

# “No One Leaves Home Unless Home Is the Mouth of a Shark”: Dwelling and the Complexities of Return in Warsan Shire’s Poetry

Uchenna Frances Obi (Corresponding author)

Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

Email: Uchennammuo@gmail.com

Raphael Chukwuemeka Onyejizu

Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

Received: 22/05/2021

Accepted: 06/08/2021

Published: 01/11/2021

Volume: 2 Issue: 6

How to cite this paper: Obi, F.U., & Onyejizu, R. C. (2021). “No One Leaves Home Unless Home Is the Mouth of a Shark”: Dwelling and the Complexities of Return in Warsan Shire’s Poetry. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 2(6), 1-6

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v2i6.88>

DOR: <https://dorl.net/dor/20.1001.1.27324605.2021.2.6.1.1>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



## Abstract

Africa’s bitter historical experience of slavery and racial discrimination influences diasporic literary writers in their representation of home and its exigencies. This is due to the sordid effect of racial conflicts culminating in disillusionment of writers, who engage in the nostalgic longing for their country of origin, notwithstanding the influences of the host country on African migrants. By exploring Warsan Shire’s poetry, this study, through the lens of modernity and globalization, examines the concept of home while x-raying locations of the African immigrant in diaspora. The research utilised the Postcolonial theory and the qualitative method of analysis to examine how diasporic immigrants, particularly female subalterns struggle to grapple with the intricacies of dwelling in a hostile clime which situates the “Us” and “Them” binary opposition on their lived conditions. It analysed Shire’s poems as a product of the transcultural identity formation of the poet, illustrating her migratory experiences through the notion of “unhomely” (in her home country) and “Homeliness” (in her host country) as dilemmas that bisect her quest for return home because of war. The study, thus, submits that globalization alternates the idea of situating home as a place of origin.

**Keywords:** Home, Dwelling, Host country, Warsan Shire, Complexities of return, Postcolonialism

## 1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is characterized by ever-increasing migratory activities, which has made issues of mobility, migration and border crossing challenging in today’s society. Africa has invariably witnessed an increasing record of migratory experiences right from the period of slavery through colonialism to the present post-colonial era. This is premeditated by certain economic, political and social situations affecting the growth and stability of the migrant in the home country. Most importantly, political conflicts like civil war, repression of human right, insecurity and economic instability constitute major factors that aid migration to other countries (Kaba, p. 116). It becomes apparent to witness Images of Africans overcrowded in boats bound for Europe and other western countries despite the huge risk involved in their mode of sojourn and unforeseen expectations.

Thus, literary writers have captured these realities of migration by focusing solely on the experiences of border crossing and the hostile treatment of the host country on the migrant. They explore how the migrant having been displaced by the anxiety for migration to a new territory, is faced with the complexity and ambivalent longing for home. These challenges of dwelling in diasporic lands enhance the desire for home having witnessed unusual degrees of displacement. Corroborating Abuku and Nietlong (2017), both scholars submit that home can only make meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it (p.309). On this premise, this study with particular focus on Warsan Shire's Poetry explores how female Somali refugees grapple with the complexities of dwelling and belonging in diaspora after being displaced by the Somalia civil war. Through her poetry, Shire illustrates the challenges immigrants in diaspora face that results in the quest for a return to home, despite the absurdities still prevalent in the homeland.

In this study, Warsan Shire's poems "Home" and "Conversation about Home (at a Deportation Center)" will be analysed using the textual method. A close reading of the text illustrates Shire's ideology on the acceptance of diasporic spaces as home, not because it elicits any sense of peace and tranquillity but because the immigrant's home country is not suitable either. By the use poetic language, symbols and imageries of female Somali refugees in the deportation center, Shire depicts the worrisome state of the Somali immigrant who was forced into exile because of the turbulent war situation in Somalia.

## 2. Complexities of Home: Borders and Dynamics of Dwelling

The current complexity of diasporic literature has led to a serious political and theoretical debate on the notion of home. Home significantly involves ideas of comfort, peace and safety which embodies a place where one was born, where one is at home with culture and lived experiences. This relates to Avatar (1997) definition of home "which on one hand is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination, a place of return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin" and on the other hand, home is a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust" (p. 192). This definition juxtaposes the idea of home of origin against home of settlement, depicting that an ambivalent relationship between the host country and home country exists in their desire to serve as a place of refuge for the individual. Thus, reaffirming Nina Glick Schiller et al (1995) assert that transnational migration no longer involves complete abandonment of a home country by the migrant, but rather involves maintaining connections and social relations between their countries of origin and their host countries (p. 48). However, living in one's homeland doesn't guarantee that one feels at home. Tyson (2009) notes that "unhomed" is not "homelessness". Hence, one can be at home and not feel at home at the same time. To him, "being 'unhomed' is not the same as being 'homeless', to be 'unhomed' is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself" (p. 421). Certain issues can make one lose the feeling associated with home and thus adopts a desire to relocate to another clime which could also be described as home, corroborating Bhabha's (1994) assertion that home is no longer just one place but multiple places (p. 57).

Subsequently, despite the struggle of migration and border crossing, diaspora welcomes the immigrant with the problematics of cultural and historical mechanics of belonging (Gilroy, p.123). The immigrant is faced with the intricacies of dwelling in an unfriendly clime filled with marginalization and dehumanization, thereby renewing the collective cultural memories that enforce a desire for return to home. Maximillian (2019) notes that what distinguishes the new African diaspora is the possibility of return which is in contrast to other diasporic formations, where the old homeland is usually an unfamiliar but mythologized place impossible to return (p.16). This becomes the bane of the Somali migrant in Warsan Shire's poetry who seeks refuge in diaspora because of the challenges of warfare which makes home "unhomely". However, the intricacies of belonging hinders the desire to make diaspora a place of dwelling, leading to return to homeland in order to create meaning for him/herself, reaffirming Appiah's (2009) notion that the anxiety of return portrays the migrant as a rooted cosmopolitan who despite his dislocation creates meaning for himself because of his affinity with his home culture (p. 77).

## 3. Literature Review

Unlike prose fiction, the poetic genre of African literature is usually limited to political and social issues of the immediate environment devoid of diasporic conditions and undertone. As such, the major thematic preoccupation of contemporary African poetry has shifted from issues of cultural and political disillusionment to expressions of globalization, exilic consciousness and modernity. To Gikandi (2010), "this generation of African artists are comfortable being both local and global at the same time" (p. 243). Indeed, the generation of artists preoccupy themselves with issues of migration and dwelling that are fast becoming topical issues in not only in Somali poetry but in Nigerian, South African and by extension African poetry, because of the extreme unfavorable socio-economic conditions of the continent which all African countries equally share. The discomfort and discontent at home often compel individuals to embark on a journey to other diasporic countries, with lofty dreams of greener pastures. In the words of Nwagbara (2010):

A major thematic occupation of contemporary Nigerian literature is the subject matter of exile and transnationalism...the realities of globalization which has exile as their corollary, have enriched postcolonial literature as well as contributed to the synergy of responses and attempts towards unearthing the ugly face of globalization and transnationalism. (p. 93)

Nwagbara captures the predilections attendant upon transculturalism and exile that reflect not just Nigeria but also many African countries. Thus, this becomes emphatic in Tanure Ojaide's poem "When it no longer matters where you live". Ojaide

exposes the ideals of harsh living conditions, which creates a fertile ground for globalization and exile. The poet notes that people are in frantic search for a better life and therefore, willingly leave the shores of the nation, giving rise to cosmopolitan Africans. Yet, for the most successful of such cosmopolitans, the attraction of exile can in reality be worse than a nightmare. He therefore believes that both home and exile have their own problems as the home is a place of physical torture and deprivation while the foreign countries torment the exiles with other forms of mental deprivation. This account for the reason Shija notes that Ojaide juxtaposes the “hurt at home” with “the pain outside” arriving at the conclusion that it no longer matters where one choose to live in this world (p. 36).

Warsan Shire’s poetry embody a heightened portraiture of linguistic forms, laced in a rhythmic and prose narrative structure, which captures the distressing situations women undergo in life. She employs a mental picture of feminine bodily images in discussing the effects of war, patriarchal domination, immigration challenges and societal issues perceived as taboo such as rape, sex, child bearing and female gender mutilation to be discussed freely. Lynda Ouma in an analysis of Shire’s collection *Teaching My Mother How To Give Birth*, through the lens of trauma notes that, Shire focuses on the female form which emerges as sites of agency capable of breaking down imposed barricade as a result of patriarchy (p. 73). By this, she examines the devastating effect of violence and abuse of the feminine body which was as a result of rape, female genital mutilation, war, childbearing etc.

In another vein, Leetsch (2019) analyzes the rendition of transoceanic trajectories which spans across various water spaces in Shire’s poems. She notes that the poems “connect the East Africa diaspora via the Northern Indian Ocean first to Northern Africa and the Middle East and from there via the Mediterranean to Europe, hence it speaks of three different water spaces: the Indian ocean, the Mediterranean and the Black Atlantic” (p. 2).

In relation to diasporic discourse, Merza (2020) asserts that Shire’s poetry is “a means to bridge the narrative of majority-white societies and the reality of immigration and or refugees” (p. 4). Similarly, Chandra (2020) envisages that the poem is effective in analyzing the fate of refugees and asylum seekers, while it capitalizes on the uncertainty of the migrant’s journey (p. 6). Through this, Shire evokes images which depict the danger associated with such a risky sojourn to diaspora, illustrating the response of the host country to the situation of the refugee. This challenging response of the host country is what this study tends to seek through the approach of dwelling in a hostile environment. From the foregoing it could be seen that various scholars and critics have examined Warsan Shire’s poetry through the lens of Trauma, transoceanic trajectories, the fate of refugees without focus on the issues of home, dwelling and return in her poetry.

#### 4. The Discourse of Postcolonialism

The theoretical approach for this essay is the postcolonial theory. The term ‘Post-Colonialism’ is used by theorists and critics to designate all writings affected by the imperial process of colonization up till the present day. The discourse has emerged as a confrontation to the European domination during and after the process of colonization and as a result, relate their experiences of colonization which despite the differences in regions had similar characteristics and effects. Similarly, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, the term postcolonial refers to “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day”. This involves issues of slavery, migration, race, globalization and identity. Edward W. Said’s “Orientalism” plays a crucial role in regard to the dismantling of the hegemonic discourse that constructs the opposing relationship between ‘the Orient’ as the ‘Occident’. This “othered” subjects Gayatri Spivak terms “subalterns”, who are classified as those socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power formation of the people who hold political authority.

Canclini’s (qtd in Cote 2010) concept of “hybridization” and Fernando Ortiz term “transculturation” are ideas in postcolonial theory prevalent in diasporic discourse because of the interaction of cultures. Both concepts lay a foundation on interdisciplinary studies that cut across various disciplines for a new understanding of culture. Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* analyzes hybridity from a Post-colonial standpoint. He describes hybridity as a symbol of colonial power, anxiety and experiences. To him “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities”. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity with respect to the process of intercultural communication portrays the constant link individuals have with their countries of origin and as such use such memories to create new cultural forms in diaspora. This reiterates Leetsch (2019) claim that Shire is a build-up of various cultures, languages and countries (p. 10), illustrating her transcultural identity.

Post-colonial African writers like Achebe, Ngugi, Amah, Beti and others have given the diasporic Subaltern a voice by writing to prove to the world that the African subaltern is imaginative and creative. This colonization process ultimately affects the subalterns with its act of marginalization and oppression. Postcolonialism thus creates an avenue for the diasporic Subaltern to have a voice by producing cultural discourses of migration, language, society and equating the imbalanced binary power relationship of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. This becomes the aim of Warsan Shire who uses her poem to capture the experiences of female refugees in diaspora, by relating to Gayatri Spivak’s perspective of the subaltern speaking in the face of difficulties and harsh realities. Therefore, this study through the lens of postcolonialism, will analyze how diasporic migrants particularly female subalterns grapple with the intricacies of dwelling in a hostile clime which situates the “Us” and “them” binary opposition in their living conditions. It will also analyze the poems as a product of the transcultural identity formation of the poet which illustrates her migratory experiences between unhomely and homeliness, posing a dilemma in their quest for return to home.

## 5. Diasporic Experiences of Exploitation, Violence and Trauma

Warsan Shire, a poet, editor and teacher uses her poems to explore issues of war, migration, women, sex and cultural interactions. Her poems embody the artistic use of language which involves patterning and manipulation of words to convey a thought. In her collection titled *Our Men Do Not Belong To Us* published in 2015, Shire explores various forms of exploitation, violence and psychological trauma women deal with while being exposed to terrible situations. The poet recounts the horrific situation of the Somalian civil war that instigates movement to diasporic spaces. Thus:

Is that what we're here for?  
To sit at kitchen tables, counting  
on our fingers the ones who died,  
those who left, and the others who were taken by the police,  
or by drugs  
or by illness  
or by other women? (Shire)

Shire goes further to describe the terrible impact of the war on women, one which leaves them unstable and displaced. In the poem "Ugly" she uses the female body to describe the unrest war creates.

Your daughter's face is a small riot,  
her hands are a civil war,  
a refugee camp behind each ear,  
a body littered with ugly things (Shire)

Her poem on home has two distinct versions related in content but different in style. The first poem titled "Home" was written in a poetic form of eight stanzas in 2009 and posted on youtube, while "Conversations about home (at a Deportation Center)" was written in a narrative verse in the collection *Our Men Do Not Belong To Us*. "Conversation about Home (at a Deportation Center)" is a poetic narrative which was inspired by a visit she made to the abandoned Somalia embassy where some refugees had made their home. Stating in her interview, she notes, "I wrote the poem for them, for my family and for anyone who has experienced or lived around grief and trauma in that way" (Shire, Interview). She further states that this encounter opened her eyes to the harsh realities of living as an undocumented refugee in Europe. These refugees encounter huge challenges of dwelling in a land that harbours resentment and cruelty on them. They are treated like pieces of trash that smell like strange savages. Shire notes, "When I meet others like me, I recognize the longing, the missing, the memory of ash on their faces" (Shire, Interview).

The immigrant is also faced with the problem of cultural interaction and assimilation which Shire describes in the following lines:

I've been carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long that there's no space for another song, another tongue or another language. I know a shame that shrouds totally engulfs. I tore up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel. I'm bloated with language I can't afford to forget (Shire, lines 8-11).

The above excerpt reaffirms Merza's (2020) assertion that "Shire's poem weaves intricately our history into our lives reminding us that as much as we move on with our lives, many of us carry our history through" (1). However in order to foster dwelling in diaspora, the immigrant tries to emulate Bhaba's concept of hybridity thereby faced with the complexities of cultural displacement. The immigrant is uncomfortable in the host country and in restlessness wanders around unsettled, reaffirming Shire's words "I want to lie down but these countries are like Uncles who touch you when you're young and asleep". In despair the immigrant laments about the feeling of not belonging and dwelling saying "I am unwelcome and my beauty is not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame of not belonging, my body is longing. I am the sin of memory and the absence of memory" (Shire, lines 28-29).

From the foregoing, immigrants even though they become loyal to the new systems still keep in touch with their homeland as a form of allegiance, hereby, owning multiple citizenships. Werbner (2013) also claims that the diasporic communities located in democratic nation-states have to confront their local visibility through public acts and demonstrations of hospitality and generosity to prove their identification with their homeland and other diasporic causes (p.13). Through this, the migrant keeps in touch not only with members of his home country in diaspora but also identifies with other diasporic communities to build strong affiliations. He stimulates relationships of cooperation or conflict, creating expectations and strategies to create defenses and hope. Her poem "Home" expresses the disdain and rebellion the female refugee faces in diaspora. Derogatory words are used as mechanisms for marginalization and destruction of the immigrants' emotions. Shire illustrates this thus:

The home blacks  
Refugees  
Dirty immigrant  
Asylum seeker  
Sucking our country dry  
Niggers with their hands out  
They smell strange savage

The immigrants are referred to as 'dirty asylum seekers' because of the unhomely situation that makes them wander without shelter, thus living on the streets as refugees become the only possible way out. They are referred to as parasites that suck their host country dry, depicting the image of beggars who stretch forth their hands in plea for help with the strange smell of savages oozing out from them. The scorn and rejection are basically due to the fact that the immigrant is considered a rebel who "messed up their country and want to mess up ours" (Shire). This accounts for the cruel behaviour of the migration officers on the immigrant.

However, despite the harsh words, cruelty, "unhomeliness" and filthy looks, the poetic persona still strives to stay and manage the ugly situation in diaspora. The poet in annoyance inquires how she tends to ignore living in this demeaning condition saying:

How do the words  
The dirty looks  
Roll off your backs  
Marble because the blow  
Is softer than a limb torn off  
Or the words are more tender  
Than fourteen men between your legs  
Or the insults are easier  
To swallow than rubble, than bone

The line "than fourteen men between your legs" denotes that Shire's persona is a female, whose continual stay is threatened not just with insults and homelessness but rape as well. The poet faces a dilemma of staying and coping with the challenges of diaspora. Thus she states:

I want to go home  
But home is the mouth of a shark  
Home is the barrel of the gun

The female refugee wants to go home because of the challenges in diaspora, but she can't because home is not suitable either. Hence, she has no choice but to "crawl through the desert wade through the oceans drown save be hungry beg forget pride" to survive. The immigrant is thereby faced with the complexities of return as diaspora is not welcoming and home on the other hand says "leave/ run away from me now/ I don't know what I've become/ but I know that anywhere is safer than here"(Shire). Thus, home becomes a contradictory contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation (Abuku and Nietlong, p. 309).

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. Feldner quoting Faloola states that "For postcolonial African artist today; they may live in Paris or New York but are also engaged with old home out of a sense of both personal or political moralism or realism" three. Shire's poems attempt to address this, by analyzing the messiness of Afro-diasporic belonging while oscillating seamlessly between verse and prose poetry (Leetsch, p. 88). Because of this, she constantly laments the dislocating effect of the Somalia civil war in victims. Her poems embody the plight of the female Afro-diasporic subject who is faced with the problem of homelessness and 'rootlessness', a situation posed by the effect of the war.

## 6. Conclusion

The emergence of diasporic discourse in the era of transculturalism and globalization have witnessed increased artistic focus on the recreation of those migrants' experiences, akin to those harrowing stereotypical antecedence of colonialism and slavery in the postcolonial era. Like many postcolonial poems that address such global trend, Warsan Shire's poem embodies the fate of female refugees and asylum seekers in diaspora. This is as a result of the complexities and challenges associated with the notion of home. The immigrant, faced with the intricacies of survival develops a quest for return, which seems impossible because of the problem still prevalent there. However, making diaspora home poses a huge threat to the living conditions and survival of immigrants. Shire resolves this dilemma with a voice of the homeland admonishing the migrant to "leave, run away from me now, I don't know what I've become but I know that anyone is safer than here".

## References

- Abuku, M., Nietlong, J. (2017). Migration and Realism in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*. *CACH Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*. 2(1). 308-322.
- Appiah, K.(2007). *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton University Press.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007) *Post-Colonial Studies: Key Concepts*. Rev. 2nd ed. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Avtar, B. (1997). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Chandra, S. (2020). *Understanding Refugees through Home by Warsan Shire*. E International.
- Cote, J. (2010). *From Transculturation to Hybridization: Redefining Culture in the Americas* University of Ottawa press.

- Faloola T. (2014). *African Diaspora, Slavery, Modernity and Globalization*. University of Rochester Press.
- Gikandi S. (2010). *Afterwords: Outside the Black Atlantic Research in African Literature*, 45(3), 241-244.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: African Diaspora and Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts.
- Leetsch, J. (2019). Ocean imaginaries in Warsan Shire's Afro-Diasporic Poetry. *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 13(1), 80-95.
- Maximillian, F. (2019). *Narrating the New African Diaspora 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria Literature in Context*. Palgrave Maximillian.
- Merza, M. (2020). Returning Home with Warsan Shire: Teaching my Mother how to give birth. *Book Review*.
- Nwagbaara, U. (2010). The Antinomy of Exile: Ambivalence and Transnational Discontents in Tanure Ojaide's When it no longer matters where you live. *African Nebula*, 3(2), 92-100.
- Schiller, N, et al. (1995). "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration." *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68(1), 48-63.
- Ortiz, F. (1995). *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar*. Duke University Press.
- Said, E.W. (1979). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Nelson, Caory and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan Education UK. 271-313.
- Ouma, L. (2017). *Trauma and the Female Body: Analysis of Warsan Shire's Teaching my Mother how to give birth*. Unpublished Masters Thesis.
- Shire, W. (2015) *Our Men Do Not Belong To Us*. Slapering Hol Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_(2015). *Teaching My Mother How To Give Birth*. Flipped eye publishing.
- \_\_\_\_\_(2015). Interview with Katie Reid. Africa in Words, [www.africainwords.com/2013/06/21/qa-poet-writer-and-educator-warsan-shire](http://www.africainwords.com/2013/06/21/qa-poet-writer-and-educator-warsan-shire).
- "Home" (2017). *Voice Recording*. Youtube, 13 March, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI9D92Xiygo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI9D92Xiygo).
- Werbner, P. (2013). *Migration and Transnational Studies. A Comparison to Diaspora and Transnationalism*. Blackwell.