

*“Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth”  
A feminist approach to Warsan Shire’s poetry*

**Mayte Cantero Sánchez**  
**Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)**  
[cantero.mayte@gmail.com](mailto:cantero.mayte@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how Warsan Shire’s poems deal with current issues such as violence, migration or feminism from an intersectional point of view, since her eccentric poetic voice (black, female, migrant) proposes a contradictory yet interesting engendered point of view. Thus, the aim of this article is to analyze how Shire’s poems embody different sorts of feminisms, and how current issues in gender studies such as manhood, body-shaming or sisterhood are explored. This paper is divided in four sections: an introduction to Shire’s work and her background, a section analyzing the link between manhood and war followed by its “counterpart”, a third part discussing sisterhood and feminism, and a fourth part with conclusions.

**Key words:** Feminism, sisterhood, violence, gender, Warsan Shire

**On nationality and identity: “I tore up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel” (Warsan Shire 2011: 24)**

Warsan Shire (born 1988) is a Kenya-born Somali writer, poet, and teacher, who has published three books so far: *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011), *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us* (2014) and *Her Blue Body* (2015). I will focus on her first book, especially on the poems: “Grandfather’s Hands”, “My Foreign Wife Is Dying”, “Conversations About Home”, “Things We Had Lost in the Summer”, “Beauty” and “Ugly”.

When analyzing voices such as Shire’s, the hypothesis is that art (poetry) provides a much richer and insightful approach to tough issues since it can embrace and explore contradictions and incoherencies. The “reading pact” is different when reading “fiction”

or “essay”, and so are the methodologies: that is why feminist theories can be useful to analyze and understand Shire’s work but insufficient to provide a holistic explanation of it. One of her poems, “Home”, a rewriting of her prose poem “Conversations about home” went viral on the internet in January 2016 due to the refugee crisis in Europe. She describes contemporary violence in a ruthless yet realistic way:

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  
is better than a truckload  
of men who look like your father  
I want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun/and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore  
unless home told you  
to quicken your legs  
leave your clothes behind/crawl through the desert  
wade through the oceans (24)

This extract from her well-known poem displays all the core topics of her poetry: war, migration, trauma and patriarchal violence. In order to understand why her poetry deals with these kinds of violence, some features of her background and homeland should be pointed out.

Her parents are Kenyans who migrated to Somalia, then fled to the UK when Shire was a child. According to “The Fund for Peace”,<sup>1</sup> Somalia is currently a failed state, divided into several zones where different “men of war” have monopolies of violence, including an ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) faction. Thus, Somalia, as several other areas of Africa and the Middle East, is controlled by violent forces that fight each other regardless of the civil population, who are unable to identify their enemy; moreover, other events such as droughts and civil war have led to the current dire situation: the Somalian diaspora is more than a million while the Somalian population is 12 millions<sup>2</sup>. This idea of an “unlivable” homeland is explored in Shire’s work, where most of her poetic characters are diasporic subjects that are linked somehow to territorial fragmentation, as in the poem “Grandfather’s Hands”:

Your grandfather is dying.  
He begs you take me home yaqay,  
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 (28)

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<sup>1</sup> “Fragile states index report 2015”. Web provided at the end of the article.

<sup>2</sup> “Dimensions of Crisis on Migration in Somalia” (February 2014). Web provided at the end of the article.

### **On men and war: “When the men come, set yourself on fire” (34)**

British novelist Virginia Woolf pointed out the link between war and manhood in 1938 in “Three Guineas”. The “monopoly of violence” has historically been men’s kingdom, so Woolf is right to question whether men are entitled to state that they fight to free women:

[...] if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or “our” country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect either myself or my country. For, the outsider will say, ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world (138).

Patriarchy is not an autonomous oppression system, but a system deeply rooted in imperialism, racism and capitalism. Masculinity, as one of the particular manifestations of patriarchy, is a social construction built upon ideas of “virility”, “honor” and “power”. (Kimmel, 216)

One of war’s common consequences is massive migrations and population movements, a recurrent topic in Shire’s poetry, especially in the already mentioned “Conversations about home” or “My Foreign Wife is Dying and Does Not Want to Be Touched”. In this last poem, the poetic voice is a husband whose wife is dying out of grief. Shire repeatedly uses metaphors of the woman’s body, which is both the metaphoric and the literal location of pain and joy: bodies, for the poetic voice, are to be read, are to be mapped out. They harbour pleasure but also memory of grief:

My wife is a ship docking from war.  
The doctor maps out her body in ink.  
Her body is a flooding home.  
We are afraid.  
We want to know  
what the water will take away from us,  
what the earth will claim as its own. (30)

The intangible scope of pain issued from a violent conflict is explicit in this poem. Despite the toughness of the situation, she is still pragmatically thinking about her homeland: “later, at home, she calls her sister/ They talk about curses, the evil eye, their aunt/ who drowned, all the money they need/ to send back [...] She is a boat docking in from war,/ her body, a burning village, a prison/ with open gates” (30). This embodied memory, this body full of images of horror and destruction, where physical wounds and mourning cannot be separated, leads to death as the unyielding end:

I think of all the images she must carry in her body,  
how the memory hardens into a tumor. *Apathy is the same as war,*

*it all kills you, she says. Slow like cancer in the breast  
or fast like a machete in the neck. (30)*

As Woolf already pointed out, men are seen as a source of danger. They are warriors and rapists:

But Alhmandulilah all of this [running away from homeland] is better than the scent of a woman completely on fire, or a truckload of men who look like my father, pulling out my teeth and nails, or fourteen men between my legs, or a gun, or a promise, or a lie, or his name, or his manhood in my mouth (26).

Yet men occupy a complex position in her work: desire and death, sex and destruction are two sides of the same coin. That is why her last poem, called “In love and in war”, is an admonition for the women-to-come: “To my daughter I will say /when the men come, set yourself on fire” (34).

Shire’s poetic voice is a vibrant warning regarding female-male relationships. For her, men represent desire, violence and the constant possibility of rape and death. Nawal Al Sadawi mapped out the “patriarchal continuous male tyranny” within which North African women live in her analysis of women’s situation, “The Hidden Face of Eve”, written in 1976. According to Al Sadawi, women suffer from different kinds of violations throughout their lives: mutilation, domestic violence, expectations regarding virginity, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage or sexual harassment, among others. For her, this tyranny has a socioeconomic ground shaped by religion and moral: therefore, her critique is not addressed to Islam as a whole (also applicable to Shire’s homeland and her beliefs) but to the patriarchal abuse of religion. Al Sadawi exhaustively describes the alleged reasons for female ablation, frequently performed in “The Horn of Africa”<sup>3</sup>, as reflected in “Things We Had Lost in the Summer”: “My mother uses her quiet voice on the phone:/ Are they all okay? Are they healing well? / She doesn’t want my father to overhear” (9).

### **On women and sisterhood: “Your daughter’s face is a small riot” (31)**

Following current feminist ideas on how gender is constructed, we do not possess a “womanhood” or “manhood” (an interiority or true essence, a core) out of being born male/female but out of the “continuous repetition of acts”, so to say, the acquisition and internalization of social rules. As Judith Butler states, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance” (9). This process often implies punishment and shaming to correct children’s behavior so that they copy the norm, as the poem “Things We Had Lost in the Summer” describes:

One of my cousins pushes my open knees close.

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<sup>3</sup> According to UNICEF, Somalia is the country where more cases of female ablation take place (up to an 98% of women). Web provided at the end of the article.

Sit like a girl. I finger the hole in shorts, shame warming my skin  
In the car, my mother stares at me through  
the rear view, the leather sticks to the back of my thighs.  
I open my legs like a well-oiled door,  
daring her to look at me and give me  
what I had not lost: a name. (8)

“Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth”, the suggestive title of the book, might provide a hint to analyze these complicated and contradictory female relationships. Sisterhood has been a widely explored topic in (black) feminism as a useful tool against both white (racist) feminism and both black and white men’s sexism. Sisterhood as a counterpoint to sexist and patriarchal fraternity is linked to a “lesbian continuum”:

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history- of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support. If we consider the possibility that of all women exist in a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves lesbians or not (Rich, 135-137).

For feminists such as bell hooks, Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde, sisterhood was one of the keys for feminist transformation of the society. These supportive and sensual relationships among women can be detected in Shire’s work, in the poem “Your Mother’s First Kiss”:

that same evening she visited a friend, a girl  
who fermented wine illegally in her bedroom.  
When your mother confessed I’ve never been touched  
like that before, the friend laughed, mouth bloody with grapes,  
then plunged a hand between your mother’s legs. (7)

The complicity of the poetic voice with her sister is also remarkable in “Beauty”: “It’s 4 a.m. and she winks at me, bending over the sink, her small breasts bruised from sucking./ She smiles, pops her gum before saying/ boys are *haram* (forbidden), don’t ever forget that” (15). Nevertheless, sisterhood is not an emancipatory community if the terms within which women understand themselves and other women are patriarchal. As the French feminist Helene Cixous stated, “[m]en have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their strength against themselves, to be executants of their virile needs” (883).

In traditional societies, since mothers have been entitled to raise children, they have often acted as non-critical transmitters of a patriarchal culture and so oppress themselves. For this reason, sisterhood can be seen as a politically empowering action if awareness on sexism has been raised; if it has not, it can be a place for female competition against each other to “drag a man in” or “to learn to be a proper woman”. Similar to “Things We Had

Lost in the Summer”, where the daughter challenges her authoritarian mother, in the poem “Beauty” this same mother punishes her sensual and adulterous elder sister:

Some nights I hear her in her room screaming  
We play Surah Al-Baqarah to drown her out  
Anything that leaves her mouth sounds like sex  
Our mother has banned her from saying God’s name (15).

“Beauty” depicts an extremely daring and sensual female that stole the neighbour’s husband and “burnt his name in her skin” (15). This poem can be read as a diptych along with “Ugly”. Here, the lyrical voice addresses a “you”, the mother of an ugly daughter, who has been allegedly touched by an evil eye: “As a child, relatives wouldn’t hold her / She was splintered wood and sea water/ She reminded them of the war” (31). Her body, as we have seen before in the poem “My Foreign Wife Is Dying”, gathers up images of wars and borderlands, as an embodiment of emotional landscapes of long-distance journeys:

You are her mother  
why did you not warn her,  
hold her like a rotting boat  
and tell her that men will not have her  
if she is covered in continents  
if her teeth are small colonies  
if her stomach is an island  
if her thighs are borders? (31)

She embodies the memory of the wars: “your daughter’s face is a small riot, / her hands a civil war, a refugee camp behind each ear, / a body littered with ugly things”. This curse she seems to carry empowers her, makes her too much to assume for a single man: “What man wants to lie down/ and watch the world burn/ in his bedroom?” (30), and, finally, makes her more powerful and braver, as the end of the poem states “but God/ doesn’t she wear/ the world well?” (30)

## Conclusion

“The physical memory blunders through the doors the mind has tried to  
seal. ... Wisdom says forget, the body howls”  
Jeannette Winterston

“Mother, loosen my tongue or adorn me with a lighter burden”  
Audre Lorde<sup>4</sup>

Warsan Shire’s poetry explores current issues from an original angle due to her intersectional placement regarding race, religion and migration. Shire’s work is located in the midst of different cultures, creating a poetical “third space”, as Homi Bhabha puts

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<sup>4</sup> This verse by Lorde is quoted in the introduction to *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*. (Shire, 2011)

it. Thus, her poetry is itself a process of hybridity, a space which is not simply the mix of two “previous” and “original” culture but a place where new ways of the political and poetical might arise. Poetic metaphors and images are repeated in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* and in her other works so as to build a very personal and original imaginary world where men’s position is paradoxical and female characters are highly empowered. Her corporal writing suggests a feminist re-signification of the body as female bodies have always been considered as an object for the male gaze, a place to conquer. Shire’s poetry suggests that, quoting Barbara Kruger’s work, “the body is a battleground”, a crossroad where identity and memory are constructed. Finally, a topic to be explored in further research is Shire’s poetical filiation within the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century poetic tradition, as she seems highly influenced by Audre Lorde’s descriptive and politically engaged poetry, Winterston’s poetic and corporal prose, or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s powerful and bare novels.

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**Mayte Cantero Sánchez** holds a BA in Liberal Arts (UAB 2014), a BA in Philosophy (UAB 2015) and is currently finishing the Master's course Construction and Representations of Cultural Identities (CRIC) at the University of Barcelona. Her research fields are feminism, subjectivity, cultural representations of crisis and its intersections.

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