

The Theme of Trauma in Refugee Literature

Prof. Hannah Padma Peddamudium

Refugee Literature refers to literary works, including books, stories, poems, and essays, created by individuals who have experienced forced displacement from their home countries due to conflict, persecution, or other reasons. These works often explore the themes of exile, identity, loss, and the complex emotions and experiences of refugees. Refugee Literature provides insight into the personal and collective struggles of displaced individuals, offering a unique perspective on the human condition and the challenges of seeking refuge and rebuilding one's life in a new place.

Grimsrud, Hovden, and Mjelde have opined that refugees are a particular group of the population that often experience extreme traumatic circumstances including death, war, and loss. This position is often ignored or pushed aside in favor of focusing on their impact on our society. What is often diminished is the horrific experiences that have forced this group of people to leave everything behind in search of safety. In recent years, discourses in the Western public sphere have changed markedly. The warfare in Middle Eastern countries and several revolutions following the Arab Spring have caused increasing turmoil and created many displaced persons who find themselves in completely foreign areas with different cultural and social norms.

The position of Refugees is often ignored or pushed aside in favor of focusing on their impact on society. Literature has always provided a prism through which to understand society and in the case of refugees that is no different. Novels and short stories by members of refugee communities who have overcome tragedy and lived to pen their tales continue to appear on bookstands, bestseller lists, and independent bookstores. In the face of sensationalized media discourse on the global migrant crisis, it is the role of literature and culture, whether autobiographical or fictionalized, to remind us that our conversations about a "crisis" are about the lived realities of people, who love and live just like we do, but who are unlucky enough to find themselves in a conflict zone. An attempt is made in this paper to examine the theme of trauma in the works of DinawMengestu and Warsan Shire.

DinawMengestu is an Ethiopian-American writer known for his works that often touch upon themes of immigration, displacement, and identity, which are closely related to refugee literature. While not a refugee himself, Mengestu's novels such as *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, *All Our Names*, and *Rolling Stone*, explore the immigrant experience and the challenges faced by individuals who left their homes in search of a better life. His writings delve into complexities of belonging, cultural adaptation, and the search for a sense of home making his work relevant to the broader discourse on displacement and identity strongly marked by the duality between a displaced, African man and white Americans.

Mengestu represents trauma in the novel, paying special attention to language and loss. With the purpose of initiating chronologically, the main traumatic experience in the novel is also the one that initiates the plot. Midway through the novel, Sepha wanders to visit his uncle. Having the key, he enters the apartment without the uncle's presence. Sepha finds an old letter addressed to President Carter on the current crisis in Ethiopia and in particular the

beating and murdering of Sepha's father by militants, after finding anti-revolutionary flyers in his office (125). Reading it, he rectifies the uncle's facts, so the reader receives the actual information, namely that his father was not carried out of the house by the militants but insisted on walking out on his own feet after numerous beatings, as well as he hides that, the flyers were Sepha's. Following this is a thorough description of the episode with one main goal: to vividly describe exactly what happened that day as if it was happening in the exact moment, but also it clearly illustrates the countless number of times the scene has been replayed in Sepha's mind. This is clearly visible in the following where his mother throws herself at the soldiers to protect his father: "I remember the studied, almost bored air in which they conducted the whole affair. They saw her coming long before she even took her first step. One of them simply raised the butt of his gun and leveled it directly at her chest. He didn't even have to turn around to see her coming. When she fell, it was as if someone had lifted her legs from under her, and then pushed her backward while she was midair. (126) The event has too many details to be perceived with the natural eye when it actually happened, and the description comes from Sepha's countless replays of the event, representing his traumatic experience. Continuing the depiction of his experience, it becomes obvious to the reader that he feels guilty for the death of his father. Not only because it was his flyers, but also because of his failure to do anything to prevent the murder of his father: "And me? Where was I during all of this? Standing in a corner holding my seven-year-old brother's head against my body" (126).

Certainly, the experience could cause anyone great traumatic stress, but that is not the case per se; there is little doubt that Sepha is traumatized, but this experience is referred to rather rarely in the novel. What seems to cause Sepha the most distress is the trauma of loss. Loss is omnipresent in the novel; not only specifically in Sepha's life, but also in the other characters' lives. His neighbor, the old lady Mrs. Davis, recently lost her husband, and Naomi lost her father figure as Judith and Ayad split. This not only traumatized her, but it also affected her behavior. An example is her tendency to run away from her home to escape from Judith - the only one she can blame for her parents' separation. Moreover, the loss is also present in the conversations between Sepha, Kenneth, and Joseph, all experiencing the loss of their families and cultures, with one significant example: all of them lost their fathers and in their conversation, Kenneth utters "I can't remember where the scar on my father's face is'. [...] 'Don't you worry you'll forget [your father] someday?' [Sepha:] 'No. I don't. I still see him everywhere I go'" (9). This uttering represents that while they are all refugees suffering from losses, their experiences and coping strategies are rather different, ultimately showing individual characters. Evidently, it also illustrates Sepha's trauma and his incapability of forgetting.

Mengestu explicitly uses the connotation of the word loss to convey the degree of the suffering Sepha undergoes during the novel. In terms of literary trauma theory, loss is one of the major tropes in terms of displacement and disconnection with one's host country and culture. : "[...] the days of a shopkeeper are empty. There are hours of silence punctuated briefly with bursts of customers [...]. The silence becomes a cocoon in which you can hear only your voice echoing [...]" The symbolism of the uttering is unmistakable; Sepha is not

merely physically alone in his store, his mind's loneliness surrounds him with a wall that disconnects him from the rest of the world. Not because he wants to be, but because he cannot find a way out of it. The trope of the unspeakable is also actively utilized when Sepha recalls his past: "I came here running and screaming with ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back," not explicitly representing what horrors he bears, but allowing the reader to imagine them.

Refugees often feel guilty for leaving home; the destiny and security of those they leave behind is uncertain, and they feel responsible for helping the only way they can - economically. Sepha feels the same responsibility as he sends them money they do not really need: "because [he is] American, and because sending money home is supposed to be the consolation prize for not being home" (41). The feeling of loss never entirely vanishes for him, and the economic help he offers symbolizes the need to reconcile with his guilt.

Mengestu utilizes the character of Sepha and his thoughts to illuminate some of the struggles refugees go through. One example is his thought that "the first aim of the refugee is to survive, and having done that, that initial goal is quickly replaced by the general ambitions of life" (98).

Certainly, the goal is to survive; survival is the exact thing that drives them to flight. However, once in safety, they have similar life goals as anyone else, which only makes their disconnection with 'normal life' even more present.

Warsan Shire is a British writer, poet, editor, and teacher, who was born to Somali parents in Kenya. Shire is known for her powerful and evocative poetry, which often touches upon themes related to trauma, displacement, immigration, and identity. Her poems advocating refugee rights and social justice, frequently explore the experiences of refugees, immigrants, and marginalized communities, offering a poignant perspective on the challenges they face and the emotional toll of displacement. Her words "No one leaves home unless/home is the mouth of a shark", from the poem "Conversations about Home (at a deportation center)", have been called "a rallying call for refugees and their advocates."

Warsan Shire's representation of refugees in her poem "Home" is incredibly accurate. She encapsulates the atrocities that refugees survive when the safe comfort of their homes change to an inferno of catastrophes, and she articulates the xenophobic resistance they endure in their new country. The pathos in Shire's poem is powerful and her message is unmistakable. Her use of the second person point of view is inevitably compelling, and her way of addressing the reader is efficacious: "you have to understand, / that no one puts their children in a boat/ unless the water is safer than the land." Through this, she addresses the Western lack of sympathy and the primal instinct to do absolutely everything to save one's children. In the beginning, Shire explicitly states the poem's message: "you only leave home/ when home won't let you stay." This simplistic sentiment directly addressed to the reader is a proclamation: that a refugee does not flee unless it is the refugee's only option.

Within a space of eight stanzas of varying length, Shire escorts the reader through the unimaginable horrors a refugee faces. She explicitly states the horrors in the native country, on the travel and in the resettlement country; both to state the terrific character of these horrors, but also to say that just as unimaginable it is for the Western reader, equally

unimaginable was it for those it happened to. In other words, what happened to the refugees happened to human beings just like you. Shire's message is a proclamation to the reader, to take notice and to understand and imagine the lifealtering experience it would be to "forget pride/ your survival is more important" Fundamentally, Shire's message justifies the scope of the present thesis, as it will be evident that while her representation may be unique, it is not singular.

In Mengestu's storytelling, readers gain insight into the complexities of the immigrant experience. Through the character of Sapha, he skillfully portrays the enduring impact of trauma on individuals, the mechanisms they employ to cope with it, and the challenges they face in rebuilding their lives. Sapha reveals the effect of trauma on relationships, both isolating characters and forging connections based on shared experiences of loss and displacement. Warsan Shire through her poetry renders a heart-wrenching reminder of the emotional toll of displacement, resonating with the countless individuals who have endured similar trauma. Her poetry voices the urgency of addressing the hardships faced by refugees and displaced people.

Works Cited

DinawMengestu, *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, Penguin Random House,2008.

Warsan Shire, "Home", PoemHunter.com.