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### Immigration Poetry as a “Call to the Fortunate” : A Reading of Warsan Shire

Immigrant/Immigration Literature, as a genre, has been around for many decades. Sigrid Loffler, a distinguished German critic, while speaking at Lit.Cologne (2017), a prominent literature festival of Germany referred to this genre as “new world literature” and said it’s important to lend a structure to this particular brand of English literature. She also spoke of the “generational shifts” pertaining to the difference in the themes in the writings of different generations of writers, starting from the “problems to settle and integrate into the new countries” to the “mystery of arrival” and then themes which are “no longer poverty-driven”. Nevertheless, the displacement and rootlessness and finding ways to survive in a hostile environment owing to unfamiliarity of land, language and culture essentially remain the themes of these writings.

Warsan Shire, a Somali-British poet, has primarily written about the trauma of exile and suffering due to immigration. The nomadic experiences and stories of refugees and immigrants that “otherwise wouldn’t be told” is the focus of her collection of poetry *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth, Her Blue Body* and *Our Men Do Not Belong To Us*. Shire was named the first young poet laureate for London, aged 24, and has won numerous awards; she also teaches workshops on exploring memory and healing trauma through the power of the spoken word. The present paper offers a reading of the Immigration poetry of Shire and her portrayal of the actuality borne by those who were forced to flee their homes in search of a new shelter and how they end up being on the margins owing to the sea of hardships. Her depiction of the grief associated with leaving behind the hearth and home by refugees and immigrants is heart wrenching and is a “call to the fortunate” to exercise our power to help those in need with empathy and compassion.

We all are aware of the refugee crisis and tragic events of Syria that keep unfolding every now and then. How could we ever forget the image of the three year old boy having washed ashore? This was just one of the glaring examples of the suffering of thousands like the boy, who have to leave their home in the middle of a crisis in search of a better place to survive. Not many stories such as these come in the limelight and rather remain obscure in the middle of the other more consequential things happening in the world. Warsan Shire has given her voice to those ‘unheard’ in order to make the world wake up to the pain and trauma of refugees. According to Alexis Okeowo in the *New Yorker*, Shire’s work “embodies the kind of shape-shifting, culture-juggling spirit lurking in most people who can’t trace their ancestors to their country’s founding fathers, or whose ancestors look nothing like those fathers. In that limbo, Shire conjures up a new language for belonging and displacement.” Shire’s poetry is a healing agent for the ordeal of exile and anguish. She said about her poetry in an interview, “Character driven poetry is important for me—it’s being able to tell the stories of those people, especially refugees and immigrants, that otherwise wouldn’t be told, or they’ll be told really inaccurately. And I don’t want to write victims, or martyrs, or vacuous stereotypes ... my family are really amazing—they’ll tell me, ‘I have a new story for you,’ and I’ll get my Dictaphone and record it, so I can stay as true as possible to the story before I make it into a poem”

The very prologue to her book *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* is a hard hit, a short, terse line which profoundly encapsulates the trials and tribulations arising out of the sealed fate of the immigrants, a sense of loss and separation forever permeating their life and their world. It says –“I have my mother’s mouth and my father’s eyes, on my face they are still together.” The poem that follows this—“What Your Mother Told You After Your Father Left” is another laconic but powerful expression of the pain of the female, after her husband is separated from her:

*“I did not beg him to stay*

*Because I was begging to God*

*That he would not leave”*

The immigrants make it their whole life to live the ways of the unfamiliar land where they settle and yet are always reminiscent of their original place of living, and do fondly

remember it every now and then, severely longing to go back to their place once before they die. Needless to say, the wish is never granted.

*“your grandfather is dying*

*He begs you take me home*

*I just want to see it one last time*

*You don’t know how to tell him that it won’t be*

*Anything like the way he left it”*

One can easily make out the undercurrents of female agony, doubly tormented being a woman and undergoing the trauma of immigration in Shire’s Poems. She has written liberally about the torture of the female mind and body owing to their immigration experiences. “In Love and In War” a small two lines poem says a lot in this connection—“to my daughter I will say, when the men come, set yourself on fire”. The experiences of immigrant refugee women goes beyond words –expecting mothers, mothers carrying young children, walking miles together with no hope for any help and visions of bleak future. Some women have been forced to leave home in a condition when they would have been going to hospital to deliver a child and have been heard of giving birth on roads, leaving behind their hearth and home. Their trauma and suffering is beyond imagination. Along with Shire’s experience deriving from her first-generation immigrant family, her understanding of her black womanhood, and her heritage as a Somalian is also heavily interwoven in her poems. In “My Wife is Dying and She Does Not Want to be touched” she says

*“my wife sits on the hospital bed*

*Gown and body together: 41 Kilos*

*She’s a boat docking in from war,*

*Her body, a burning Village, a prison*

*With open gates. She wont let me hold her now, when she needs it the most.”*

Expressions like “her body is a flooding home”, “her skin is parchment, dry and cracking” and “apathy is the same as war, it all kills you, she says” only begin to make clear the indifference and apathy as the poet herself puts it, of the world towards refugees in general

and women in particular. In “Tea With Our Grandmothers” she voices the emotional ‘lack’ or vacuum that the tragic events leave the mothers and grandmothers with as they “wait for the sons to come home and raise the loneliness they had left behind.” “When we Last Saw your Father” is an account of the loss and the sense of being lost in the apathetic world. “he was sitting in the hospital parking lot , in a borrowed car, counting the windows of the building, guessing which one was glowing with his mistake.” The poem “House” is one more example of the representation of female agony on account of their experiences as refugees.

*Mother says there are locked rooms inside all women; kitchen of lust,  
bedroom of grief, bathroom of apathy.  
Sometimes the men - they come with keys,  
and sometimes, the men - they come with hammers*

The poem *Home*, written beautifully depicts the instinctive ponderings and retort of an immigrant. The poem allows us to gaze upon the terror that immigrants face while escaping the dangers of their home. The poem puts in a nutshell the unrefined sentiments of so many who have undergone the same experience of leaving their ‘home’ for some reason. She composed this poem after spending time with a group of young refugees who had fled troubled homelands including Somalia, Eritrea, Congo and Sudan. The group gave a “warm” welcome to Shire in their makeshift home at the abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome, she explains, describing the conditions as cold and cramped. The night before she visited, a young Somali had jumped to his death off the roof. The encounter, she says, opened her eyes to the harsh reality of living as an undocumented refugee in Europe: “I wrote the poem for them, for my family and for anyone who has experienced or lived around grief and trauma in that way.”

*no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark.  
You only run for the border  
when you see the whole city  
running as well.”*

The evocative poem makes the world wake up to the reality of the refugee crisis, saying that you can run when things get wrong but it will forever be a part of you. Explaining, in short verses, the unthinkable choices refugees must take, Shire writes:

*no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land  
no one burns their palms  
under trains  
beneath carriages  
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck  
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled  
means something more than journey.  
no one crawls under fences  
no one wants to be beaten  
pitied  
no one chooses refugee camps  
or strip searches where your  
body is left aching  
or prison,  
because prison is safer  
than a city of fire  
and one prison guard  
in the night*

Shire's repulsion at the "disgusting, ugly, horrific inhumane atrocities [that] happen when we allow people to be dehumanised" is strongly illustrated in *Home*:

*And you are greeted on the other side  
with  
go home blacks, refugees  
dirty immigrants, asylum seekers*

*sucking our country dry of milk,*

*dark, with their hands out*

*smell strange, savage –*

*look what they've done to their own countries*

Shire's shrill cry in the poem "Questions for Mirium"-- "Were You Ever Lonely"? and "did they know that you were only human" ably sums up the feelings and the mental scar that immigration leaves on the refugees. In Conversations about home (at the Deportation Centre) she says, "do you know how difficult it is, to talk about the day your own city dragged you by hair, past the old prison, past the school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags. ? when I meet others like me I recognize the longing, the missing, the memory of ash on their faces.... Look at all these borders, foaming at the mouth with bodies broken and desperate. I'm the color of hot sun on the face, my mother's remains were never buried. I spent days and nights in the stomach of the truck; I did not come out the same. Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body."

Her poetry seeks to voice those who remain unheard as she depicts the quagmire of the immigrant experiences which cripple the refugees for life. At the same time, it is also an appeal to the world, the indifferent and apathetic world, a call "to the fortunate" to exercise their power to help those in distress, those need and deserve our compassion and love. I shall conclude in her own words, "I know a few things to be true. I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome and my beauty is not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame of not belonging. I am the sin of memory and absence of memory. I watch the news and my mouth becomes a sink full of bood....I hear them say go home, I hear them say f\*\*\*\*\* immigrants, f\*\*\*\*\* refugees. Are they really this arrogant? Do they not know that stability is like a lover with a sweet mouth upon your body one second; the next you are a tremor lying on the floor covered in the rubble and old currency waiting for its return. All I can say is, I was once like you, the apathy, the pity, the ungrateful placement and now my home is the mouth of a shark, now my home is the barrel of a gun. I'll see you on the other side."

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Works Cited

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