
Inherited Ties and Identity Construction: A Semiotic and Representational Analysis of Cultural Symbols in Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi

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Abstract

This study examines the key symbolic structures employed in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing through a bifocal theoretical framework, integrating semiotic analysis grounded in the work of Roland Barthes and representational analysis guided by Stuart Hall. Drawing on Barthes' concept of myth as a second-order semiological system, the paper investigates how the key symbols in the text function beyond their literal meanings to represent culturally infused ideologies. Hall's theory of representation reveals how these recurring symbols construct and communicate meaning within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. The study focuses on selected key symbols in the narrative, demonstrating how they operate as signifiers that negotiate identity. The objective of the research is to unfold the power of language and culture as an agency of resistance and resilience, underscoring their impact on identity construction and cultural continuity of the African diaspora. The novel underscores genealogical trauma faced by the generations of two half-sisters, Effia's Ghanaian descendants and Esi's African American descendants, because of the transatlantic slave trade. Effia and Esi represent variant destinies within the African diaspora, as one's destiny is cursed by fire and the other's identity is mitigated by water (The Atlantic Ocean). Through semiotic mediation, these symbols operate as myths, encoding and enunciating histories of colonial trauma, displacement, and cultural memory. The study highlights the significance of the symbolic representation of collective diasporic memory imbued with cultural affinity to contest the transgenerational trauma of identity.

Keywords: Semiotics, Representation, Symbols, identity construction, trans generational trauma, Homegoing

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a profound resurgence in diasporic literature, an ever-evolving genre that traverses the terrains of migration, displacement, historical trauma, and cultural memory. This body of work not only documents ruptured histories but also reclaims indigenous epistemologies and cultural semiotics as powerful sites of resistance and identity articulation. Yaa

Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016), a landmark debut by the Ghanaian American novelist, spans over 300 years and two continents, weaving together the fractured genealogies of two half-sisters and their descendants. Through this expansive narrative, Gyasi excavates the intergenerational legacies of slavery, colonialism, and systemic erasure. What renders *Homegoing* distinctive is not merely its historical breadth, but its deliberate and textured deployment

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of ontological symbols as markers of cultural existence to render a complex semiotic cartography of identity, continuity, and memory.

This study interrogates the interpretative and representational function of cultural symbols in *Homegoing* by employing a bifocal theoretical framework that fuses Stuart Hall's theory of representation with Roland Barthes' mythological/semiotic critique. Barthes explains how symbols mean; Hall explains how those meanings function in culture. Through a methodologically grounded close reading and semiotic analysis of emblematic signs, such as fire, ocean (water), and the black stone, this research aims to explore how *Home going* constructs and communicates inherent resilience embedded in trans generational trauma, cultural memory, and diasporic subjectivity.

Human consciousness is imprinted with archetypes, schemata, and symbolic codes—structures so fundamental that they often precede linguistic cognition. As Kenneth Boulding (1956) suggests, “The peculiarity and the glory of man” lies in his symbolic capacity: the uniquely human proclivity to encode experience in symbolic systems. Symbols, therefore, constitute the very foundation of human behavior, thought, and civilization. In literature, they function as hermeneutic devices, enabling the transference of layered meanings and abstract concepts into tangible form. Within the realm of literary studies, symbolism and metaphor transcend their ornamental roles to become ontological instruments that evoke collective memory, cultural consciousness, and emotional resonance.

From a cultural-critical perspective, symbols serve as interpretative prisms that refract meaning through the lens of specific traditions, histories, and epistemologies. In a globalized literary context, cultural symbols and metaphors become both bridges and boundaries, linking disparate worlds while preserving distinct identities. This study embarks on an intellectual and interpretive journey to excavate the semiotic architecture of Gyasi's *Homegoing*.

Each symbol is akin to a brushstroke in a trans-generational mural, animating history, mediating trauma, and dialoguing with ancestral memory. These cultural signifiers are not static motifs but dynamic agents of meaning, functioning as conduits between the material and the metaphysical, the personal and the collective.

This study contributes to the growing field of African and African American literary scholarship by offering a semiotic interrogation of symbolic representation in *Homegoing*. It proposes a novel intersection between Hall's theory of representation and Barthes' mythological critique, thereby reframing symbols not merely as decorative narrative elements, but as ideological instruments of memory, resistance, and meaning-making. By highlighting the representational power of the indigenous motifs, the study enhances our understanding of how diasporic fiction reclaims African epistemologies in the service of cultural and identity reconstruction.

This study aims to examine the power of language and culture as an agency of resistance and resilience, underscoring their impact on identity construction and cultural continuity of the African diaspora. The research specifically aims to: (i) Examine how *Homegoing* deploys African cultural symbols to signify cultural identity, continuity, and rupture; (ii) Analyze the representational strategies employed in the novel using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, focusing on how meaning is produced, circulated, and interpreted. Deconstruct the mythological function of symbols in the novel through Barthes' semiotic theory, discerning how cultural signs are transformed.

Literature Review

In order to position the present research within the broader academic discourse and emphasize its relevance, it is essential to revisit existing studies on the deployment of symbolic language. The representation of ethnic identity in literature is not merely an aesthetic endeavor but a political and

cultural act, one that affirms marginalized histories and reclaims silenced voices. Within the evolving canon of world literature, authors from diverse backgrounds have deployed symbolic language to explore the intricacies of cultural heritage, diasporic fragmentation, and the existential tensions of belonging. Seminal works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of cultural identity, utilizing symbolism as a vehicle to interrogate memory, trauma, and hybridity. In Morrison's *The Color Purple*, for instance, Celie embodies the traumatic intersection of race, gender, and poverty in the American South, emerging as a symbol of Black female endurance and resistance. Similarly, Lahiri's protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, becomes a metonym for diasporic dislocation, suspended between inherited tradition and contemporary American identity.

Symbolism, in this context, operates not merely as a narrative device but as a medium for encoding and contesting cultural ideologies. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz employs the character of Oscar as a signifying site of Dominican diasporic struggle, demonstrating how cultural disinheritance and myth intertwine. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's desire for blue eyes transcends personal longing to reveal the internalized violence of racialized beauty standards. In Sherman Alexei's *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the titular figure becomes a complex signifier of historical rupture and cultural reclamation in Native American identity. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, through the symbol of Mahjong, formulates the intergenerational tensions between Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters, negotiating memory, migration, and cultural continuity.

Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* can be placed within this intertextuality and intercultural conversation as a profound meditation on the trans-generational effects of slavery, the ontological dimensions of cultural memory, and the symbolic architecture of diasporic identity. Scholars such as Cañellas I Bosch

(2020) underscore how the novel thematically highlights the loss of lineage and the erasure of names, an act that reflects symbolic violence within colonial and slave economies. Mikić (2022), employing post memory and epigenetic theory, articulates how Gyasi's characters inherit ancestral trauma inscribed in both psyche and body, thereby extending the novel's reach into the affective domains of memory transmission.

Through a psychologically oriented reading, Rianingsih (n.d.) applies Maslow's hierarchy of needs while analyzing the character of Ness from a psychological point of view, revealing how human longing for security, love, and self-actualization abides even under the brutality of chattel slavery. In continuation of such representations, a similar affective dimension is examined by Roy (2022) in *The Bangalore Review*, where the manipulation of Yaw's body is presented as an allegorical representation of colonial inscription and internalized shame, an embodied crisis of self and history.

Homegoing has widely been discussed in the backdrop of 'displacement' and "home, Heinz (2021), in *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift*, challenges the conventional interpretation of "home" as a stable or rooted phenomenon, arguing that Effia's life trajectory signifies home as a site of dislocation and a violently contested construal. Gyasi's vision of home is not merely as a geographical entity but a layered text of memories, ruptures, and reconstructed identities. This dislocation is further gendered, as Kavipriya and Sutharshan (2023) show in their study on women's oppression. They are of the view that Gyasi's female characters are not mere historical victims but symbolic agents of cultural resilience and intergenerational resistance. Kerketta (2022) extends this reading by tracing the gendered transitions across colonial and postcolonial subjectivities, thereby positioning *Homegoing* within the broader perspective of postcolonial feminist thought.

The novel has undergone comparative analysis based on the geographical, social, and cultural

aspects of diasporic study. Clarke (2018) juxtaposes *Homegoing* with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, revealing how Gyasi's work contributes to a larger discursive field on racial identity, cultural hybridity, and Black consciousness in Western spaces. These comparative analyses further position *Homegoing* as a diasporic text layered, fragmented, and rich with transcultural representations.

Furthermore, Gyasi's incorporation of African oral traditions, mythopoeic structures, and symbolic systems enriches the novel with a profound resonance with indigenous cosmology. In her *Chicago Review of Books* interview (2017), Gyasi discusses how her visit to Cape Coast Castle inspired her to imagine ancestral voices lost to history. Her use of Adinkra symbols and African spiritual metaphors becomes a mode of historical recovery, i.e., imaginative yet epistemologically significant.

Notwithstanding this scholarly depth, relatively few studies have focused on the semiotic functioning of Adinkra symbols, traditional Akan visual symbols that convey philosophical and cultural meanings, and African cosmological sign systems as meaning-producing structures in the novel's narrative architecture. Teye (2020) makes a brief reference to this aesthetic function, but the symbolic system remains under-examined from a theoretical perspective. The present research seeks to address this gap in scholarship by offering a comprehensive semiotic and mythological analysis of *Homegoing*, with particular attention to African cultural symbols. The study aims to foreground the function of African cultural and cosmological symbols as ideologically charged signifiers in the production of diasporic meaning and identity.

With its emphasis on encoding/decoding and signification, Hall's (1997) theory of representation offers a dynamic framework to investigate how meaning is produced and interpreted within cultural texts. He is of the view that representation is constructive, not reflective, and offers space for analyzing how *Homegoing* actively constructs diasporic identities through symbolic registers.

Building on this, Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972) provides tools for discerning how everyday cultural signs, such as the black stone or the ocean, are transformed into myths, concealing ideologies under the guise of naturalness. The combined framework provides a multifaceted reading of *Homegoing*'s semiotic fabric.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research approach grounded in literary semiotics and cultural theory. It employs textual analysis as its primary method, focusing on close readings of *Homegoing* to examine the semiotic function of key cultural symbols across the narrative. The analysis is guided by the integrated framework of Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Roland Barthes' mythological critique, allowing for a layered understanding of how cultural symbols operate as semiotic instruments that generate, encode, and extend meaning within a diasporic framework. The analysis proceeds in two stages: first, in the light of Barthes' notion of myth, symbolic signs are identified, and then their mythic meanings are decoded using Barthes' semiotic model; second, Hall's constructionist approach operates to interpret how these meanings function within broader representational and ideological structures.

The primary text for this research is Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, published in 2016, while the secondary sources include a curated corpus of scholarly articles, book chapters, interviews, and critical essays focusing on semiotics, cultural representation, and African diasporic literature. These include both theoretical sources (e.g., Hall, Barthes) and literary-critical engagements with *Homegoing*.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by a bifocal theoretical framework through integrating Roland Barthes' concept of myth and Stuart Hall's constructionist

approach to representation. Roland Barthes conceptualizes myth as a second-order semiological system that is inclined to naturalize historically contingent meanings, while Hall emphasizes how meaning is actively constructed through representational practices within cultural and discursive contexts. Hence, myth becomes a tool of representation. Barthes' notion of myth works as a specific mechanism through which representation operates, transforming culturally produced meanings into seemingly natural truths. In this sense, Barthes' analysis functions primarily at the level of signs and signification; Hall's implication deals with the inquiry at the level of discourse, where meanings are circulated, negotiated, and contested within broader sociocultural structures. While Barthes' model operates to decode the symbolic signs and their mythic meanings within *Homegoing*, the study applies Hall's theory of representation (1997), where representation is conceptualized as a discursive practice that constructs meaning rather than reflecting reality. His encoding/decoding model acknowledges the multiplicity of readings that the cultural text demands, shaped by the socio-political/positional ties of their producers (encoders) and consumers (decoders).

In conjunction, Hall and Barthes offer a dialectical approach that enables an examination of the semiotic structure of *Homegoing* as both representational and ideological, while simultaneously aesthetic and political in orientation. The analytical procedure is guided by a layered and integrated framework that systematically interrogates the semiotic architecture of the text.

The analysis shall follow a self-referential pattern involving recurring cultural signs like fire and ocean/water embedded in the African ontological system, along with ancestral artifacts, e.g., the black stone. It commences with symbolic mapping, involving the identification and taxonomical classification of these cultural signifiers, embedded within the narrative matrix. Building upon this, a denotative/connotative analysis is undertaken through the application of Barthes'

semiotic model to disentangle the interplay between literal signification and culturally inflected connotation. Complementing this, an encoding/decoding paradigm, informed by Hall's theoretical formulation, facilitates an exploration of how meaning is discursively encoded by the author and differentially decoded across heterogeneous readerships. The framework culminates in an ideological critique, which critically examines the degree to which these symbolic signifying practices operate to reproduce, negotiate, or subvert dominant ideological formations associated with history, memory, and identity.

Discussion

The study is guided by the dual semiotic framework operating within the selected symbols/signs in the text, of *Homegoing*, delineating the postulates of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, alongside contesting the concept of second-order signification proposed by Roland Barthes in his magnificent work "Mythologies". Hall's concept of representation involves a meaning-making process, where language, symbols, and images play together to construct cultural understanding.

The text does not merely mirror the display of trauma and destruction associated with slavery and colonialism, but it is indeed a harbinger of creating a perspective that works as a catalyst for establishing a cultural and historical linkage. Thus, it becomes an agency of producing meanings above the denotational and linguistic level. Barthes' theory of myth suggests that signs function at two levels: Denotation, being the first level, gives way to a second level interpretation where an initial sign takes the role of a signifier in the context of a broader ideological system. When these two frameworks are applied together, the text seems to function above the level of a mere narrative, while it unfolds a complex system of signs that carry cultural and historical interpretations. Barthes explains how symbols generate meanings; Hall's theory provides an

explicit account of how these meanings function in culture.

After deconstructing the specific signs as “Myth”, the study involves Hall’s (1997) Constructionist Approach. The analysis aims to reveal how these myths lead to positioning the characters within the cosmology of the African diaspora. Implications of Stuart Hall’s concept of identity and representation delineate that it is a matter of production away from a fixed perspective that works under these signifying practices. The analysis from a Hallian point of view, i-e, representation and positioning, brings out the fluid nature of the signifier, whose meanings are constructed in the backdrop of the novel’s eight generations to dismantle Western cognitive imperialism.

Homegoing encompasses the lives of fourteen characters, in its fourteen chapters named after the characters who are descendants of Maame, who herself was an enslaved woman. Maame, mother of two daughters, who were born under different circumstances in separate villages, escapes captivity. She abandons newborn Effia while setting the forest on fire. Effia’s descendants remain in Ghana, and although they do not experience displacement, they are cursed with the business of slavery. The second child, Esi, Maame bears after fleeing enslavement, is kidnapped at the age of fifteen and sold into slavery. Esi’s lineage suffers separation and loss of identity – traumas that float in her lineage. *Homegoing* thus becomes a delineation of multigenerational trauma, characterized by resistance and resilience. Notwithstanding the horrors of colonialism and enslavement, the characters somehow survive and revive their identity through the indictments by their consistent and continuous striking back to the links and connections, both in terms of haunting memories and through sustaining their ancestral rituals. The novel revolves around these dynamics spanning a period of more than 250 years, happening in diverse social, geographical, and historical backgrounds.

The analysis follows a three-step sequence, engrossing in the symbolic clusters, i.e.,

identification of the powerful recurring signs, conjoining the characters’ history, fragmentation, and later unification.

1. Semiotic and Representational Analysis of ‘Fire’

Setting on with ‘Fire’, being the first sign that lays the foundation of this transgenerational traumatic saga, the opening line of the novel carries the sign: “The night Effia other was born into the musky heat of Fante land, a fire raged through the woods just outside her father’s compound”. (Gyasi, 2016, p.5)

Following the Barthesian second-order semiological system that is rooted in the linguistic level, the denotational meaning highlights this stark contrast between Effia’s birth and the raging of fire. This mystical manifestation is further mystified in the preceding lines when Cobbe, Effia’s father, acknowledges the lurking curse: “He knew then 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,” (Pg. 5)

The fire as ‘sign’ at the linguistic level, i.e., the first level in semiological context, is foregrounded in the backdrop of the setting of the novel, where it is placed as an element of nature that has some connection with Effia’s birth. Later, at the metalinguistic level, the fire appears as the symbol of continuity, an affliction that shall lead to a genealogical curse. It claims an analysis that involves Barthes’ second-order semiological analysis.

The semiological analysis reveals how the mystery of fire transforms into myth, where a sign is constituted through the interaction of a signifier and a signified, culminating in signification. remain just an ontological existence, it becomes a sign that carries a history of generational trauma that is ready to haunt not only Effia “The child of the night’s fire” (p.5), but also her children, and her children’s children, as is predicted by the father Cobbe. The fire signifies devastation and separation permeating through generations. This fire becomes a myth that

stands for historic violence, beginning with the assault of Maame, Effia's mother, by her father, Cobbe, and continuing as a legacy of slavery. The sign rooted in the concept (signified), stands for a chaotic fire that predicts traumatic lives preceded by a chain of miseries and inflictions grappling the generations. The signification reveals the sign as a metaphor, carrying the blemishes of slavery, shaping and shadowing not only Effia's destiny, but it is going to distort the destiny of her descendants, thus engulfing the whole of Effia's existence.

The myth resonates itself, through recurring appearance of the sign, i.e., fire, signified by the concept of 'curse', as evident in the following lines, when Baaba convinces Cobbe that Effia will never become a woman; "I think she was cursed in that fire, a demon who will never become a woman" (Gyasi, 2016, p.16)

Here, the woman on a linguistic level appears as a sign that only tells about a gender, but the connotational/mythical contour reveals that 'fire' has eaten up not only Effia's destiny, but it has also consumed her womanhood. The concept (signified) reveals that "woman" stands for fertility and for life, but in Effia's case, the myth confers and prophesies her as a "demon" that eats life. The demon might be a sign of the profession of slavery that all of Effia's descendants are going to be engaged in. The fire as myth keeps floating in the lines related to Effia and her lineage. Baaba told Abeeku, "That the fire that had destroyed so much of their family's worth had also destroyed the child". At the end of the first chapter, "Effia", the cursed one is told by her brother FiiFi about the reality of her mother, thus emulating the significance of fire. "Our father had you by a house girl, who ran away into the fire the night you were born." (Gyasi, 2016, p.28) The recurring sign reinstates the signified (concept) behind the form (signifier), meaning to the myth. The recurrence of the symbol in the narrative resonates with the following statement of Barthes.

Barthes states;

"The meaning of the myth has its own value, it belongs to a history, in the meaning, a signification

is already built, the meaning is already complete, and it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions" (Barthes, 1991, p.116).

As the research focuses on the semiotic and representational analysis encompassing the ancestral artifacts like the black stone and elemental ontologies based on the recurring motifs of fire and water, the Hallian lens aims to determine how these myths mediate collective memory and facilitate resilience and resistance against colonial erasure.

The recurring sign of fire carries layers of cultural and historical connotations. Seeing through the lens of Hall's theory of representation, fire appears to be a signifying practice induced with deeper meaning, carrying trauma, memory, and the construction of identity. The symbol of fire is introduced in the very opening of the novel associated with the birth of Effia is very much significant in signifying the destiny that Effia and her lineage is going to bear in the words of Cobbe, the father of Effia; "The memory of the fire that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as line continued". (Gyasi, 2016, P.5)

Here, the sign gains its meaning and vitality through a whole process of signification laden with tribal history and colonial implication. The representation of fire signifies violence through the historical references of the narrative.

Fire plays a pivotal role as a signifier that works to construct the cultural connotations of meaning and represents the historical context of the narrative. The sign predicts the generational trauma that is associated with the transatlantic practice of slavery. With Akua, being a member of Effia's descendants, fire plays a hallucinative role, transforming her into a 'Mad' woman, because of her constant talking about a fire in her dreams along with a firewoman; it eventually leads her to set her own hut on fire and kill her own children.

Fire becomes a sign that signifies psychological trauma rooted in generations. In the words of Stuart Hall;

“Members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images, and ideas, which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. In this sense, thinking and feeling are themselves ‘systems of representation’ which our concepts, images, and emotions ‘stand for’ or represent, in our mental life, things which are or may be ‘out there’ in the world” (Hall, 1997, p.4).

Hence, the representation of fire is illustrative of the notion that violence and pain embedded in genealogical history creep too far into the thought process and practices of its victims, just as the following quote expresses:

“The firewoman is not a dream but an incarnation of ancestral pain. It is this vision that induces Akua’s trance state in which she kills one of her children. Trauma has become madness, and madness becomes legacy”. (Yousaf, 2025, P.615)

Fire is a sign/system of representation, under the cover of a linguistic code, because it has not only been written or spoken by the characters in the novel, but it also represents what they wanted to confess, reveal, and express. Fire becomes a sign of memory, an ancestral memory, moral, and practice, inherited by Marjorie, the last of Effia’s lineage, as mentioned in the novel.

“Ever since she had heard the story of how her father and mother got their scars, she had been terrified of fire”. (Gyasi.2016, P.269)

This is how language operates on representation that involves practices based on shared sets of concepts, images, and ideas, structuring the emotional and ideological patterns of the people who own it. Fire does not remain an element, but rather appears as an ontological entity, where fire gets the length and breadth of a cultural

representative, displaying the history of the people of Fante land and Asnate.

2. Semiotic and Representational Analysis of ‘Black Stone’

Analyzing black stone through the lens of Roland Barthes’ theory of myth leads to revealing the status of black stone as a sign that transcends its physical existence or interpretation (denotation) as a piece of stone inherited by Maame’s lineage. It becomes a binding tissue, a DNA chromosome weaving the identities of all the fourteen characters of the novel, both in terms of its presence (In Effia’s lineage) and its absence (In Esi’s lineage). It becomes a myth of unification, a symbol that represents continuity of ancestral genealogy and trauma of fragmented identity among generations belonging to the African diaspora.

Barthesian notion of the second level of signification reveals Yaa Gyasi’s craftsmanship in transforming a primary sign into a myth; in this way, the sign becomes a vehicle for ideological meaning. It is by this semiotic elevation that the narrative transcends its literal function and becomes an embodiment of collective memory, evolving from a symbol of connection into a profound manifestation of internalized pain.

The black stone appears to be a sign of resilience and resistance against the continuous attempts of erasure characterized by colonialism and slavery. The sign plays a pivotal role in the delineation of power held by culture and cultural practices. Its process of signification becomes the process of uncovering a myth that has a manifestation beyond the text of *Homegoing* and connects it directly to the African culture and the plight of the African diaspora.

“The black stone, passed down from Maame to Effia and Esi, is a physical representation of that which was lost and that which is left behind. When Esi swallows the stone before she is shipped off to America, she ensures its survival within her body. Generations later, her descendants lament its loss.

Meanwhile, Effia bears her stone unaware of its origin until the secret is revealed by Fifi. The stone grows warm in the priest's hand because it is a living remnant" (Yousaf, 2025, p.616).

Following the metalanguage implications, i.e., the second-order semiological system proposed by Barthes, the signifier constituting a myth is imbued with ambiguity because it performs a dual role, functioning both as form and as meaning within the same linguistic event. It is real in its sensory existence, yet mental as a concept. The stone as a sign within Roland Barthes' myth contains a past, carries memory, and is situated within a comparative order of facts, i.e., its association with the ancestral genealogy of Maame's daughters, functioning as a point of "connection" within Effia's lineage and as a marker of "disconnection" among Esi's descendants.

The stone is then passed on to Quey from Effia. The black stone is a sign that preserves the continuity between the present and the past, and the lineages of Effia and Esi demonstrate that ontological signs and practices embedded in cultural history can retain and recuperate ideology and identity. These household narratives, family practices, and cultural emblems endure across historical currents. The paramount struggle of memory and belonging against the overwhelming power of displacement and distortion is thus characterized by a form of resistance sustained through cultural endurance.

The black stone is then passed from James to Abena;

"Her father got down to his knees all that was left in his palms was a black stone necklace----- This belonged to my grandmother, your great-grandmother Effia. It was given to her by her own mother. Abena put on the necklace and hugged her father." (Gyasi, 2016, p.152)

The second order semiological interpretation of these lines from the chapter "Abena" signifies that the sign as a metalingual entity incorporates a signifier that is empty. Myth strips off the constructed meaning or ideology, making it a shadow, a voice of truth. The semiotic code, i.e.,

connotation, exhibits the black stone as a myth that is coherent with an essential character and can defy the opposite forces conspiring for the erasure or entrapment of identity. The black stone in Effia's lineage becomes a collective reality, and among Esi's descendants, it stands for collective memory.

Myth is not identified by the object but by its assertive existence as a fact. From the beginning of the novel, the sign of black stone has maintained its standing as a legacy to be passed on; it never stayed in the realm of an object. It marked the destiny of characters, joining their past and present, and it is what stood as a barrier between erasure and existence.

In Chapter thirteen, Marjorie, the Blackstone, emerges again;

"Are you wearing the stone"? Her grandmother asked..... It had belonged to the old lady and to Abena before her, and to James and Quey and Effia the beauty, before that it had begun with Maame, the woman who had set the fire". (Gyasi, 2016, p.262)

The first order denotational interpretation might mirror the lines only as an act of transference of a family legacy, i.e., black stone, starting from Maame, the woman who had set the fire. The denotational study triggers the second-order semiological connotation of the above lines, where Gyasi seems apt in revealing and naturalizing the existence of the black stone as a myth that operates and functions as resilience, acknowledgment, and connection. The myth associated with the black stone justifies Barthes' statement, i.e., "Unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth." (Barthes, 1991, p.117)

The black stone started its journey from the first chapter, 'Effia,' and this continuous transference culminates in the last scene of the last chapter, Marcus. Marcus is the last descendant representing Esi's lineage, while Marjorie belongs to Effia's. "The black stone necklace rested just below her collarbone, and Marcus watched the glints of

gold come off it, shining in the sun. “Here”, Marjorie said. “Have it.” She lifted the stone from her neck and placed it around Marcus’ “welcome Home”. (Gyasi, 2016, p.298)

At the very outset, these lines demonstrate the final settlement of the events, of characters of their past, present, and with a hint that leads to the future. The union of Marcus and Marjorie no longer remains mystical. The sequential delineation of underlying motives that finally culminates in this figurative, suggestive union serves to bridge the divide and displacement.

The black stone is a myth; it reveals that identity may undergo existential challenges, it might be suffocated by power, displacement, and traumatic suppression, but it is never irrecoverably lost. It survives in fire, it breathes in dungeons, and it floats in oceans. No matter if it has to go through a relentless struggle against erasure. But it sustains itself in signs and symbols, in the relics of myth that bind the lost ties of past and present.

The black stone, when studied under the lens of Hallian theory of representation, functions as a sign that represents continuity, suggests ancestral links, and, in the case of Esi’s lineage, represents a cultural memory.

The stone that originates from Maame, reaches Effia through Baaba, and from Effia, it gets its way to Quey and all her lineage appearing in the novel, is a sign that serves and represents the connection that always remains at stake under the trauma of colonialism, suppression, and displacement.

These symbolic signs, according to Stuart Hall, play a very crucial role in constructing a sign that withstands the havoc of erasure and withholds the existence of ancestral heritage and legacy despite going through the violence of transatlantic slavery and the trauma of existence. It remains an emblem of resistance and reconciliation.

In the novel, Yaw, who survives his mother’s (Akua) fire, receives the stone as a legacy and as a symbol of surveillance and resilience; thus, the stone becomes a sign that represents endurance and

continuity that can withstand and uphold the identity despite suffering and loss.

From Yaw, the necklace/Blackstone reaches Marjorie, the last one from Effia’s lineage, asserting the continuity of representation and association from past to present generations.

3. Semiotic and Representational Analysis of ‘Ocean’

Examining the symbol/sign of the ocean in the novel *Homegoing* under the lens of Barthes’ second-order semiological system directs us to take the sign first at its denotational level, according to the first order, where the ocean (signifier), when analyzed from the outset, appears to be a large expanse of water, stretching between Africa and America. At the connotational level, however, the ocean transcends its physical reality and becomes a culturally charged signifier rooted in the historical experience of Africa and the African diaspora. The narrative cosmos of the novel delineates the Atlantic functioning not only as a geographical space but as a mythic site of displacement, trauma, and forced separation. The following lines of chapter “Esi” illustrate the symbolic power of the Atlantic within the novel: “At night Esi dreamed that if they all cried in union, the mud would turn to river and they could be washed away into the Atlantic”. (Gyasi, 2016, p.30)

Contextualizing the sign via discourse provides discursive information. The discourse of Esi; her dream of the ocean tells that the colonizers or power structures hegemonize not only the physical, cultural, and social existence of the colonized, but also have access to their dreams. In these lines, the ocean is not represented just as a sign, but rather by going through the process of signification, it becomes a myth where its composition might include the salty tears of those who are crying, and what the mighty Atlantic is going to throw on its sands is not the oysters, but it can actually wash away their identities. The ocean/sign does not remain a water body; it becomes a demon/signification that eats

identities, its water not only washes their lineage, their culture, but even their dreams are also destined to get drowned in the dreary Atlantic. This second-order semiological analysis presents the ocean as a myth, far deeper than the depth of The Atlantic, a myth of power, a myth of transgenerational trauma. From the perspective of Hall's theory of representation, the symbol of the ocean acquires meaning through cultural and historical context. According to Hall, meaning is constructed through representational practices and discourse. He is influenced by Michael Foucault's concept of discourse, who argues that "Nothing has any meaning outside of discourse." (Foucault, 1972, p.xx)

This is an illustration of Hall's perspective;
"This idea that physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse, is at the heart of the constructional theory of meaning and representation." (Hall, 1997, p.45)

So, the power dynamics operate at the bottom of representation of the ocean as a sign, and on the level of discourse as well, the process of decoding, i.e., interpretation on the part of the reader, pushes the limits of this meaning-making process; meanings are continuously constructed and reconstructed. In the same chapter, 'Esi', the ocean reappears with all the disgust attached to it.

"The scent of ocean water hit her nose; the taste of salt clung to her throat. The soldiers marched them down to an open door that led to sand and water, and they all began to walk out onto it" (Gyasi, 2016, 49).

The denotative meaning of the ocean in Homegoing refers to the Atlantic as a physical body of water characterized by its vastness, salty smell, and overwhelming presence. At this level, it appears as a natural phenomenon through which enslaved Africans are transported. However, at the connotative and mythic level, the ocean transcends its physical reality and becomes a powerful symbol of suffering, displacement, and historical trauma.

The expression, "The scent of ocean water hit her nose," transforms the ocean from a neutral geographical entity into an oppressive and intolerable force associated with fear and captivity.

The verb "hit" intensifies the emotional violence attached to the experience, while the soldiers, marching the captives, toward the shore, signify forced displacement and helplessness. In Barthesian terms, the ocean becomes a mythic signifier of the Middle Passage and the enduring curse of slavery. It symbolizes separation, erasure of identity, and collective trauma, while later in the narrative it also gestures toward memory, return, and reconciliation within the diasporic experience.

The dominant ideology behind the discourse remains the affliction that started from fire and is not going to be extinguished by the ocean. The hegemonic designs of the masters even alter the meaning of the signs. From a negotiated position, the ocean is something that is always striking back at their identities, but at the same time, a force that is bound to bind them again. Hence, the ocean that was once owned by the Fante and the Asnate's appears to be a stranger ready to make them estranged.

The following excerpt from chapter 'Ness' is evidence that Ness, Esi's daughter, inherits the calamity;

"Ness' mother, Esi, had been a solemn, solid woman who was never known to tell a happy story. Even Ness's bedtime stories had been ones about what Esi used to call "the Big Boat," Ness would fall asleep to the images of men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth" (Gyasi, 2016, p.72).

Here once again, Yaa Gyasi presents the ocean not just as a physical element but as one that carries a mythic existence that goes beyond denotative meaning.

The denotational representation of the ocean is associated with purification and life, but the connotational interpretation of these lines presents inverted meanings. The anchors have no groveling; they have no weight. The Barthesian second-order

semiological system suggests that the concept (signified) behind the form (signifier) is of an absolute erasure of identity, because once thrown into the ocean, the men would cease to exist from every chapter of existence. Here, the text builds its own myth of the ocean. It is not just a vast expanse, an element of unimaginable depth, but a void that engulfs souls. Hall's concept of mental representation brings the ocean as an abyss where men are destined to destroy their identities. In the context found Ness, Esi's daughter, living in the traumatic annihilation, where her dreams will always have horrible pictures of the Atlantic, eating the faceless, baseless men as if they were, and belonged to, nothing. From a negotiated position, the sign does not just represent erasure, but it also holds memory.

From a negotiated position towards an oppositional position, the ocean transforms into an archive carrying Esi's stories. So, the meaning floats; it does not remain fixed. Hall's constructionist approach insists that repeated imagery not only stands for historical trauma, but it is at the same time safeguarding the traces that always provide a link to connect and save the identity. The power dynamics that translate the Atlantic as an epitome of erasure are challenged by the decoding of the sign. The Atlantic appears as a symbol of suffering and trauma; it is represented as a sign of resistance and resilience as well. For Ness, it becomes a connection to her past through the stories of her mother.

The story extends to eight generations, and in the chapter 'Marcus', Marcus found a male descendant from Esi's lineage, who tells Marjorie (from Effia's lineage) the reason behind his fear of the ocean. *"It's not just because I'm scared of drowning. Though I guess, I am, it's because of all that space. It's because everywhere I look, I see blue ----- have no idea where it begins."* (Gyasi, 2016, p.293)

The sign once again strikes back to its denotational level, which shows the ocean remains the vast blue stretch of water when the eighth generation of Esi is expressing his ties with the

phenomenon but here again sign takes place of form on the metalingual level and signified (concept) is there to extend and enrich the meaning, to destabilize the earlier one and stabilize the new one, enriching the sign with a new mythical existence where the ocean, once an agent of separation and displacement, appears as a mark of reconciliation. Marcus, when lost to find the fractured identity, reconciles it through his fears; his fear of the ocean acts as a legacy, it is also a myth that has helped Marcus to go back and find the motives behind it, and thus it becomes a sign of a middle way between home and displacement.

Conclusion

This study explores how African cultural symbols in *Homegoing* shape and reconstruct fragmented diasporic identity through the lenses of Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall. Recurring symbols like fire, water, and the black stone serve not only as narrative devices but as culturally charged signifiers that express trauma, memory, displacement, and resilience, influencing diasporic identity across generations. Barthes' second-order semiotics posits these signifiers as myths, carrying ideological meanings—fire, for instance, begins as a symbol of trauma for Effia and her descendants, transforming into a myth of resistance and continuity. The ocean, initially symbolizing erasure for Esi, becomes a site of ontological fluidity and a transgenerational link, as does the black stone representing lineage. As Yousaf notes, oral and ritual practices connect individuals to a collective history, transforming stories of suffering into signs of survival and hope. Hall's theory emphasizes that these symbols are not fixed but fluid, reshaped across contexts, shaping identity through ongoing negotiation and symbolic discourse. Ultimately, *Homegoing* uses symbolism as a narrative strategy linking past and present, illustrating how memory, trauma, and heritage are transmitted, contested, and reinterpreted—turning displacement and slavery into myths of resistance and reconciliation.

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