's presence does more than exemplify hybridity; it transforms Willie's own perspective. She can neither fully comprehend him through inherited racial assumptions nor dismiss the complexity he embodies. In this moment of uncertainty, Willie enters what Bhabha describes as an "in-between" space, a site where established meanings lose their authority and new forms of selfhood emerge through the articulation of cultural differences rather than through stable origins (2004, p. 2). Through this encounter, she comes to understand that identity is not fixed or easily defined by race, family, or belonging. Rather, it is constantly shaped and reshaped through the overlapping influences of history and culture.

This recognition later informs Willie's understanding of home and return. During her conversation with Carson, when the possibility of returning to an ancestral homeland is raised, she replies with striking certainty: "We can't go back to something we ain't



never been to in the first place. It ain't ours anymore. This is" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 393), as she gestures toward Harlem, "all of New York, all of America," Willie acknowledges that identity cannot be secured through a return to an authentic origin. Yet, neither does she claim the present as a complete or uncomplicated home. She accepts the difficult reality of existing between a past that remains inaccessible and a present that cannot fully resolve the legacies of displacement. Willie embodies the fluidity of postcolonial identity, revealing how the self is continually reconfigured through encounters with conflicting histories, memories, and cultural legacies (Bhabha, 2004, p. 2). Her belonging remains fluid and unresolved, not because she is without identity, but because her sense of self is formed in the space between loss and attachment, memory and presence, inherited histories and future possibilities. Rather than arriving at a fixed identity, she learns to live within these tensions and negotiate them continuously.

Willie's experience of in-betweenness across migration and return continues in Marjorie's story, where questions of belonging become even more deeply tied to both place and emotion. For Marjorie, hybridity is not simply an abstract idea of identity; it is something she feels in her everyday life, in the tension between familiarity and estrangement. This becomes particularly evident when she is asked whether she would return to Ghana. Before answering, she recalls a series of vivid images: her grandmother, the sea, Cape Coast Castle, and the bustling streets of Cape Coast, where "wide-hipped women selling fish," children calling "Ice water," and people moving through crowded spaces create a rich sensory memory of home. Yet these memories do not lead her to imagine a permanent return. Instead, she simply replies, "I don't think so" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 428). Her hesitation is significant because it reveals that Ghana, while emotionally important to her, is no longer an unquestioned home to which she can easily return. The place of origin has already been reshaped by distance, memory, and the changes brought about by living between different worlds.

Marjorie's explanation further intensifies this condition: "I mostly just feel like I don't belong there... I'm like them but different too. They can smell it on me" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 428). The language of "smell" is particularly significant, as it translates cultural difference into an embodied, almost involuntary marker of recognition. Belonging is no longer determined by geography or ancestry alone but is experienced as perceptible difference within the body itself. In Bhabha's terms, Marjorie inhabits the "interstices" of cultural difference, a space where identity is shaped through negotiation across overlapping histories and cultures rather than grounded in a single, fixed sense of belonging (2004, p.2). Marjorie's admission, "the way I don't fit here or there," encapsulates the ambivalence of diasporic identity, demonstrating that hybridity is not a stable reconciliation of cultures but an ongoing negotiation of difference. She inhabits an in-between space where belonging remains perpetually unsettled, as neither homeland nor host society offers complete acceptance.

The culmination of this in-betweenness is staged in the final encounter between Marjorie and Marcus at the shoreline, where Gyasi transforms hybridity from a conceptual condition into a fully embodied, spatial, and sensory experience. The scene is structured through a striking convergence of elemental oppositions: Marcus encounters “a dazzling fire with flames that licked out and up, crawling toward the water,” while the ocean extends “in all directions that his eye could see,” producing a landscape in which fire and water coexist without resolution (2016, p. 462). Rather than functioning as opposing forces, these elements constitute a shared liminal field in which identity is articulated through tension rather than synthesis. Fire evokes historical memory, trauma, and inherited violence, while water signals fluidity, movement, and continual becoming; together they produce a space where fixed boundaries are reconfigured.

Within this environment, Marcus’s movement into the water, “run underwater,” reinforces the embodiment of in-betweenness. The act of running, typically associated with direction and arrival, is transformed into immersion and disorientation, collapsing the distinction between progress and submersion. Water enters the body, “into his nose and stung his eyes,” underscoring that this is not a symbolic transition but a sensory destabilisation in which identity is experienced as continually shifting (Gyasi, 2016, p. 463). In this sense, the ocean symbolizes Bhabha’s “in-between” space, where subjectivity is neither fixed in origin nor secured in destination but produced through ongoing movement across thresholds.

Marjorie’s response intensifies this relational dynamic of becoming. Her entry into the water, “run, headlong, into the crashing waves,” signals not escape but immersion into instability itself. The shoreline becomes a site of encounter rather than division. When Marcus follows her into the sea, the exchange of the black stone necklace intensifies this symbolism: as Marjorie says “Have it” and later “Welcome home” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 464). The notion of home is redefined as a moment of relational recognition within motion rather than a stable point of return. The weight of the stone against Marcus’s chest contrasts with the fluid instability of the sea, suggesting that identity is formed through the tension between historical burden and continuous transformation.

Ultimately, *Homegoing* presents in-betweenness not as a condition to be overcome but as a lived reality that shapes identity across generations. Through characters such as Esi, Kojo, Quey, Willie, Marjorie, and Marcus, Gyasi shows that identity is never fixed or fully resolved. Instead, it is continuously formed through memory, loss, movement, and the ongoing negotiation of histories that remain present even as they change. In this way, belonging becomes less a return to a stable origin than a process of learning to live with complexity, contradiction, and becoming. It is precisely from this unstable space of identity that forms of mimicry and ambivalence emerge, revealing

the tensions that arise when individuals navigate colonial legacies while seeking their own sense of self.

#### 4. Neither This, Nor That: Mimicry and Ambivalence in Gyasi's *Homegoing*

In *Homegoing*, postcolonial identity is consistently shaped through the intertwined dynamics of mimicry and ambivalence, where subjects approximate dominant cultural norms while remaining marked by difference, and where belonging is simultaneously desired and unsettled. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's formulation of mimicry as "almost the same, but not quite" (2004, p. 122), the novel foregrounds identities that are produced through partial imitation, cultural translation, and persistent slippage rather than stable assimilation. At the same time, ambivalence structures these processes by generating conflicting attachments to inherited and adopted cultural positions, preventing any final resolution of identity.

Significantly, Effia's story indicates that mimicry and ambivalence do not arise in isolation but develop from a prior experience of displacement and unhomeliness. Once she leaves her native community and enters the Cape Coast Castle as the wife of James Collins, home ceases to function as a stable source of identity and belonging. Although the Castle offers comfort and social prestige, it simultaneously distances her from the cultural values, social relations, and traditions that had previously shaped her sense of self. Consequently, Effia inhabits a liminal position in which she is neither fully attached to her Fante origins nor entirely integrated into the colonial world she has entered.

More specifically, Effia's adaptation to colonial life is first manifested through language and ritual. During her marriage ceremony, she is compelled to repeat vows "she didn't mean in a language she didn't understand" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 24). The scene reveals that her entry into colonial society depends on performing customs whose meanings are not originally her own. Later, the narrator explains that she and James had been "trading languages"; he teaches her English while she teaches him Fante (Gyasi, 2016, p. 28). At first glance, this exchange appears reciprocal. However, the colonial context renders it unequal because English carries political authority and social prestige, whereas Fante remains associated with the private and domestic sphere. Effia learns the colonizer's language and gradually adapts to his world, yet this adaptation remains incomplete. Her joy in moments when she can "speak Fante as fast as she wanted" with "no one telling her to speak English" (Gyasi, 2016, p. 37) demonstrates that her attachment to her native language persists despite her immersion in colonial culture. Thus, mimicry does not culminate in complete assimilation; rather, it produces a partial and unstable resemblance that prevents Effia from fully becoming part of the colonial world, while also preventing her from remaining entirely outside it.

This failure of full adaptation generates a sustained condition of ambivalence. Although Effia benefits from the privileges of life in the Castle, her existence is shaped by the simultaneous presence and erasure of its underlying violence. The silence surrounding the dungeons, “No one ever mentioned the dungeons,” reveals that colonial comfort depends not on ignorance, but on selective refusal to articulate what is already structurally present. Within this environment, Effia cannot achieve full identification with the world she inhabits, as her awareness of its foundations continually disrupts any sense of stability. This tension is articulated in her question, “What sins did the white man carry with him?” (Gyasi, 2016, p. 37, 30), which signals not a late awakening but an already divided position toward colonial authority. Consequently, her relationship to the Castle is marked from the outset by ambivalence, in which proximity and discomfort, attachment and estrangement, coexist without resolution.

Furthermore, this ambivalence extends beyond the social sphere into the most intimate dimensions of Effia’s identity, particularly in the cultural and religious tensions that shape her relationship with James. Caught between inherited Fante beliefs and the Christian framework associated with the Castle, Effia becomes a site where competing epistemologies of meaning collide. This conflict is visible in everyday practices, especially in James’s rejection of African rituals such as the use of roots for fertility, which he interprets through a Christian moral lens as superstition or wrongdoing (Gyasi, 2016, p. 34). In contrast, Effia perceives these practices as part of her cultural inheritance, revealing a fundamental divergence in how both characters understand belief, tradition, and authority.

This divergence is further intensified by James’s tendency to evaluate the world through rigid moral binaries, in which practices are classified as either good or bad, civilized or uncivilized, Christian or non-Christian. Effia, however, resists this mode of interpretation. She does not fully adopt this oppositional logic, nor does she entirely reject it; instead, she remains unsettled by its reduction of complex cultural practices into fixed moral categories. The narrator’s suggestion that such judgments of “good or bad, white or black” feel like an impulse highlights Effia’s discomfort with this binary worldview (Gyasi, 2016, p. 35). She becomes increasingly aware of the violence embedded in classification itself, where cultural difference is translated into hierarchy. This refusal does not take the form of open resistance but rather manifests as an internal hesitation, a reluctance to accept the world as neatly divided along moral or racial lines. It is precisely this tension, between proximity to colonial logic and resistance to its categorizations, that deepens the ambivalence shaping her identity.

Following his mother’s emphasis on the impossibility of fully forgetting one’s origins, Quey’s subjectivity is further shaped by a condition in which colonial performance and internal division coexist without resolution. His position within the Castle and his role as a company man require a form of behavioural conformity that resembles mimicry,

as he is expected to act within the administrative logic of colonial trade, overseeing operations and maintaining the authority of the system. However, this outward functionality does not translate into stable identification with colonial expectations. Instead, his subjectivity remains marked by hesitation and internal fracture, revealing that what appears as compliance is never fully consolidated into assimilation.

This instability becomes visible in his interaction with Fiifi, where emotional vulnerability briefly interrupts the demand for composure. Although he momentarily hopes for recognition, “for just a second Quey wondered if his uncle had understood him,” this opening is quickly closed off as he withdraws into self-restraint, “trying to collect himself,” before performing social adequacy through a smile and polite departure (Gyasi, 2016, p. 95). The contrast between fleeting affect and immediate self-regulation exposes a split between interior feeling and exterior performance, suggesting that mimicry in Quey’s case remains incomplete. Rather than producing a coherent colonial subject, the demand to perform competence and control results in a fragile and unstable enactment of identity, where outward conformity masks internal dissonance. This moment illustrates a form of ambivalence embedded within Quey’s lived experience of colonial structures. He is required to embody the functional rationality of the colonial system, yet this role does not eliminate the persistence of affective ties and personal uncertainty. Instead, it produces a subject who operates within colonial mechanisms while remaining unable to fully inhabit them, thereby revealing mimicry not as successful imitation but as a destabilised and unfinished process of becoming.

The logic of mimicry in Quey’s experience becomes visible through moments where colonial cultural forms are adopted but cannot be fully stabilized within his subjectivity. As Bhabha argues, the “inappropriate appropriation” of the colonizer’s culture undermines its colonial hegemony (2004, p. 150), since imitation does not produce faithful reproduction but instead exposes the fragility of colonial authority through partial, displaced, or contextually unstable repetition. In Quey’s case, this dynamic emerges not as open resistance but as the subtle displacement of colonial forms within everyday interaction and self-performance. One of the clearest manifestations of this dynamic appears in Quey’s linguistic behaviour, where English surfaces as an involuntary marker of colonial affiliation rather than a fully mastered or consciously deployed tool of authority. When he “said in English, forgetting himself,” the narrative signals a moment in which language exceeds intentional control and becomes an embedded habit of colonial formation (Gyasi, 2016, p. 100). This linguistic slip does not simply indicate bilingual competence; rather, it reveals how colonial language operates as a form of internalized structure that surfaces unpredictably across different social spaces. However, this very recognition of Quey’s “British-like” speech by Cudjo destabilizes the assumed authority of English, repositioning it as a performed identity rather than a natural marker of superiority.

Within this interaction, mimicry does not produce assimilation into colonial norms but instead generates a visible gap between language and authority. English, when displaced into a non-colonial social context, seems to lose its institutional force and become a recognizable performance of colonial identity rather than its embodiment. This is precisely where Bhabha's notion of "inappropriate appropriation" becomes operative: colonial culture is repeated, but in a way that is no longer fully governed by its original structures of power. As a result, colonial hegemony is subtly undermined not through direct opposition but through the instability produced by its own replication in altered contexts.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* offers a compelling representation of postcolonial subjectivity as a dynamic and unfinished process shaped by histories of colonialism, slavery, and diaspora. Through the theoretical lens of Homi K. Bhabha, the novel reveals that identity cannot be understood as a fixed cultural essence or a stable inheritance passed unchanged across generations. Instead, identities emerge within liminal and contested spaces where mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity continuously reshape the relationship between self, history, and belonging.

The analysis of characters such as Esi, Effia, Quey, Kojo, Willie, Marjorie, and Marcus has shown that cultural identity in *Homegoing* is constituted through negotiation rather than resolution. These characters inhabit in-between spaces where inherited memories, colonial legacies, and contemporary realities intersect, producing subjectivities marked by displacement as well as possibility. Mimicry exposes the instability of colonial authority by revealing that imitation can never become complete assimilation, while ambivalence unsettles rigid oppositions between colonizer and colonized, home and exile, past and present. Hybridity, therefore, emerges not as a harmonious fusion of cultures but as an ongoing process of cultural translation that resists essentialist notions of identity and belonging.

Ultimately, *Homegoing* reaffirms the enduring relevance of Bhabha's postcolonial thought by showing that identities are shaped not through the recovery of a pure origin but through the continuous negotiation of difference. In doing so, Gyasi's novel makes an important contribution to contemporary discussions of diaspora, memory, and belonging. It reminds readers that home is not necessarily a place to which one returns, but a space that is continually reimagined through history, human connections, and the ongoing process of becoming.



## Bibliography

1. Bhabha, H. K. (2004). *The location of culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
2. Guerin, W. L., Labor, E., Morgan, L., Reesman, J. C., & Willingham, J. R. (2011). *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
3. Gyasi, Y. (2016). *Homegoing*. Alfred A. Knopf.
4. Loomba, A. (2015). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
5. Selden, R., Widdowson, P., & Brooker, P. (2005). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (5th ed.). Pearson Longman.
6. Taoua, P. (2021). "The Chance of Freedom: Of Storytelling and Memory in Neo-slave Narratives." *Transition*, 131, 194–213. <https://doi.org/10.2979/transition.131.1.17>
7. 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>
8. Wegerbauer, A. R. (2025). " 'Welcome home:' The unhomely in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*." *Kente: Cape Coast Journal of Literature and the Arts*, 1(1), 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.47963/jla.v1i1.1835>
9. Welnhof, N. (2017). "The shadow of slavery: A look into how *Homegoing* depicts the structural oppression apparent in American and Ghanaian society." *First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition*, 2017(1). [https://ddc.duq.edu/first\\_class/vol2017/iss1/3](https://ddc.duq.edu/first_class/vol2017/iss1/3)

© Academicus™

DP13193-DP13194 28-2010 Academicus International Scientific Journal  
International Trademark Classification under the Nice Agreement

 Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC

Intergenerational Negotiations of In-Betweenness, Mimicry and Ambivalence in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*  
by Hanane Boumaraf  
is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Presented: June 2026

Included for Publishing: July 2026

Published: July 2026, Volume 17, Issue 34 Academicus International Scientific Journal