Refugee Storytelling: Warsan Shire's *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* and Corporeal Experience

Elise Luik

Abstract: This paper examines the politicization of refugees', women's, and racialized bodies represented in Warsan Shire's poetry collection *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022). Shire's poetry evokes the embodied experience of living as a marginalized individual to craft a narrative that bridges multiple periods in a refugee's life to explore how personal experiences are inseparable from power dynamics within the state. Thus, her poetry collection reveals how a refugee's experience of reality is perpetually negotiated with the state.

To have a body and to be a body constitutes existence. Individuals live and experience life through their bodies; bodies are not simply biological products but integral sites to identity. The body occupies a dual role: it is both a subject with agency and an object constructed through cultural, political, and social narratives. Higgs and Gilleard state that corporeality describes the "material actions and reactions of bodies that are realized socially" while embodiment "refers to the body as a vehicle or medium of social agency" (ix). In the poetry collection *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022), Warsan Shire weaves corporeality and embodiment into a narrative that spans temporal dimensions—shifts between fragments of childhood and adulthood—to represent her experience of simultaneously living as a refugee, a woman, and a racialized individual. Shire's poetry grounds experiences of survival and womanhood in the body to reveal how the body archives trauma, migration, and memory. Her poetry articulates the inability to escape the power relations that construct her body as a political

tool, positioning it as both an instrument of oppression and a site of domination. At the same time, her poetry generates new understandings of refugee experiences as she reclaims her corporeal experiences by foregrounding the illusive dichotomy between the personal and political spheres. Although one might argue that personal experience exists independently from political contexts, Shire's poetry illustrates how politics shape the embodied reality of living as a refugee. Throughout her poems, Shire uses storytelling as a tool of resistance and liberation within an oppressive power dynamic between the state and the refugee. Her refugee story challenges the state's definitions of humanity and language of classification while presenting how personal experience is inextricably tied to state politics.

The experience of embodiment and the power dynamics that exist between the state and refugees intersect in the way refugees' bodies are controlled, monitored, and classified within social and political structures. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the term *refugee* refers to "people who have fled their countries to escape conflict, violence, or persecution and have sought safety in another country;" as such, refugeedom encompasses both a political condition of displacement and an embodied experience of exile and survival. Thus, physicality is integral to refugees' experiences of reality because their bodies tangibly affect their position in political and social reality. Barbara Grabowska argues that the body determines one's political status which is why all political action is significant to personal identity (116). Shire's poem "Assimilation" foregrounds the relationship between refugees, their bodies, and state politics by creating a narrative that deconstructs the state's dehumanizing practices. Shire writes about a corporeal experience, "I can't get the refugee out of my body, / I bolt my body whenever I get the chance" (Shire 21). These lines evoke a visceral image of refugeedom's lasting impacts on an individual's social identity and sense of self. The verb "bolt" denotes a sudden and swift movement, which illustrates that the refugee exists in a constant state of alertness because her social identity per-

petuates an inescapable vulnerability. The refugee aims to secure and protect her body because she is unable to shed her refugee identity. The verse gives a physical essence to the seemingly abstract concept of refugee, embodying her experiences as a refugee through a corporeal dimension.

Refugees exist in a liminal space where they are neither fully included in a host state nor fully belonging to their country of origin, which positions their social and political status precariously. As a political entity, a state holds sovereignty, and this sovereignty authorizes it to determine citizenship and legal personhood within its borders; a state can define who receives rights, protections, and recognition, thus creating the conditions in which refugees are granted or denied asylum and legal status as refugees. The conclusion of "Assimilation" explores the corporeal experience of embodying the social strata of refugees. The poem reveals that the state's language of classification is not abstract but has a physical presence and impact: "At each and every checkpoint the refugee is asked / *Are you human*?" (Shire 22). The checkpoint presents a physical barrier of screening, processing, and restriction that the refugee must cross. It symbolizes the numerous evaluative moments that the refugee must face where the state scrutinizes her humanness. The poem's subsequent question, "*Are you human*?", calls out the asylum processes that reduce the refugee's identity to her circumstances of forced migration and statelessness by evaluating whether she deserves protection. The state's documentation practices politicize the refugee's identity, rendering her as a physical object: "The refugee is sure it's still human but worries that overnight, / While it slept, there may have been a change in classification" (22). Shire's use of "it" as a pronoun exposes the state's dehumanizing language of classification, drawing on the level of power the state exerts through its ability to define who and who is not human within its borders. The refugee's worry about a "change in classification" encapsulates her fear of not only an abstract change in classification but a tangible shift in how society perceives her (22). The poem establishes a paradigm of a refugee's internal struggle to retain a

sense of identity amidst a power dynamic with a state that reduces her identity to a bureaucratic category. The refugee feels this objectification in a profoundly corporeal experience that leads to a particular alienation—a feeling of dehumanization—which the refugee in this poem is acutely aware of when she suggests her worry that her classification has changed. Essentially, the state's classification practices regulate how the refugee experiences physical and social reality.

Shire captures the relationship between the refugee's corporeality and power relations with the state and society in the poem "Bless Your Ugly Daughter" (35). Jennifer Leetsch suggests that in Shire's poetry, the physicality of exile manifests through the female body, which creates a narrative of alienation and dislocation in which female corporeality becomes a material entity manipulated by state powers (89). The poem "Bless Your Ugly Daughter" foregrounds how the speaker's newfound state and former society both perceive and subsequently label the daughter as inherently unclean: "As an infant forced to gargle rosewater / Smoked in uunsi to purify her of whatever / Unclean thing she inherited" (Shire). The daughter carries an uncleanliness that constitutes her essence—her body is unclean and is defined by this uncleanliness—which continually requires purification. The following lines localize the daughter's uncleanliness:

> Your daughter is covered in it.
> Her teeth are small colonies,
> Her stomach is an island,
> Her thighs are borders
> […]
> Your daughter's face is a small riot,
> Her hands are a civil war,
> She has a refugee camp tucked
> Behind each ear, her body is littered
> With ugly things (35).

Her body becomes cartography for the trauma of refugees,

and her body's inherent ugliness holds blame for the pain of refugee experiences. Her face being a "small riot" (35) proposes that she wears a tumultuous expression that reflects a disturbance in her sense of peace. Riot indicates a revolt, which suggests that the daughter's refusal to suppress her authentic emotions is a form of rebellion. Correspondingly, the metaphor of her hands being a civil war deepen the sense of the daughter's internal struggle and the violent circumstances that catalyzed it, illustrating that the conflict that plagues her remains unsettled. The refugee camp tucked behind each ear exposes that she physically carries memories from the camp on her body as she moves through the world. The poem connects emotions and political realities to the girl's experience of embodiment. Through each metaphor, the poem reveals how the physical body is not simply material, but a vessel that bears and expresses human experience. In this poem, the female body simultaneously becomes a political landscape, battleground, and place of refuge.

As the refugee's persona grows older across select poems in Shire's collection, she struggles to exert a level of agency over her social and political status, pursuing conformity in her newfound state as a method to escape the experience of inhabiting a marginalized body. In the poem "The Baby-Sitters Club," the concept of whiteness becomes a tangible essence that the speaker desperately attempts to sew into her body:

> stitching
> My body into the body of Home-
> coming Queen, rising, stretching
> my white body, in my white underwear
> sprawled on white sheets, (Shire)

The enjambment of "home- / Coming" emphasizes the word "home" to highlight the perplexing question of what home represents to a refugee (64). Correspondingly, in a futile effort, the speaker attempts to shift her corporeal experience as a woman of colour to a reality in which she can embody

whiteness and assimilate into the default and unmarked social category in her state. Bourdieu and Eilas argue that the state's dominant structures in society maintain their dominance through the "application of mechanics of stigmatization" that lead to the outsider's "acceptance of their allegedly lesser human worth" (Buschendorf 13). In the context of Shire's "The Baby-Sitters Club," the speaker senses social stigma inscribed onto her racialized body, incentivizing her desire to morph into a white homecoming queen. The body acts as a site of enacting and mediating power relations of exclusion and marginalization; as the speaker attempts to assimilate to her newfound "home," social pressures drive her desire to move through the world with the implicit advantages associated with whiteness by altering her physical appearance. Her physical form embodies these pressures through modification practices because the politicization of racialized bodies negatively shapes the speaker's life. The speaker actively strives to reposition the racialization of her body by "stitching" and "stretching" her physical self to fit her society's white body standards (Shire 64). The speaker's desire and attempt to conform to these standards reveal that she possesses the agency to resist or conform to power structures. Grabowska argues that women's bodies become instruments of oppression when they engage in a "regimen of practices" that transfigure their bodies (199). The speaker's pursuit of whiteness reflects the patriarchal and racist power structures that alienate and stigmatize refugees', women's, and racialized bodies. In desiring and pursuing body modification, the speaker's body becomes a tool through which these structures of power operate to regulate whose bodies are acceptable, valuable, and desirable.

Shire's nonlinear narrative structure—her narrative juxtaposing temporal dimensions—weaves different possibilities of representation and apprehension of refugee experiences, incorporating the corporeality of existing in a particular time, place, and body in each temporal dimension. As Shire's poems move through the temporal dimensions of a new refugee, daughter, and teenager, the narrative seeks to reveal an expansive and corporeal essence of truth in

the refugee experience. Her narrative creates an authentic and deeply subjective knowledge of a refugee's social conditions that resists the state's dehumanizing rhetoric. Lee Anne Bell argues that resistance stories—stories that resist the "status quo" of dominant power structures—"expand our vision of what is possible" (71). Further, Stefania Ciocia suggests that stories "do not rely on the evocation of actual events but on the imaginative re-elaboration of a particularly haunting experience or of something elemental in the human condition" (220). While the state legally classifies the new refugee's body in "Assimilation" (21), societal standards and norms existing within the state shape the speaker's desire to embody whiteness in "The Baby-Sitters Club" (64). In "The Baby-Sitters Club," temporal dimension—the period of adolescence—places the refugee in a stage where peer acceptance is crucial, and thus, conforming to social norms is an attempt to reduce feelings of isolation and rejection (64). At the same time, values from the refugee's former homeland impact the daughter's corporeality in "Bless Your Ugly Daughter," while the newfound state blames the daughter for the ugliness of refugee experiences (35). Shire's narrative evokes corporeal insights that form an understanding of experience that comes through the body. She spins an intersectional web of the essence of refugeedom, invoking the body as a site of experience, memory, and political mediation. Lena Wånggren argues that in the context of social change, narratives create "an opposition to established knowledge" (403). In Shire's poetry collection, her story evokes corporeal experiences that the state's politicization of refugees', women's, and racialized bodies shapes. She presents resistance and opposition to the structures that govern her corporeality by reclaiming the state's dehumanizing rhetoric and presenting their absurdity in her poems.

In Shire's "Assimilation" (21), "Bless Your Ugly Daughter" (35), and "The Baby-Sitters Club" (64), she focalizes the poems through a refugee's subjective perspective while foregrounding the power relations that influence the refugee's corporeality. The poems draw explicit attention

to the state's dehumanization and objectification of refugees, which challenges the absurdity of the state's oppressive practices. At the same time, the poems humanize the ramifications of dehumanization on refugees by presenting the state's classification practices, norms, and societal standards through the lens of a deeply personal and evocative narrative. In this way, her poems contain generative elements that question the dominance of these dehumanizing practices. For example, in "Assimilation," the speaker highlights that "the refugee is sure it's still human" directly after the state asks about her humanity (Shire 21). Despite the state's attempt to strip the refugee of her humanity—to oversimplify her identity and worth through classification—the speaker holds a level of agency in shaping readers' opinions of her humanity by foregrounding the absurdity of the state's dehumanization. Shire's collection, while emphasizing the state's marginalization of refugees, questions the power of the state's practices concerning refugees and challenges the state's dominant rhetoric about refugees.

In Shire's collection of poetry, she represents the state's impact on refugees' experiences of corporeality and embodiment, highlighting the effects of the state's dehumanizing practices. Her poems foreground the power relations that dictate refugees' corporeal experiences, emphasizing how living as a refugee, woman, and racialized person fundamentally shapes one's experience of reality. Her narrative weaves together temporal dimensions to present how temporality alters corporeal experiences as her narrative bridges different periods of life. At the same time, Shire reclaims the state's harmful rhetoric by presenting the impact of documentation practices and harmful social norms. Shire's poetry collection wields words as tools of creation that challenge dominant social norms and practices, expanding the possibilities of apprehension and representation of refugee experiences.

Works Cited

Bell, Lee Anne. *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching.* 2nd ed., Routledge, 2020.

Buschendorf, Christa, editor. *Power Relations in Black Lives: Reading African American Literature and Culture with Bourdieu and Elias.* 1st ed., Transcript, 2017.

Ciocia, Stefania. *Vietnam and Beyond: Tim O'Brien and the Power of Storytelling.* 1st ed., Liverpool UP, 2012.

Grabowska, Barbara. "Perspective Chapter: The Female Body as Sites of Power." *Feminism: Corporeality, Materialism, and Beyond,* edited by Dennis S. Erasga and Michael Eduard L. Labayandoy, IntechOpen, 2023, pp. 115–24.

Higg, Paul, and Chris Gilleard. "Introduction." *Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment,* Anthem Press, 2013, vii-xiv.

Leetsch, Jennifer. "Ocean Imaginaries in Warsan Shire's Afro-Diasporic Poetry." *Journal of the African Literature Association*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, pp. 80–95.

Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head:* Poems. Random House, 2022.

Who We Protect: Refugees. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Wånggren, Lena. "Our Stories Matter: Storytelling and Social Justice in the Hollaback! Movement." *Gender and Education,* vol. 28, no. 3, 2016, pp. 401–15.