

**TRAUMA AND THE FEMALE BODY: AN ANALYSIS OF WARSAN SHIRE'S  
*TEACHING MY MOTHER HOW TO GIVE BIRTH.***

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**A research project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of  
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**Declaration**

The research project is my original work and has not been presented for the award of a degree in any other university.

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This research project has been submitted for examination with our permission as University Supervisors.

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Aidah and Joshua Ouma

your love and encouragement helped me every step of the way

To my siblings, Rose and Phillip

And to Assia, Marie, Docy, Nyambura, Pippa, Chiharu and Cathy

for the blessing of sisterhood

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates the use of body images in expressing trauma in Warsan Shire's poetry collection *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* (2011). It explores the use of female body images and their significance in the poems. The aim of the study was to identify various structural and stylistic elements used in the poetry. It further explored the dominance of female body images in the poems. This was done to analyze how this gendered aspect contributes to the representation of trauma.

The study was carried out using formalist and feminist theoretical frameworks. Formalist theoretical perspective emphasizes on the importance of the form of a literary work. It involves a close reading of a literary text in this instance poetry with emphasis placed on the use of stylistic devices. Feminist theoretical perspective is concerned with the way feminine consciousness is portrayed in literature viewing it as an agent for social transformation.

In the poems studied for this research the trauma is presented as embodied in the female form. There is a link between the female body and the expression of distressing situations with a special focus on how it affects the society, family and most importantly women. This is then used to illustrate the wider effects on the community. In many ways the women depicted in the poems are seen to be negotiating and questioning their personal yearnings, self-identity, contradictions in society and conflict.

In this research, I tested the hypothesis that Shire chooses to use the body to embody traumatic experiences and that these particular events occur on the female body. I have demonstrated the confirmation of both hypotheses. The theoretical perspectives of formalism and feminism played a significant role in proving these hypotheses right.

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## CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### 1.0. Introduction

How can the indescribable be made comprehensible? Is a question that any who attempt to narrate a traumatic event or past have to grapple with. Speaking out about the traumatic experience is one of the approaches that many take in this regard. Often placing the experience within a person's life history is a way of incorporating it within the self. We ascertain our experiences by configuring our recollection of them in a time frame familiar to us. Recollection of trauma acts as a way in which the victim can begin the process towards attaining normalcy in their life. Though it may be problematic it is however the only framework which provides a path towards reconciliation and healing. For example, an individual who has been raped is able to recover from the trauma that results gradually when they relive and re-tell the experience which results in reclaiming their body from the ordeal.

Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (2001) explores the universality of trauma and its effects. Herman elucidates that trauma is an event that "overwhelms the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning" (33). It is "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered" (LaCapra 41). These definitions demonstrate that a traumatic experience may be too overwhelming to be remembered fully as it occurs and is thus unavailable to conscious recall.

Trauma is not configured to the past; it is re-lived endlessly in the present through painful reenactments, nightmares, hallucinations and flashbacks. These instances in which trauma is re-lived by the individual wreak devastating effects on the survivor's memory and identity. Trauma insinuates that the self is essentially relational; one's sense of identity can be shattered by violence or any other distressing event. This same identity though is also resilient

enough to be reconstructed with the help of others. Judith Herman therefore notes “the traumatic event destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others” (53).

Individuals who have been rendered victims of an intense breach of their identity often need to re-count their traumatic ordeal and in the process assimilate this experience into their understanding of the self. Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) bridges the gap between the occurrence of a distressing event and its effect on an individual by asserting that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature – the way it was previously not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Trauma and the suffering that results from it can be likened to a festering wound that demands immediate attention. This wound cries out as it were in its attempt to express a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. (4).

In reliving trauma different writers represent it from different perspectives and one of this is the gendered approach. Trauma has often been studied in the lenses of women narrating or being narrated on. There is a distinct separation between how men and women respond to traumatic events. More often than not it is women’s bodies that are narrated. Warsan Shire as a female author voices how trauma is revisited on both men and women. Shire describes how bodies become the signifiers of trauma. Her poetry collection *Teaching My Mother how to give birth* (2011) chronicles the traumatic outcome of the Somali civil war and subsequent Diaspora with a particular focus on the impacts felt by women.

Poetry is a literary genre which utilizes language in an appealing and rhythmical manner in order to depict a human experience. The patterning of words into a musical form in a poem adds force, beauty and emphasis to what the poet is saying. One of the key attributes of poetry is that it manipulates the musical structures of language in order to communicate human experiences. As a poet and writer Shire employs this feature of poetry to capture the theme of



trauma in a concrete and clear manner. This utilisation of the musicality of language arouses human emotions as a result of the pattern made by the recurring rhythm and structure of the poem. The arousal of emotions in art is the process by which human emotions are also released. The structure in a poem orders and controls the emotions aroused and gives the finished poem an aesthetically satisfying pattern and unity. It also results in a feeling of relief and at times contentment to the reader making it an appropriate choice in the discussion of issues such as trauma.

The most prominent theme in Warsan Shire's poetry remains trauma. Shire's poems are concerned with the plight of women who are vulnerable to the suffering that results from distressing experiences. In taking a gendered aspect to trauma she explores how one type of body or another undergoes various types of trauma from war and its resulting effects such as rape and violence to realising that one is an illegitimate child and the identity crisis that results from being a refugee.

Born in the Diaspora Somali community in Kenya before relocating to London, Warsan Shire was fortunate not to experience the conflict that rocked the country. Though the author of the poems that are analysed in this study has not gone through many of the experiences she speaks of, through her poetry she is able to bring to life the accounts of suffering that many from her country have had to endure. Warsan Shire thus uses her poetry as a tool which enables victims of trauma to heal.

### **1.1. Statement of the problem**

In describing traumatic experiences, literary works often provide a suitable medium in which the complexities of the disturbing events can be explored to provide healing for the victims. Writing emerging from the genre of trauma explores how survivors of traumatic events and critics transform traumatic memory into active memory in an effort to give the victims agency over the situation.

This project concerned itself with the representation of the experiences of women's psychological and physical trauma. As such it took a gendered approach to the issue in examining the poetry of Warsan Shire.

The body, particularly body image is layered with cultural meanings. How bodies are conceived seems to be based largely on prevailing social conceptions between the sexes. This study therefore investigates the use of body images in voicing trauma and is based on the poetry collection *Teaching My Mother how to give birth* (2011) by Warsan Shire.

### **1.3. Objectives**

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine how the female body image embodies trauma
2. To examine the stylistic techniques used by the poet in describing the trauma.

### **1.4. Hypotheses**

The study was based on the following hypotheses:

1. Female body images have been used to embody trauma.
2. The poet uses various elements of style to illustrate how trauma is revisited on the female body.

### **1.5. Justification**

Literary works that focus on trauma and its effects on individuals serve as critiques of oppressive social, economic and political institutions in a particular society. One way of doing this is by characterizing dispossessed individuals and examining what their internalization of their personal and collective histories reveal about the effects of living under distress.

Poetry is a witness to human cruelty and through out time poets and writers have borne witness to acts of injustice in their creative pieces. This study finds it place in the fact that trauma and its effects are key issues in the world we live in where individuals, families and whole countries are being devastated by one conflict or another.

Texts in this genre shed light on the plight of individuals and communities who undergo different forms of distress brought on by the memory of their suffering. In efforts to cope with this reality much of the literature has focused on first-hand accounts of trauma survivors with a particular interest on analysing trauma through female lenses. Warsan Shire has been described as a cartographer of the physical body using the woman's body as a canvas on which traumatic experiences are inscribed. What is notable is that she focuses on female and male bodies undergoing trauma thereby giving us a balanced angle. Lytton Smith notes that for Shire "the body isn't discrete, can be retrospective, someone else's" (2016) adding that she views the body and what it goes through as resulting from social disharmony, brought about by war and other types of conflict which results in suffering. The body therefore becomes the receptacle through which the legacy of what it has been through and what others think it has been through is relieved.

Warsan Shire occupies a unique space, she is a writer of Somali origin who has access to an 'outsider-within' perspective because she writes from and resides among a Somali diaspora community. As a contemporary writer she is able to embrace diverse perspectives in her poetry afforded by the 'double vision' of those forced conceptually to straddle both sides of a dichotomous social divide.

Shire's poetry is thus significant in retelling the upsetting past faced by trauma survivors with a particular focus on the effect it has on the woman. There is a distinct separation between men and women in the poems but often it is the bodies of women that are the centre of focus. The body as central to identity is inevitably associated with trauma. This deliberate

employment of the female body as the inscriptive surface on which traumatic identities are written forms the justification for this study.

### **1.6. Scope and Limitations**

In this study I focus on Warsan Shire's poetry collection *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* (2011). My background readings involve selected poems from Shire's other collection *Our men Do Not Belong to Us* (2014).

I am concerned with how a female author presents male and female bodies. In addition, my interest is in the different types of body images present in the poetry and what they represent.

### **1.7. Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to highlight research work, which has some bearing on this project. I review the existing critical discourses to establish the area in which this study is pegged on. Trauma studies and theory allow us to read the wound with the aid of literature. It involves how telling and witnessing, whatever form the narration may take, are steps in the healing of trauma.

Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) provides a model for studying the psychological wound that results from trauma. This wound is not identifiable and treatable like a bodily wound rather it is a breach in the mind's temporal framework. This implies that we acknowledge the existence of trauma once we begin to discuss it openly and analyze how it affects the individual. Efforts made in addressing traumatic experiences either through speech or written works serve to break the silence as it were. Writing therefore provides one way in which the articulation of a distressing event can be done. The act of writing about personal experiences of a traumatic nature has a cathartic effect on the victim. They experience a sense of mastery and control over the trauma and are able to overcome feelings of helplessness.

Referring to Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of trauma, Cathy Caruth observes that Freud "takes a literary approach in describing traumatic events because literature much like psychoanalysis, is capable of addressing the complexities that arise after an individual has suffered a distressing situation in their life. The choice of language use in literature and the psychoanalytic theory of trauma are effective in presenting an accurate analysis of the situation."(3). The writing emerging from the genre of trauma thus explore how survivors of traumatic events and critics transform traumatic memory into narrative memory in an effort to give the victims agency over the situation.

Anne-Marie de Beer and Elisabeth Synman in their essay "Shadows of life, death and survival in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide" (2015) note that "contrary to the involuntary and intrusive nature of traumatic memories, narrative memory can be empowering in the sense that it is a voluntary act, chosen and not inflicted or endured. The narrations of memory serve to defuse traumatic memory and give shape and temporal order to the events recalled thus establishing more control over their recalling and helping the survivor to remake a self" (117). This process involves "regaining one's voice" and subjectivity after being silenced, and a shift from being the object or medium of someone else's words or behavior to being the "subject of one's own (117).

Trauma narratives especially those arising from the central African country of Rwanda explore the characteristic of death with a particular focus on life after "death" and issues of survival. This is not literal death however as Anne-Marie de Beer and Elisabeth Synman in "Shadows of life, death and survival in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide" (2015) observe. The death is spoken of in the experience of rape, which took place during the violent period of the Rwandan genocide. They take a critical look at testimonials of three Rwandan texts written by female authors. Writers Monique Ilboudo from Burkina Faso and Véronique Tadjou from Côte d'Ivoire – who in 1998 took part in a collective writing project to offer

literary responses to the genocide- and Esther Mujawayo a genocide survivor who tells her story in her testimonial titled *SurVivantes* (2004).

In analyzing these testimonials de Beer and Synman observe that the authors place their recollection of rape incidences in settings, which add weight to the subject matter; the genocide (118). Véronique Tadjó creates a character whose own brother sexually assaults her before the genocide. Tadjó thus symbolically addresses one of the most difficult features of the genocide, namely that family members found themselves in opposing camps and often this resulted in betrayals. Her own husband rapes Monique Ilboudo's female character after the genocide. This is clearly a secondary effect of the genocide on their lives, underlining the prolonged effects of trauma which are not confined to the period of the genocide.

Esther Mujawayo was not raped during the genocide. In her testimonial *SurVivantes* (2004) she retells the experiences of women who though they survived the genocide, they were raped. These women use the avenue provided by AVEGA, a support group established by Mujawayo, to talk about their harrowing ordeal at the hands of rapists. She reveals how for some of them, recounting these incidences resulted in relief while for others it did not. De Beer and Synman arrive at the conclusion that in "the narration of these women's stories, the authors underline the various symptoms of traumatic memory and the 'death' and rape experience as they manifest not only in their physical bodies, but also in their relationships and their minds" (127).

In 1998 a collective writing project was formed titled "Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire" (Rwanda: To write by work of memory). Monique Ilboudo from Burkina Faso and Véronique Tadjó from Côte d'Ivoire are some of the writers who travelled to Rwanda as part of a group of African intellectuals to participate in the collective writing project, They give us the perspective of intellectual witnesses to the genocide. Esther Mujawayo a genocide survivor in her testimony titled *SurVivantes* (2004) recounts individual suffering expressed

through collective voices. The support group that she helped form plays an instrumental role in helping her regain her connection to humanity and in this way she takes steps towards taking control of her future after surviving the genocide. In their texts the two female writers aforementioned configure how “genocide has impacted on the lives of individuals, their capacity to and at times their inability to overcome the trauma they have lived through.” Mujawayo’s text focuses on the real-life strategies she employed to help her work through her trauma, whereas for the other two authors, more attention is paid to how they portray the paralyzing effect of the ‘death experience’. (Quoted in Anne-Marie de Beer and Elisabeth Synman)

Testimonials and autobiographies form the bulk of trauma literature, which give voice to the traumatic experiences of individuals, groups of people and by extension communities who have suffered the effects of one form of injustice or another. The texts are concerned with the survivor’s inability to overcome trauma, death, and issues surrounding identity, loneliness and violence. These narratives offer different perspectives on how trauma is narrated from the angle of men, women, children and the youth. Paul Rusesabagina and Immaculée Ilibagiza illustrate the difference between the male and female points of view in retelling the horrific events that took place during the genocide in Rwanda. Immaculée Ilibagiza in her book *Left to Tell: One Woman’s Story of Surviving the Rwandan Holocaust* (2006) recounts her ordeal as a Tutsi woman in Rwanda who was hunted down and marked for death during the 1994 genocide. During the unending hours of indescribable fear that she and the women hiding together in a bathroom went through, she discovered the power of prayer, eventually shedding her fear of death and forging a profound and lasting relationship with God. This was a way of coping with the terror. On the other hand we have Paul Rusesabagina whose autobiography titled *An Ordinary Man* (2006) describes in sobering detail the spectacle of seeing friends hacked to death, he describes the frustration and helplessness he felt while his pleas for aid were ignored. The narrative paints him as a sort of hero who risked his life to save others from death.

Immaculée Illibagiza details the suffering and mental anguish she went through as she hid in a bathroom for ninety-one days with seven other women away from killers from the Hutu community who were looking for them. As a Tutsi woman she recounts her ordeal and traumatic memories of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Paul Rusesabagina describes in sobering detail the horror of seeing his friends hacked to death during the 1994 Rwandan genocide as well. He tells with much difficulty the frustration and helplessness he felt while his pleas for aid were ignored. These life narratives allow the authors to live an untenable tale of anguish in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone.

Wambui Otieno's narrative *Mau Mau's Daughter: A Life History* (1998) is a comprehensive personal account of Otieno's experiences during the Mau Mau Rebellion. Otieno relates her role in the passive wing, her rape while in detention, and women's roles in the rebellion more generally. The book provides a platform on which to discuss the place of women in Kenya. Otieno is seen to be highly critical of the President's treatment of women, and urges Kenyan women to "throw off their sense of inferiority" and demand greater power. Ken Waliula notes "her narrative stands out as the one and only authentic female account of the horrors of detention in colonial Kenya. It is only Otieno's autobiography that so far stands or sinks as the sole female island in the expansive sea of male voices that narrativize confinement in colonial Kenya from an experiential point of view" (73).

Meghan Twible in an unpublished M.A thesis "Women Who Remember Rape: Representing Trauma and the Self" (2012) presents the trauma rape victims endure and the difficult process of reconstructing their identity in addition to finding the space and language with which to articulate their experience after they have been silenced by the traumatic act. She analyzes the memoirs of two American women rape survivors who regain their agency by the act of writing. Testimonials and autobiographies often employ narrative technique shifting between the past and present an effective strategy in reinforcing the idea that the past is alive in the



present. The body being central to identity is thus associated with trauma. The traumatic accounts thus highlighted suggest that trauma is bodily inscribed.

Beatrice Lamwaka in her short story titled “Butterfly Dreams” (2011), paints a picture of a family coming to grips with the return of their traumatized daughter Lamunu who was forcefully taken from the family at a young age to become a child soldier. This act took place during the period of warfare that rocked northern Uganda because of the insurgency by Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) against Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF). Lamunu’s homecoming is shadowed by sadness as she returns with an emaciated and scarred body traumatized psychologically. All but completely mute, Lamunu is unable to speak of her experiences, her feelings, or even of everyday things. This silence is only broken when she thanks her mother for enabling her to continue with her education. This act becomes the assurance that both the family and Lamunu can eventually work through the trauma of the war. In narrating the silences that are present in the text, the author succeeds in showing how life-threatening situations can alter families and communities at large. Thus, individual and collective trauma are linked with the narrative strategy of using the second person pronoun “you”.

In “The Garden of Mushrooms” (2009), another short story by Beatrice Lamwaka, trauma manifests itself with the same sorts of symptoms as witnessed in “Butterfly Dreams” silence, isolation, and the destruction of community. Lamwaka explores the trauma in autobiographical terms giving us glimpses of how her life was affected by the civil war. “The Garden of Mushrooms” reveals a silence just as prevalent in Lamwaka’s life as it was in Lamunu’s. Silence pervades her family particularly after her brother’s abduction. Narrating trauma by employing the use of silences shows the difficulty with which the victims have in sharing these experiences. Life just seems to move on. Her narrative is one among many number of child-soldier memoirs and novels, highlighting the prevalence of narrative as a response to trauma.

Antony Wanyoyi Wasena in an unpublished M.A Thesis “Authenticity in Witness Literature: An Examination of ‘Truth’ in Three Memoirs of War Survivors” (2010), is keen on questioning the truth or credibility of childhood narratives in highlighting trauma and survival of war. This adds to the expansive area of literature concerned with how children deal with trauma.

From the literature review it is clear that various scholars have conducted research in the area of trauma and its effects on men, women, children and communities at large with each scholar tackling different objectives. In researching this area some have focused their attention on specific incidences in the protagonists’ life to the kind of trauma it represents. Putting into consideration the kinds of research that has gone on in this field, the study aimed at analyzing representations of trauma through the angle of bodily embodiment by investigating how bodies whether physical or social embody trauma. This study sought to add to this field of knowledge by investigating how Warsan Shire makes use of body images as a strategy of expressing trauma in her poetry. To achieve the set objectives, this study relied on the theoretical frameworks outlined in the following section.

### **1.8. Theoretical Framework**

This research project focused on body images and how trauma is inscribed on the body. To achieve the objective, the study was conducted through a close reading and analysis of the poems in the collection *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* (2011) by Warsan Shire. The theoretical perspectives relied on for the study was formalism and feminist theory.

In this research, my main focus was on the form, diction and unity of the poems. It involved a close reading of the poems to evaluate how the stylistic elements work together in articulating the focal point of the study which is trauma. Formalism is a theory which provides a reader with the tools needed to understand and analyse a creative work for its own inherent value as

a piece of literary art. It asserts that understanding the meaning of any work of art lies in examining it as a self-sufficient object with formal elements, laws of its own that could be studied.

Ann Dobie in *Theory into Practise: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (2009) observes that formalism is concerned with how emotion is expressed in art. She cites the explanation given by T. S Eliot, one of the contributors to the theory, regarding objective correlation which states that ‘a chain of events or situation shall be the development of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience are given; the emotion is immediately evoked’ (34). When examining the facts presented in a poem they should correlate immediately invoking an emotion. The poems that have been examined for this study are grounded in the body. The body is the medium on which the themes of displacement as a result of war and the struggles of women are engraved. Either they contain concrete images of the body and what it goes through, or it expresses the tense relationship mothers and daughters have, often over and through the changing body of the maturing daughter.

Trauma theory was found to be useful. It was used to gain an understanding of the complicated wounds of traumatized individuals. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth describes “trauma” as a wound of a devastating violent experience that people endure following unforeseen circumstances which cannot be controlled. Initially, the term was used to highlight the aftermath of a harsh injury. However Caruth observes that in medical literature, trauma focuses on the wound that “inflicts not upon the body but upon the mind” (3).

Used in this instance, there is a difference between the trauma of the mind and that of the body with the former being more severe. The contrast between these two descriptions is that the trauma of the mind can always be shared mentally through memories and history while physical trauma is always isolated to the self. In essence it is impossible to share the physical trauma of another person though one can empathize with their emotions. It is with this in mind that there is need for total comprehension of the traumatic experiences of others by listening to testimonials and experiences of those who have passed through them.

Traumatized individuals often have to carry the weight of living with the emotional burden for a number of years due to the difficulty it takes to alleviate their distressed state of mind. The point at which these individuals are able to open up and share their pain with another signals that they are now on a path towards healing. The distress shifts from the individual to a shared community as it were. Literature that explores how this trauma is overcome plays a crucial role in bringing closure for the distressed victims. The study therefore critically examined how Shire through her poetic works opens the wounds of her characters and relieves their trauma and offers a solution through art. The study established that the poems not only expose the pain but the healing as well. This is because the poet takes on the role of a spokesperson for those whose neglected stories need to be voiced by an individual who deeply understands them.

In *“Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self.” Acts of Memory* (1999) Susan J. Brison offers an important assessment of what connects a traumatic experience and the healing process. She contends that trauma narrative is a process of reliving the harrowing experiences as “a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self” (40). With this in mind the study analyzed the identity transformation that the various characters described in the poems go through as a result of the cathartic act of uncovering the causes of trauma.

In analyzing all the facets of a text, it is important to look into everything that a given reference suggests. It was noted that the poems in the collection deal with the female experience in expressing trauma. The poems repeatedly evoke images of feminine strength, loss and sacrifice. Therefore the study found it important to analyze the female standpoint and voice in the poems.

The research utilized feminist theory, which proposes a feminist angle in analyzing poetry that touch on women's experiences. Feminism views the experiences of women as the point of departure with which to understand aspects of the world that affect them. A feminist angle was therefore essential in examining the systemic oppression in a society that devalues women's capabilities and criticize patriarchal theories.

Feminism explores the gender dynamics in a text and uses sex, gender and/or sexuality in comprehending their use in a literary work. It explores ways in which ideas, groupings and various peculiarities add to or hinder the examination of gender and sexuality as an important aspect of poetic structure. It is pegged on the notion that the gender of the poetic persona influences the telling of the story: a male and a female persona would tell the same fact differently. This was particularly useful in investigating the gendered aspect of trauma and the significance of body embodiment. Prevailing social conceptions between the sexes has a bearing on how bodies are perceived in feminist studies. This difference in perception was analysed in depth.

Susan Lanser in her essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology" (1986) notes that feminist criticism could provide a foundation for exploring the idea that there could be a clear distinction between a "woman's" writing and that of her male counterpart, a female tradition and why it is said that both write differently (614). Feminism was therefore useful in exploring how the women's bodies in the poetry of Warsan Shire become the space on which trauma is revisited and how this results in their agency. To this end the study incorporated the

approach of Elizabeth Grosz in her research '*Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (1994)' in which she notes that "the depth of the body" and how it is similar to a program, a system of algorithms to be decoded and merged with the purpose of unearthing socially identifiable meanings and functions (5). This asserts that the body is subject to various cultural and societal connotations.

Oyèrónkè Oyèrùmí in *The Invention of Woman: Making An African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) further highlights the centrality of the body in gender studies by looking at how far the body is involved in the building of sociopolitical categories "two bodies on display, two sexes, two categories persistently viewed — one in relation to the other. That narrative is about the unwavering elaboration of the body as the site and cause of differences and hierarchies in society" (7-8). The various theoretical tools outlined were employed on the basis of complementarity in order to yield a more comprehensive outcome.

### **1.9. Research Methodology**

This study was concerned with the effective use of body images to analyze trauma in poetry. To achieve the set objectives, the methodology involved a close reading of the primary text to identify the different types of images used and what they symbolize. These images gain significance because they create the form and unity of the poems. The focus of the study was on the body images present in the poems be they physical or social and how they signify trauma. The book *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* encompasses twenty-one poems all of which contain body images.

The methodology also included a review of secondary texts especially critical works dealing with Shire's poetry from different perspectives. I examined works of other writers who have dealt with the space of trauma and body embodiment to shed more light on the research project. The research also relied on the Internet as a useful tool for obtaining secondary

critical works and acquiring more information about the poet and her work. In achieving the objectives, the study further reviewed interviews Shire granted especially on areas relevant to the project like trauma, identity and belonging.

After collecting the relevant data from the primary as well as the secondary texts, the study analyzed the data through an interrogation of the primary text using the different theoretical perspectives proposed. The wider aspect of formalism was relevant in analyzing the structural elements of the poems and how they come together in the creation of their content. Trauma theory served as a guide in drawing out the various types of suffering discussed in the poetry and concentrating on the major theme of this project. Feminism was useful in analyzing the gendered aspect of trauma. The following chapter will focus on the relationship between physical and social body images as they emerge in the poetry of Warsan Shire.

## **CHAPTER II: PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL BODY IMAGES**

### **2.0. Introduction**

This chapter explores the physical body images present in the poetry with the aim of analyzing their significance and how they lead to an understanding of the social body images that emerge. It will address areas of interest such as the gender of the bodies that are inscribed in the poetry and how this is done. In this regard I will examine the silences present and how this relates to the gender of the speaker in the poems under discussion.

The physical body images present in the poems will be explored to show their connection to the social spaces which emerge. To this end I will examine the emerging cultural and political aspects associated with the female and male body and look at how the author maps the transformation they undergo. Feminist perspectives will guide this section on body embodiment to analyze constructions of sexed difference and how this affects the woman's position in society.

This chapter is therefore concerned with the gendered aspect of trauma and body embodiment. It reveals how the female body is used as a space for revisiting trauma and how this results in their agency.

### **2.1. Identity of the inscribed body**

Questions of uniqueness and supremacy relations form an integral part of studies that involve the body. Studies on feminism have expressed an interest in the use of the body in defining sexual identity with regards to the social configuration and its role in society. Rather than being tied to a fundamental nature, the body can be seen as key to social production and inscription and is therefore positioned in the midst of a labyrinth of socio historical relations instead of being tied to a fixed essence.



Oyeronke Oyewumi in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) highlights the centrality of the body in gender studies. She states that the “body is the foundation on which the social order is anchored; the body is always seen in different angles. As such, it draws a gaze: a gaze of difference, a look of differentiation — the most historically constant being the gaze based on gender. There is a sense in which phrases such as “the social body” or “the body politic” are not just metaphors but can be read literally” (2). This therefore creates a need for the body to be refigured so that it moves from the periphery to the center of analysis and understood as the substance of subjectivity.

The contrast between mind and body has often been associated with the difference between male and female, with the later often seen as engrossed in her bodily subsistence in a way that makes attainment of rationality questionable. Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) observes, “Women tend to be more biological, more physical, and more natural than men” (14). Oppression by males thus justifies itself by associating women more with the body than men and as a result, restricting their social and economic roles.

Shire explores these restrictions on women’s role starting with a scrutiny of the traditional family unit. Right from the epigraph she says, “I have my mother’s mouth and my father’s eyes; on my face they are still together”. This is a powerful expression that portrays how the strong family bond characteristic of the Somali community is broken down. This is as a result of the sexually and physically violent environment resulting from civil war. The family breakdown also comes about as a consequence of dealing with the challenges posed by adapting to western ways of life for refugee and immigrant families. The tensions generated as a result contribute to both personal and social stresses and vulnerabilities be they physical, emotional or mental.

These strains and weaknesses within families have wide repercussions for the society as a whole. Basic certainties of Somali family life have undergone significant upheaval as a result of war and state collapse with the result being a rising number of absent fathers and husbands. Shire tackles this rising phenomenon beginning with the poem titled “What Your Mother Told You After Your Father Left” (Shire, 7). The poem raises the concerns of a community that witnessed the breakdown of one of the families within it. The third person pronoun ‘your’ in the title refers to the voice of the community reporting the events that took place.

The persona’s voice then shifts and takes the first person voice to report the action that the mother takes when she senses that her marriage is falling apart. The first person point of view used here shows that the woman takes ownership of the decision that she makes in regard to the husband’s act of leaving. She says,

I did not beg him to stay  
because I was begging God  
that he would not leave. (7)

This indicates that she made a conscious decision not to run after him and ask him to stay with the family. She realized that she is not powerful enough to face him and ask him why he wanted to leave. The woman is therefore aware that begging him to stay would not lead to him changing his mind and thus she sought higher intervention in religion.

The woman’s position in the family and society at large does not always afford her a chance to voice her opinions regarding matters that have an effect on her life as well as that of her immediate family and the community. This means that she has to seek other avenues where she can freely express herself. Somali women occupy a complicated paradox in their society states the UN Women website adding that “because of deeply rooted gender inequality the women are excluded from formal decision making and often operate through a patriarchal filter” ([africa.unwomen.org](http://africa.unwomen.org)).

In highlighting the position of women in Somalia, it is observed that though the women are integral to the social, political; and economic development of their communities as a result of their education, most of their efforts are suppressed due to the imposed cultural limitations. In the meantime, they are still expected to submit to men and fulfill their duties as women. Thus the fact that the persona in the poem does not beg her husband to stay is a pointer of the cultural limitations placed upon her by the society.

The mood in the poem is that of resignation. The mother resigns herself to the fate imposed on her culturally that despite whatever action on her part, the man will still leave, that is why she chooses not to beg him to stay instead resorting to the only avenue that will grant her a hearing; religion. Religion holds a central position in the life of the Somali woman especially as a refugee removed from a familiar environment in Somalia notes Celia McMichael in *“Everywhere is Allah’s Place’: Islam and the Everyday Life of Somali Women in Melbourne Australia”* (2002). She observes that, ‘A woman can find an enduring home in Islam that is carried throughout the displacement and resettlement for the refugee. They can observe the religion through different lenses that include the construction of space, daily practices, and forms of interactions and modes of thinking about their lives. It further gives them a meaningful framework of practice and ideology that sustains them throughout the hardships associated with exile, displacement and resettlement and in times of emotional distress’ (171).

In Islam, God is a spirit and the creator; all discerning and sexless therefore the woman finds approach to God as a safe and neutral point since God does not show partiality to any gender. What she cannot ask of the man, who society has placed at a position above her, she can ask of God who is seen as having an impartial view to the situation. Therefore, in the poem *“What Your Mother Told You After Your Father Left”* (7) the persona, who is a woman, a wife and a mother turns to God, begging God that her husband does not leave. This is because religion is the only avenue where she knows that her concerns will be heard since the

patriarchal nature of the society she lives in will not allow her to voice an opinion or suggestion contrary to her husband's.

This disintegration in the family is further observed in the poem "When We Last Saw Your Father" (Shire, 20) where the first person plural poetic voice 'We' could represent the mother and/or other members of the community who were present when the father left his wife and her new born. The voice relates,

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 father's actions seen in the first and second lines of the poem paints the picture of a man, a husband and a father weighing his options with his mind set on fleeing the scene. He is pictured in the parking lot in a car which is not his trying to understand which hospital room his wife and new born child is in. The final line in the poem gives evidence of the dilemma the man faces and the irony of it. On the one hand he claims ownership of the child seen in the use of third person possessive pronoun "his" while at the same time he views it as a mistake and is thus seen contemplating leaving his family.

The poem refers to the child as his mistake evidence that they had not planned on having this child and it is more than he can handle. The thought that the "windows of the building are glowing with his mistake" underscores the resolution of the father in his decision to desert his family. This choice of words points to the bitter mood in the poem and emphasizes the loss and pain that the mother and child experience as a result of abandonment by the family head.

In both poems, the male figures -fathers mentioned are all absent and silent. The persona is either the mother who is the abandoned wife or someone in the community who was present on the day of birth. Fathers in the Somali society occupy a position of importance and

privilege in the community. Islam gives the man the option of having up to four wives if they can love the wives equally. Furthermore the man is the main decision maker when it comes to matters of marriage annulment. A man may want to annul a marriage for reasons such as misconduct, stubbornness, disagreement, failure of the wife to play her role well, indifference towards his wife and loss of affection for her.

The patriarchal society places the huge responsibility of leadership and sole provider of the family on the man. The man therefore occupies a prominent position in the marriage arrangement as opposed to the woman. Judy El-Bushra and Judith Gardner (2016) observe that though Somalia is a patriarchal society, the ideal of Somali manhood is not predicated on violence or on the violent oppression of women. Rather the man's reputation, status and power depend on how well he is judged to fulfil his obligations towards his family and clan, and how far he demonstrates mastery of the ideal knowledge, skills and qualities of a man (448). These roles are gender generic thus excluding the women.

These notions of Somali manhood have not changed despite the effects of war and resulting instability in the region since 1991. War often leads to a lack of stability in men because social norms dictate that they take up the role of warrior and protector in defending their community and families. However prolonged war affects them socially and psychologically which dissociates them from 'normal' human living due to the prolonged trauma of pain, death and loss.

It is probable that within such a historical context, most men would not be in a position to fulfil their gender specific responsibilities as expected by society. The poet therefore by interrogating scenarios in which the family heads are absent shows that vulnerability in conflict settings is not only confined to women and children but also affects the men. Thus the family unit is most likely to fall apart since the men may be ill prepared to take up these traditional roles expected of them.

Distressing events such as civil and ethnic strife, war and acts of terror often generate serious and catastrophic challenges to not only personal but also communal self- understanding. The memory of such trauma plays a significant role in shaping subsequent personal and communal political perceptions, affiliations and action. Duncan Bell in *Memory, Trauma and World Politics* (2006) observes that traumatic memories help shape the identity of an individual. In moments of crisis he states, ‘we tend to look back into the past with intensity to draw on and reshape our memories in an effort to defend challenged identities and shore up a sense of self and community’ (6). The physical body having undergone a painful experience becomes the site on which representations of identity are inscribed, more like a tattoo. Shire looks at the tensions between the refugees’ lived bodily experiences and the meanings inscribed on the body.

The experiences of the physical body undergo a wide array of understandings between the ‘natural’ and social worlds. The body in health offers a model of organic wholeness; the body in sickness offers a model of social disharmony, conflict and disintegration. In the same vein, a society in sickness and in ‘health’ offers a model for understanding the body. Warsan Shire in “Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)” (24-27) chronicles the immigrant and refugee crisis facing the individual in a personal and social world. The poem paints the picture of a hostile, inhospitable homeland that spits out its inhabitants. The title of the poem points to the location where these conversations about a lost home take place to be a deportation centre. They have been socially rejected as it were, by their host country and now are on their way out of the country that they had fled to in the hope of finding refuge.

Presented as a ‘conversation’ this poem proposes the idea that the poet becomes the voice of the voiceless in society. Diaspora writers like Warsan Shire possess unique ‘outsider-within’ perspectives due to the hybrid position they occupy in society. Shire inhabits an intersectional space of race, religion and migration. Her work is situated in the midst of different cultures creating a poetical ‘third space’ in the words of postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha.

The third space created as a result of hybridity 'enables other positions to emerge' according to Homi Bhabha (Rutherford, 211) this then creates a spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that 'initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation' (Bhabha, 1). Shire therefore uses this space to highlight the fears faced by the refugee subject and to discuss emerging issues surrounding their identity or lack thereof. The voiceless in the poem "Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)" are the refugees who are waiting to be deported back to the countries from which they fled. The physical space occupied in this instance; the deportation centre, points to their identity as refugees which has been inscribed upon them by others.

The poem illustrates how these new social bodies and by extension identities emerge with the opening lines,

Well, I think home spat me out, the blackouts and curfews like tongue  
against loose tooth. God, do you know how difficult it is, to talk about the  
day your own city dragged you by the hair, past the old prison, past the  
school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags? (Lines 1-4)

The country here is personified to embody citizens who take up the act of war on fellow citizens as a social whole body. It emphasizes the hostile, inhospitable environment in which the citizens live under. Generally we spit out from our mouths that which tastes bad, is harmful or what we basically do not like and thus deem to be unwanted. The act of the country spitting its inhabitants out is extended throughout the stanza to illustrate the loss of a home as countrymen and identity as citizens of a nation which plagues the individual seeking refuge from violence and war. She goes on to highlight the indignity that results from this loss by stating that the feeling was like being dragged by the hair.

Hair on the head of a woman is a source of pride or glory not only biologically but also culturally as it is part of her signature in beauty. When it is pulled out in a violent way, it not only causes pain but also is a sign of disrespect, an act meant to humiliate her. The poem by

referring to the individual(s) being dragged out of the city by their hair thus shows the pain and humiliation they faced as they fled their country. They are dragged past familiar sites as the poem mentions, the old prison, school gates: landmarks that burn in their minds the permanency of their loss.

The flag is one of the symbols used in identifying a country and is implicitly used in stimulating feelings of patriotism and nationhood among its citizens. It indicates their common shared experiences, gives them a sense of belonging and identity through the meanings associated with the flag. The opposite is true in the scenario depicted in the poem. In this instance the peculiar characteristic of the experience is in the “burning torsos erected on poles like flags” which means that it is not just their lives but also their sense of belonging and identity which they lose. Their identity is now closely linked with loss. The spiral effect of the loss is seen from the personal to the community then to a wider scale, the nation.

The physical body which should be a fortress against the suffering betrays one. This physical body of the individual can be likened to the physical boundaries surrounding the country which the citizens live in. Much like the skin which acts as a protective covering for the human body, the boundaries that surround a country are meant to give its citizens a sense of belonging and identity while protecting them. The country therefore betrays the citizens as it fails to protect them from the sprouts of internal wars and their devastating effects.

The end result being damage to the internal structures represented by its citizens. The damage takes the shape of deaths, displacement, and loss of identity and sense of belonging and in turn just like the proverbial snake biting its own tail, the country harms and destroys itself. The damage done to the nation is described through the personification of the city, as a person dragging their fellow citizens, (its people) out by the hair past burning torsos which points to the loss of lives.



A musical composition of a patriotic nature like a national anthem evokes a sense of nationalism in its citizens and eulogizes their history, traditions and struggles. National Anthems encompass a country's culture, their social, economic, religious and political identity which have been set apart by a country as a national song. The poem expresses the need for the individual to hold on to their sense of identity by describing them as "carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long." (Stanza 1, Line 7). Though their desire is to remain a part of their familiar community, by referring to it as old signals that they have to abandon the country and adopt new homes and identities.

This nostalgic tone creates a sad mood to the reader as the longing to stay and remain rooted in familiarity and the ideal of retaining identity is something that every human being craves for and is made as a call to the plight of the refugees to the "hosting" nations to feel their pain and thus acting as an avenue of communication, a conversation. This sense of loss culminates in the last three lines of the first stanza,

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 (24)

The vivid description of an obsolete passport being destroyed at an airport extends the metaphor of spitting out and suggests the internalizing of the process of identity crisis. The language that leaves them bloated refers to a feeling of discomfort that even though they want to let go of the past it is impossible to do so thus the sense of hopelessness which persists and will continue to shape their identity. This fact is evidenced in the word choice of "language" which they cannot afford to forget.

A shared language gives one a sense of belonging. Language gives one a social identity. It is one of the ways through which the fabric that makes up a persons culture is carried with them even as they move away from their place of origin. Individuals who speak the same language

have a feeling of inclusion while those who do not are often viewed as the 'other' and are excluded from certain social spaces. A common language further gives one a sense of identity and unites a community. The refugee subject by residing among a group of people who speak a language different from the one they speak will be in a constant state of identity crisis.

The second stanza in the poem "Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)" continues to interrogate factors that lead to an identity crisis for the refugee. The first three lines of the stanza say,

They ask me how did you get here? Can't you see it on my body? The  
Libyan desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the  
city of Rome with no jacket. I hope the journey meant more than miles

The physical body provides the immigrants' chronicle, a living canvas that contain the response to the question of distinctiveness while providing the history and justification for their struggle. Physical geography and anatomy is used to track the path towards becoming a refugee and how the memory of it is inscribed on their bodies. The poem highlights the perils and dangers that individuals who seek a new life away from their ancestral homes face. It likens these dangers to a physical mark left on the body.

The second stanza recounts the magnitude of lives lost in this journey by referring to the Gulf of Aden as bloated with immigrant bodies which depicts death. Reports by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees shows that 'on a regular basis, thousands of distressed Somalis and Ethiopians risk their lives to cross the Gulf of Aden in their quest for a better life. Most of them are killed in violent circumstances, stabbed, bashed, drowned, attacked by sharks, asphyxiated while in crowded smuggler boats plying the dangerous route between Puntland in Somalia and the beaches of Yemen.' This is according to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights website. The poem thus shows the grim reality that these individuals have to face as they seek new homes.

African migrants take many routes to reach the Libyan coast which serves as a gateway to the city of Rome in Italy where many hope they will find refuge and stability. This does not always end as they had hoped because as seen in the poem, the Libyan desert is depicted as “red” with immigrant bodies. Red is the colour of blood which is usually a sign of life or death. In this instance life is lost as the desert is filled with bodies in the quest to attain freedom as they flee their country trying to cross the Libyan Desert.

The city of Rome on the other hand offers “no jacket” to the immigrant they are thus exposed to the cold and harsh weather that they are not accustomed to. The use of personification depicts the inhumane nature the refugees face when in foreign countries whereby the host citizens do not welcome them but see them as “aliens” in their land. This can be read as a reference to the growing hostility towards migrants and refugees. The important insights and observations on what it means to be a refugee are summed up in the final stanza. It says,

I hear them say *go home*, I hear them say *fucking immigrants, fucking 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 rubble and old currency waiting for its return...’ (27).

Refugees have no real safe place to stay, anywhere they turn, they face hostility. The statements ‘go home’ and ‘fucking immigrants’ have been italicised in the poem to draw our attention to the lack of empathy, a sense of hatred and indifference, which is attached to the plight of refugees. The poet uses abusive taboo words like ‘fucking’ to depict the hostility and potential upheaval that the host harbours in most cases towards the refugees.

The poem tackles the betrayals that take place during periods of war by addressing the stark reality that in an unstable world anything can change at the blink of an eye. These betrayals are felt at the physical level on the human body and at the social level on the society that resides in the country. A country that was once stable is likened to a lover who in the initial

stages of the relationship will put their best foot forward as it were saying and doing all the sweet things and then suddenly change tact. This change in a country that was once stable leads to its slowly sinking into instability turning into rubble overnight. The stanza has a nostalgic and wistful tone signaling that the refugee does not hold any hope towards the situation changing. In reference to how a stable situation quickly turns unstable the poem reflects that for those affected and buried under the rubble they liken the situation to, 'old currency waiting for its return'. Once a country unveils new currency notes into its market it rarely goes back to the old the only way is forward.

## **2.2 The body in feminist discourse**

In discourses meant to dismantle oppressive patriarchal structures, the body is often presented as absent yet ironically it is both a site of oppression and acts of resistance meant to emancipate it. This section will discuss how the female body though oppressed is able to rise up against structures meant to maintain inequality with the result that it achieves agency.

The breakdown of identity and the struggle to reconstitute and possess a new identity takes place precisely on the female body as the poems will show. Since corporeality is the central agent in the constitution of women's identities and subjectivities, body and mind may be perceived as a unified whole. Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) posits that "bodies provide the base, the raw materials for the inculcation of and interpellation into ideology but are merely media of communication rather than the object or focus of ideological production or reproduction" (17).

Shire's explication of the trauma that social bodies undergo and the spaces they occupy is experienced at a bodily level. The human body may be viewed from various perspectives. Nancy Scheper – Hughes and Margret Lock outline three angles which can be used to view the body from different perspectives. The first is as a phenomenally experienced individual body-self. Secondly as a social individual which would entail looking at it as a natural symbol

for thinking about relationships among nature, society and culture. The third view would involve analyzing it as a political body which is an artifact of communal and political control (6).

The body comes out as a highly ambivalent site of both oppression and agency, as it negotiates its way around experiences which seek to limit its scope of action and freedom. The lived experiences played out on the female body is essential in shaping both the choices the women make and their exercise of agency.

Women experience their bodies as highly ambivalent sites of violation; an instance of this is in the poem discussed in the previous section, “Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)” where the poet uses the female body to relate the experience of flight and loss of home. The second stanza lines three and four recounts a mother mourning the loss of her children,

I hope the journey meant more than miles  
because all of my children are in the water.

In the line quoted above it speaks of a parent possible a mother, worried about the safety of her children. The poem mentions the children as being on water in reference to journeys refugees make on boats and ships across seas while heading to European lands seeking asylum. The fifth line of stanza two also shows that the body under discussion is female. The line reads,

I want to make love, but my hair smells of war and running  
and running. I want to lay down, but these countries are like uncles  
who touch you when you're young and asleep”

As mentioned in the excerpt above, the pride of a woman is her hair and most women like to wear their hair long. The memory of the war and escape from a troubled land is embedded in the female body. The persona says her hair smells of war and running to illustrate that she

cannot run away from the trauma that it brings. It is like a recurring nightmare. The memory of which is inscribed on the body.

The stanza further recounts acts of rape and sexual abuse that women experience. Here the hostility and unwelcoming nature of the host countries is likened to uncles who sexually abuse their young nieces. This abuse as the poem mentions happens when they are 'young and asleep' a state in which one is vulnerable and unable to defend themselves. In a similar way the individual fleeing into another country seeking sanctuary will often face discrimination, abuse and hostility from their host at their most vulnerable moment. They cannot defend themselves because they are at their mercy.

The female has to endure acts of torture as a result of the war that leave her degraded. The third stanza paints a vivid picture of this torture in its description of how the female body is abused by men. It mentions the efforts the refugee has to make to blend into their new environment as of importance considering the inhumane conditions they had to endure during their escape such as,

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. (Lines 9 – 12)

The act of rape discussed in the above stanza paints the picture of the body as a physical control site, a concrete presence whose material existence renders its owner vulnerable to violation. Jeannette Kupfermann in *The MsTaken Body: A Fresh Perspective on the Women's Movement* (1981) observes that the physical abuse exemplifies a total breakdown of mutuality, the violation of the body's boundary (120).

The body goes through a process of transformation as it seeks acceptance in the new social space it occupies having survived forced migration. Maymuun's Mouth" (Shire 10) retells the

account of a young immigrant who is adjusting to life in the West. The persona Maymuun had to “lose her accent” as the first line in the poem indicates so that she could fit in to the new society. Her accent acted as a pointer to her former identity which had to be lost if she is to gain acceptance in the new society.

The new accent and voice she acquires is described as “sophisticated”. This brings about the concept of the “other” often associated with foreigners where the old accent was associated with something ugly that had to be lost and the new one is deemed acceptable hence sophisticated and would likely indicate a rise in her social position. The poem further highlights the transformation that the physical body has to undergo in order to seek acceptance in the new social space it occupies. The persona in the poem makes physical transformations as a way of fitting into the new social environment she occupies,

Most evenings she calls me to talk about the pros and cons of  
heating molasses in the microwave to remove body hair (lines 2 – 3)

The persona is learning new ways of changing her physical appearance to blend in with what is considered a desirable body in her new location. Body hair that appears on other parts of the body other than the head is unwelcome for most women. A woman who has excess hair on the arms and legs as an example puts a lot of effort to remove it so that they maintain their beauty. We notice this aspect of beauty in the phrase molasses to remove body hair. She is referring to the different ways women use wax to remove excess hair on parts of the body such as arms and legs. This is a common practice in western cultures where hair removal to achieve smooth skin is regarded as being beautiful.

In addressing immigrant experiences we notice the insecurities that result from being away from home which pushes an individual to the limit where they begin to consider physical changes that would make them look more desirable and accepted. The physical changes and

transformation that Maymuun in the poem undergoes can be defined as an act of 'passing'. In the United States minority groups such as African Americans historically "passed" to escape the strong oppression that led to their enslavement, segregation and brutalization. Miscegenation between white male slave owners and black female slaves resulted in children light enough to pass for white. Often times, being able to pass for a white person meant the difference between a life in captivity and a life of freedom. Even with the end of the slave trade, blacks continued to pass as they faced stringent laws that limited their ability to reach their potential in society.

'Passing' therefore gave these groups of people social and economic clout than the racial or ethnic groups into which they were born. In a similar way Maymuun desires to blend in and make a new life for herself in the new social space she now occupies. To achieve this she transforms herself. Her transformation goes beyond the physical to touch on aspects of her identity and personality. We are told in the fourth line that, "She has taken to dancing in front of strangers." (10). This could be in reference to the occupation she has, which is probably working as a strip dancer in order to support herself. This type of occupation is taboo for a woman who has been brought up in a society where the females are expected to cover themselves in a hijab or buibui which is a piece of black cloth worn by a Muslim woman when out in public.

The change in her identity also results from the exposure and worldview that she acquires. This results from her taking up residence in an area occupied by other nationalities,

She lives next  
door to a Dominican who speaks to her in Spanish whenever they pass  
each other in hallways. I know she smiles at him, front teeth stained from  
the fluoride in the water back home. (10)

She is now getting exposure to cultures other than her own an aspect of cosmopolitanism. The line also says that she smiles at her neighbor. She takes the initiative which is in stark contrast



to how men and women relate in Somali culture. They do not relate so openly towards each other and women only associate with close male relatives in public.

Maymuun's real experience as played out on her body is central in informing the decisions she makes and her exercise of agency. She embraces the changes that are taking place in her life and is not afraid to share them with her family back home. The poem gives evidence of this by stating that,

We've received photos of her standing by a bridge, the  
baby hair she'd hated all her slicked down like ravines. (lines 8-9)

At the beginning of the poem Maymuun reveals her desire to remove excess hair on her arms and legs by heating molasses. This is so that she can have smooth skin which is regarded as beautiful. In the lines quoted above she goes further and smoothens the soft hair that she has despised all her life. Baby hair occurs on the edges of an adult's head. It is very soft in texture much like the hair that newborn babies have hence the name baby hair. By slicking her baby hair, the picture we get of Maymuun is a woman with very straight almost Caucasian like hair. This all points to the drastic changes she makes to blend in.

The bridge token mentioned in the eighth line of the poem in the photograph she sends home works on the incidental and symbolic levels. This use of symbolic imagery extends the metaphorical reach in comprehending the transformation, journey and identity in diaspora experience. It also indicates ownership of her agency that the persona makes as she is seen taking control of her new life away from the controlling gaze of her community. In addition she shows that she is not afraid of their reaction because she starts the conversation by making long distance calls back home and sending photographic evidence of the new steps she is taking.

The physical transformations which the characters in the poetry of Warsan Shire must undergo in difficult situations such as those described in “Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)” and “Maymuun’s Mouth” can be defined as a way in which the individual acquires a “social skin”. This is a concept developed by Terrence Turner to highlight the indentation of social categories on the body. The body represents a “kind of common frontier of society which becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted” (qtd. in Scheper – Hughes and Lock 25). The clothing, new tongues and other forms of bodily adornment become the language through which new cultural and social identities are expressed.

### **2.3. Agency of the female body**

The body emerges as a site of agency as it negotiates its way around experiences which seek to limit its actions and freedom. The female body is often seen in terms of childbearing and nurturing of a family but never as a political tool. Shire has created female characters in her poetry who through the lived experience played out by and on their bodies make choices based on these experiences that lead to their agency. These actions spell out their resistance to the patriarchal rules that govern their existence.

In gender studies the female body is read as a surface in which cultural values and practices play themselves out. Robert Connell notes that it is important to examine the features of this surface looking at the forms of material practice through which the body is “both shaped by social regulation and at the same time intervenes in shaping its own history and shifting identities’ (11 -12). This means that an exclusive focus on gender as a social construct may lead to ignoring the real effects on and of the body. Thus bodies in their own right and their experiences do matter.

This section will look at selected poems which highlight how the women in Warsan Shire’s poetry use their bodies as avenues of resistance and sites of renegotiating power. Maymuun in

“Maymuun’s Mouth” (10) lays bare the changes she has made to her life and body as a way of adjusting to life in the West for her entire family to see. She does so through phone calls and photographs in her communication with them. Sofia in “Birds” (14) renegotiates on her own terms the cultural and sexual balance of power by tricking her husband that she was a virgin on their wedding night using pigeon blood. Her actions may be viewed on one hand as conforming to the expected societal norms regarding women owing to the lengths she goes through to make her husband and mother-in-law believe she was a virgin. However this same action is what brings her praise from her husband and proves that women can subvert the double standards set in society.

Women construct their freedom and resistance around their bodies. This statement is best exemplified in the poem titled “Fire” (17 -19). The poem recounts the experience of a couple who quarreled and the husband was made to leave the house because he hit his wife. The second stanza the husband on his way to a hotel, remembers the death of a cheating husband whose wife when she found out about his affair after a visit by the man’s young lover doused herself in lighter fluid and when he came home burnt him to death. Though she exacts her revenge by incinerating her husband for his infidelities, she also kills herself in the process, as evidenced in the poem when it says that,

The wife, waiting for her husband to come home,  
doused herself in lighter fluid. On his arrival  
she jumped on him, wrapping her legs around  
his torso. The husband surprised at her sudden urge,  
carried his wife to the bedroom, where  
she straddled him on their bed, held his face  
against her chest and lit a match. (Stanza 2 lines 13 – 19)

The action she takes gives us an all-or-nothing position which is hardly the picture of strength. In this instance we see the trauma as revisited on the female body as she incinerates herself and her husband as revenge for his infidelity.

The final stanza of the poem the husband who was made to leave his family home after the quarrel while checking into a hotel meets a young man who comments,

*the rooms in this hotel are sweltering.  
Last night in bed I swear I thought  
my body was on fire.*" (Stanza 3, lines 4-6)

The lines quoted are italicised in the poem as a way of creating emphasis. It could be an allusion or forewarning the man has of what his outcome may be. Starting with the title "fire" the poet employs imagery that points to fire in the entirety of the poem. In the first stanza the opening section of the poem the wife is described as,

she sat on the front steps  
dress tucked between her thighs,  
a packet of Marlboro lights  
near her bare feet, painting her nails

The stanza opens by mentioning cigarettes which is a reference to fire and continues the thought brought out in the title. The idea of fire is continued in the third part of the first stanza through colour symbolism. The wife is described as picking off nail polish with her teeth. The result being,

Later that night she picked the polish off  
with her front teeth until the bed you shared  
for seven years seemed speckled with glitter  
and blood. (17)

Red is a very dominant colour which can draw both positive and negative emotions. Writers often use it to draw out emotions such as passion, warmth, aggression or danger. Red is the colour of fire and blood and can symbolize adventure, violence, danger, anger, war, strength, determination as well as love. In this instance in the stanza quoted, the colour red has been used to show the emotion of anger. The wife who made her husband leave picks off her nail polish which makes the bed look like it is speckled with blood. In addition the manner in

which she chooses to remove the polish, picking it off, as opposed to using a cotton swab shows that her demeanour is that of anger. We can therefore conclude that the wife is still angered at the thought that her husband hit her.

The image of fire is more pronounced in the second stanza, which recounts the incident where the cheating husband and his wife burnt to death, after his wife lit a match having earlier doused herself in lighter fluid. The final stanza also invokes the image of fire when the young man compares how hot the rooms in the hotel were the previous night to body being on fire. The title and scenarios depicted in the poem therefore tie in well to illustrate just how far the woman will go to avenge a wrong done to her by her husband.

Read within conventional understandings of agency this act of self – immolation signals defeat. This is because when one attains agency the end result is often survival and living beyond the oppressive circumstances which would then be seen as an expression of resistance. Grace Musila however argues that this outlook would “weigh these acts down with simplistic, even mundane parameters of agency and resistance.” (59). In her analysis of how women embody experience Musila comments that acts of suicide described in Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* represent “an act of embodiment as an exercise of agency” (59).

The acts of suicide highlighted in *Butterfly Burning* are: the swallowing of a needle by a woman before going to bed, all four inches of it and followed it with water" with the "thread trailing out of her mouth" claiming that "a man she cared for had not smiled back when she did, not touched her wrist on the pulsing spot when she asked him to, not come back home one night and many nights that followed"; and later, the character Phephelaphi took the path of setting her body alight after dousing it in paraffin ( Qtd in Musila, 59). These two suicides she notes are a defiance of life itself adding that as a result of their death, the “two women re-appropriate both their bodies and their lives, and in one elegant gesture truly hold their bodies and lives in their hands.” (59).

In the normal sense when a person commits a wrongdoing, they should be punished for their sins. Collective punishment is never meted out for the sins of an individual, as this would be unfair to innocent parties. The men in the novel *Butterfly Burning* betray the women in their lives just as the man in the poem titled “Fire” by Warsan Shire betrays his wife by taking up a young lover. The irony though is that both the innocent and guilty parties face the same punishment. By highlighting scenarios where women resort to suicide, the writer implies that that in certain contexts death becomes a life-affirming experience.

The final poem in the collection “In Love and In War” (34) is a warning to female bodies entangled in war. Consisting of only just two lines, it reads,

To my daughter I will say,  
‘when the men come, set yourself on fire.

In this poem just like “Fire” already discussed, the poet makes reference to suicide as a way of liberating oneself. During a crisis such as war women may fall victim to violent crimes such as rape. The act of setting oneself on fire is a warning call to the women folk to take charge of their lives and bodies similar to the women in *Butterfly Burning*. Committing suicide in this case means that they do not go through the trauma of rape and other torturous acts that result from war. They preserve their dignity in war.

The title of the poem not only talks of war but also a time of love. It can thus be read as advice given to young women beginning a romantic relationship. Fire as mentioned in the poem can be a metaphor for strength. This is because the color associated with fire is red. Red can symbolize strength and energy. The fire is thus a metaphor for strength, the flame of individuality. The woman who is beginning a romantic relationship is advised to maintain her sense of independence while in the union. She should not let her sense of self be swallowed up by the decisions the man makes in their union. Rather she should maintain her

individuality while at the same time maintaining her commitment to the relationship. Thus the two fold message captured in the title, 'In Love and In war'.

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

In the poems discussed in this chapter, it emerges that despite women's experiences having a heavy impact on them they still devise strategies of reclaiming these bodies and using them in acts of resistance to oppressive systems. The chapter has demonstrated how the female body moves from the margins to become the focus in articulating how disenfranchised individuals can rise above oppressive systems through the voicing of the trauma, which finds its mouthpiece in the poetry collection.

In this way the poet has awakened in us the option of rethinking assumptions on nature, sex or the body as rigid and absolute. It has shown how physical bodies transcend materiality to occupy various social spaces and observed that bodily displacement is expressed through the lens of the female form. It concludes by noting that the body becomes the canvass on which injustice and suffering of traumatized individuals is painted on when they are forced into situations that deny them their right to express their identity and social standing both as individuals and collectively as a community.

## **CHAPTER III: STYLE AND TRAUMA: STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES IN WARSAN SHIRE'S POETRY**

### **3.0. Introduction**

Literary theorists and psychologists have used various terms to endeavor to articulate the collapse of a normal, linear understanding that results during and after harrowing experiences. This chapter focuses on how the poet Warsan Shire uses body images as a tool of communicating trauma in her poetry collection *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* (2011).

The chapter will further highlight how the body images used address various types of distress evident in the poems such as rape, female circumcision, plight of being a refugee, infidelity in marriage, crimes committed against women during war, loss of identity, levels of conflict and how this affects the identity of the individuals within their community and the world. Finally I will explore taboo topics that emerge in the poems and how they have been addressed.

Taboos are often a reflection of cultural norms. The study will therefore investigate how the author has addressed these topics and the strategies used to unveil the female body. To this end I will look at the resulting effects of addressing taboo subjects as they relate to the body images discussed. The chapter will explore how these elements work together to create meaning. I. A. Richards proposed a 'scrupulous explication' of poems in the investigation of their meaning (Dobie, 34). Formalism is the theoretical framework that will guide this section, which is interested in how the formal or stylistic choices of the text relate with each other.

### **3.1. Stylistic Techniques**

Cathy Caruth refers to the description of trauma as an 'impossibility' (9) and literary theorist Shoshana Felman notes that traumatic events give rise to a 'disintegration of narrative' (171).



In her essay titled 'Education and Crisis', Felman observes that traumatic events are those that occur 'in excess of our frames of reference' (16). These statements clearly show that one of the major characteristics of trauma is its inability to be contained within conventional linguistic and narrative structures.

Trauma takes place precisely when the ordinary narrative abilities of the victim fail them. This takes place in the process of the event not only going beyond but also dismantling the victim's schematic understanding of the world, removing their ability to create and trust the stories, categories and time-space delineations necessary for normal functioning. In literary works these disruptions may manifest themselves in the choice of language, stylistic techniques and creative strategies which writers use to convey trauma in their work.

Images play a crucial role in creating unity in creative works especially poetry. The most widely used definition of image in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that by Ezra Pound which defines it as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' (Poetry Foundation.org). This definition places image as a putting into words of the emotional intellectual and concrete stuff that we experience at any given moment. The act of using images to describe situations and ideas is like the process of giving names to things; a fundamental and essential step in the process of creating understanding.

The poetry collection is titled '*Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*' which is paradoxical in nature and makes the first reference to the female body by mention of 'mother' and 'birth'. This is ironical because a child cannot teach their mother how to give birth in the biological sense because it is the mother who gives birth to the child. The title of the collection points to an ideological reference of birth which comes after the consummation of a marriage. It links the social aspect of giving birth with how mothers and daughters relate and their differing outlook on matters affecting their life.

The poem titled “Fire” (Shire, 17) illustrates the differences in viewpoint between mothers and daughters. The second stanza relates a conversation that takes place between a mother and her married daughter after she makes her husband leave their matrimonial home because he hit her. The mother cannot understand why such a thing would make her daughter drive her husband out saying,

*What do you mean he hit you?  
Your father hit me all the time  
but I never left him.*

The stanza ends with the lines,

*He pays the bills  
and he comes home at night,  
what more do you want?*

The poet italicizes the second stanza to draw our attention to the mother’s opinions in regard to marriage. The mother is of the view that a woman should not complain too much if her husband physically assaults her provided he cares for the needs of the house. The daughter’s actions however show that for the younger generation of women; they demand and require more from a marriage mate and will not settle for ill treatment just because their household needs have been met.

From the foregoing explanation it is evident that the title of the collection serves to overturn conventional wisdom and force us to reconsider received roles and notions of women in society. The author of the collection Warsan Shire is of Somali descent and makes reference to aspects of the culture in her poetry as well as incorporates Somali words and phrases in the poems. This leads to the conclusion that the society under discussion in the poetry is Somali. The poem thus interrogates the traumatic effects of the civil war on the Somali community. There is an audacity to the title as if the author wants to claim ‘I am more than what you and

the community have passed down to me! It is a will to find greater purpose within oneself beyond religion and ethnicity.

The title of the collection therefore serves as a pointer to the reader to be attentive with regards to the descriptions of mother and daughter relationships in the poems which bring to light the frictions and tensions magnified by the width of the cultural-generational gap. The poem “Things We Had Lost in the Summer” (Shire, 9) is a fitting example of this gap. The images that come to mind when we think of summer are hot sunny days. It is a season, which signifies freedom and growth into young adulthood. A time when the youth grow into mature adults and begin to explore issues of love, acceptance and a change in their identity.

Writers thus use images of summer to ground their story in a particular experience and a specific context. In this instance the poem addresses an adolescent girl’s exploration of her sexuality and her attempts at understanding female circumcision and the complexities surrounding it. The persona in the poem is reunited with her cousins who as she observes have gone through physical changes associated with growing up and now look older and mature.

One of the visible changes the persona notices is the development of breasts in her cousin Amel whose, ‘..hardened nipples push through / the fabric of her blouse,’ yet the last time they saw each other they were,

waifs with bird chests clinking like wood, boyish  
long skirted figurines waiting to grow  
into our hunger. (9)

The last lines of the first stanza paint the picture of preadolescent girls eagerly waiting for signs that their bodies are maturing. The use of words like ‘bird chests’, ‘boyish’ and

'figurines' is a reminder of their last meeting when they were teenagers with barely noticeable changes waiting to develop into young adulthood.

Summer thus represents a time when they would grow into their maturity and gain an understanding of their sexuality exploring it to the extent of forming romantic relationships. The second stanza alludes to a loss that is shrouded in secrecy. The persona observes that her mother demands a sort of silence around the loss so that others do not overhear. The second stanza she says:

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)

The mother's 'quiet voice' exposes the silence and secrecy that surrounds female circumcision. The second line in the stanza reveals that the girls have been circumcised because of the mother's concerns regarding how they are healing. The mother by her need for silence over the action seems to be suggesting that what the girls have gone through should not be spoken of. However as their mother it is probable that she had a part to play in it.

The girls have been circumcised and this is an indication of their maturity and readiness for marriage. Circumcision is seen as a girl's initiation into womanhood is an integral part of the community's cultural heritage. The patriarchal nature of the society places this action as socially constructed for the benefit of men in the society who control and determine the identity of who a woman is and more so "control" her virginity and chastity. It is carried out as a way of controlling women's sexuality and is thought to ensure virginity before marriage and fidelity afterwards in addition to increasing male sexual pleasure.

The daughter's curiosity in this poem is evident, she is yet to experience what the other girls are going through but she can tell that a significant change in their physical make up has taken place. The third line in the third stanza is emphasized in the poem, where the daughter

asks her cousins *'how does it feel?'* (Stanza 3, Line 3). The response she receives in lines 4 and 5 in the same stanza is ambiguous, 'She turns to her sisters and laughter that is not hers/ stretches from her body like a moan.' There is the juxtaposition of 'laugh' and 'moan' in this sentence. This could mean pleasure and happiness on her cousin's part because she is now considered a mature woman in the community; however the opposite could also apply. In this instance since her laugh has been likened to a moan she could be experiencing pain as a result of the circumcision but is trying to hide it because of the perceived benefits that have been said result from the procedure by the community.

The result is though she tries to mask the pain through her laugh she is not very successful resulting in a moan. The word moan may be described as a drawn out, low sound that escapes someone expressing physical or mental suffering, sexual pleasure or any other strong emotion. In this context moan has been used to express physical pain. The description that her laughter is like a moan depicts the reaction formation that she undertakes in conversion of the pain to try and mask it through laughter.

The final stanza in the poem, the adolescent girl is seen exploring her sexuality. This is evidenced by the act of 'opening her legs' which produces as effect an adversarial relationship between mother and daughter:

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. (9)

The idiomatic expression, 'well-oiled door' in the stanza quoted above is often used to refer to something that is functioning smoothly in a proper and successful way. In this setting however this image is used to show that the persona has not been circumcised. She has not lost that ability to explore her sexual identity, which is one of the things circumcision aims to

control. This is further demonstrated in the final line of the stanza where the persona refers to “what I had not lost” as hint that she has not been circumcised.

The daughter’s actions while they result in goading her mother into anger, shows her refusal to be shamed for her budding sexuality. By creating a poet persona who questions the silences around the issue of female circumcision the author points to the trauma associated with circumcision to the extent that those involved would rather not speak about it. This ties in with the title of the poem “Things We Had Lost in the Summer” which is oxymoronic in nature. Summer is a season often equated with happiness and signifies freedom and growth. For those in their teens it is a time of growth into young adulthood and symbolizes a search for love, acceptance and identity. This means that one cannot lose things in the summer and if they do then it often is traumatic in nature.

Shire alludes to the notion of circumcision as a way in which the girl child in the Somali community is imprisoned in another poem titled “Mermaids” (Shire, 2015). The poem “Mermaids” opens with the lines;

Sometimes it’s tucked into itself,  
sewn up like the lips of a prisoner.

After the procedure, the girls learn  
how to walk again, mermaids with new legs,  
soft knees buckling under their new sinless bodies

The first stanza in the poem “Mermaids” describes how female genital circumcision is performed. In this instance she is referring to Type 3 circumcision or infibulation where the vaginal opening is narrowed by covering it with a seal formed by cutting and repositioning the labia majora (unfpa.org). The procedure is meant to hide these parts of the female genitalia much like a prisoner is kept behind bars because of their wrongdoing.

The result is shown in the second stanza their physical make-up changes seen in the line, ‘...girls learn how to walk again, mermaids with new legs’ this paints a picture of pain and suffering that they have to bear with because their bodies had been deemed as ‘sinful’ before the procedure. The persona in “Things We Had Lost in the Summer” is thus free because she has not been circumcised and can freely explore her young woman hood as opposed to the women described in “Mermaids” where the poem depicts the suffering and feeling of imprisonment that a long lineage of women have gone through unable to explore their sexuality and bodies.

The frictions and tensions that characterize mother-daughter relationships are further illustrated in the poem “Beauty” (15). In this poem the mother bans her daughter from saying God’s name because: “Anything that leaves her mouth sounds like sex”. The first stanza in the poem introduces the reader to the daughter who is said to have had an immoral relationship with the neighbour’s husband. The second and third lines in the first stanza points to this:

When she was my age, she stole  
the neighbour’s husband, burnt his name into her skin.

The act of having sexual relations outside marriage is obviously frowned upon in the community. One of the results is the mother now sees her daughter as promiscuous and bans her from saying God’s name. There is a gender bias here in that the daughter is referred to as the one who stole the husband, yet two people were involved. The man could also be spoken of as having stolen the girl; however in this case we see that the female is the one who is spoken of in a negative light. Her sexual desires are portrayed as the driving force behind her actions resulting in her 'stealing' men to satisfy them. Promiscuity to the society is a sin and the name of God is a symbol of purity therefore because of her actions she is deemed as impure, unfit according to societal constructions to invoke God’s name therefore a taboo. The last stanza of the poem points to this tension:

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. (Stanza 3)

The daughter is judged as being promiscuous because she has gone against societal and religious codes that govern morality. The poem makes reference to one of the longest Surah's or chapters in the Quran, which is often recited to keep the house free of evil. This act of drowning out the daughter's screams by playing a chapter from the Quran is meant to silence her and shows that she has been demonized because of her actions.

The stanza also points to her condition in exile by stating, "some nights I hear her in her room screaming" this can be interpreted to mean that she is not allowed to associate with the rest of the family because she has been judged as evil, promiscuous. The poet here addresses the exilic conditions of the female body as well as their resistances to exile and resolutions in reintegrating with the body and community. The daughter in this poem is turned into an outsider according to her family; she is not behaving as a "proper daughter" and thus is in an exilic state locked up in her room and forbidden from praying to God. Commenting on the strategies of resisting oppression and exile, Ketu Katrak in *Politics of the Female Body: Post colonial women writers of the Third World* (2006) says that 'in spite of tragic and negative consequences such as madness, death, suicide or other forms of social exclusion an un-belonging in women's texts, it is important to recognize the strategic use of those same female bodies as the only available avenue for resistance' (3). The poem "Beauty" (15) even though the daughter has been "silenced" and banished to her room she is still able to voice her displeasure and resistance to her mother's chastisement by the act of screaming which still gives her a voice despite her banishment.

An outstanding distinction of Shire's poetry is the dissociation of body, identity and memory that is widespread in the poems. This is achieved through narrative distancing which is a



concept developed by Bertolt Brecht in 1935 to label an approach in drama that discouraged involving the audience in an illusory narrative world and in the emotions of the characters. He thus coined the term ‘narrative distancing’ to define the emotional distance that is required on the part of the audience to reflect on what was being presented on the stage in a critical and objective way. Brecht’s aim was to create an intelligent audience who did not involve themselves or sympathize emotionally with the characters on stage but instead sought to understand intellectually the characters’ dilemmas and wrongdoing which were exposed in the dramatic plots thereby reaching an intellectual level of understanding (Literary studies.com)

Brecht’s idea of alienation is reflected in this poetry through the various modes of fragmentation, dissociation and lack of reference, the marks of traumatic constriction evident in the poems. Distancing oneself from the telling of a painful event is one way of separating ourselves from the pain thus we do not relive the shame and sorrow it once brought us. Shire employs this distancing effect in her poetry through a constant shift between first, second and third person point of view as if there is a floating in and out of various states of consciousness.

These shifts in points of view mirror the explosive nature of the distress, which her characters have gone through thereby shattering their existing structures to extract meaning. The capacity for the persona’s integration of emotions, sense, perceptions, thoughts, and behaviours is shattered creating a unique class of traumatic memory that is marked by fragmentation, dissociation, intrusion, timelessness since time as a constant is lost during such ordeals and extraordinary sensory and emotional arousal. This technique helps the personas in the poems distance themselves from the events described because of their distressing nature. “Your Mother’s First Kiss” (8) imagines a mother getting on a bus in London and finding the driver is the man who raped her and fathered her child. The second person poetic voice ‘You’ is used which distances the mother from the narration because of the memories it invokes.

The first boy to kiss your mother later raped women  
when the war broke out. She remembers hearing this  
from your uncle, then going to your bedroom and lying  
down on the floor. You were at school. (Stanza 1)

In the stanza above, kiss could be a euphemism for sex or rape. 'Remembers' conveys the idea of memory of the trauma here identified to be rape. This act of rape was done to the mother perhaps when she was sixteen years of age as the first line of the next stanza shows, 'Your mother was sixteen when he first kissed her' and later he raped other women during the re emergence of war as shown in the first stanza. The trauma here is revisited on the bodies of women. As Susan Brison notes 'the intermingling of mind and body is apparent in traumatic memories that remain in the body, in each of the senses, in the heart that races and skin that crawls whenever something resurrects the only slightly buried terror' (42). The body recalls these instances of abuse.

Trauma to the body is locked within it, making itself known in actions other than words. The poem is replete with actions that point to the memory of the trauma. The second stanza takes us back to the past where the mother blacked out as she was being kissed. Kiss, as has already been mentioned at the start could be a euphemism for sex or rape. She wakes up to find, '...her dress was wet and sticking to her stomach, / half moons bitten into her thighs'. This paints the picture of a sexual act that was not consensual. Furthermore the memory of it is burned onto her skin as indicated by the bite marks on her thighs.

The final stanza of the poem brings us to the present time of the writing of the poem where the mother sees the man 'driving the number 18 bus' and lets out a deep moan when she comes to the upsetting realization of the resemblance between the man and her child. While this is an incident that happened to the mother she is removed from its retelling by virtue of the fact that the poetic voices keep on changing through out the poem. There is an interchange of second and third person point of view. The memory and recollection of events for the

mother comes from what the uncle tells her about the boy which also illustrates the extent to which she is removed from the incident. The poem chronicles the trauma of the memory of rape for the mother; and for the child the shocking discovery that they were conceived as a result of a violent act towards their mother.

This act of narrative distancing reflects the flat, dissociative experiences that the body undergoes to defend itself against overwhelming events by shutting down, a body whose only survival is to convince itself that it is removed from reality. In shifting from one point of view to the other, the poet indicates that the body is not discrete, it can be retrospective, someone else's. The shifts in point of view further suggest that the human form is the product of family histories and when those histories also intersect with war-torn regions, with bodily violence the results can be unnerving as they are essential to confront. One minute, we as the readers are the child addressed as 'you' in the poem "Your Mother's First Kiss" (8). At certain points the reader is made privy to confessions by a persona in the poems.

The poetic persona in the poem titled "Bone" (12) opens with a confession in the first stanza. She says,

I find a girl the height of a small wail  
living in our spare room. She looks the way I did when I was fifteen  
full of pulp and pepper.  
She spends all day up in the room  
measuring her thighs. (Stanza 1)

In those opening lines we are not simply hearing confessed what the poet has experienced or imagined; we're part of the "our". The persona invites us to view the distress of a married woman who has to adjust to the reality that her husband has brought home a second wife to her already unhappy marriage. The woman looks at the young girl reminiscing about the time when she too was a young bride full of "pulp and pepper" words that refer to a time when she was healthy and full of life growing into her identity as a woman.

The opening lines to the first stanza, and the third line in the second stanza in the poem “Bone” which reads, “Later that night while we lay beside one another” reveals that the persona is a married woman remembering when she was a young bride. Now though after perhaps years of marriage things have taken a turn for the worse in the marriage and the husband’s attention shifts to the young wife. The third stanza indicates that one of the problems affecting the marriage could be domestic violence.

You look straight at me when she tells us  
how her father likes to punch girls  
in the face. (Lines 20 -22)

There is an unspoken message in this stanza, an awareness passed between husband and wife that indicate that the husband is also violent towards his wife. The poem delves into the realities of marriage and the betrayals that most women face in these kinds of situations. It makes us question whose mother is being taught and whose body is at stake. It is evident that this woman resides in a patriarchal society where her opinion on matters that affect her will never be sought.

The poem can be read as a critique of social norms and institutions that silence women and seek to control them. The final stanza points to her suffering when she questions how her husband will be able to provide the attention and affection that the young wife is hungry for; yet he could not do the same for her. The action of counting her ribs is an allusion to the biblical account of creation in the bible. The bible recounts in the book of Genesis how God formed the woman by taking a rib from Adam’s side and forming it into the woman Eve. This action united Adam as ‘bone of bone and flesh of flesh’ with his wife and depicted the close bond that couple was to have. While there is no Quranic basis for the view that Eve was created from Adam's rib; there are hadiths that support the creation of woman “from a rib” such as Sahih Bhukari. Therefore the woman in the poem by counting her ribs as she reflects on her new marriage arrangement can be said to be mourning the lost bond she once shared

with her husband. It points to the physical and psychological pain that the first wife is enduring.

I can hear you in our spare room with her.  
What is she hungry for?  
What can you fill her up with?  
What can you do that you would not do for me?  
I count my ribs before I go to sleep. (Stanza 4)

From the preceding discussion of the poem “Bone” it is evident that in a patriarchal society traditions like dowry payment and polygamy are often ‘mystified as social custom with the weight of ancient at times scriptural authority’ (Katrak, 14) with the resulting effect of controlling the uses of the female body and neglecting the emotional and physical turmoil the woman may undergo as a result.

The overall structure of the poems depicts a sense of fracture and further highlights the overall theme of trauma that runs through the collection. The poet adopts free verse form in most of her poems. These aspects of form and internal rhyme contribute to the musicality of a poem. Free verse gives the poems a strange, uneasy feel on one hand while at the same time equips the persona in each poem with the language to freely express the trauma they undergo and devise ways of healing.

A selection of poems in the collection read like prose poetry while others are composed of just two or three lines. The woman’s body on the other hand through various meanings accrued from culture has varying definitions of beauty. One thing that stands out in all cultures is the notion of ugliness, which is often seen as the deviation from set standards of fairness or beauty in any given society both in physical or mental forms. The deviations observed in the poems point to the fact that they can be said to be enacting a dynamic and contradictory narrative through their structure. The physical and structural form of the poems coupled with the word choice re enacts the unspeakable experience of suffering that the

characters have gone through. Robert Lifton in an interview with Cathy Caruth comments that while the fragmented nature of a literary work is ‘a shattering of form, it also signifies a new dimension of experience’ (Lifton, 134).

The poem titled “Ugly” (31) visualizes the haunting images of a female body occupied by war and displacement. The daughter’s body is described as ugly, full of scars and wounds with a belly that carries whole cities. The second stanza extends the image of ugliness and loss by painting the picture of the daughter’s body ravaged by the act of running away from a warzone.

As a child, relatives wouldn’t hold her.  
She was splintered wood and seawater.  
She reminded them of the war. (Stanza 2)

In the stanza quoted above there is an end stop after each line. The effect is that the sentences read like simple declarative statements which leave no room for argument or discussion. The images are cut off, they do not run into the next line it is almost as if the author is telling us there is nothing more to discuss. The situation is bleak and will continue unchanged. The end stops break the continuous flow of thought in the stanza which would not be observed in other poetic structures such as a sonnet. This break in continuity reflects the difficulty which the poet has to struggle with in explaining the distress that results from being a victim of displacement. The thoughts are cut short and this articulates the extent to which the daughter’s body has been occupied by war such that it is difficult to describe it in detail.

The image of splintered wood and seawater in the second line chronicles the immigrant experience as they make perilous journeys across oceans to reach presumably safer spaces. This experience of suffering is inscribed on their bodies and mirrors what we see in the world today where individuals fleeing countries where there is conflict and poverty like Somalia, Eritrea, Libya and South Sudan make perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea in the

hopes of seeking asylum and making better lives for themselves in Europe. The physical wounds on the daughter's body mirror a landscape that is hard, chaotic and littered with ugly things. The poet seems to suggest that the images together with the extensive use of end stops in the stanza depicts current situation in troubled Somalia, where a nation has been left to its own demise and chaos and nothing can be done to mitigate the wars just as in other war torn countries.

In the female anatomy the belly conjures the idea of childbirth, bringing forth a new life which is always a cause for joy. Children are an assurance that a family and by extension an entire community will preserve their lineage. The poet uses the unusual image of "carrying whole cities" in the ugly daughter's belly as an indication that because of the war it is highly likely that there will not be a future generation of that community. Instead of bringing forth life, the belly takes it away. The daughter's belly in this poem carries whole cities a metaphor for the displacement and loss that results from a history of civil wars and devastation that has characterized the persona's country. This image maps out the life course of a refugee that is marked with loss.

The poem describes a foul sense of loss and longing one wears like a perfume but stinks like a sewer. The fifth stanza uses the female body as the chronicle on which the traumatic effect of war is inscribed. The daughter's body is covered with the memory of war, loss and flight.

...men will not love her  
if she is covered in continents,  
if her teeth are small colonies,  
if her stomach is an island,  
if her thighs are borders? (Excerpt from stanza 5)

The use of the conditional phrase 'if' in the stanza quoted shows that the woman's body is coded in terms that are undervalued. The fourth line reveals the power structures that come into play in regard to the woman and her body. 'Men will not love her...' shows that men in

the society condition what a woman is and should not be. This is an implication of the power structures that feminists have long described as patriarchal, structures that govern relations between the sexes. The woman in the poem “Ugly” is thus seen as socially unacceptable because she carries a history of war and flight with her. As the excerpt above shows the trauma associated with the war consumes her and covers her every being.

In addition to end stops there is an extensive use of commas in the rest of the stanzas in the poem. The commas act as a signal of a brief stop to the reader. In this instance the use of many commas serves to draw attention to the topic under discussion. The seventh stanza she says:

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. (31-32)

The stanza paints images of wars and borderlands, as an embodiment of emotional landscapes of long distance journeys. Journeys which change not only the physical make up of the individual but also their identity. The poem ends on a defiant note,

But God,  
doesn’t she wear  
the world well?’

Despite the challenges of trauma and dealing with ugliness the daughter ‘wears’ this new identity with pride. There is a condescension by using the idea of suffering as fashion which points to a larger resistance to the ways the female body is cast by others’ expectations. It speaks to the enduring human spirit to survive. Herein we see the ‘new dimension of experience’ (Lifton, 134) that the traumatized bodies go through. The daughter now has to embrace her new identity as a refugee.



The poem “My Foreign Wife is Dying and Does Not Want to be Touched” (30) discusses the trauma of war on whole countries or communities. The elucidation of trauma is centred on a dying body. The title ‘foreign wife’ indicates that it is a female body while the word ‘foreign’ suggests that this body occupies a space where it is seen as the other and probably not welcomed. It could be a refugee or immigrant. The body here is the central figure in articulating the trauma resulting from civil unrest. The first stanza the doctor maps out her body in ink which indicates the permanent life threatening nature of her illness. The illness here is used to symbolize the war which has spread and thus the reason the doctor in the following line says, “only the nipple” can be saved.

The word choice of nipple shows that the woman is unable to sustain life because the whole breast –body part used to feed an infant with- is filled with disease except the nipple. Breasts are a significant indicator of womanhood, a prominent and visible display of femininity. They are a nurturing and life giving body part serving the biological function of lactating the new born child to ensure its growth and strength by providing it with milk that contain nurturing and healing abilities. The woman has now lost these life-sustaining abilities and only a small part, the nipple, can be kept. The nipple alone cannot provide milk and nutrients to the new-born in the same way the war has ravaged the whole country and nothing if only a small part remains that can provide a home for its inhabitants.

The fifth line in the first stanza, ‘Her body is a flooding home’ continues the thought that the country is not safe for its citizens. It cannot sustain life so they have to flee and live as foreigners in other lands. The chest and skin of this body is described as parchment dry and cracking therefore cannot provide comfort and nourishment. The first and third stanza ‘the sick dying body of the wife’ is compared to a warzone which consumes whole communities. The mention of weight loss of 41 kilos points to a loss that results from a cancer, much like war is a cancer that if left unchecked is able to wipe out whole communities.

The poem employs the image of a female body shattered and ravaged by illness and is completely disrobed to expose the extent to which the cancer has affected the body. This symbolizes the rot in a system that would result in endless wars and devastating effects for individuals residing in a war torn area.

The final poem in the collection, “In Love and In War” is a two line poem that ends with the idea of the female body entangled in war. In times of war the women of an invaded country are often the greatest victims. The warning to ‘set yourself on fire’ is an act of suicide meant to avoid the objectifying and dehumanizing effects of war that would ultimately be meted out on the woman. In a covert, self-conscious and creative manner the female body resorts to self-immolation as a way of confronting and resisting domination. This is done to preserve her dignity.

### **3.2. Discussing Taboo Subjects**

When we are inscribing on the space and time of the page’s body, the events which transcend and shatter normal containers of space and time, events which are defined by their very ‘describing’ of the body there is a need to use language and words that will effectively capture those events in a bold unapologetic manner.

Shire’s poetry acts as a mirror that reflects the unspeakable experience of traumatized bodies in the world. The poet freely discusses subjects that are seen as taboo within the Somali culture thus exposing traditional practices and customs that mostly serve to oppress the woman in that society. The female reproductive body is the site of various societal taboos that render this body and its experiences taboo. Shire unveils these taboo bodies and lays bare their experiences. In doing this, she explodes the silences that surround female bodies and women’s experiences of their sexual bodies which have remained hidden under the repressive veil of social conventions. This section will interrogate her discussion of these subjects.

Nawal El Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1976) maps out the ‘patriarchal continuous male tyranny’ within which North African Women live. She observes that women suffer from different kinds of violations throughout their lives; mutilations, domestic violence, expectations regarding their virginity, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage in addition to sexual harassment among other violations.

This tyranny often has a socioeconomic ground shaped by religion and moral codes. She thus sets forth a critique addressing the patriarchal abuse of religion. Al Saadawi describes the alleged reasons for female ablation or circumcision frequently performed in the horn of Africa as reflected in the Warsan Shire’s poem “Things We Had Lost in the Summer” (9) where the poet exposes the expected silence over these practices as demanded by the community.

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. (Stanza 2)

The mother uses her quiet voice indicating that the phone conversation is a discussion about a sensitive matter. The poet has created a persona who is at the stage of development into young adulthood and unlike the older generation of women does not see why these issues are shrouded in silence. The persona therefore makes a deliberate effort to start a conversation around the topic in efforts meant to understand what is happening and what the changes mean.

This relentlessness to start a dialogue over the physical changes the girls are experiencing is repeated throughout the poem. She uses expressive statements with words that convey a deep meaning such as ‘..opening of legs like a well-oiled door’ which means that the girl has not yet been circumcised and therefore free to explore her sexuality; and descriptive actions like opening of the knees by the persona to signify the need for an end to the silence and the need

for open communication about female circumcision which is still practiced in the culture but viewed as a taboo topic for discussion in the community.

Further the mother's insistence on silence about the fact that the girls have been circumcised points to the older women as the custodians of the practice thus ensuring its continuity. In traditional societies, since mothers are assigned the responsibility of raising children, they have often acted as non-critical transmitters of a patriarchal culture and so oppress themselves. Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* recounts the pain and feeling of betrayal that is experienced by young girls who after being circumcised seek comfort from their mothers in the hope that they will be able to help them understand why they had to endure such a traumatizing ordeal only to find out that they were party to it. Saadawi shares her own experience saying;

‘I did not know what they had cut off from my body, and I did not try to find out. I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her, I could not be mistaken, in flesh and blood, right in the midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them, as though they had not participated in slaughtering her daughter just a few moments ago’. (8)

The statement quoted above captures the mental anguish and sense of betrayal that the female child undergoes when they discover that the person they expected to protect them actually participated and approved such a terrible act robbing them of their childhood. The author further states that the memory of her circumcision stayed with her like a nightmare and that she found it hard to trust her parents and the society at large because she got the sense that she had been born of the wrong gender.

The notion of sex and sexuality has often occupied a space between nature and civilization, with some cultures extolling the importance of sexual intercourse as a natural way of life and others placing labels of impropriety onto conversations with sexual overtones or on the act

itself. The construction of sex and sexuality as a social taboo is observed in many parts of the world where more often than not chastity and virginity on the part of the female is highly valued revealing the social norms of sexual restraint. Shire's poetry sheds light on the socially constructed base towards sex and sexuality in the Somali community by presenting situations where characters in her poetry engage in acts of lesbianism or openly explore their sexuality.

The poem, "Your Mother's First Kiss" alludes to a lesbian act between the mother and her friend. In the third stanza through skillful use of body imagery in the last two lines, '...the friend laughed, mouth bloody with grapes, / then plunged a hand between your mother's legs' suggests an act of lesbianism. In Somali culture these are not topics that are discussed openly. By referring to the girl as a friend to the mother, the poet could be suggesting sisterhood as one way of handling these complicated female relationships. Sisterhood as a counterpoint to sexist and patriarchal fraternity can be linked to a "lesbian continuum" where the term includes a range of experiences in a woman's life throughout history beyond the fact that they have had or desired genital sexual experience with another woman. Adrienne Rich states in her essay "*Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*" that this term has the expanded meaning of 'embracing the many 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 all women exist in a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbians or not' (135-137). These supportive and sensual relationships can be detected in the poem "Your Mother's First Kiss" (8) as the stanza quoted below indicates.

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. (Stanza 3)

After her experience at the young age of sixteen when she may have been raped or had sex with the boy mentioned in stanzas one and two she seeks comfort and understanding in the relationship she has with her friend who in the last line, ‘plunges a hand between your mother’s legs’ this act could be seen as a way of examining the mother to see if she is alright or the friend could be interested in arousing those feelings once again for the mother to experience.

“Things We Had Lost in the Summer” (9) is a poem about a young pre-adolescent girl, the persona, who is at the stage where she is aware of her budding sexuality and development into a young woman. Not only does the persona notice what physical beauty is by observing her cousins but also she dares to explore and feel for herself the changes taking place in her body. She says in the third stanza, ‘I finger the hole in my shorts’ this is interpreted to mean a reference to the female sexual organs. The girl thus fingers herself to ascertain and accentuate her sex and gender identity which we notice already she is made to feel ashamed about. This is because previously she had been told to ‘sit like a girl’ as if she is not already a girl in the biological sense. The society has a different outlook of sex and gender whereby the gender-social controls of identity and roles are overruled by biology.

All through the poem the persona displays an eagerness to understand what is going on with all the changes. In the third stanza we observe that when her cousin Juwariyah whispers that she has started her period the persona asks ‘..how does it feel?’ revealing a sense of curiosity, wondering what kind of sensations and changes the other girls must be experiencing. She has not reached that stage yet but is aware that it signals a change in how the female form is viewed.

The final stanza in the poem “Things We Had Lost in the Summer” (9) from line three reads,

...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.

The lines reveal that the persona has not yet been circumcised like the rest of her cousins described in the poem. This desire to explore her budding sexuality and refusal to be shamed for it produces an adversarial relationship between mother and daughter.

The poet has used religious imagery to denote a change in the physical appearance of the girls thereby signaling their development into mature girls and awareness of their sexuality. The third and fourth lines in the first stanza reads, 'Amel's hardened nipples push through / the paisley of her blouse, minarets calling men to worship'. Amel's nipples are likened to minarets which is a tower next to or part of a mosque surrounded by one or more balconies in which the muezzin stands as he makes the call for all to come and pray. In this context the term has been used in a way to sexualize the act of her developing breasts. The sacrilegious and physical are used to produce imagery that alludes to the maturity and desirability of the girls by referring to the breasts as minarets which call men to worship. Amel's physical appearance has changed over time and now she is irresistible to the gazes of men.

Chastity which culminates in the idea that sexual instincts have to be repressed particularly in women reflects a gendering of sexual intercourse with the result that it codifies the different attitudes each gender should have and reinforces the widespread idea that men and women are distinctively different. The poem titled "Birds" (14) explores the expectations of a society that dictates that a woman should be a virgin on her wedding night. Virginity in most cultures is highly valued and often may even increase the amount of bride price paid. The persona in the poem, Sofia, uses pigeon blood on her wedding night to stain the sheets and succeeds in making her husband believe that she was indeed a virgin on their wedding night as would be expected. The result is the husband is filled with joy the next morning and praises her for her supposed chasteness.

This is satirical on men as they are painted as ignorant. Through vivid descriptions the persona creates the image of the husband's emotive feelings and reactions as ecstatic upon the realization that his wife was a "virgin" on their wedding night. The second stanza lines four to eight we see his reaction to the blood stained sheets,

that he gathered them under his nose,  
Closed his eyes and dragged his tongue over the stain.  
She mimicked his baritone, how he whispered

her name- Sofia  
Pure, chaste, untouched (14)

This has a satirical effect since we know that the blood used is from a pigeon thus making us laugh and question why the society perceives blood as a measure for virginity.

It is ironical that the standard for checking that a woman maintained her purity is left to the husband who cannot even tell the difference between human blood and that of birds. Sofia's actions mock a moral code of morality that cannot be policed effectively. The poem is an ironic treatment of the conflict between modern and traditional sexual norms in Somali society and also between expected moral standards for women and double standards in favor of men.

As a result of these double standards the chastity of men before marriage is not called into question. Nowhere in the poem do we get the sense that the man had to show he was staying pure waiting for his bride Sofia. This is not something that is even considered in the community. Sofia in the poem thus renegotiates on her own terms the cultural and sexual balance of power. Patriarchy dictates that virginity is a requirement for women but not for men.



A feminist lens highlights how the old order represented by the mother in law in stanzas four and five play a role in policing virginity and furthering the interests of men. The persona imagines how the mother in law would be overjoyed at the news that her son found a virgin to marry. She says in lines eleven and twelve that,

Imagined his mother back home, parading  
these siren sheets through the town,

The mother's joy is likened to a scene in a parade or carnival where celebrations of happy occasions take place. A common feature of parades is a float, a decorated platform built on a vehicle like a truck or towed by one. Floats are usually decorated in flowers or other attractive materials which adds to the happy atmosphere of the parade. Floats can be elaborate and beautiful; or funny and satirical. The twelfth line in the stanza the mother parades these 'siren sheets' through the town as evidence that she has a daughter in law who was a virgin. The alliteration of the S sound in 'siren sheets' adds musicality to the poem and furthers the idea of parade atmosphere. The result as already mentioned earlier is satirical on the men.

Sofia's actions in the poem therefore subvert these patriarchal views held by the society. By using pigeon blood and fooling both mother and husband, she re-shifts power structures by outsmarting what the society uses as signals and signposts of virginity.

The idea that women should not have sexual relations before marriage and the preferred stance that matters regarding sex should arise only in the context of procreation is strongly refuted in the poem "Birds". This social construction is rejected in a more pronounced way in the poem that follows it "Beauty" (15). The poem opens with the image of the persona's sister soaping between her legs. Her pubic hair is described as a 'prayer of curls'. There is a deliberate choice of words by the author here which signals defiance. The religious metaphor used is an act of defiance on the poet's side. The body images used in the first stanza suggest and confirm that the sister did something viewed as immoral in the community. The third line

in the opening stanza alludes to an affair between her and the neighbor's husband when, '...she stole the neighbor's husband and burned his name into her skin'. The stanza that follows it confirms this action by showing that the evidence of it is inscribed on her body literally,

It's 4 a.m. and she winks at me, bending over the sink,  
her small breasts bruised from sucking. (Stanza 2, lines 1 and 2)

The statement 'breasts bruised from sucking' in the second line shows that on her body are marks that show proof of a sexual liaison between her and the neighbor's husband.

The sister made a conscious decision to go against set standards of morality in the community. The patriarchal nature of the society monitors women's sexuality and relations with members of the opposite sex as has been exemplified in the poem "Birds" (14). The tone in the stanza is that of defiance seen in her winking, smiling and popping gum before saying, '*boys are haram, don't ever forget that*' (emphasis not mine). The last two lines in the final stanza reveals that because of her actions her mother sees her as promiscuous and the result is she is banned from saying God's name. She is seen as unworthy to stand before God. Often when discussing a taboo topic religion is woven into the discussion which gives evidence that this is one of the institutions that is used to reinforce most of these customs that limit women's freedom when it comes to matters of sexuality.

Rape is another taboo topic in the Somali community. Victims of rape fear social isolation and victimization, thus many of them will never report that they have been raped out of this fear. The number of rape cases in Somalia is high largely because the country has seen decades of civil unrest resulting in lawlessness; and for the female survivors who manage to escape the devastation of the war, there is a high chance that they will be sexually violated due to their vulnerability.

The collection recounts four acts of rape all connected to the effects of the civil war that has rocked the region since 1991. “Your Mother’s First Kiss” (8) recounts the memories of trauma that a mother relives after seeing the man who raped and fathered her child driving a bus that they have boarded. “Conversations About Home (at the Deportation centre)” (24-27) is concerned with the refugee crisis and recounts acts of rape that happen to women as a result of the war. In times of war and violence rape is often used as a tool meant to oppress and dehumanize women. The third stanza recounts the intense suffering, pain and dehumanization that the female refugee subject undergoes as a result of being sexually violated as they search for safe places to call home. Using vivid imagery she describes the horror visited upon the female body by men who should be protecting the displaced women. The poet says;

But Alhamdulillah all of this  
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)

The women face torture and violent deaths when she says ‘scent of a woman completely on fire’. In addition the poem reflects on these acts of rape which robe the woman of her dignity.

Another poem that alludes to acts of rape in the collection is “Ugly” (31-32) which visualizes a daughter’s body occupied by war, displacement and ‘ugly’ things. The seventh stanza last line refers to the daughter’s body as ‘littered with ugly things’ given that the girl has gone through the horror of living and fleeing refugee camps it is reasonable to conclude that these ugly things could be trauma from rape. The final poem in the collection “In Love and In War” (34) is a warning to daughters’ bodies entangled in war.

In periods of war, women and children are often the greatest victims. They risk sexual and physical violence which robs them of their dignity and innocence. As has been exemplified

by the poem “Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)” (26) the third stanza of the poem the last four lines describes what the female body undergoes in times of war;

‘...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.’

As the lines quoted above indicate, in times of war the women are vulnerable to all forms of exploitation and even the relationships and bonds that they had with their community are broken and they are betrayed in the end.

By highlighting taboo subjects openly in her poetry, Shire questions the constructs of society in regard to the position of women. In addressing taboo subjects in the Somali community Shire turns conventional wisdom on its head. This forces a re-examination of the prescribed roles and position of women in the Somali culture. The message that is passed across is that the woman should be free to explore and dictate matters around her sexuality.

### **3.3. Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the effectiveness of stylistic techniques used in the poems in *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* (2011). It has focused on how these elements of style merge with body images to articulate the effects of trauma. The chapter has observed that images related to the female body is central in how the author manipulates language and style to highlight effects of pain affecting the society. It concludes by noting that the poet has used these strategies as a way of addressing taboo subjects in the community and exposing customs which restrict the women in the society.

## CONCLUSION

In this research I sought to investigate how female body images have been used in articulating accounts of trauma based on Warsan Shire's poetry collection *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* (2011). I explored the use of female body images in the poems and the significance of using these images in analyzing the effects of trauma.

The project had two main objectives namely to examine how the female body image embodies trauma and identify and evaluate the significance of the stylistic techniques by the poet in describing the trauma. The study employed formalist and feminist theoretical perspectives to achieve the set objectives.

The study was concerned with the effective use of poetry as a genre which appeals to the emotional sense of the reader. The language use, mood and tone in the poems studied was effective in capturing the distressing circumstances which the women in *Teaching My Mother how to give birth* (2011) undergo in the course of their lives. The stylistic choices were thus effective in capturing the agency which the female form attains as a result of embodying trauma.

The study found that the poet uses language both aesthetically and as a tool of attaining agency for trauma survivors. It demonstrated how this results in shifting the trauma from a painful memory to an active memorization that results in healing for the victims.

The language employed by Shire is not only pleasurable but also educative in its examination of key areas of concern for the womenfolk such as circumcision, child bearing and their role in the family beyond nurturing the children. Images associated with the female body were found to be a key aspect in how the author manipulated language and style to shed light on the suffering affecting the society.

The poet in *Teaching My Mother how to Give Birth* makes a deliberate effort to address issues that are taboo in the context of the Somali community. By doing so, Shire can be viewed as questioning and re-examining long held traditions in the community through highlighting taboo topics. In this way she also demonstrates concern for the plight and position of women in a society influenced by patriarchal ideals. The poems not only bring into consideration humanitarian issues, but they also call for a change of lived experiences and ideals to the readers by trying to subvert what is possibly seen as cemented in dogmas and doctrines of human associations be it in terms of women and the society or the issue of statehood, citizenry and globalization. Further the study noted that Shire demands that we question the silences that result from oppressive structures directed at women and men which affects how they assert themselves.

*Teaching My Mother how to give birth* further addresses taboo subjects in line with female embodiment. The poet does shy away from using vivid descriptive language and at times taboo words to draw the reader's attention to the particular concerns of the women living in a patriarchal society. By delving into these taboo topics the study found concluded that the poet provides a space which marginalized members of a society can speak up and effect change not only for themselves but for the wider community.

In this regard I found that the body is the central figure in relating how distressing circumstances affect a community. In this case the focus was on the female body and how it has been used as metaphor to point at the devastating effects of war and resulting injustices in addition to patriarchal domination on the community in general and women in particular. The study observed that images related to the body and other stylistic elements were employed as tools of communicating trauma.

This study can be situated in feminist studies concerned with bodily embodiment and trauma. I also observed that by putting the female form on display as art through the medium of

poetry and under microscopic scrutiny and appreciation of that artistry, the personas appeared to suggest that preconceived notions and ideas ascribed to women should be revised. By focusing on the female form however it emerges as sites of agency capable of breaking down imposed barricades as a result of patriarchy. The voices in the poems therefore not only speaks but echo the plight of refugees, women and other marginalized groups in society who may occupy a marginal space but still need their voices to be heard. The study observed that as a black, female writer residing in the diaspora, Shire occupies a hybrid space which she uses to expose and speak for these groups facing identity crisis as a result of displacement both bodily and physically.

The study has successfully demonstrated the role body images play in expressing the devastating effects of suffering and instability to communities and the individuals who make up the community with a particular focus on women. The study recognizes that there are areas for further research in the text and suggests that they could focus on how the poet addresses the changing roles of the menfolk in the community as a result of the war.

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