

Understanding Refugees Through 'Home' by Warsan Shire

Written by Sanya Chandra

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SANYA CHANDRA, AUG 2 2020

The very conditions of 'I', 'we' and 'you' necessitate boundaries. These boundaries are traversed by a variety of groups, some more vulnerable than others. While on the one hand, the category of 'refugee' is de-historicized, and seen without the context of post-colonial responsibility,[1] the "signs of threat" that accompany those bodies are shaped by multiple histories.[2] The poem *Home* by Kenyan-born Somali poet Warsan Shire points out the various motivations that fuel the need for people to flee and brings us the understanding of larger themes in the discussion surrounding refugee crises around the world, especially in the global North. This paper will delve into these themes including vulnerability, grief and risk that surround the journey an asylum seeker undertakes. In addition to this, I will focus on the threat constructed around the refugee by mechanisms of the state and its inhabitants. It becomes important to focus on the affect produced by these ideas of vulnerability and violence because narratives which have conventionally focused on the views, policies and politics of the state run the risk of erasing complexities and nuances surrounding people.

What's in a frame? Challenges from Poetry

Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles cite Nancy Fraser in defining the 'social' as a metaphorical space where the "politics of policies and knowledge production are meted out." [3] Drawing on this understanding, poetry can be construed as a feature of the social. It is produced and reproduced as a critique to mainstream forms of media which may act as purveyors of the same "cultural frames of thinking" [4] perpetuated by the state which dictate both the content and the perspective presented. These tend to silence refugees, placing them as abstractions and laying emphasis on the humanitarian aid doled out to them by state actors. This allows only rigid conceptions of loss, so loss of lives which are not 'ours' are not grieved, especially those which have been established as threatening at the outset itself. Butler says, "It is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable." [5] By the fact of being unmarkable, these groups are ungrievable; as it is very difficult to evoke emotion for an abstraction. It is here that the role of poetry becomes critical, while it may not produce individuals, it does something more important- it puts experiences as personal and not pitiable. Poetry also brings to the public view crimes that are always partially hidden [6] by mechanisms of state vetted journalism.

What the media intensifies is "racial hysteria in which fear is directed anywhere and nowhere,...so everyone is free to imagine and identify the source of terror." [7] This, in the context of refugee crisis, is imagined as the masculinized, threatening mobile other.

Hanging in limbo: the sedentary feminine and the mobile threat

In *Home*, Shire evokes imagery which brings to light the risk associated with the journey an asylum seeker undertakes. The usage of words like 'leave' and 'stay' points to the creation of binaries that Hyndman and Giles bring to light.

no one leaves home unless

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home is the mouth of a shark...

...you only leave home

when home won't let you stay [8]

The binary is between the settled other and the mobile other, from the perspective of the host state. The former is the refugee that waits[9], the latter, the refugee who acts. It is important to analyse this distinction as it defines the political with its basis in movement- while the settled refugee is systematically depoliticized, the mobile refugee is increasingly political.

This understanding rests on Hyndman and Giles' analysis of gendered systems which manage refugees and the geographic spaces they inhabit. These spaces act as sites for the enactment of gendered notions where the settled refugee- one whose life is in a state of "permanent temporariness"[10] is "genuine, immobile" and hence feminized. It is by virtue of this feminization that they are perceived as benign recipients of benevolence from the host state. *Home* becomes crucial as the perspective of the recipient of this discretionary goodwill is missing in the mainstream. It puts the same as-

no one wants to be beaten

pitied

no one chooses refugee camps [11]

The second is the kind of refugee who is introduced to the host state while mobile. They are consequently perceived as "potential liabilities as best and security threats at worst"[12].

Both these notions of the political and the apolitical are products of what Judith Butler terms as masculine systems of knowledge production which dictate that being women, or in this case being feminized, automatically restrains violence.[13] The idea of a body that is weak at the outset draws on not just physical movement over landscapes but "categorical figures moving through representational spaces." [14]

While it may seem as if identifying the refugee in terms of the feminine may "cut across cultural and political difference"[15], this is flawed at best. This is because a true cutting across would require what Butler calls a state of "primary vulnerability." [16] Being a refugee entails this as you hand your state of being a human to another. As of now, this is a one-way mechanism where host countries, especially of the global north, (owing to material power and historical knowledge discourses) can dictate the human-ness of a vulnerable, feminized other owing to their lack of agency. In coherence with what Butler argues in the context of war, this conception needs to be applied more equitably where the category of being human, is not a result produced as a function of power but a process of relatability.[17]

Creation of the threat: Sedentarist bias and a fearful state

Home, in addition to focusing attention on the risks of the journey, draws on the description of movement, Shire uses phrases like "*whole city running*" producing a sense of urgency and ontological threat. Looking at the aforementioned binaries in this light, the discussion of western notions of privileging sedentarism over mobility becomes important. It also acts to reinforce geopolitical hierarchies between the global North and South.

In this context, the notion of 'deserving' is linked to a measurement of mobility. Movement creates the conception of an asylum seeking body as one which shouldn't be helped as they are a potential threat. Drawing on Sara Ahmed, mobility of the other is threatening, the construction of threat in turn is to protect the mobility of the self[18]. This self, here, is the privileged subject who has the power to *choose* their displacement or lack thereof. Because they conform to the sedentary norm of the state, they are not a threat. The feminized temporarily settled refugee isn't a great threat

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either owing to their sedentary character. In the case of a mobile refugee whose existence is evidently precarious, the performativity of movement renders someone 'undeserving.' [19] As Giles and Hyndman put it, refugees are helped only when they "cannot help themselves." [20]

An undeserving migrant is depicted as a vague figure whose advent is constructed as threatening within the "social imaginary" [21] (constructed by the state and the media). This conception is manifested owing to the state's anxiety, something Butler poses as the global north coming to terms with the precarity of its own existence of never having its sovereign body "transgressed." [22] Drawing on similar ideas, Ahmed puts this precarity in terms of fear which is created by the approach of a vague object. [23]

A threat based on fear results in an attempt to reverse the approach of the concerned object away from geographical proximity with the host state. As this fear makes its way through the state and its people, Ahmed associates it with the "passing of an object." [24] This is integral to the understanding of a refugee crisis because of the presented anxiety that an asylum seeker might "swamp the nation." [25] The fear and the consequent bias associated with the refugee is exemplified in the terms used by Shire—

sucking our country dry

niggers with their hands out

they smell strange

savage [26]

The hope then is to create, in this context of fear, a common understanding of relations based on shared vulnerability and the affect of grief, in both the states of mobility and temporary stability. This evokes a sense of empathy with phrases like the one mentioned below.

but I [home] know that anywhere

is safer than here [27]

Effect and Affect: Extra-legal Spaces, Vulnerability and Grief

The poem is also effective in thinking of the fate of refugees and asylum seekers, while it capitalizes on the uncertainty of the journey, it also brings out responses from the host country where, as Ahmed puts it, fear seeks to "re-establish distance," [28] both tangibly as states would rather focus on the movement of capital out of their boundaries rather than people into them, [29] and intangibly in constructing gaps to maintain a lack of relatability with the other.

Violence as a result of fear is not just a product of action but also inaction. This is a situation where life of "can be expunged by the wilful action of another." [30] Drawing on Giles and Hyndman's analysis of extra-legal spaces, tacit violence becomes visible; while state action may not necessarily cause violence, state inaction can create conditions that perpetrate it. For instance, many refugees in the global South "self-settle" outside formal refugee camps. By this 'living outside', they are unassisted by the UNHCR. [31] This extra-legality necessitates a state of being dependent on other bodies to voice their concerns. [32] Moreover, it creates conditions for individualised paths to out of life in the camp. This points to systemic conditions for the existence of crime, Shire personalises this by evoking the imagery of rape—

because prison is safer

than a city of fire

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and one prison guard

in the night

is better than a truckload

of men who look like your father [33]

This is tandem with the feminized camp which is associated with devaluation of life and death, and being accorded "less prestige and opportunity for advancement." [34]

Here, it is important to think of Butler's idea of vulnerability not because it deals with the specific condition of being a refugee but because it pertains to the very idea of personhood that denies certain bodies rights in the first place. She argues that bodies are politically and socially constituted, bringing to light the conclusion that one cannot exist independently without the composition of the other. [35] This owes to "corporeal vulnerability" based on disparate ways of distribution and the fact of exposure by virtue of public existence. [36] The very nature of being vulnerable makes the body at risk of violence.

no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck

feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled

means something more than journey. [37]

It becomes especially important to think of vulnerability in light of the aforementioned extract when considering the epistemological gap between the subjects of knowledge in this sphere and its audience. *Home* becomes important as it attempts to bridge the gap by inadvertently drawing on the same principles of shared vulnerability and commonality of being that Butler dwells on. This approach inevitably draws focus away from thinking in terms of mechanical binaries and aims to include emotions of grief, fear, and loss hitherto ignored from the field.

Grief is a theme that is seen across the body of the poem. It is conventionally perceived to be personal and in light of the gendered division between the private and the public, the personal is associated with the feminine. Grief, then much like the existence in a refugee camp life is feminized and by extension "depoliticizing." [38] Butler challenges this hypothesis by arguing for a shared grief based on perceived connections as a foundation for "theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility." [39] The goal for this sort of understanding is to evoke relational ties fundamental to how bodies socially understand themselves. Because of this fundamentality, stories cannot be told keeping oneself detached. [40] The refugee, as a representational category of distinct "bounded beings" [41], ceases to be someone who is perpetually 'outside'.

Grief then must act as a takeaway for a basis of politics, especially in terms of dealing with difference because it challenges existing models which dictate making "ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration." [42] For instance, *Home* emphasises this lack of consideration by focusing on the dearth of empathy for motivations which drive people away by summing up the sentiment like so.

messed up their country and now they want

to mess ours up [43]

Conclusion

Looking at the centrality of emotion and bodily suffering in this context, we realise that there exists an imperative need to analyse state policy as it means to the recipients of the same, especially those who often aren't given the space to be heard. Moreover, there exists a need to humanize and politicise the liminal existence of a refugee. This is

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primary as discourse often pre-supposes categorical distinctions that rid bodies of individuality. Individuation then becomes a privilege. The very base upon which the conventional debate on rights exists, is hence not a guarantee to such groups.[44]

As peoples are systematically granted the humanitarian right of survival but denied fundamental human rights (such as economic opportunity), which ensure conditions better than just survivability, *Home* forces us to contend with a larger problem– exclusion from the circle of grief based on the lack of shared norms of humanity. It is best summed up in

forget pride

your survival is more important [45]

The point then isn't to find "common cultural and epistemological grounds,"[46] but to understand that the lack thereof cannot be used to dehumanize.

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Notes

[1] Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles, "Waiting for what? The feminization of asylum in protracted situations," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 18, no. 3 (19 May 2011): 361-379, see 363.

[2] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 117-139, see 126.

[3] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 364.

[4] Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (July 2008): 9-37, see 21.

[5] Butler, "Violence," 23.

[6] Butler, "Violence," 28.

[7] Butler, "Violence," 27.

[8] "'Home' by Warsan Shire," Facing History and Ourselves, accessed 22 March, 2020, <https://www.facinghistory.org/standing-up-hatred-intolerance/warsan-shire-home>

[9] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 361.

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[10] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 361.

[11] "Home."

[12] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 363.

[13] Butler, "Violence," 29.

[14] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 364.

[15] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 367.

[16] Butler, "Violence," 20.

[17] Butler, "Violence," 19-21, 32.

[18] Ahmed, "Affective," 127.

[19] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 367.

[20] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 367.

[21] Ahmed, "Affective," 126.

[22] Butler, "Violence," 27,

[23] Ahmed, "Affective," 125.

[24] Ahmed, "Affective," 124.

[25] Ahmed, "Affective," 124.

[26] "Home."

[27] "Home."

[28] Ahmed, "Affective," 126.

[29] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 374.

[30] Butler, "Violence," 17.

[31] Rights granted under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 362.

[32] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 368.

[33] "Home."

[34] Hyndman and Giles, "Waiting for what?" 363.

[35] Butler, "Violence," 12.

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[36] Butler, "Violence," 10.

[37] "Home."

[38] Butler, "Violence," 12.

[39] Butler, "Violence," 12.

[40] Butler, "Violence," 13.

[41] Butler, "Violence," 14.

[42] Butler, "Violence," 19.

[43] "Home."

[44] Butler, "Violence," 13-16.

[45] "Home."

[46] Butler, "Violence," 27.

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