The Representation of the Marginalized in Warsan Shire's Poetry

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Završni rad

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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Abstract

As a writer of Somali descent raised in the United Kingdom, Warsan Shire intertwines poetic landscapes with concrete struggles she, her family members, and friends have experienced since the Civil War in Somalia began. Her 2022 debut poetry collection *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* tackles haunting and difficult topics such as the atrocities of war, migration and immigration, racism, gender-based violence, loss of identity, and alienation. The poems are simultaneously direct, merciless, and poignant. For the most part, Shire utilizes her trauma and loss as a foundation of the poems that raise multifaceted questions relevant in the contemporary society. As the paper will show by looking at issues such as intersectionality, sexism, and racism, Warsan Shire's poetry articulates the plights of those who are disregarded and unjustly treated by society. It represents forced migrants, war victims and Black women as highly marginalized groups whose struggles are rarely voiced, often neglected, and always tainted by Otherness.

Keywords: Warsan Shire, poetry, Somalia, intersectionality, migration

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Introduction

The realm of poetry is often considered a highly aesthetic one, but numerous poets showcase its ability to raise questions about politics, religion, and broader society. Warsan Shire is an example of a poet whose writings give attention to traumatic and heartbreaking fragments that shape both an individual's perception of the world and the world's perception of the individual. The paper focuses on her collection titled *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022) and the selected poems interpreted in this paper show how certain groups face marginalization, how fragile identity is, and how human interactions weave the fabric of life.

The first chapter of this paper defines Crenshaw's intersectional theory together with theoretical frameworks proposed by different scholars who recognized the entwined notions of race, gender and class. Furthermore, this chapter establishes a link between the aforementioned theories and Shire's ability to poetically convey the complexities of human identity within her community. The following chapter gives a short insight into Somalia's turbulent history, politics, and Muslim dominated culture. The chapter clarifies the unfavourable position of certain groups in Somalia while also giving insight into the reasons behind migration tendencies among Somalis.

The third chapter is analytical and covers immigration, Civil War in Somalia, as well as its colonization in the past century not only through background information but also through the analysis of Shire's poems that deal with the aftermath of such tumultuous events. Even though these poems are an account of personal loss, they also manage to voice the shared struggles of many Somalis both in their home country and upon reaching the United Kingdom. Additionally, this chapter emphasizes the fickleness of identity, and the struggles of assimilation and integration as they are represented in her poems.

The fourth chapter is concerned with the precarious position of Somali women who face oppression in multiple ways. Poems in which Shire confesses her own experience of physical or mental abuse are analysed in detail and framed by historical, cultural, and sociological background. This chapter attempts to deal with sensitive topics such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse and connects them to atrocities experienced by Somali women. In these poems Shire demonstrates not only her ability to raise important questions about women's identity, its roles and burdens but also her obligation to criticize how men treat their female partners.

The focal point of the fifth chapter focuses on racial theories, and racially motivated discrimination. The issues of race are, albeit not extensively, also an inspiration for poems which

Shire utilizes to highlight the interconnectedness of race, gender, and ethnicity. This chapter will be followed by concluding remarks.

1. Intersectionality and the Reading of Warsan Shire

Warsan Shire's poetry cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the basic concepts of intersectional theory. Intersectionality was introduced to the legal world by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw who argues that to properly understand the Black women's experience, its multidimensionality must be considered (*Demarginalizing the Intersection Between Gender and Sex* 139) because various aspects of an individual's identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class interweave (Chang and McCristal Culp 485). These facets should not be examined separately because the social position of a person cannot simply be reduced to one of them. Surprisingly, "until the early 1980s, sociological scholarship and teaching on race relations, social class, and gender developed in almost complete isolation from each other" (Belkhir and McNair Barnett 158). Thus, the theoretical focus at the beginning of the century "was on the integration - not merely the addition of - race, class, and gender" (Belkhir and McNair Barnett 158). Intersectionality is crucial in understanding the struggles of the marginalized groups because the experience of the White and the heteronormative cannot sufficiently aid the marginalized (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1246). The main gender terms like "man" and "woman" or racial ones like "White" and "Black" should not be considered what Belkhir and McNair Barnett call *unitary concepts* (166). According to them, if one were to interpret these terms as unitary, it would imply that all Black people share the same experiences. Such an understanding of these terms would undermine the prejudices and struggles that oppressed groups face in patriarchal and capitalist society. Furthermore, the relationship between race, gender and class shows that they can be not only a source of oppression but also of power (Belkhir and McNair Barnett 171).

As Said has established in his influential study *Orientalism* (1987), the issue of power is especially present in the colonial discourse which deals with the ways the Western colonizers built and systematically upheld negative images of the colonized countries in order to justify both the conceptualization of native cultures as inferior and their exploitation (5-9). The West is the Subject "narrativized by the law, political economy and ideology" (Spivak 66), and its values function as those the Other is judged by. But, as Spivak contends, "[o]ne must nevertheless insist that the colonized subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (79). The experience of the colonized is thus

complex and it varies depending on gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Additionally, the position from which the world is viewed highly revolves around the West and its capitalist regime: "The reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology" (Spivak 68). Moreover, as Ashcroft et al. suggest, "[i]t is clear that economic control was of significant, if not primary importance in imperialism" (33) and it was also the tool required for cultural and ideological influence. Yet, the post-colonial theory mainly deals with ethnicity and race, downplaying the aspect of class (Aschcroft et al. 35). This is surprising, because it is safe to say that the marginalized in the analysed poems mostly belong to the lower class. Indeed, the concern for class issues seems to be disregarded by writers and poets too, and this paper will also devote the least attention to class because Shire does focus on class-related matters explicitly enough to make specific conclusions on this issue.

After presenting the main concerns of the intersectional theory, it is possible to introduce the topics Warsan Shire tackles in her debut poetry collection. As a Somali British writer born in Nairobi but raised in London, Shire is simultaneously immersed in two distinct worlds whose language, values and tradition differ greatly. *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* centres around womanhood, refugee experience, and war. Shire undeniably tries to convey the loss marginalized individuals, such as herself, experience in the search for safety outside of their nation's border. She also openly confesses and questions numerous prejudices the subaltern, whom Spivak defines as being different from the elite (80), encounter in relation to the Eurocentric gaze. Foucault suggests that "to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value" (qtd. in Spivak 81). Writing about refugee experience thus gives importance to issues that would otherwise remain unspoken. The act of writing here represents a need to understand oneself, the relationship with others (both the marginalized and the Other) and the world – to form subjectivity. Furthermore, the discourse is, in Foucauldian sense, "the world that is not simply 'there' to be talked about, rather, it is through discourse itself that the world is brought into being" (Ashcroft et al. 62). Consequently, writing existential poetry and depicting marginalized groups creates space for further discussions and (re)constructs a certain image of the subaltern and its opposite. This is exactly why intersectional theory is crucial for understanding Shire's poetry which reflects her experience, as a Black immigrant Somali woman, of being a marginalized person. As Spivak says: "if you are poor, Black and female you get it in three ways" (90). However, Shire's refugee experience and those of her

lyrical speakers cannot be considered universal. Each refugee experience is unique and considering them universal would undermine individual struggles. Since her Somali background has an enormous influence on the collection's use of language and themes, the following section of this paper will consider Somalian culture and its traces among Somali immigrants and expats in the United Kingdom where Shire was raised.

2. Notes on Somalia and Somali Culture

Barbara Howard-Hunt explains that Somalia is a country negatively affected both by the colonial and domestic rule: "Northern Somalia gained its independence from the British in June 1960, and then, a few days later, Italy relinquished control of the South" (4). The next month people joined forces and established a United Somali Republic, but the democratic unity was short-lived due to inefficient government and corruption (Farah qtd. in Howard-Hunt 4). The country is also plagued by illiteracy and poverty. Somalis share a common language so Somalia devised its national orthography back in 1972 and sought out ways to boost literacy within the country (Howard-Hunt 4). Soon after that, the drought struck Somalia between 1974 and 1975 causing a famine in the North, "resulting in the death of over 20, 000 Somalis and forcing between 10% and 20% of the population to flee to refugee camps" (Lewis qtd. in Howard-Hunt 5). After the collapse of government institutions in the early 1990s, "the country, fragmented into areas controlled by warlords and their clan-based militias, descended into civil war" (Abdullahi qtd. in Howard-Hunt 6). Continuous internal conflicts, both political and violent, prevent the country from taking a path toward prosperity and peace: "Somalia received substantial foreign aid but the local leaders decided to prevent its distribution in 1995, causing the United Nations to pull out of Somalia leaving it to numerous rival militias" (Howard-Hunt 6). Hastings claims that nowadays "there are growing concerns that Somalia could become a new centre for the proliferation of global terrorism" (qtd. in Howard-Hunt 6). Thousands of Somalis cross the borders into Ethiopia and Kenya, their neighbouring countries, in search for some kind of safety. It is apparent that Somalia is a country scarred not only by wars, militants linked to al Qaeda, dictatorship, corruption, and inefficient government but also by unfavourable climate conditions, especially lasting draughts that cause food and water shortages.

Furthermore, "Somali is rarely recognized as a distinct ethnic category" (Howard-Hunt 1). Some Somalis identify with the Arab culture and it is important to highlight that 98% of Somalis

are Sunni Muslims. Religion shapes various aspects of Somali culture quite decisively, and Shire openly refers to God in some of the poems: "Hooyo says no can fight it - / the body returning to God" (Shire 57). Shire also mentions religious figures and concepts such as Azrael (the angel of death), Illiyin (supreme paradise, highest level of heaven) and Israfil (the angel who blows into the trumpet to signal the day of judgement).[1] Shire makes multiple references to Quran and her religious background by using common Muslim words, sayings, and prayers. Some of them are *Alhamdulillah* (glory be to God), *Duaa* (prayer to God), *Inna lillahi Wa inna ilayhi Rajioon* (to God we belong, to God we return), *Istagfirullah* (God forgive me). Even though this paper is not primarily concerned with religious motifs, familiarizing the reader with the religious profile of Somalia is crucial for understanding both the collection's subtexts and the complex position of Somali women whose struggles will be analysed in depth in Chapter 4.

Somali culture is based on a clan system: "Every Somali belongs through patrilineal descent to one of the six kin based clan families" (Lewis qtd. in Howard-Hunt 7), all of which function according to the same mechanisms, which affect women negatively. Namely, "[t]here is no hierarchy or political power within the clan system although power is differentiated along gender and age lines with women subjugated to men and young people to older people" (Lewis qtd. in Howard-Hunt 7). The open council, also known as Shir, is open to the voices of all men, while women are excluded from it (Lewis qtd. in Howard-Hunt 8). Women's rights are fairly limited because "Somali Family law is based principally on Islamic Shari'a Law, which has its roots in the Sunni Muslim tradition" (Howard-Hunt 8). Women's greatest asset is bearing children, especially male children, and they are taught to be occupied only with tasks regarding the house and child-rearing.

Moreover, the inferior position of women in Somali culture is apparent when it comes to marriage dynamics. According to Lewis, "Somali men under Islamic law can merry up to four wives subject to the man being financially and physically able to care for his wives and that he promises to treat each justly" (qtd. in Howard-Hunt 9). Gardner and El Bushra suggest that, "whilst a husband can divorce his wife, by stating in front of two male witnesses that he repudiates his marriage, women have no such rights and a man can deny his wife a divorce" (qtd. in Howard-Hunt 9). Marriage is instrumental in Somali society not only because it legitimizes having children but also because children are primarily seen as members of clans which seek physical and political strength through numerousness.

[1] Definitions quoted from the collection's glossary (Shire 67–69).

Furthermore, having a boy is more beneficial to the clan because he takes "his father's clan identity and will become a member of the same diya group, [whereas] a girl, has less value to the clan. The expectation is that, upon marriage, she will bear children for another clan" (Howard-Hunt 10). Unlike her brothers, a girl will have a distinct bond with her mother's clan, which puts women in an unfavourable position because they can be identified with both their paternal and maternal clan: "This dual identity can mean there is a degree of ambivalence when clan loyalty is put to the test" (Gardner and El Bushra qtd. in Howard-Hunt 10). During wars and times of unsafety, the precariousness of women's position is even more obvious as a woman's friends and relatives can turn into potential enemies, depending on which clan they choose to support (Howard-Hunt 10).

Finally, sexual violence is frequent in Somalia, as in other in war-torn countries, and many Somali women were victims of rape camps during the early 1990s. Despite the frequency of the crime, there is no legal, psychological or emotional support for victims. In addition to psychological and physical damage caused by sexual violence, rape also has social consequences for women since "an unmarried Somali woman who is raped is considered socially dead and is likely to be ostracized from her community" (Howard-Hunt 11). Sometimes, women decide or are forced to marry their rapist or they are murdered to shield their families from shame (Howard-Hunt 11). Consequently, many Somali women choose not to confess their experience of rape and sexual abuse. This aspect of Somali women's life is clearly visible in Shire's poetry, but the paper first turns to poems that deal with forced migration and life of refugees.

3. Poems about Forced Migration and Refugees

"The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that Somalis constitute the third largest refugee group under their responsibility with 770,000 persons at the end of 2010" (Howard-Hunt 11). In recent years, a notable number of Somali refugees have migrated from secondary European countries to the United Kingdom. Reasons for this are not completely known but it is argued that Somalis probably feel the desire to join their family members and communities in the United Kingdom which "hosts the largest Somali population in Europe and has a long history of hosting Somali settlements, due to colonial links between the UK and Somaliland" (Lewis qtd. in Howard 13). Being a part of this vast refugee community, Warsan Shire has intimate knowledge

of what it feels like to be a foreigner in a new culture, and she frequently writes about her refugee experience filled with personal and familial struggles.

In "Assimilation," the second poem of her poetry collection, Shire openly confesses that refugees never feel at home in their new country: "We have never unpacked, / dreaming in the wrong language" (Shire lines 1-2).[2] The sense of not belonging and of the constant struggle to belong is the essential part of the refugee experience, which she highlights by using a metaphor of six chambers: "In the first is your mother's unpacked suitcase. / In the second, your father cries into his hands" (lines 9-10). She finishes it with "The sixth opens with the right papers" (line 14), suggesting that the administrative part of being a refugee is the most important one. Nobody cares about their feelings or helps them overcome their trauma. In fact, the whole process of immigration is portrayed as a traumatic experience that seems to be everlasting: "I can't get the refugee out of my body" (line 15). Shire defines assimilation as "an outer layer" of a refugee's heart that is crucial for survival because: "Those unable to grow the extra skin / die within the first six months in the host country" (lines 21-22).

Furthermore, Shire portrays the refugee experience as not only traumatic but also dehumanizing: "At each and every checkpoint the refugee is asked / *are you human?*" (lines 23-24), mostly because everything revolves around proper paperwork, rather than actual help and concern for individuals. It is apparent that Shire is trying to convey the idea of Otherness that haunts refugees, but in addition to race and ethnicity, they are Other because they do not possess proper documents. The refugee is somehow "substandard" in every aspect. For this reason, Shire ends the poem with: "The refugee is sure it's still human but worries that overnight, / while it slept, there may have been a change in classification" (lines 25-26). These two lines are stylistically marked because Shire uses the pronoun *it* to reference the refugee, highlighting dehumanization through language. The word *classification* also echoes historical attempts to scientifically prove the superiority of White people, which only resulted in pseudoscientific imaginings (Matek 70-73). As Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman have shown, there are no clear scientific boundaries between characteristics of human races, and any differences in behaviour, character or achievements are of environmental rather than congenital nature (18). Two racially different people can be genetically more similar than two members of the same race.

Shire touches upon war and its traumatic consequences because the migration of Somali and other African people is mostly motivated by the fact that war makes life impossible:

[2] Lines are given for poems written in verse, whereas for prose poems page number is indicated.

"Politically, many African countries have suffered immensely from internecine wars that raged for too long, displacing people and undermining social and economic institutions and systems of governance" (Adeyanju and Oriola 947). One of such poems is "Bless the Real Housewife," which is a poem about domestic violence, but whose last stanza ends with a recurring dream of both the woman's departure from the abusive marriage and of a *peaceful* country:

> along a dirt road, passing by grazing camels,
>
> her braid coming loose in the breeze, the sun
>
> lifting its skirt, a peaceful Somalia in her rearview.
>
> She thinks of this, and laughs" (Shire lines 14-17)

The poem mixes domestic violence and country violence and suggests that the only way to experience peace is to leave.

The prose poem titled "Home" is undoubtedly one of the collection's most memorable works because it describes home as a place of danger. It simultaneously touches upon war, refugee experience, racism and feelings of alienation. Shire hauntingly begins the poem by stating: "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" (8). These lines are followed by images of war and decay, of a boy you went to school with "holding a gun bigger than his body" (8). Shire openly states here that leaving home is not something one wants to do but rather something one must do to survive: "No one puts their children in a boat, unless the water is safer than the land" (8). It is widely known that African immigrants take long trips to reach European borders and that they drown or die out of different reasons on the way. Shire then proceeds to introduce issues of immigrant beatings, raping, human trafficking, and shooting. Dehumanization reaches its highest point when an immigrant realizes they survived the worst to live, only to find out they are not welcome: "Go home Blacks, dirty refugees, sucking our country dry of milk" (8). Although she is aware that such treatment is demeaning, she writes that "[t]he insults are easier to swallow than finding your child's body in the rubble" (9). The choice a refugee has is between horrible life and death, so they choose horrible life.

The end of "Home" is a confession of alienation and loss: "I don't know where I'm going. Where I came from is disappearing. I am unwelcome. My beauty is not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame of not belonging, my body is longing" (9). The clash between cultures and values certainly opens this inner rift: "Being transnational in her sojourn, Shire's diasporic experiences depict ambivalence as she tried constantly to create a home between the otherness in

exile and the distance from Somalia" (Obi and Onyejizu 5). The distinction between "voluntary and forced migration can be made by distinguishing between the voluntary decision made by a person to migrate for one or more reasons and that of a person who has been forced to flee in the interest of their personal safety" (Crisp qtd. in Howard-Hunt 15). In "Home" Shire depicts the latter, the one that leaves you no choice but to flee: "No one would leave home unless home chased you to the shore" (9). Indeed, refugees "have undergone a violent separation from their homeland" (Harrell-Bond and Voutira qtd. in Howard-Hunt 15), which makes their life very difficult. Namely, Gold points out that forced migrants are less likely to adapt to the hosting culture since they often cling to their traditional values and societal roles (qtd. in Howard-Hunt 15). However, any commonalities between the experiences of forced migrants should not lead to universal conclusions because each refugee experience comes with its own set of struggles and setbacks. That is why, as Turton says, "the refugee voice" and "the refugee experience" cannot exist, only "the voice of refugees" and "the experience of refugees" can (qtd. in Howard-Hunt 15-16).

To conclude the chapter on forced migration, the paper will turn to another prose poem, "Bless Maymuun's Mind," which depicts the loneliness and alienation of economic immigrants. Because their families are at home and depend on their work, these immigrants cannot stop working and return to their loved ones: "She imagines she will die here, alone, far from home" (10). The burden of economic stability is thus carried by an individual who simultaneously has to deal with setbacks in the host country and the expectations of their family members: "The phone warms the side of her face like the sun. She listens to the clamouring voices, oh how blessed she is, how proud they are, how all their hopes depend on her, how walahi, all their dreams lie at her feet" (10). The dreams of better life and the economic aspect of migration can also be found in poems that thematize colonialism and its consequences.

3.1. Race and The Remains of Colonialism

As the poem "Bless Maymuun's Mind" suggests, in addition to wars and violence, many migrants leave their native country in order to provide for their families at home. The irony of this situation lies in the fact that European colonial powers ruined the life of native populations as they searched for profit in the colonies, and now people from the former colonies move to Europe to find work. These poems are also marked by images of death and suffering, as Shire seems to be highly critical of the colonizers that historically infiltrated Somalia. Specifically, United Kingdom

which had control over British Somaliland from 1884 up until it fell under Italy's control during World War II.

Race and gender are deeply intertwined in this collection and both racist and sexist socialization caused many Black women to treat race as the only relevant aspect of their identity (hooks 14). The complete focus on race only causes further disparity among racially different people. Avoiding this hyperfixation on one label of identification is exactly the goal of theory of intersectionality that highlights multidimensionality of people. Nevertheless, race proves to be an important marker of one's place in the society and it inevitably raises questions about racial differences, racism, and historical oppression: "Though intimated throughout the world in innumerable ways, racial categorization of human beings was a European invention" (Winant 172). It was colonialism that created racism.

The first studies on race mainly used biological or pseudo-biological methods to explain physical, behavioural and other distinctions between the races. *The Inequality of Human Races*, a study published in 1854 by Count Arthur Gobineau served to justify the dominant races of Europe and their attempts to gain control over other peoples (Reuter 453). Gobineau was not the only thinker whose racist claims and ideas influenced the development of racist theories in the West. G. Vascher de Lapouge, among other eminent social Darwinians, believed in the supremacy of both Nordic and Arian races and promoted the idea that progress depends on the racial profile of the population (Reuter 454). However, as Reuter explains, at the beginning of the twentieth century there was a realization that the complexities of race cannot be simply defined by biological parameters: "There is no known group of men whose culture can be differentiated on the basis of any specific complex of racial traits" (Reuter 455). Cultural differences are thus independent of race, so the question of race started to move from the biological to cultural and sociological sphere ultimately leading to the conclusion that race "is not a natural category but a social one" (Appiah). Historians have mostly agreed that "all the great civilizations of record have been the work of heterogenous and racially mixed groups" (Reuter 459).

Ethnicity-oriented theories of race suggested that prejudice could be avoided by integration and assimilation while discrimination could be stopped through laws and regulations promoting equality (Winant 179). However, juridical changes are not easily carried out and sustained. Furthermore, most minorities find assimilating into the White cultural norm undesirable. Class-based theories of race had argued that racial conflict was the mode in which class conflict was lived out or expressed (Hal et al. qtd. in Winant 179). Robinson suggests that "racism emerged to

rationalize pre-capitalist class relations; capitalism subsequently developed with race built in, inheriting and repurposing the practice of national-racial differentiation established in the European Middle Ages" (qtd. in Calnitsky and Martinez 247). Lastly, nation-based theories of race have atrophied due to immense migration and globalization in the contemporary society (Winant 180).

When it comes to racism, Bowser mentions three intertwined types. The first of them is cultural racism which is based around "distinct norms, attitudes, beliefs, and values and is a particular worldview" (580). Cultural racism is the trigger for institutional racism which is upheld by legal actions, such as Jim Crow laws. Lastly, activists also defined individual racism, but claimed it is not innate to most White people – it is rather taught (Bowser 580). For hooks, racism is "the highest expression of the colonial system and one of the most significant features of the colonialist" (167). Additionally, neocolonialism upheld by globalization and capitalist regime should not be neglected when discussing the present influence of the West. Many believe that Black people cannot be racist due to their inability to systematically oppress other races. The belief that White people can experience racism is referred to as reverse racism but the institutional powerlessness of non-White people leads many to dub such behaviour as simply prejudice.

Shire makes several references to colonial powers in her poems. In "Bless the Ghost" Shire says Somalia is culled by war "and the white gloved hand of Europe" (line 32). She finishes the poem with the following stanza: "She unfolds a small silk scarf, / to catch a tear, were it to fall / as dictators fall" (lines 33-35). In the same poem her mother recalls a time when the people worshipped "birds, kingdom of myrrh, damp / hands working her breast for lumps, / steam marbling her reflection" (lines 26-28). Her mother's outlook on life is deeply rooted in tradition which she idealizes, but Shire, who was raised in the United Kingdom, is not blindly following its rules. In the poem "My Father, the Astronaut" Shire addresses the loss of a parent due to migration: "If the Moon was Europe, my father was an astronaut who died on his / way to the moon" (lines 1-2).

Colonialism is based on binary oppositions whose relevancy is constantly perpetuated by the colonizers: "The idea of the savage could occur only if there was a concept of the civilized to oppose it" (Ashcroft et al. 32). Shire uses this word in the poem "Home" when she portrays verbal discrimination and negative views of immigrants: "sucking our country dry of milk, dark with their hands out, smell strange, savage" (8). In the initial poem of the collection, titled "Extreme Girlhood," Shire confesses:

Born to a lullaby

lamenting melanin,

newborn ears checked

for the first signs of colour. (lines 12-15)

Melanin and black skin are portrayed as something one laments over for it *scars* the child. They are not lamented because of the colour itself but because of the burden that comes with it. In the poem "The Baby-Sitters Club" Shire wonders how life would be if she had been baptized as Tiffany or Kimberly, a child dreaming "in the language of white suburbia" (line 3). The racial implications are apparent for everything takes on the colour white:

drapes, beyond which white clouds

are punctured by a white god

stretching his white arm from

out a white sky, while a white

limousine waits at my door. (lines 11-15)

In that way Shire applies racial separation even on metaphysical beings such as gods, meaning there is a god for Us and a god for Them.

To be sure, Shire is completely transparent when it comes to her past and idealization of White boys, as she openly confesses in "Drowning in Dawson's Creek": "When I was twelve or thirteen and mad / with loneliness, I dreamed of white boys and / ladders leading to bedroom windows" (lines 8-10). She writes about how the dominant culture became desirable to her, although her African identity seemed Other to White British people, and how she wanted to fit in. She ends the poem by saying "For Pacey Witter I would hitchhike Capeside. / For his plaid embrace, / I was willing to disown myself" (lines 13-15). The lyrical subject clearly associated Whiteness with a sense of beauty and superiority. Such portrayals of White people stem from "three interrelated extraeconomic factors: colonial discourse, migrants' accounts or presentation of self, and the contemporary mass media" (Adeyanju and Oriola 961). Adeyanju and Oriola suggest that colonialism further amplified the tendency to associate progress and prosperity with European culture (aesthetics, language, philosophy, education, art) and primitivism, as well as backwardness, with the African Other (961). "Drowning in Dawson's Creek" is accompanied by

a note at the bottom of the page that says: “The remains of a murdered Somali woman were found in Lewis County, Washington State, in 2010, and for a decade, her body was misidentified as Caucasian Jane Doe” (Shire 15). By doing so, Shire borrows the woman’s story and intertwines it with her own experience of idealizing Caucasian boys. She highlights how human desires can often be misplaced or even dangerous, and how identities can merge and become fluid, particularly in cases of displacement, that is, migration. The body of a murdered Somali woman was submerged in bleach that caused paling of her skin and lead to misidentification of her cadaver as Caucasian. The misidentification occurred solely based on skin colour and not any other physical traits, leading to the idea that dissimilarities between races are often not as apparent as one thinks. “Although the concept of race appeals to biologically based human characteristics (phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process” (Winant 172). Humans simply cannot be colour-blind to these visible racial differences but the tendency to constantly accentuate them leads not only to separation but also to neglection of internal qualities.

3.2. Linguistic Heritage and Erosion of Identity

Language is one of the central aspects of one’s identity and Shire is undoubtedly aware of this fact. Noah Chomsky believed that identity should not be central to theories of language (Norton 409), but Bourdieu “argues that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from the larger networks of social relationships” (qtd. in Norton 411). Many of Shire’s poems thus speak of alienation through language, of the warmth of the mother tongue, and of identity’s erosion when one starts to neglect it: “Both language and literature are carriers of political genes. Identity is not just a political and historic construct, but a linguistic one as well” (Daruwalla 169).

One of the poems dealing with the inability to use your own language in the country you live in is “Midnight in the Foreign Food Aisle” that opens with the lines “Dear Uncle, is everything you love foreign / or are you foreign to everything you love?” (Shire lines 1-2). Shire proceeds to mercilessly unravel the uncle’s loneliness: “Love is not haram but after years of fucking / women who are unable to pronounce your name, / you find yourself totally alone” (lines 7-9). The foreign food isle is where the uncle’s memory is triggered and he recalls his “mother’s warm, dark hands, / prostrating in front of the halal meat, praying in a / language you haven’t used in years” (lines

11-13). Not being able to speak your own language is an alienating and hurtful experience, but Shire certainly also wants to vocalize that there must be something shameful, almost degrading in entirely abandoning one's language to assimilate and even have a sexual relationship with someone unable to pronounce your name correctly. The minority's language is always marked as inferior to the language of the immigrant country. It is expected of immigrants in the United Kingdom to learn the English language in order to become proper members of the British society. As Ashcroft et al. suggest, the global social élite uses the English language as well as other ex-colonial languages because their relevancy reflects both their historical and economical power (57).

The use of language is important for poets too: "So what does the expat writer do? He is either being accused of being too native or not being native enough" (Daruwalla 202). English is simply the language that ensures a wide audience, which makes it today's lingua franca. Shire was not born in the UK; but she was raised there and so she published this collection in English, but she nevertheless expresses the appreciation she feels towards her mother tongue by her use of Somali. She emphasizes the importance of respecting one's mother tongue and the dangers that neglecting it can have on an immigrant's identity. "Assimilation" begins with the following lines: "We never unpacked, / dreaming in the wrong language" (lines 1-2) and "Saint Hooyo" ends with

I don't recognize my own children

they speak and dream in the wrong language

as much as I understand

it may as well be the language of birds. (lines 17-20)

When another language infiltrates the realm of dreams, its relevancy is solidified. "Saint Hooyo" showcases familial distancing that arises when two generations speak different tongues. In such cases, immigrants are not able to properly communicate among themselves leading to further alienation and deeper misunderstandings. The poem also deals with motherhood – the word Hooyo means mother (Shire 68) – and so it is one of the majority of poems dealing with the female experience.

4. Black Womanhood

Apart from writing about immigration and war, Shire questions patriarchy, and women's – particularly Black women's – unfavourable position in society. Even the collection's title *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* foreshadows the central figure of the book – a woman. During the Civil Rights Movement, "Black women were told that they should take care of household needs and breed warriors of the revolution" (hooks 19). So, the Movement that started as a "movement to free all Black people from racist oppression became a movement with its primary goal the establishment of Black male patriarchy" (hooks 19). The reason this situation in American history was brought up is because Shire currently lives in the USA and is aware of the fact that Black women are subjugated even in a society that boasts its democratic principles, and, more importantly, because it testifies that Black women did not face discrimination only by White men and women, but also by Black men – members of their own community. Namely, Black women were, like any other woman, "celebrated for their unique devotion to the task of mothering" (hooks 21), which constitutes women as bodies able to give birth to and take care of children.

Shire explores the mother-daughter paradigm in the poem "Fillial Cannibalism." The poem begins with a reference to animal mothers who occasionally devour their young out of "pure, bright need" (line 5). For human mothers, the relationship with her daughters is never "pure and bright":

> mothers from ordinary
> homes, much like our
> own, feed on the viscid
> shame their daughters
> are forced to secrete
> from glands formed
> in the favour of men. (lines 7-13)

The most striking idea presented in the poem is that of mothers feeding on the shame of their daughters, making shame the central feeling of a woman's experience. Shire is aware of how patriarchy is not perpetuated only by men, but by many women as well. As hooks says: "Systematic devaluation of black womanhood was not simply a direct consequence of race hatred, it was a calculated method of social control" (87). This devaluation certainly came from the

colonizers, but it was also perpetuated by Black men who sought out ways to subjugate Black women: "While racism caused white men to make black women targets, it was and is sexism that causes all men to think that they can verbally and physically assault women sexually with impunity" (hooks 98). Ultimately, in patriarchal society it is the female identity that makes women victims, much more than their racial identity.

4.1. Rape and Shame

Rape and other forms of sexual assault are deeply traumatic experiences and Shire's poems suggest that rape is not a rare and extreme situation, but practically an inevitability in a woman's life. The poem "Bless This House" begins with the stanza: "Mother says there are locked rooms inside all women. / Sometimes, the men – they come with keys, / and sometimes, the men – they come with hammers" (lines 1-3). The juxtaposition between peaceful and aggressive ways of treating a woman are apparent, but what is more devastating is the balance between the two: sometimes one happens, sometimes the other, and women have to accept it. At the end of the second stanza Shire reveals the woman's helplessness in an instance of rape: "I said *Stop*, I said *No* and he heard nothing" (line 6). The lyrical speaker refers to her body as "this old thing" and is aware that "[t]he bigger my body is, the more locked rooms I find. The more men queue at the door" (lines 13-14). Some of these men are Ahmed, Ali, Johnny who "came with a bag of tools he'd used on other women" (lines 16-17) and Yusuf. Their names suggest that sexism and objectification of women is not reserved for a specific culture, but that men of all races, religious affiliations, and ethnicities abuse women. The following stanza leads to the conclusion that the girl confessed this experience to someone: "*Show us on the doll where you were touched*, they said. / I said *I didn't look like a doll, I looked more like a house*" (lines 22-23). A house is a solid building made of different locked rooms whose doors men break and then abandon women: "Knock knock. / Who's there? / No one" (lines 32-34). The woman is no one – she is just a body, not a person to them, and rape also causes her to detach from herself in order to survive. The lyrical speaker ends the poem with "At parties I point to my body and say */ Oh, this old thing? This is where men come to die*" (lines 35-36), insinuating her inability or perhaps even unwillingness to satisfy the needs of men. Although violence against women is a universal problem, Shire's poems are definitely marked by specific Somali experiences.

Howard-Hunt's study focuses on Somali women who migrated to the United Kingdom at the begging of the century after experiencing the atrocities of the Civil War: "For many of the women the memories were so painful that they had spent the years since migration trying to forget, preferring to remain silent" (Howard-Hunt 68). Many rape camps were set up in the early 90s in the capital of Somalia, Mogadishu. Militia used them to rape women and young girls systematically and continuously (Howard-Hunt 73). This violence was not racially motivated as the rapists were Black and Somali. Women are simply seen as easy targets. As Tenaw et al. claim, "women and girls are especially vulnerable to sexual violence during war and civil conflict, whether fighting while escaping from their homes, or even once inside camps for refugees or internally displaced people" (2). When men decide or are forced to participate in war affairs, their absence causes families to lose their male protector, which renders both children and women defenceless. In Somalia's case, "nearly every Somali man possessed at least one automatic rifle and many had even heavier weapons" (Gardner and El Bushra qtd. in Howard-Hunt 69). This ultimately meant that any act of female disobedience could result in physical or sexual abuse: "Although more men lose their lives during armed conflict, women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual and gender-based violence including rape, which is a myriad debilitating consequence of war" (Ward qtd. in Tenaw et al. 2).

Sexual violence often takes on extremely disturbed forms, and often women are abused as punishment for the crimes of their fathers, husbands or other male relatives. Some women in Howard-Hunt's study "said that they had heard stories of women being raped on top of the bodies of their murdered husbands and fathers" (80). The brutal details of rape are frequently unspeakable and women frequently keep silent, which prevents them from recovering from their trauma. Unfortunately, even the women who confess their traumatic experience of rape often gamble with their lives: "Under Sharia law, a woman who accuses a man of rape and fails to produce four male witnesses could be stoned to death for adultery" (Ali qtd. in Howard-Hunt 80). Consequently, the lives of Somali women greatly depend on the readiness of men to act justly, which is mostly a risk they cannot take. If their rape experience becomes public, they face discrimination and alienation from community members, close family, and relatives, which represents a second instance of abuse and mistreatment. One woman in the study said: "Nobody will marry you… you are spoiled… your family they will not speak to you… you bring shame on the family" (Howard-Hunt 81). Even though Shire migrated to the United Kingdom with her mother when she was only one year old, she is aware of the abuse that Somali women face and it is undoubtedly reflected in the collection's

choice of themes. So, in addition to sexual violence, she writes about the general experience of being a woman.

4.2. Female Burdens and Trauma of Body Image

The collection's opening poem titled "Extreme Girlhood" already tackles the burden of being born as a girl: "A loop, a girl born / to each family, / prelude to suffering" (lines 1-3). The baby girl is described as "patron saint of not / good enough" (lines 6-7) who reads surahs each night "to veil her from il / protecting body and home / from intruders" (lines 18-20), most probably men. Shire confesses that she made it out of her mother's house "alive, raised by / the voices / in my head" (lines 36-38). Left without a father figure, the child also struggles to establish a healthy relationship with her mother. It can be concluded that the girl is Shire herself for she says: "Are you there, God? / It's me, Warsan" (lines 8-9). This reference to Blume's literary classic *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) and a reference to Gaynor's feminist hit "I Will Survive" − At first I was afraid, I was petrified" (line 16) − suggest that women constantly struggle, in all societies and cultures, because shame and fear seem to be central to their experience.

In "Bless Your Ugly Daughter" Shire uses land and war imagery to portray the subject's physicality: "Her teeth are small colonies, / her stomach is an island, / her thighs are borders" (lines 10-12). Shire later equates the daughter's face with a small riot, her hands with a civil war and the backside of her ears with a refugee camp. Since "She knows loss intimately" (line 1), various traumatic experiences are projected onto the daughter's outer appearance. She will grow into an unwanted woman who is scarred, tainted by war, violence, and other unpleasant and burdensome events. The point of such writings is, as Eunice de Souza says, to validate "the stuff of women's lives, women's experience, and not to 'transcend' being a woman" (qtd. in Daruwalla 202). However, it also suggests that women (are forced to) see themselves through their body and appearance, which can be problematic. Another poem that deals with negative body image is "Bless the Bulimic" in which the lyrical speaker confesses she prayed "to the God of thin women" (line 4) and now she is asking for forgiveness since so many people are hungry, and the speaker's desire to be thin is mere vanity. This memory causes immense guilt because she is aware of the starving people back home: "ribs, forgive me please, / famine back home" (lines 6-7).

In the poem "Backwards" Shire depicts violence that her mother experienced and raises the issue of abortion: "Step-dad spits liquor back into glass, / Mum's body rolls back up the stairs, the bone pops back into place, / maybe she keeps the baby" (lines 10-12). Women are always judged – and frequently by men – based on the issue of abortion, although to keep an abuser's child is a devastatingly difficult thing, which men can never understand. On multiple accounts Shire depicts the traumatic events in her mother's life, symbolically suggesting that women's life – her mother's life – is a life in darkness, and in the poem "Are You Afraid of the Dark?" she compares her to an olm that is "thriving in the dark / rare and translucent / sustained by so little" (lines 3-5). Women are taught to endure suffering silently which affects their identity and life, as well as their children's lives.

In "Bless the Real Housewife" Shire questions the women's tendency to stay in a bad marriage. Her mother "calcifying her one human body, staying / for the sake of the kids, then staying / for the sake of staying, enduring" (lines 3-5). Shire discourages this by stating: "I ask *What if you die while you're waiting*?" (line 11). Her mother rather sits "waiting for him to die" than actively pursues divorce because she is afraid of damaging her children and of societal pressure: "*What would people say*?" (line 10). It is apparent that Shire supports the idea of leaving a dysfunctional marriage which can leave lasting consequences on women's health and social mobility. According to Carswell et al., both women's mental and physical health cripple two to three years upon arriving in the UK as refugees (qtd. Howard-Hunt 2). Furthermore, "Somali women are more likely than men to be disadvantaged as traditional cultural norms and the language barrier marginalises them in terms of the wider society" (Gardner and El Bushra qtd. in Howard-Hunt 2).

In "Bless This School for Girls" Shire comments on the lack of attention the educational system pays to female bodies and biological processes and the need for sisterhood, that is, women's closeness and mutual support: "Falis taught us more about our bodies / than we'd ever glean from the curriculum" (lines 1-2). The poem also portrays closeness among women who are dealing with reproductive issues "of cysts, signs of infertility, abortions and where / they were punishable by death, miscarriage" (lines 4-5). However, no one ever asked Falis "how or why she knew these things" (line 9), which shows that knowledge of women's bodies belongs to a realm of secrecy and obscurity. "Bless the Blood" depicts how taking a woman's virginity kindles happiness and proudness in men because it is seen as a trophy which affirms a man's masculinity: "Sofia used pigeon blood on her wedding night. / Next day, over the phone, she told me / her husband smiled when he saw the sheets" (lines 1-3). Her mother-in-law back home will parade blood-soaked sheets

through the town and she will do it proudly. Having sex socially marks women based on the circumstances under which they had sex for the first time: “Prior to the breakout of civil war, women’s virginity was highly valued and therefore violating a woman’s honour was considered scandalous” (Abdi qtd. in Howard-Hunt 80).

Shire’s poetry comments on the etiquette that is expected of girls and that causes shame if breached. She explores this issue in “The Abubakr Girls Are Different” where “One of them pushes my open knees closed. *Sit like a girl.* / I finger the hole in my shorts, / shame warming my skin” (lines 13-15). Whereas relaxed behaviour and sexual activity is viewed positive in men, women are expected to be reserved. This is what Butler’s theory of gender performativity tackles. According to Butler, “norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act at all, and that when we do act, we recapitulate the norms that act upon us, perhaps in new or unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede us and exceed us” (9). Essentially, “when a child is ‘gendered,’ that child receives an enigmatic demand or desire from the adult world” (Butler 9), meaning that “none of us has the choice of creating ourselves ex nihilo” (Butler 9). The girl in the poem sits in a way that is simultaneously comfortable for her but unacceptable by cultural norms and thus results in shame.

Conclusion

Warsan Shire is a Somali British author whose debut poetry collection *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* showcases her ability to intertwine personal stories with those of other Somali people in order to address shared experiences. Her language is direct, often harsh and violent, just like the atrocities her lyrical subjects witnessed.

Shire is concerned with the representation of the marginalized communities which include immigrants, war victims and black women. Many Somalis faced famine, violent crimes and eventually death during the Civil War, which motivated Shire to discuss their position not only in Somalia but in the United Kingdom as well. Numerous Somalis had to choose between death and leaving, but Shire warns us that simply surviving is not and should not be enough.

The struggles of assimilation, integration, alienation, gender, race, cultural and generational differences are all interwoven in the fabric of Shire’s poetry. Prose poems like “Home”

and “Bless Maymuun’s Mind” openly reveal the obstacles that Somalis face on a personal and societal level upon migrating to the United Kingdom. Often unwelcome due to the colour of their skin, their language and tradition, a crippling sense of alienation and longing infiltrates their mind. In “Bless This House” Shire explores the consequences of rape, body issues and unhealthy yet socially accepted ways men treat women. Numerous poems also question patriarchy, women’s role in its perpetuation and body image. In poems such as “Bless the Ghost” she condemns colonial powers and its repercussions, some of which include her own history of idealizing White men. “Extreme Girlhood” is a poem which encompasses the complexity of her experience as a Black child who was not only tainted by girlhood but also by black skin.

To conclude, Warsan Shire’s poetry is multidimensional and tackles various topics that are central to the lives of the marginalized and it voices the numerous struggles that immigrants, war victims and Black women face in search for a better, deserving life. By revealing the complexity of marginalized lives, Shire’s poems affect the reader and suggest that the marginalized are also human, which may contribute to the lessening of prejudice against the marginalized.

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