Creative Saplings, Vol. 05, No. 03, March. 2026, **ISSN-0974-536X,** https://creativesaplings.in/

Motherhood Under Chains: The Impact of Slavery on Maternal Bonds in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

Nasreen Zankawah Department of English, University of Alabama at Birmingham.*
Email: Author@nasreenzankawah.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.56062/gtrs.2026.5.3.1155

Abstract

Slavery, a phenomenon that has existed for centuries, has secured a permanent spot in literature, with numerous writers, including Yaa Gyasi, using it as a premise to creatively tell stories. This paper departs from existing conversations on how the narrative structure of Homegoing enables readers to view racialization as a result of lived experiences, how the symbolism of water, fire, and stone in the novel highlights themes of healing and diasporic migration, and how home can be problematic. Rather, it focuses mainly on the novel's portrayal of how slavery fractured motherhood by replacing the natural bonds between mother and child with continual loss, absence, silence, pain, and trauma. A close reading of the novel reveals many instances in which mothers are unable to love their children because of the circumstances into which they were born or because their maternal love is overshadowed by traumatic experiences caused by slavery. These examples suggest that, within a more conducive environment, such bonds would be able to flourish without obstruction. Therefore, this paper offers readers a lens through which to look beyond the fictional characters in Homegoing and recognize that the experiences of the mothers and children in the novel reflect historical realities, encouraging an appreciation for the love that can be freely expressed and the maternal bonds that can be nurtured.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Maternal Bond, Family, Slavery.*

Ghanaian writer, Yaa Gyasi, joined the conversation on slavery and colonization in Africa, in her 2016 debut novel, *Homegoing*. With her remarkable artistry, Gyasi tells a story of a matriarch who loses her two daughters and follows their descendants over seven generations. Gyasi traces the descendants of these stepsisters chronologically, with alternating settings in Ghana and America, spanning from the eighteenth century through to early twenty-first century. Each chapter of this piece is told from the perspective of a distinct protagonist who is a descendant of either sister. Through the lens of her characters, Gyasi enthralls her readers with themes including slavery and its legacy, colonization, violence, oppression, fear and trauma.

Many scholars have examined *Homegoing* and have made insightful arguments, drawing the attention of readers to specific themes. Marijana Mikić for instance asserts that Gyasi's recount of the experiences of enslaved people in *Homegoing*

Article History : Received: 29 January. 2026. Accepted: 21 March. 2026. Available online: 25 March. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). **Licensing :** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License **Conflict of Interest:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

enables readers to assess the effects of epigenetic science and the narrative structure allows them to view racialization as not only biological but as a result of lived experiences. She emphasizes that *Homegoing* gives readers an understanding of the intergenerational impact of trauma and resilience on the characters (101). DeLinda Marzette also focuses on how Gyasi uses fire, water and stone as symbolic elements to highlight the themes of healing, diasporic migration, home and motherhood (102). Additionally, Sarah Heinz argues that by using the stepsisters, Effia and Esi, *Homegoing* depicts "home" as desirable even though it can be problematic regardless of whether a character has a permanent home, moves from place to place or is homeless (120). What these scholars largely overlook is how slavery specifically affects maternal bonds in *Homegoing*. Therefore, this paper will examine Gyasi's portrayal of how slavery fractured motherhood by replacing the natural bonds between mother and child with continual loss, absence, silence, pain and generational trauma.

For centuries, some women have yearned to experience motherhood. Motherhood has proven to be of significant value to these women and goes beyond fertility, demanding modification of physical, biological, cultural and social domains (Hwang et al. 8). There has been a social and cultural perception of what makes a good mother. This ideology imposes a criterion against which all mothers are examined, implying that mothers are "good" if they meet these standards, and "bad" if they do not (Williamson et al. 102).

Through her character, Baaba, Gyasi defies the norms of who a good mother is, when slavery brings forth a child, Effia, whom Baaba considers her nemesis and the cause of her misfortunes. Effia is born to an Asante slave, Maame, who is captured into the Fanteland and impregnated by her master, Cobbe Otcher. After Maame is believed to have died in a fire, Baaba, Cobbe's first wife, is left with no other choice than to cater for Effia. Of course, some women do not experience motherhood biologically but become mothers through other means that do not involve the stage of pregnancy, such as step-parenting, foster care and adoption (Karmakar 170). Regardless, there are instances where these women cater for

and love these children like their biological ones and are fulfilled with their ability to build a bond through their own efforts based on the love they have for these children, and their dedication to parenthood, without the aid of biology (Paldron 150). To them, making a decision to be loving mothers is rewarding, especially when this trait is not innate (Paldron 151).

On the contrary, some non-biological mothers'— specifically stepmothers' — attachment orientations may influence their inability to interact and build a positive relationship with stepchildren due to their reluctance to create ties and their limited proficiency in relationship-building techniques (Ganong et al. 3), which is the case with Baaba in *Homegoing*. Baaba never makes a genuine effort to build a friendship or develop ties with Effia, despite Effia doing everything within her means to please her. Baaba's hatred for Effia is attributed to the fact that she is born to a slave and worse, because she is coerced to cater for the child by her husband, Cobbe. This is depicted when Gyasi narrates:

> Effia grew thinner, skin on small bird-like bones, with a large black hole of a mouth that expelled a hungry cry which could be heard throughout the village, even on the days Baaba did her best to smother it, covering the baby's lips with the rough palm of her left hand.
>
> "Love her," Cobbe commanded, as though love were as simple an act as lifting food up from an iron plate and past one's lips. At night, Baaba dreamed of leaving the baby in the dark forest so that the god Nyame could do with her as he pleased. (Gyasi 3-4)

Gyasi paints a vivid picture of Baaba's feelings toward Effia through her careful choice of words in the above passage like "smother it' and the phrase, "rough palm of her left hand." These words are unpleasant and do not ignite any positive feeling. For instance, "smother it," which connotes suffocation, will barely be used in the context of a caring mother and her child, because a loving mother would barely consider suffocating her children. The harshness behind these words only mirrors the hate brewing within Baaba. Additionally, the touch of a mother is usually considered gentle and the term, "the gentle touch of a mother" is often used, connoting love and care, without taking into consideration the texture of the mother's palm. Studies on attachment reveal that the quality of

maternal touch also influences an infant's behavior, and not solely the existence or lack of it (Crucianelli et al 47). Feldman further affirms that affectionate touch encourages a concurrent relationship between mother and child and increases the probability of the child's ability to provide love and affection in future relationships (374,376). Gyasi specifying the texture of Baaba's palm and using the adjective "rough" defeats the notion of a mother's touch being gentle and lays bare the toxicity of her relationship with the child. This is especially because the Ghanaian culture condemns using the left hand in performing and doing significant things including giving, receiving, eating and drinking. Using the left hand is considered rude, disrespectful and demeaning (Kita and Essegbey 73). Hence, Baaba covering Effia's mouth with her left hand highlights her disregard for her.

Similarly, "dark forest" symbolizes danger and connotes fear especially since forests are considered sacred and it is a taboo for people to enter sacred sites like forests and groves without justification (Barre et al. 32). Doing so may leave them confronted with unpleasant experiences and an inability to return home (Osei-Tutu 119). Therefore, people avoid the forest due to these perceived consequences and measures are implemented to avoid complications whenever a violation of this taboo occurs (Barre et al 34). Hence, Baaba's desire to leave Effia in the dark forest not caring what may happen to her only reflects the intensity of her hatred.

Additionally, the second part of the passage depicts the pressure Baaba receives to cater to Effia, which further fuels her hatred. Cobbe's words, "Love her," are a command, which gives her no opportunity to rebel or register her displeasure nor gives her the avenue to reconcile with the terms of Effia's birth and time to develop affection for the child. Mainly because of the general acceptance of polygamy and the patriarchal nature of the society, she finds herself in a situation where the husband has authority over the wife and restricts her participation in decision making, ultimately exercising control over her life (Amonzem 50). Cobbe's command reveals that society perceives maternal love

as inherent and expects a woman to automatically love a child once they are put under her care, without considering how this burden can cause her psychological and emotional pain or affect her relationship with the child. The pain Baaba feels gradually manifests into physical abuse when she constantly beats Effia and also receives beatings from Cobbe, as punishment for doing so:

> And so the cycle began. Baaba beat Effia. Cobbe beat Baaba. By the time Effia had reached age ten, she could recite a history of the scars on her body. The summer of 1764, when Baaba broke yams across her back. The Spring of 1767, when Baaba bashed her left foot with a rock, breaking her big toe so that it now always pointed away from the other toes. For each scar on Effia's body, there was a companion scar on Baaba's, but that didn't stop mother from beating daughter, father from beating mother. (Gyasi 4-5)

The above passage reveals Baaba's inability to contain her pain, hence, her need to inflict it on Effia who is unfortunate to find herself in this situation against her will. At the end, both mother and child suffer the consequences of this forced relationship, and the scars which will forever remain with them will constantly be a reminder of this pain.

Gyasi further convinces her readers that Baaba's inability to love Effia is due to the circumstances she was born under when she portrays Baaba's loving relationship with her biological son, Fifi, by narrating that Effia sang her husband " a song that Baaba used to sing Fifi at night as Effia lay in the corner, pretending to be asleep, pretending not to care that she was never included" (19).This attests to the fact that one way caring mothers build a relationship with their children is through songs. Lullabies especially strengthen the bond between mother and child as some of these songs are a reflection of the mother's love and affection (Samboh 71). Had Baaba done the same for Effia, she would have probably developed an affection for her. Effia notices that the beast in Baaba vanishes whenever she is with Fifi and yearns for an iota of the love Baaba showers over him, to the extent that "it was only when Effia didn't speak or question, when she made herself small, that she could feel Baaba's love or something like it" (Gyasi 8). Heinz asserts that for Effia, "home is smallness,

silence, and a desperate attempt to come up to the unspoken, yet crucial and unquestioned expectations of the rules and people closest to her" (128). While this is true, Heinz does not highlight the fact that Effia would not feel this way if her biological mother, Maame, was present, since it is evident that Baaba dominates this "home" and things would have been different if it were Maame in her place.

This lack of love exhibited by Baaba toward Effia, traumatizes Effia to the extent that when she marries and her husband expresses his desire to have children with her: "Effia cringed, worried that she would not be able to fulfill this want, worried too that because she had a bad mother, she herself would become one" (Gyasi 20). This goes to show the dire effect Baaba's abuse has on Effia especially when Baaba convinces everyone in their village that Effia is a bad omen. Hence, when she encounters difficulty in conceiving a child, "Effia had started to believe that perhaps Baaba was right. She'd lost her virginity on the night of her wedding, but months had passed without a pregnancy. The curse may have been rooted in a lie, but perhaps it bore the fruit of truth" (Gyasi 20). This shows that Baaba's actions have condemned her to a life of self-doubt.

Furthermore, through Effia's stepsister, Esi, Gyasi gives an in-depth look into Maame's life and highlights the trauma and loss she suffers due to slavery. After Maame escapes her slaver, Cobbe, by burning down his compound and abandoning her child, Effia, she marries Kwame Asare, a Big Man in the Asanteland, and births her second daughter, Esi. Unlike Effia, Esi receives maternal love and affection from Maame. However, the traumatic experiences of enslavement and rape derail Maame's emotions causing her constant fear and worry, affecting her self-esteem. Due to this, Maame feels obligated to satisfy her husband's desires because everyone thinks she is lucky "to have gotten a husband like Big Man when she had no family, no background to speak of" (Gyasi 35). In Ghana and in most parts of Africa, marriage is not just an individual affair, but rather a family affair, and this is due to the significance placed on family and the need to have one to reinforce a person's identity (Layefa

et al. 3,5). Maame finds herself in this situation because she was enslaved, and her constant battle with her self-worth threatens to overshadow the love she has for Esi, who observes the way Maame's "shoulders always seem to droop, the way her eyes were always shifting" (Gyasi 39). This signifies the anxiety and burden caused by Maame's experiences.

Gyasi further highlights Maame's trauma when Esi discovers Maame's contempt for fire and her uneasiness around it. This stems from the fact that Maame escaped slavery by setting the Fanteland on fire which is described in the first page of the novel:

> The night Effia Otcher was born into the musky heat of Fanteland, a fire raged through the woods just outside her father's compound. It moved quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in caves and hid in trees; it burned, up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind, until it reached an Asante village. There, it disappeared, becoming one with the night. (Gyasi 3)

The vivid description of the fire in the above passage and the imagery it invokes for the reader, reveals the severity of the fire Maame set and shows why she is still haunted by it. The sight of fire is always a reminder of her experience as a slave and what she had to do to escape it. Hence, the few times she has an altercation with Esi are related to fire as depicted below:

> "Aiiee!" her mother cried out, wiping the oil away with her hands and blowing on the burn. "Stupid girl! When will you learn to be careful around fire?" Maame asked. Esi had heard her mother say this or something like it many times before. Maame was terrified of fire. "Be careful of fire. Know when to use it and when to stay cold," she would often say. (Gyasi 33)

Fire not only has a psychological effect on Maame, but an emotional one too, which makes her hypervigilant. Also, Maame wiping the oil and blowing on the burn caused by Esi illustrates her battle to avoid her past which keeps resurfacing no matter how hard she tries to suppress it. People involved in fire incidents can exhibit intense signs of traumatic stress for an extended duration (Van Loey et al. 7). It plunges them into pain and alters their capacity to perform

emotionally and physically, ultimately affecting how they perceive themselves and the world around them (Mitchell 231). Maame cautioning Esi to know when to use fire and when to stay cold mirrors her endurance of the probable maltreatment she received as a slave and the extreme measure she took when she could no longer tolerate the suffering. This caution is also meant to prepare Esi for whatever her fate may be and how she should address issues she may encounter.

When Esi hides in a tree to avoid being captured by enemies who raid her village, Gyasi, again, reveals fire as symbolic to pain when she narrates, "Time passed and passed. Esi felt like her arms were encircling fire instead of the tree, so badly were they burning" (43). This shows that Esi is an image of her mother, and it would be impossible for her to detach herself from Maame's pain. The "fire" and the "burning" suggest that whatever pain Maame has experienced, Esi will experience in the same form or in a different way. Since Esi is unable to fathom her mother's fear of fire, having her experience what it is like to be burned by fire literally or figuratively will give her a better understanding of her mother's pain.

The snippets of unease, anxiety and gloom Esi observe in her mother, eventually converge to create a complete image of who Maame truly is, and Esi discovers that Maame is not complete:

> Esi stared at her mother then, and it was as though she were seeing her for the first time. Maame was not a whole woman. There were large swaths of her spirit missing, and no matter how much she loved Esi, and no matter how much Esi loved her, they both knew in that moment that love could never return what Maame had lost…Esi would inherit that unspeakable sense of loss, learn what it meant to be un-whole. (Gyasi 42)

The third-person point of view narration of this passage, gives readers an overview of Maame and Esi's relationship and their inner thoughts in just a few words, and shows that something greater overshadows the love they have for each other. The clause, "There were large swaths of her spirit missing" is dense

and the choice of words highlights the gravity of Maame's emptiness due to what she has lost, which are her dignity as a human and her daughter. A study by UNESCO Slave Route Project has revealed that millions of people, their descendants and communities have been negatively affected by slavery, causing victims to perceive themselves as damaged (5,35). Additionally, when a parent loses a child, they lose a part of themselves, and regardless of the number of children they subsequently have, the void can never be closed and their grief never ceases completely (Campbell-Jackson et al. 7). The last part of the above passage foreshadows what will happen to Esi, preparing readers for what is yet to come.

In conclusion, this analysis provides readers with a lens to see beyond the characters of Baaba, Effia, Maame, and Esi and understand that what these characters encountered is beyond fiction and that mothers and their children did have their relationships fractured, disorientated and ruined due to slavery. *Homegoing* also grants people the opportunity to appreciate any iota of freedom they enjoy, to receive and reciprocate love and affection. Also, Gyasi's narrative goes beyond all these and enlightens readers about the culture and traditions that existed in the Gold Coast which persist in present-day Ghana, ultimately enriching Ghanaian and African literature as a whole.

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