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Affective Alienation: Diasporic Melancholia in Warsan Shire's "Home"

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ABSTRACT:

In violent and visceral imagery, Warsan Shire's poem, "Home," documents the diasporic melancholia at the heart of losing a space and place of home. In conversation with Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," my paper examines the melancholic orientation of home as a radical political tool for unearthing the concealment of colonial histories. As Freud's seminal text argues, mourning lapses into an unhealthy state of melancholia when the subject holds on to the object of loss. For the melancholy migrant, the object of loss is home. I argue that through deploying home as an unhappy object, Shire offers a vital reminder of the complex power relations which inform and determine mobility, diaspora, and dispossession. Her poem illustrates how the affective afterlives of diaspora shape the concept of home as an unhappy object which "embody the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness" (Ahmed 159). Shires' poem becomes a generative and productive site for a movement, not towards healing, but towards affective alienation in which the reader bears witness to the trauma, xenophobia, and pain that diasporic subjects experience. By exposing home as an object of migrant melancholia, Shire's poem announces a radical and politically charged unhappiness with the persistence of racist and colonial ideology.

Keywords: *diaspora, melancholia, home, affect*

With the haunting legacies of colonialism, home is a central topic of postcolonial thought and discourse as postcolonial subjects grapple with the aftermath of displacement, diaspora, and migration. Home operates on multiple levels, both as a physical space and as an imagined place of domestic, familial, and national belonging. To be *un*homed, then, is to be disconnected from a sense of belonging through the socio-cultural processes of inclusion and exclusion. Employing violent and visceral imagery, Somali-British poet Warsan Shire documents in her poem "Home" the diasporic melancholia at the heart of losing a space and place of belonging, especially for refugees and people suffering from forced migration. Through her poem, she offers an intervention and reorientation of the social constructions of home to not only be situated as a domestic space, but also as a site of legal, social, cultural, and political discourse. Home, for Shire's speaker, is a site of melancholy. She voices how the home—affectively, materially, and symbolically—becomes a place of pain, chaos, and anxiety, reversing dominant understandings of home as a happy object. In conversation with Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," Shire's poem examines the melancholic orientation of home as a radical political tool for unearthing the concealment of colonial histories. By demarcating home as an unhappy sphere, Shire offers a vital reminder of the complex power relations which inform and determine mobility, diaspora, and dispossession. Home is not universally safe, but is radically re-shaped by relations of history, power, and violence. The poem illustrates how the affective afterlives of diaspora shape the concept of home as an unhappy space that "embod[ies] the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness" (*Promise* 159). While colonial ideology suggests an entitlement to space, Shire

reorients the reader towards an understanding of home as inherently precarious in order to generate a radical and politically charged unhappiness with the persistence of colonial ideology.

Shire attends to the anxieties of contemporary diasporas by revealing how leaving home, whether forcibly or by choice, forecloses the possibility of ever feeling at-home. Avtar Brah argues that "'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (188-9). The diasporic desire for home stems from a lack, an intense longing for a space and place of belonging that cannot be retrieved. Thus *un*homed, the diasporic subject is forced to negotiate with a sense of belonging that is not tied to a space and place, affectively alienating them and causing them to face a sense of vulnerability. Pointing to the vulnerability of being *un*homed, Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin state,

> Being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (90)

For Shire's speaker, home is an instigator of trauma, one that instills and perpetuates endless mourning and is, hauntingly, both present and absent. In her poem, home is an undeniably unsafe and violent space, manifesting as "the mouth of a shark" (75) and the "barrel of the gun" (76). Contradicting all normative expectations of how home should look and feel, Shire exposes the anxiety tied to home for diasporic populations. Her poem explores the implications of being

*un*homed as synonymous with being unsafe and vulnerable to systems of power and violence that circulate in the contemporary, global world. Home, in its social construction as a happy object, is sentimentalized as a place of safety and comfort. Yet for the speaker, home is a place of turmoil that induces flight and lapses into a site of melancholia.

As Freud suggests in his text "Mourning and Melancholia,"

> Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning" (243).

Freud argues that mourning lapses into an unhealthy state of melancholia when the subject holds on to the object of loss. For the melancholy migrant, the object of loss is home. Freud asserts that "In melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one; it is complicated by the conflict due to ambivalence" (256); as Shire suggests, home becomes a site of tension precisely because it operates through ambivalence. The speaker voices her desire to return home, but simultaneously recognizes that home is a site of danger and violence: "i want to go home,/ but home is the mouth of a shark" (74-5). The home is both a space and place of desire and a site of fear; while home should be a safe space, it becomes inherently unsafe for diasporic subjects precisely because of political violence, in both the host country and the country of origin, and attendant dehumanization. Infused with the discourse of ambivalence, Shire suggests that home is not a universally safe space, nor is it a site of entitlement. For the privileged subject who has never experienced the affects of displacement, home is an undeniably happy object, one that reflects

domestic safety, familial belonging, and national attachment. But owing to their ambivalent relationship to home, diasporic subjects are reoriented towards the object of home as a site of melancholia.

Ahmed argues that "melancholics would be affect aliens in how they love: their love becomes a failure to get over loss, which keeps them facing the wrong way" (*Promise* 141). In her poem, Shire suggests that mourning for home lapses into melancholia precisely because of the persistent machinations of coloniality that dehumanize diasporic populations and render their bodies vulnerable to violence. Being *un*homed is a dehumanizing trauma, one which cannot be resolved, and which necessitates an endless mourning for the space and place of home. With regard to melancholia, Ahmed asserts that "Suffering becomes a way of holding on to a lost object" (*Promise* 142), a sentiment which the speaker carries throughout the poem. The speaker endures the weight of unhappiness and melancholic memory, instigating a radical exposure of the amnesia tied to colonial histories. The poem, dedicated to the trauma of diasporic subjects, transforms suffering into a political act of unveiling home as a space and place of precarity.

The figure of the melancholy migrant is a product of affective exchange. Ahmed states that "We can understand the spectrality of [the melancholic migrant] if we consider how histories of empire have been narrated in terms of happiness. The migrant who remembers other, more painful aspects of such histories threatens to expose too much" (*Promise* 148). Through "Home," Shire enacts this painful remembrance of histories that hegemonic forces attempt to silence. Her poem announces bodies that are subjected to pain, while simultaneously pointing to global ethical complaisance for the lives of migrants. Speaking of the silencing of migrant narratives, Ahmed argues that for the migrant, the supposed duty is to only voice certain stories of arrival

(*Promise* 158); to voice other stories is to disrupt the hegemonic facade of national happiness. Ahmed asserts that, "the melancholic migrant's fixation with injury is read as an obstacle not only to his own happiness but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and even to national happiness" (*Promise* 144). "Home" is radically political precisely because it refuses to participate in the dutiful happiness of migrant narratives. In view of histories of multidimensional violence, Shire identifies home as an unhealable wound, one that defies assimilation into a happy narrative of migrancy precisely because it is a history that cannot be resolved. The poem functions as a declaration of unhappiness with hegemonic discourse that silences melancholy migrants and the persistence of ethical complaisance; Shire demands attention for the migrant body in pain.

She does this by initially instigating a reflection for the reader's own privileged assumptions about home as a safe space. The speaker states, "you have to understand,/ that no one puts their children in a boat/ unless the water is safer than the land" (23-5). Through deploying the second person, the speaker directly commands the reader to bear witness. The poem invites the reader to participate in the mourning of home, an act that draws attention to those whose lives are disavowed by the present world order. Addressing the subjects of grief, mourning, and humanity, Judith Butler poses the question, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life?*" (20). By bringing diasporic others into emotional proximity with the reader, Shire places the question of home as part of Butler's question of the process of humanizing, interrogating what makes us care about some displaced populations and not others. By directly referring to the reader in second person, Shire's speaker demands the recognition of humanity for diasporic subjects.

"Home" returns us to the vulnerability of individuals and collectives by writing the body in pain. Shire attends to the violence that initiates diasporic journeys by alluding to the horrific physical torment that migrants endure to escape the dangers of home. Her speaker focuses on the body in pain to radically expose the level of violence that one experiences when leaving home. The imagery is uncannily visceral: "no one burns their palms/ under trains" (26-7), "no one crawls under fences/ no one wants to be beaten" (33-34). The sexual violence and discussions of rape in the poem further reflect the vulnerability of migrant bodies: "because prison is safer/ than a city of fire/ and one prison guard/ in the night/ is better than a truckload/ of men who look like your father" (40-5). Referencing the physical pain and emotional turmoil of leaving home, the speaker laments that "no one could take it/ no one could stomach it/ no one skin would be tough enough" (46-8). Deploying the body in pain, the speaker draws attention to the vulnerability of bodies and the precarity of life. By emphasizing the body in pain, Shire's speaker argues that migration is not always a choice, but a matter of survival, stating that leaving home is "not something you ever thought of doing/ until the blade burnt threats into/ your neck" (15-7). She further emphasizes that "you only leave home/ when home won't let you stay" (10-11) and "no one leaves home unless home chases you" (12).

Shire confronts the social misconception that diasporic populations only migrate out of a desire for new homes and demands a recognition that survival provides the momentum for leaving home. In the final lines of the poem, the home speaks for itself, asserting, "run away from me now/ i don't know what i've become/ but i know that anywhere/ is safer than here" (94-7). The home's recognition that it has lapsed into a dangerous space points to the ambivalence of home

for diasporic subjects; while home is a "mythic place of desire" (Brah 188), it is a site of no return. As home has become a dangerous place, the only course of action is to flee.

Through displacement, those who are *un*homed are faced with the challenges of negotiating with a sense of belonging and are subject to the processes of inclusion and exclusion of the societies in which they arrive. Within the normative imagination, Ahmed states that home "becomes associated with stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity. Home is implicitly constructed as a purified space of belonging" (*Strange* 87). Shire pushes back against dominant understandings of home as intrinsic to identity by questioning what happens to subjecthood when diasporic subjects are *un*homed. Pointing to the entwinement of the concepts of home and belonging, Brah argues that home "is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of 'belonging'" (Brah 89). Home, as a site of familiarity, informs and determines the sphere of belonging for a community. When the diasporic subject leaves home, identity and community become sites of turmoil. Ahmed gestures towards the social construction of the migrant body as that which does not belong, stating that "migrants are often constructed as strangers. In such a construction, the strangers are the ones who, in leaving the home of their nation, are the bodies out of place in the everyday world they inhabit and in the communities in which they come to live" (*Strange* 78). Shire's speaker exposes the abjection that she faces as a "strange body" by explicitly voicing the racist discourse she experiences: "go home blacks/ refugees/ dirty immigrants/ asylum seekers/ sucking our country dry/ niggers with their hands out/ they smell strange/ savage/ messed up their country and now they want/ to mess ours up" (49-58).

Through the operation of distinguishing some bodies from others, racist discourse establishes the boundaries and borders of bodies and communities. The hatred for the migrant bodies reflects what Ahmed terms "affective economies" that "align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space" ("Affective*"* 119). Racism operates through adhesion and cohesion, binding some figures together to create a collective while operating to exclude others. The proximity of the migrant's body within the borders of the nation provokes anxiety and fear for those with the privilege of feeling at-home. Determined to be out of place, the foreign body is determined to be unassimilable with the communal sphere of belonging. Addressing the abjection associated with migrancy, Ahmed states, "The threat of contamination posed by strange bodies is precisely that those bodies already exceed the place in which they come to be encountered as such" (*Stranger* 53). Through the discourse of abjection, Shire reveals the normative understandings of migrants as the dangerous 'others' that pose the threat of invasion and corruption of the nation. Operating on a metonymic slide, the foreign bodies are read as an invasion of the body of the nation causing the bodies of migrants to be aligned with hatred because of the perceived contamination of the pure, national sphere of belonging. The hatred that Shire exposes reveals how migrant bodies are tied to the threat of loss; they are a reminder that home is precarious. The language fettered to migrant bodies further points to the power relations that operate through difference; migrants are "savage," "dirty," and smell "strange." Infused with abjection, this language works to differentiate the migrant body as unlike the bodies within the nation. The politics of fear and hate are intrinsically bound up with the anxiety around spatial and bodily boundaries causing a perpetual anxiety of invasion. The foreign body thus becomes associated with that which is abject; their body poses a threat of contamination to the supposedly pure, homogenous space of the community.

By explicitly voicing the language of hatred tied to the migrant body, Shire's speaker reveals the representational violence that she is subjected to because she has been *un*homed. Yet the speaker endures this violence because "the insults are easier/ to swallow/ than rubble/ than bone/ than your child body/ in pieces" (68-73); she further asserts, "how do the words/ the dirty looks/ roll off your backs/ maybe because the blow is softer/ than a limb torn off" (59-64). With survival as a priority, the violence of racist discourse is far safer than the physical violence that the speaker would experience if she refused to leave home. Without the "purified space of belonging" of home, diasporic subjects are faced with alienation, racial and cultural tension, and representational violence.

Such populations become affect aliens, which Ahmed defines as "those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world" (*Promise* 164). The melancholy migrant as an 'affect alien' experiences alienation precisely because he/she is identified as a strange body within the new borders that he/she inhabits. Through the affective economies of exchange, the migrant's body is tied to not-belonging because of the differentiation between those who are at-home and those who are *un*homed. Gesturing towards the affect of belonging, Ahmed states "To be alienated from happiness is to recognize not only that you are the one who is out of place but also that you cannot make yourself be in place, that you cannot make yourself belong 'anywhere'" (*Promise* 156). The object of loss for the melancholy migrant is irretrievable; once the diasporic subject has left a politically volatile, threatening home, neither are they ever able to return, nor are they able to reorient themselves towards home as an object of happiness. Shire's speaker laments "only tearing up your passport

in an airport toilets/ sobbing as each mouthful of paper/ made it clear that you wouldn't be going back" (20-2). The speaker directly mourns the loss of home with the object of the passport, which operates as a metonymy for belonging; by destroying the passport, the speaker acknowledges that home is a place of no return. Butler suggests that "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever" (Butler 21). The diasporic subject's mourning of home asserts that once home is lost, it is irretrievable, both as an imagined space of safety and a physical place of domesticity.

Although diasporic subjects of forced migration experience alienation because of their melancholic orientation towards home, Shire suggests that new systems of belonging can be forged through affective communities. Using a multiplicity of voices and narratives, Shire instigates a communal mourning for the lost object of home. The speaker expresses that the "the whole city running as well" (4) to escape the violence emanating from home. Her poem is crowded with bodies in flight and in the throws of violence: "your neighbors running faster than you/ breath bloody in their throats/ the boy you went to school with/ who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory/ is holding a gun bigger than his body" (5-9). Shire establishes the magnitude of diaspora by describing multiple bodies in pain; losing home is not a singularity, but a communal experience for subjects who are haunted by a history of exploitation, dispossession, and dehumanization

Through the communal mourning of home, Shire's poem establishes an affective community for melancholic migrants, creating a new site for affects of belonging. In regards to the creation of communities, Ahmed argues that the orientation of subjects towards lost objects

can provide the foundation for membership in a community (*Promise* 141). Using multiple narratives of diasporic suffering, Shire reveals the creation of a community between those who have lost the object of home and are now aligned with home as a site of melancholia. The sharing of melancholic narratives of home opens up the possibility for new spheres of belonging to be forged for affect aliens who are disoriented from happy objects. The communal expression of grief also reveals "the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (Butler 23). Communal mourning offers an ethical space for the recognition of precarious lives. By grieving the lost object of home, Shire demands the recognition of humanity, pushing back against dominant discourse that dehumanizes refugee populations through a language of abjection.

In Shire's poem, trauma is both a subject and a vehicle for understanding the entwinement of home with loss, mourning, and violence. Paul Gilroy encourages the explorations of violence perpetrated by colonial ideology, stating, "we need to ask how an increased familiarity with the bloodstained workings of racism...might be made to yield lessons that could be applied more generally, in the demanding contemporary settings of multicultural social relations" (4). By unearthing the melancholia of diasporic populations as intrinsically tied to histories of oppression, racism, and displacement, Shire generates a productive site for affective alienation. She forces readers to bear witness to a migrant melancholia that is informed and determined by specific histories of power and politics. For such refugees, home becomes a site of endless mourning that is radically active and rooted in the present moment. "Home" does

not enact the grieving for home as a movement towards healing, but as a reminder of the precarity of home; once home is lost, it is irretrievable and instigates a perpetual mourning for a space and place of belonging and safety. Through the production of a site of melancholy, Shire generates a community based on ethical recognition of the precarity of life. Her exposure of the damage perpetuated by racist ideology refuses to allow the lives of melancholy migrants to go *un*named and *un*grieved. Her insistence on not healing opens up the possibility for a community to be founded on trauma.

For the diasporic subject in Shire's poem, affective alienation becomes a productive and radical site of empowerment. As Ahmed suggests, "Consciousness of alienation involves both recognition of suffering and recognition of what produces that suffering. To become conscious of alienation is to become conscious of how one's being has been stolen" (*Promise* 167). By employing the discourse of melancholia, Shire's speaker becomes conscious of her alienation from the dominant sphere of belonging, but also of the networks of power that inform and determine her exclusion. Ahmed posits that to become conscious of affective alienation is revolutionary in nature, precisely because the subject recognizes that dominant power relations have *made* them an affect alien (*Promise* 168). As a revolutionary affect alien, Shire's speaker experiences estrangement by "feeling at odds with the world, or feeling that the world is odd" (*Promise* 168). Speaking to the revolutionary affect alien, Ahmed argues that "You do not flow; you are stressed; you experience the world as a form of resistance in coming to resist a world" (*Promise* 169). By being in tension with the world and its power relations, Shire exposes the global complaisance of diasporic suffering. Addressing the ethics of recognizing life as precarious, Butler insists that "Suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of

impressionability, and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not 'resolve' them too quickly" (150). Living in a state of melancholia, Shire's diasporic subject does not let her suffering be resolved. She highlights the dehumanizing suffering that migrants experience, pointing to the precariousness of the human life, while simultaneously invoking melancholia as a tool to provoke ethical outrage in the reader, one that is "distinctively, for an Other, in the name of an Other" (Butler 150).

Shire's poem "Home" is a call for action on the urgent topic of global migration, diaspora, and the systems of power that inform and determine the inclusion and exclusion of certain bodies. Pushing back against the normative demand for migrants to remain silent, Shire deploys melancholia as a tool to expose global indifference towards the precarious lives of diasporic populations. Wrestling with the fear at the heart of losing home, Shire's speaker voices the precarity of life for migrant subjects and reorients the reader towards an ethical understanding of the causes of diaspora; many migrant subjects do not leave home by choice, but out of necessity and a desire for survival. Shire critiques the dominant discourse that is infused with xenophobia and exposes the racism, fear, and hatred that torment migrant subjects. "Home" prompts an ethical outrage for the marginalization, oppression, and violence that is targeted towards those who are *un*homed. Shire's poem effects an intervention regarding the dehumanization of migrants through unearthing the melancholia invoked by the dispossession of home.

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