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Spring 2017 Third Prize Essay

“THE SHADOW OF SLAVERY: A LOOK INTO HOW *HOMEGOING* DEPICTS THE STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION APPARENT IN AMERICAN AND GHANIAN SOCIETY”

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Having been born in Ghana and emigrated to the United States at the age of nine, Yaa Gyasi understands the life of Africans and African-Americans – more importantly the connection they have with each other. In her novel, *Homegoing*, she demonstrates the oppression wrought on by colonialism, imperialism, and slavery by following a family’s lineage dating back to the seventeenth century. These issues remain in memory for white culture, yet their effects are still being felt to this day in the black community. Even after *Brown v. Board of Education*, there still remains much housing segregation that leaves the poor neighborhoods with failing schools – thus creating a cycle of poverty. Gyasi illustrates the struggles of each generation in the family, which further paints the cycle of oppression that exists. She also shows that institutions put in place by white culture have historically failed African-Americans and Africans alike. I argue that *Homegoing* shows the implications of colonialism imperialism, and slavery, which displays the connections they have to the struggles in the black community today. Ultimately, Gyasi suggests that the oppression that black people face today is largely systematic, as they were forced to live in a culture and society that favors white people.

Gyasi’s *Homegoing* uses characters that have been subjected to such oppression. Sadly, these stories are all too familiar with those among the black community. Their oppressors, western culture, subjugated the native African people to benefit their own gain through use of institutions like education, religion, law-enforcement and slavery. Michael Omolewa explains in his article “Educating the ‘Native,’” that the English colonizers had pushed Euro-centered ideals and culture that were “ill-suited and irrelevant” to African people (Omowela 269). Furthermore, Africans had grumbled as they noticed new values like “intolerance, hatred, ‘cutthroat competition,’ disharmony, pride, arrogance, and even cheating” (Omowela 269). Beyond the physical exploitation of black people throughout slavery, Melissa Harris Perry explains the stereotypes that stemmed from it that persist to this day in her book, *Sister Citizen*. She claims the origin of the Jezebel stereotype as an excuse for white slave owners to sexually exploit their black slaves (Perry 56). By labeling black women as “hyper-sexual,” they were painted as the perpetrator in sexual encounters as opposed to the white male. In today’s world this has evolved to lessen the word value of black women in regards to rape allegations. This is just another sinister example of the continuity of slavery following its legal death. Backlash against these institutions from the black community have been met with much resistance, sometimes resulting in violent, deathly outcomes from those same institutions – mainly the law enforcement. Not even the United States Constitution is free of blame, as Devon Carbado explains in his article, “From Stopping Black People to Killing Black People,” the Fourth Amendment has been interpreted to legalize racial profiling (Carbado 125). This leads to the racial discrimination we see in arrests nationwide – thus spinning the cycle of oppression and poverty. All protagonists in *Homegoing* are disillusioned to these institutions and white culture, which mirrors the feelings of many in African-American communities today. Slavery was just the beginning of the exploitation and oppression that African-Americans would have to face for centuries.

By comparing the horrors of slavery to Hell, Gyasi demonizes the slaving industry and those involved. Ness, born a slave, is the primary channel through which Gyasi illustrates the life of a slave. Gyasi describes Ness’s life at the first plantation as, “In Hell, the sun scorched cotton so hot it almost burned the palms of your hands to

touch it. Holding those small white puffs almost felt like holding fire, but God forbid you let one drop. The Devil was always watching,” (Gyasi 74). The metaphor of Hell emphasizes the brutal conditions and treatment that Africans were subjected to. The imagery furthers this metaphor, as Gyasi is trying to demonstrate that slave work was a literal Hell on Earth. By referring to the plantation owner as the Devil, she illustrates the fear that the slave masters instilled into them. Ironically, whites pushed Christianity onto Africans and their slaves, yet instead of setting an example of what a good Christian should be, they mirrored the Devil and exacted their own Hell onto their slaves. The relationship between the slaves and slave master is furthered by the Ness’s fear, as “the Devil shows no mercy...[Ness] is beaten until the whip snaps off her back like pulled taffy...some nights, they feared that the Devil is watching them as they lie,” (Gyasi 81). The gruesome diction displays the savagery that white people inflicted to their slaves – something that has not been forgotten in the black community. Ness was driven to paranoia by these beatings, which creates a distrust and fear of her white oppressors. These feelings do not go away easily, and although slavery is long gone the distrust and fear of authoritative whites still lingers.

Gyasi displays this mistreatment of police through the violent details in the chapter following H’s life through his time in prison and freedom. H lived as a freedman following the Civil War, yet the people sworn to “serve and protect” ridded him of this liberty not so long after – for something as insignificant as looking at a white woman (Gyasi 158.) She depicts his handling following arrest as, “ten men who had been chained to him on the train ride there...he saw a boy no older than twelve...he looked like he would melt down into a puddle of wet...he’d probably never seen a whip like the one the boss pit had... only heard about them in nightmarish stories his parents told him,” (Gyasi 160). The chain and the whip are synonymous with the torturous aspects of slavery. Through this imagery, Gyasi alludes to the fact that even though slavery was banished, the criminal justice system still permitted the same oppression in practice. The fearful diction also demonstrates the traumatized feelings of the African-American community as a whole, due to the “nightmarish stories” his parents lived through. While serving his sentence, H was whipped and scarred; which after an exchange with a white man calling him out for them, he knew “he couldn’t go back to the free world, marked as he was” (Gyasi 167-168). These scars would be common on slaves as well, illustrating further the continuity of slavery following its legal death. The disillusioned tone also indicates the knowledge that had become common for many blacks at the time – that freedom was not yet truly here.

The educational gap between whites and blacks in *Homegoing* displays the advantages given to white people that are not given to blacks. This discrepancy was largely due to the segregation that was prevalent and legal in America. Karen Benjamin in his article, “Suburbanizing Jim Crow,” explains that this discrepancy in schooling was done intentionally by lawmakers, particularly in Raleigh, North Carolina (Benjamin p. 226). The local governance had “protected” elite white neighborhoods by placing restrictions on where African-Americans could move to, then equipped the white neighborhoods with newer, better schools (Benjamin 226). This is a blatant act of discriminatory action towards African-Americans, one that demonstrates the malevolent systematic oppression that white culture has induced on the black community. Gyasi displays these discrepancies when Sonny is visiting a white school as,

Sonny looked at the pristine building, clean and shiny, with smartly dressed white children entering and exiting as calmly as can be, he’d thought his own schools, the ones in Harlem that had the ceiling falling in and smelled of some unnamable funk, and he was surprised that both things could even be called ‘schools’...Sonny said he didn’t mind his schools because he never went, and Willie said the fact that he never went was what was wrong with them. (Gyasi 249)

The juxtaposition between the “clean and shiny” white school with the black one that had “ceilings falling in” and an “unnamable funk” display the unmistakable inconsistencies in who our education system benefits – rich white kids. Sonny’s surprised reaction furthers this juxtaposition as he would not even put

the two in the same category. His school failed to even give him reason to attend, which sets him up for little hope of economic mobility. This story is not an isolated one, as many African Americans are caught in this cycle of poverty brought on behind the shadows of intentional segregation that remain prevalent in residency.

Christianity is portrayed as yet another instrument of structurally oppressing the African people by Gyasi. The distrust of Christianity by the Ghanaians is displayed by Yaw as he,

Wasn't certain he believed in forgiveness. He heard the word most on the few days he went to the white man's church...and so it had begun to seem to him like a word the white men brought with them when they first came to Africa. A trick their Christians and earned and spoke loudly and freely about to the people of the Gold Coast. Forgiveness, they shouted, all the while committing their wrongs...forgiveness was an act done after the fact, a piece of the bad deeds future. And if you point the people's eye to the future, they might not see what is being done to hurt them in the present. (Gyasi 237-238)

This enlightened point of view displays the true intentions of the British in spreading Christianity – control. The repetition of the word “forgiveness” demonstrates the shallowness in its meaning, also originating from white institutions. The concluding sentence indicates that the British used Christianity to blind the Ghanaian people and understate the oppression they have and continue to face. The spread of Christianity was represented as a positive thing for Africa by the white, Christian community, yet they took little note or care of the opinions of those it was being pressed onto. While once again rooted in their own self-interests, the English pushed another white institution, Christianity, on the African people.

The emptiness of Christian forgiveness is furthered by the missionary's murder of Akua's mother, Abena. In a violent scene, the missionary drowned her in an attempt of baptism, “I took her to the water to be baptized. She didn't want to go – but I forced her. She thrashed as I carried her through the forest to the river. She trashed as I lowered her down into the water. She trashed and thrashed and thrashed, and then she was still. I only wanted her to repent,” (Gyasi 189). This gruesome detail displays the evil qualities of the missionary – forcing his own religion on her against her will. Ironically, he breaks a tenant of his own religion “Thou shall not kill,” while performing a sacrament of Christianity (Exodus 20:13). This indicates the contradictions the missionaries had in their teachings and actions, which further leads to the emptiness of the white man's word. It also demonstrates that the true reason for spreading Christianity was not to offer salvation to the Africans, but to use it as a way to control their lives. Following her drowning, the missionary burned her corpse and her belongings, while pleading for his God to forgive him (Gyasi 189). This directly coincides with what Yaw was alluding to in his summation of Christian forgiveness. The white people were using this term as a way to rid themselves of the guilt and Hell in the afterlife – even though they had imposed a real life version of Hell onto the Africans. This incident is a microcosm of the abusive relationship between Christianity and Africans – it was forced onto them whether they embraced it or not. This displays that Christianity was a way for the British to try to better control the mind and spirit of the African people, which makes them easier to exploit.

Another way the English oppressed the Ghanaians is through their use of their own language, Gyasi illustrates the class associations and discomfort with speaking English. The English ran schools had required Africans to speak and write in intelligible and meaningful English (Omowela 275). However, only the top tier of African students were ever allowed to study English . Gyasi expresses the discomfort speaking English by Africans,

It was like he had opened a gate, her body began to slip into an easy stance, and Yaw realized that it was not his scar that had terrified her, but rather the problem of language, marker of her education, her class, compared with his. She had been terrified that for the teacher of the white book, she would have to speak the white tongue. Now, released from English Esther smiled more

brightly than Yaw had seen anyone smile in ages. (Gyasi 230)

The eased diction demonstrates how anxious and uncomfortable Esther was to speak her spotty English because she was ashamed it would reveal her low education and economic levels. This also illustrates the longing that Africans have to live in their native culture. The “white book” and “white tongue” display the connection that the school curriculum has with English; and language is a physical embodiment of a culture. This reveals the agenda the British had when creating these schools – to culturally suppress the Africans. Yaw’s fascination with Esther’s smile indicates that he does not see this from his students – meaning that they are not interested or engaged. This is still a pressing issue in Ghanaian society, as Charles Owo Ewie explains in his article, “The Language Policy of Education in Ghana,” Ghana made English the official language of learning in May 2002, which infringes on their linguistic human rights (Owu-Ewie 79). This adoption of English demonstrates legacy of the continuity of the systematic oppression – further pushing them into the white man’s world.

The English exploitation of the African people continued to America, where institutions were set up to benefit white society and disregard the black community. In *Homegoing* Gyasi displays the sole purpose for Africans in America – forced labor. With this in mind, it indicates that the Africans had been forced into the white, American society – which naturally benefited white Americans rather than African-Americans. Through Sonny, Gyasi points out that the education system has failed African-Americans while the white children get to attend the good schools and set themselves up well financially. This leads to the cycle of poverty that strikes so many black neighborhoods nationwide. In today’s America, education is the path to economic stability, and without adequate educational institutions African-Americans are systematically blocked from this path. The exchange between Yaw and Esther show the implications of the British forcing English down the African’s throat. The staple of every culture is its language, and the British had pushed the Ghanaians to learn English in exchange for education. Since the English had set their white system of economic stability through education, this was their only hope of escaping poverty. This allowed the British curriculum to teach British values and Euro-Centered history – having little to no importance to the African children. Gyasi portrays missionary work as evil and non-consensual, which juxtaposes many white people’s ideas of missionary work. The English pushed Christianity upon the Africans in order to blind them from the exploiting relationship they had been a part of. Yaw explains that they used the concept of forgiveness to rid themselves of their guilt of the Hell they had inflicted on the Africans and to ease relations with the Africans – so they could control them easier. Ultimately, *Homegoing* illustrates the institutions that white culture has set up were meant to exploit Africans and African-Americans alike. Through colonialism, imperialism, and slavery, Africans were forced into a world shaped by white people for white people. A serious discussion needs to take place regarding how we can make our institutions more beneficial to the needs of African-Americans and other minorities, not just their white creators. Affirmative Action and *Brown v. Board of Education* are a good starting point, yet they are a means to lessen the effects of the systemic oppression – they do not address the root cause. African-Americans feel helpless after hundreds of years of this oppression, as Gyasi points out throughout *Homegoing*. If we are to create a fairer and accepting society, then we must seriously consider reform to the institutions that push this oppression and look at the origins of why our society was built the way it was.

ⁱIn *Homegoing* this refers to the British and American societies

ⁱⁱThese tests divided the students into four groups: Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, and Group 4. Group 1 was permitted to learn English, as they had the highest scores. Group 2 learned subjects like history, religion, Latin, and Yoruba. Group 3 was taught algebra, chemistry, botany and biology. While Group 4 was left with low-intellectual training in drawing, bookkeeping, shorthand, and art.

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