

Black British Women's Writing in the 1970s and Beyond

Black British Women's Writing in the 1970s and Beyond:

Away from Home

Edited by

Camille S. Alexander

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



Black British Women's Writing in the 1970s and Beyond:
Away from Home

Edited by Camille S. Alexander

This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2024 by Camille S. Alexander and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-5274-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-5274-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1	5
Extreme Girlhood: Daughterhood, Beauty Politics, and the Transformation of Coming-of-Age Stories in Warsan Shire's Poetry Julieta Flores Jurado	
Chapter 2	23
"London Blues," Black Women, and Diasporic Racial Disunity Camille S. Alexander	
Chapter 3	43
Movement, Moving and Making Home: The Black British Experience <i>"I was somebody now. I belonged..."</i> Anna Osarose	
Chapter 4	59
The "Half-Room" as a Site of Enunciation and Productivity in Buchi Emecheta's <i>Second-Class Citizen</i> Ijeoma D. Odoh	
Chapter 5	81
The End of the Immigrant Narrative Camille S. Alexander	
Contributors.....	101

INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the *Empire Windrush* on 22 June 1948 marks a seminal moment in British literature for it was at this time that, one could argue, the genre Black British Literature was born. From this generation writers, such as Sam Selvon, Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, and George Lamming, came the voices of a generation as well as of the new genre. For decades, these names, and others like them, came to represent the best and the brightest writers from the Empire's colonies—largely from the then 'West Indies'. Yet, the popularity of these Caribbean male writers raises many unanswered questions—the most pertinent being “Were there any women writers from the colonies during the Windrush era?”. African, Asian, and Caribbean women writers did immigrate to Great Britain during the Windrush years, but it was not until the subsequent decades that their words—their voices—were acknowledged. Sandra Courtman's research on Guyanese-British writer Beryl Gilroy, the mother of postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy, identifies what many scholars of Black British writing suspected: that, while women were writing, they were not afforded the same publishing opportunities as their male counterparts as “the dominant narrative of exile was male,”¹ and many publishing firms were not focused on providing women writers the opportunities to have their work published. The arrival of the *Windrush* has been, and to some extent continues to be, “memorialised as masculine”² much to the detriment of women and their stories. The reality of the publishing industry's overt and covert misogyny and xenophobia in the decades following the Second World War should not come as a surprise. Even today, women writers remain largely relegated to specific literary genres while male writers are free to explore any topic, including writing about women's lives to varied levels of success.³ From a

¹ Sandra Courtman, “Women Writers and the Windrush Generation: A Contextual Reading of Beryl Gilroy's *In Praise of Love* and Children and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*,” *EnterText* 9 (2012): 84.

² Courtman, “Women Writers and the Windrush Generation,” 85.

³ Literary history abounds with examples of male writers attempting to analyse women's lives, stretching back to texts such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1749), and moving into contemporary times with authors such as Jeffrey Eugenides, who wrote *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Michael Cunningham, who penned *The Hours* (1998)

literary and historical perspective, it cannot escape notice that the great Virginia Woolf had no recourse but to found Hogarth Press with her husband, Leonard, in 1917 to be published. Although Woolf had the benefits of an impeccable English familial pedigree and white skin, even she could not easily get published in England in the early twentieth century.

In the decades following the Windrush, Black British writing began the slow and steady process of allowing women to ‘speak’ through their writings. Texts like Beryl Gilroy’s *Black Teacher*⁴ and Joyce Gladwell’s *Brown Face, Big Master*⁵ articulate some of the issues germane to immigrant women in the UK. These autobiographies are critical to studying immigrant women writers abroad—particularly those from the Caribbean—yet there are other texts from the Commonwealth by women writers, written in the decades following the Windrush generation, that are equally important.

This book is a collection of essays about texts by women writers from the African and Caribbean Diaspora who migrated to the UK in the decades after the Windrush generation, which, for the purpose of this text, will be defined as spanning from 1948 to 1969. Chapter One explores the texts of Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, discussing how girlhood can become ‘extreme’. Julieta Flores Jurado addresses the influence of beauty politics and the act of transformation on Shire’s coming-of-age poetry. Chapter Two addresses the Caribbean female immigrant narrative posed in Trinbagonian poet Eintou Pearl Springer’s text “London Blues.”⁶ In this chapter, Camille S. Alexander explores the often-troubling situation of disunity between Afro-Caribbean men and women who migrate to the UK and the impact this has on the women, who often struggle to find connections to home amid this migration. Chapter Three examines Beryl Gilroy’s Windrush novel, *In Praise of Love and Children*, which was not published until the latter part of the twentieth century.⁷ In this chapter, Anna Osarose explores how protagonist, Melda Hayley, a Guyanese immigrant who came to England in the 1950s, navigates her unique position as a single, independent woman engaged in the act of making a home for herself and for the children she mothers while abroad. Chapter Four discusses Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen*⁸ and the concept of the “half-room” to the African immigrant woman in the UK. Using Emecheta’s own experiences

⁴ Beryl Gilroy, *Black Teacher* (London: Bogle L’Overture Press, 1994).

⁵ Joyce Gladwell, *Brown Face, Big Master* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2003).

⁶ Eintou Pearl Springer, “London Blues,” in *Loving the Skin I’m In* (Port-of-Spain, Trinidad: Lexicon Trinidad Ltd, 2005), 14-18.

⁷ Beryl Gilroy, *In Praise of Love and Children* (London: Peepal Tree Press, 1996).

⁸ Buchi Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen* (New York: George Braziller, 1974).

to foreground the discussion, Ijeoma D. Odoh discusses how protagonist Adah challenges the patriarchal structures both at home and abroad. Finally, Chapter Five addresses the end of the immigrant narrative. In this chapter, Camille S. Alexander explores Barbara Jenkins' "Making Pastelles in Dickensland" and Jenkins juxtaposing the act of making pastelles with the very real and painful act of facing the death of a loved one.

This collection bridges gaps in studies of Black British literary studies that are often exclusively male and occasionally ignore the presence of women writers from this genre in the decades following the Windrush, using writings from the decades following the ship's arrival, which are critical periods in history from a social and political perspective. This collection hopes to shed light on the women's literary voices that sometimes remain silenced in the decades following the Windrush as well as to provide some additional context to the Black British female immigrant narrative.

CHAPTER 1

EXTREME GIRLHOOD: DAUGHTERHOOD, BEAUTY POLITICS, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF COMING-OF-AGE STORIES IN WARSAN SHIRE’S POETRY

JULIETA FLORES JURADO

As narrative in a profile published in 2022, Somali-British poet Warsan Shire mused, while looking at a collection of her childhood photographs, “I think people should have more photos of themselves as children around . . . there’s no way that you can’t give that version of yourself grace and patience and empathy and understanding.”¹ In a sense, Shire’s poetry supplements this picture box, adding new vignettes to a narrative that depicts, with nuance, beauty, and unflinching clarity, the experience of growing up in a female body under the joint threats of patriarchal traditions, war, imperialism, racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. Shire became well known in 2016 after collaborating with Beyoncé on the visual album *Lemonade*. In previous years, she obtained a substantial following online from her self-published work at Tumblr. Shire was born in Kenya in 1988 to Somali parents. Political repression during the regime of Siad Barre (1969-1991) forced her father, a journalist, to relocate their family to Kenya, where they lived for a year before moving again—this time to the United Kingdom. Shire grew up in London, became the city’s first Young Poet Laureate (2013-2014), and is currently a member of the Royal Society of Literature. Her work is included in the anthology *Penguin Modern Poets 3* (2017) alongside Malika Booker and Sharon Olds. Shire

¹ Alexis Okeowo, “Warsan Shire’s Portraits of Somalis in Exile,” *The New Yorker*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/02/14/warsan-shires-portraits-of-somalis-in-exile>

cites the latter poet as a literary influence with Mary Oliver and Margaret Atwood.² She was awarded the Brunei International African Poetry Prize in 2013.

Even if Shire's poetry is now printed in more conventional formats and housed at prestigious literary publishing houses, the features of social media remain present, influencing the form, style, and the sharing of her writing. She writes in English, but words and phrases in both Somali and Arabic are distinctive features of her poems. Following two brief collections, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011) and *Her Blue Body* (2015), Shire published her first full-length book, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*, in 2022. American poet Terrance Hayes credits Shire with inspiring the next generation of poets,³ while Chelsea Haith notes that "Shire's verse was put to work in both political and pop culture contexts in 2016 and 2017, a natural progression for a poet whose work concentrates on themes of nation, exile, displacement, belonging, the Black female body, infidelity and violence."⁴

Shire's poem "Home," a version of the work initially titled "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Centre)," was shared widely online and in some live events during the 2015 European migrant crisis. Grounded in conversations with African asylum-seekers in Italy, the poem recreates the voice of a home that pleads with her inhabitants to "leave, run, now. I don't know what I've become."⁵ Through the use of poetic devices, such as personification, metaphor ("Home is the mouth of a shark. Home is the barrel of a gun"), and anaphora ("No one would leave home unless home chased you," "No one puts their children on a boat, unless the water is safer than the land"), Shire's poem moved readers who had become accustomed to reading about the forced exile of thousands and the great risks and dehumanising treatment people encountered on their journeys to safer lands. In fact, poetry might possess an advantage over the distanced, objective presentation of news media coverage of war and violence, showing that figurative language and the sensorial aspects of

² Katie Reid, "Q & A: Poet, writer and educator Warsan Shire," *Africa in Words*, June 21, 2013, <https://africainwords.com/2013/06/21/qa-poet-writer-and-educator-warsan-shire/>.

³ Quoted in Okeowo, "Warsan Shire's Portraits of Somalis in Exile."

⁴ Chelsea Haith, "Close reading of Warsan Shire's 'Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)'," *Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds*, 2017, <https://writersmakeworlds.com/essay-shire-home>

⁵ Warsan Shire, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (New York: Random House, 2022), 25.

sound and rhythm can make communicating a difficult subject more effective although not less clear.

Notwithstanding Shire's popularity on social media during this early stage, her work has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention. Inspired by Alexis Okeowo's assessment of Shire's first chapbook *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* — "East African storytelling and coming-of-age memoir fused into one"⁶—this chapter aims to examine Shire's interweaving of themes, such as girlhood, sexuality, shame, beauty, and gender-based violence in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* and *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*. As the titles of these works suggest, the identity of a daughter—a role identified with youth—is central to Shire's exploration of gender relations, familial tensions, and of girls' bodies as records of a painful history. Her approach is characterised by a combination of beauty and ugliness, joy and grief, violence, and tenderness, resisting univocal or stereotypical images of young Somali and Somali-British women and their family ties. For Isabela Sandoval Vela, in Shire's poetry "war becomes the site of death and atrocity, but also of resistance, solidarity, and strengthening of relationships and the very condition of being a woman."⁷

Okeowo's allusion to the coming-of-age genre is intriguing, given that this literary form is concerned with a young person's transition to adulthood, with the thoughts and feelings that accompany formative processes; with the acquisition of maturity, autonomy, and status; and with integration into society's available roles. However, the conventions of coming-of-age stories tend to privilege stories about boys becoming men—in the most traditional form, the protagonists of coming-of-age stories end their narrative arc once they become model citizens and heads of families.⁸ Stories about young women seldom fit into this pattern of reaching a mature subjectivity with complete autonomy, given the many structural disadvantages that girls and women still face. This is also the case for non-white protagonists in diasporic and postcolonial contexts. Somali girls and teenagers, who are also Muslim, are central subjects of Shire's poetry; their lives are hindered by civil war, displacement, and by the undervaluing of

⁶ Alexis Okeowo, "The Writing Life of Warsan Shire, a Young, Prolific Poet," *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-writing-life-of-a-young-prolific-poet-warsan-shire>

⁷ Isabela Sandoval Vela, "Voces femeninas en la guerra: las narraciones de resistencia de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie y Warsan Shire" (BA Thesis, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2019), 18. My translation.

⁸ Ricardo Quintana Vallejo, *Children of Globalization: Diasporic Coming-of-age Novels in Germany, England, and the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2.

girls and immigrants in their settings. Besides gender, other aspects of identity, such as racialization, class, ableness, nationality, religion, and citizenship status, can determine whether characters and readers can relate to the more ubiquitous stories about growing up. For example, Lashon Daley contends that “there is no coming of age for Black girls due to the ways in which the historic traumas of slavery, civil rights, and racial formation have adulterated how their age, rates of physical maturation, and social development are constructed and perceived.”⁹ Thus, Daley finds that “coming-of-age” is an inadequate term for narrating the growth of Black girls.¹⁰ Drawing from Audre Lorde’s 1981 essay “The Uses of Anger,” Daley identifies a narrative that is best described as “coming-of-(r)age.”¹¹ While this argument about the insufficiency of traditional genre categories to characterise Black women’s writing is valid, Shire’s poetry can be studied in proximity with recent theorisations on diasporic coming-of-age narratives. The translation of her books into Spanish, French, Dutch, and Swedish also speaks of the “inherent cultural transferability” of these kinds of stories as they echo the experiences of immigrants in other nations besides the United Kingdom.¹² Although these works are, first and foremost, poetry collections; the poems follow loosely a narrative sequence. In particular, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* tells a story of a girl’s survival in the absence of an encouraging female role model and her contact with other images of Black womanhood, such as model Grace Jones (“Bless Grace Jones”).¹³ Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo remarks on the transformations that writers who experience various systemic challenges in their coming-of-age journey bring about in the genre:

[M]yriad possibilities burst open as coming-of-age novels shift their focus to the formative processes of young diasporic individuals. Useful in unravelling the complexities of identity, writers for and from diasporic groups have used the coming-of-age genre to reflect on their relegated positions, the expectations

⁹ Lashon Daley, “Coming of (R)age: A New Genre for Contemporary Narratives about Black Girlhood,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46, no. 4 (2021): 1036, <https://doi.org/10.1086/713293>

¹⁰ According to Okeowo’s profile, Shire self-identifies as a Black woman, although she clarifies that she did not associate this identity with herself until she was perceived as Black in her school in the UK (Okeowo, 2022). This chapter draws on insights from Black feminist theory and Black girlhood studies.

¹¹ Daley, “Coming of (R)age,” 1036.

¹² Quintana-Vallejo, *Children of Globalization*, 16.

¹³ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 81.

of their societies, and their place as adults in contemporary geographical and epistemic borderlands.¹⁴

The intellectual and artistic legacy of Audre Lorde can be recognized in Shire's early work, as she begins *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* with an epigraph by the American poet: "Mother, loosen my tongue or adorn me with a lighter burden."¹⁵ Shire highlights the voice of a daughter who wishes for the ability to find words to represent her experience, even as she endures the effects of intergenerational trauma. Still, this burden is presented in Lorde's work as an adornment, and Shire's collection demonstrates that beauty and joy might be found even when many sources of violence prevent the girls from exercising their autonomy and agency. Going back to the issue of coming-of-age narratives, Shire stated in an interview: "I'm writing about Somalia and I'm writing about here, but my favourite film is *The Virgin Suicides* which is about American suburbia."¹⁶ The film based on Jeffrey Eugenides's novel might seem like an unlikely influence. While not a typical coming-of-age story, it is a novel about adolescence in which teenage girls' sexuality is feared, mystified, and punished; similar attitudes towards women's sexuality prompt Shire's poetic and political response. According to the webpage for the British edition of *Bless the Daughter*, the publication date "pay[s] quiet homage to the 23rd anniversary of Lauryn Hill's seismic Grammy win for *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*," a key text about Black girls' formative experiences.¹⁷

Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth is bracketed by poems that juxtapose love and war and that to extreme patriarchal violence as a terror that daughters are made aware of by their mothers. "Your Mother's First Kiss," the second poem in the chapbook, begins: "The first boy to kiss your mother later raped women / when the war broke out."¹⁸ In the final poem, "In Love and In War," the daughter vows in turn "To my daughter I will say, / 'when the men come, set yourself on fire'."¹⁹ The threat of sexual violence is one of the motives that one of the refugees in "Conversations

¹⁴ Quintana-Vallejo, *Children of Globalization*, 3.

¹⁵ Warsan Shire, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (London: Flipped Eye Publishing, 2011), 3.

¹⁶ Reid, "Q&A."

¹⁷ Flipped Eye Publishing, "Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head," February 24, 2022, <https://flippedeye.net/product/bless-the-daughter-raised-by-a-voice-in-her-head/>

¹⁸ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 6.

¹⁹ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 32.

about Home” presents as an explanation for her arrival in a foreign country: “They ask me *how did you get here?* Can’t you see it on my body?”²⁰ However, it is essential, as Faegheh Shirazi remarks, not to simplify the connection between women and war to the status of victims, given that in “times of civil war or strife when male family members are drafted into the military, arrested by government or occupying forces, or killed in combat, women assume primary responsibility for their households and carry the burden of ensuring the immediate survival of family members.”²¹

Uchenna Frances Obi and Raphael Chukwuemeka Onyejizu contend that Shire’s poems

embody a heightened portraiture of linguistic forms, laced in a rhythmic and prose narrative structure, which captures the distressing situations women undergo in life. She employs a mental picture of feminine bodily images in discussing the effects of war, patriarchal domination, immigration challenges and societal issues perceived as taboo.²²

These authors do not emphasise girlhood as a political issue, but that is done here, following Ruth Nicole Brown’s stance, who maintains that Black girls’ childhoods “are not free from injustice and inequality and, as they negotiate state structures and agencies that are often hostile to their well-being, Black girls experience politics at an early age.”²³ Shire’s engagement with issues that centre on girlhood and female bodies can be approached in three ways: by discussing poems about kinship, bonds between girls, and the traditions and patriarchal systems that imbue the processes of coming of age with violence; by focusing on representations of beauty in Shire’s work; and finally, by looking at texts in which girls’ lives are interrupted and growth and autonomy are not possible. The chapter closes with a commentary on the final poem from *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*,

²⁰ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 22.

²¹ Faegheh Shirazi, Introduction to *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*, edited by Faegheh Shirazi (University of Texas Press, 2010), 2.

²² Uchenna Frances Obi and Raphael Chukwuemeka Onyejizu, “‘No One Leaves Home Unless Home Is the Mouth of a Shark’: Dwelling and the Complexities of Return in Warsan Shire’s Poetry,” *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature* 2, no. 6 (2021): 3, accessed November 23, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v2i6.88>.

²³ Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 3.

in which the young woman concludes her journey into adulthood by envisioning her own future daughters and granddaughters.

Coming of Age and Kinship among Girls

Frequently, Shire centres her poems on the point of view of a girl who looks up to her older peers, such as sisters or older cousins, and learns about gendered expectations that generate ambivalence and an increasing awareness of the forms of violence that will affect them as they mature. An often-violent transition into adulthood is eased by intimate conversations between girls, challenging the silence surrounding taboo subjects and confronting the omissions or biases in formal sex education. For example, “Bless this School for Girls” tells of a girl named Falis, who passes on important information about women’s health:

Falis taught us more about our bodies
than we’d ever glean from the curriculum;
periods, uterus contractions, early symptoms
of cysts, signs of infertility, abortions and where
they were punishable by death, miscarriage.²⁴

In “Things We Had Lost in the Summer,” the speaker describes an encounter with her female cousins, who she has not seen since she “was twelve years old and swollen / with the heat of waiting.”²⁵ Upon their return, the speaker notes that her cousin’s body is now vulnerable to sexualisation and to the invasive gaze of men. She recalls how, when they said farewell some years earlier, they were still “waifs with bird chests clinking like wood, boyish / long skirted figurines waiting to grow / into our hunger.”²⁶ Feeling curious about her own sexuality, about the changes that await girls, and admiring her cousin who is the same age as her and “is more beautiful than I can remember,” the speaker nevertheless feels excluded because she has not had her period yet and is admonished by her cousins to “*Sit like a girl*.”²⁷ Summer in teenage culture signifies freedom, growth, and excitement, but as the poem establishes, this is a time marked by a series of losses. The poem briefly alludes to the secrecy surrounding the practise of female genital mutilation (FGM), a rite that, while supervised by the adult women in the family, originates in men’s control over women’s sexuality:

²⁴ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 60.

²⁵ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 7.

²⁶ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 7.

²⁷ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 7.

“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.”²⁸ A newer version of this poem, published in *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* titled “The Abubakr Girls Are Different,” makes a more explicit allusion to FGM: “After the procedure, the girls learn how to walk again, mermaids / with new legs, soft knees buckling under / their raw, sinless bodies.”²⁹ In 2014, during her appointment as London’s Young Poet Laureate, Shire wrote a poem to support a campaign for teaching the risks of FGM in the UK and for ending the practise. She stated, “I write poems on FGM because I have been raised and loved by a community where many people I know have undergone this procedure. To work towards the eradication of this practice, their voices need to be heard.”³⁰ Through this effort, Shire joins Somali activists such as Ifrah Ahmed, whose foundation trained around 5000 workers to speak out against FGM and to dispel the beliefs invoked to justify the practise.³¹

Shire commented on how, although she refrains from using people’s real names, it is true that many of the characters in her writing are based on members of her community, as the quote in the previous paragraph suggests. Elsewhere, the poet said, “my relatives and my friends and my mother’s friends have experienced things that you can’t imagine, and they’ve put on this jacket of resiliency and a dark humour.”³² Her poem “Birds,” adapted slightly as “Bless the Blood” in the more recent collection, is a good example of how the bonds between young women are sustained by resiliency and humour. The speaker calls a friend named Sofia, a bride who admits to tricking her husband into believing she was a virgin: “Sofia used pigeon blood on her wedding night, / Next day, over the phone, she told me / how her husband smiled when he saw the sheets.”³³ The two women “[giggle] over the static” as Sofia mimics her husband’s deep voice and makes fun of his credulous, aggrandized praise of Sofia’s purity. Their knowledge of tricks for circumventing outdated limitations on women’s

²⁸ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 7.

²⁹ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 59.

³⁰ Symeon Brown, “Warsan Shire: young poet laureate wields her pen against FGM,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/feb/17/warsan-shire-young-poet-laureate-michael-gove>

³¹ Sarah Johnson, “‘On a Rampage’: The African Women Fighting to End FGM,” *The Guardian*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jun/08/on-a-rampage-the-african-women-fighting-to-end-fgm>

³² Reid, “Q&A.”

³³ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 13.

bodily autonomy position them as having agency and the figurative ability to “fly,” in contrast to women who collaborate with the patriarchal systems. Sofia imagines her mother-in-law as the figure that will police the bride’s purity, showing proudly the nuptial sheets to the town, pausing at “her arms fleshy wings bound to her body, / ignorant of flight.”³⁴

The important habit of speaking to a close female friend or relative is also depicted in “Maymuun’s Mouth,” from *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*. The speaker notices how, after emigrating and studying English “in a local community college,” her friend Maymuun acquired a sophisticated voice, is going through new experiences, and has a possible love interest in her neighbour. After talking to her on the phone, the speaker imagines Maymuun “learning to kiss with her new tongue.”³⁵ The verb “to learn” speaks of formative experiences and of the linguistic and sexual agency that she could claim in her new setting.³⁶ However, this character reappears in *Bless the Daughter*, where she is seen from the opposite perspective, as the newer poem “Bless Maymuun’s Mind” centres on Maymuun’s point of view. Maymuun is seen performing exhausting manual labour and struggling with mental health issues: “The doctor won’t know about the voices or her hands raw from washing.”³⁷ Even if she looks forward to phone calls with family, “[t]he phone warms the side of her face like the sun,”³⁸ the admiration of her family back in her home country increases the pressure on Maymuun, who “listens to the clamouring voices, oh how blessed she is, how proud they are, how all their hopes depend on her, how walahi, all their dreams lie at her feet.”³⁹ The poem that follows immediately alludes to Dahabshil, the money transfer company, and an immigrant woman, who could be Maymuun, despairing because it is now difficult to imagine a time when she is recognized as a citizen and her life can be “untethered / from the Home Office.”⁴⁰

Beauty Politics and the Body as a Text

Girls in Shire’s poetry are born into a world that does not receive their births with joy. “Daughter is synonymous with traitor,” mutters the

³⁴ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 13.

³⁵ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 8.

³⁶ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 8.

³⁷ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 26.

³⁸ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 26.

³⁹ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 26.

⁴⁰ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 27.

father of five girls in “The Abubakr Girls are Different,”⁴¹ and “Bless the Qumayo” uses this term, which means “cruel person,” to refer to someone “who upon hearing news of a girl / child, lit torches of contempt to welcome / us onto this planet.”⁴² The opening stanzas of “Extreme Girlhood”⁴³ begin with the biography of an “ugly child” who will be vindicated in later poems:

A loop, a girl born
to each family,
A prelude to suffering.

Bless the baby girl,
caul of dissatisfaction,
patron saint of not good enough.⁴⁴

This intergenerational violence and the fear and pain instilled in female bodies drive Shire to search for alternative ways of imagining the feminised bodily ceremonies of beauty as sites of both conflict and autonomy. Thinking of the context of the Iraq war, Cynthia Enloe suggests that, even in extreme scenarios, such as war, occupation, or economic or political crisis, women’s embellishment of their bodies has political undertones as the female body is so often a site of struggle:

Women looking at themselves in the mirror as tanks roll up their streets. Women thinking about the curl of their hair while their country is occupied by foreigners. Women spending money on their looks while their husbands and children lack sufficient food. Women gossiping about marriage gone sour when serious people are struggling for power. Such trivializing dismissive images grow out of unexamined presumptions: that femininity itself is not a battleground; that anxieties about women’s beauty are pre-political; that marriage is not about power; and that the same men who are immersed in national politics do not try to control women’s bodies.⁴⁵

It is not superficial to reflect on beauty in a context of war and exile. Without diminishing the other sources of suffering that a refugee encounters, the

⁴¹ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 58.

⁴² Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 32.

⁴³ According to Haith, “Extreme Girlhood” was also the working title of *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* during the writing stage.

⁴⁴ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 19.

⁴⁵ Cynthia Enloe, *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 22.

speaker of “Conversations About Home” laments that her body and humanity will be judged under xenophobic, prejudiced expectations, stating “I am unwelcome and my beauty is not beauty here.”⁴⁶

In her paper “Body Aesthetics and Beauty Politics in Twenty-First Century Africa,” Nada Mustafa Ali details the significance of beauty rituals for women in East Africa, who meet and work together to prepare perfumes and cosmetics before weddings or other special occasions. These gatherings “offer platforms for women to catch-up, exchange ideas and advice on different issues, and to seek and offer material and social support and solidarity where needed.”⁴⁷ In Ali’s essay, perfume is examined as a means of embellishing the body that is often overlooked in today’s more visually centred culture. Shire is also alert to these beauty practises as she depicts women braiding their hair and perfuming it with the smoke of frankincense or *uunsi* (sometimes spelled *ounsi*).⁴⁸ Journalist Hibaq Farah remarks that *uunsi*, Somali frankincense, is widely used to perfume the houses of Somalis both at home and abroad and is linked to safety, comfort, and familiarity. She writes, “According to the elder Somali community, *uunsi* is used to lift your spirits and make the house smell clean with its powerful scent that lingers for hours. *Uunsi* is commonly used in Somali households across the globe and is one of the connecting daily routines for the wider Somali diaspora.”⁴⁹ Farah associates *uunsi* specifically to the bonds between young people, noting “All the joys, memories, and moments come alive with just a scent—reminding me of all the lives I’ve lived. I vividly recall giggling with my cousins as we tried to desperately explain the smell of one another’s houses, we’d never find the right words to use.”⁵⁰

Besides perfume, Ali cites kohl eyeliner as an example of how cosmetics and beauty routines “are often also reservoirs of sentimental and spiritual meaning. They function as bridges to loved ones for immigrants, refugees, and displaced people . . . [and] go beyond simple body beautification.”⁵¹ Shire’s poem “Bless Hooyo’s Kohl-Rimmed Eyes” is written in the plural first person; in it, a group of girls observe their mother

⁴⁶ Shire, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, 22.

⁴⁷ Nada Mustafa Ali, “Body Aesthetics and Beauty Politics in Twenty-First Century Africa: Case of the Sudan,” in *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*, ed. Maxine Leeds Craig (London: Routledge, 2021), 128.

⁴⁸ Shire, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, 20, 28.

⁴⁹ Hibaq Farah, “The Scent That Takes Me Back Home, Wherever I Am,” *Architectural Digest*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/home-scents-somali-uunsi>

⁵⁰ Farah, “The Scent That Takes Me Back Home.”

⁵¹ Ali, “Body Aesthetics,” 129.

(Hooyo, the Somali word for mother or mom) applying her kohl eyeliner. They are entranced by how she confidently lines “her eyes with darkness, no reflective / surface necessary, Allah guiding her hand / as steady as the dead.”⁵² Yet, when they try to mimic her eye makeup “with borrowed / 4B pencils,” the boys whisper behind them, calling them witches.⁵³ The girls respond together, moving “like synchronized / swimmers,” and dismissing the verbal attack with laughter.⁵⁴ Laughter here works as an act of unity among girls, turning the tables on the system that constructs women’s bodies according to male desires. Makeup is also disassociated from the male gaze and becomes a tool for women’s self-expression.

“Ugly” addresses the reader in the second person without clarifying the identity of the speaker: “Your daughter is ugly. / She knows loss intimately, / carries whole cities in her belly.”⁵⁵ As a child born in wartime, she is shunned by relatives as “She reminded them of the war.”⁵⁶ The girl’s mother attempts to make her daughter prettier, doing her hair and perfuming her breath with rosewater, stating “maccanto⁵⁷ girls like you shouldn’t smell of lonely or empty.”⁵⁸ In the 2022 rewriting, “Bless Your Ugly Daughter,” the baby girl is “smoked in uunsi to purify her of whatever / unclear thing she inherited.”⁵⁹ If anything makes the girl unacceptable, it is not her emptiness but her body overflowing with meaning that carries the weight of a painful history:

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.⁶⁰

This stanza echoes the formulaic *blason*, the rhetorical device in love poetry that describes a woman’s features by comparing parts of her body to beautiful objects like flowers or gems. Here, this formula is subverted by portraying this body as “littered with ugly things”— as an unwelcome reminder to the community of the terrors they survived. This notion of a

⁵² Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 61.

⁵³ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 61.

⁵⁴ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 61.

⁵⁵ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 28.

⁵⁶ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 28.

⁵⁷ According to the glossary included at the end of *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, *maccanto* is a “Somali term of endearment, meaning sweetness.”

⁵⁸ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 28.

⁵⁹ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 35.

⁶⁰ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 28.

body in which political history is inscribed and trauma acquires a bodily expression is a constant element in the collection, for example, in “My Foreign Wife is Dying and Does Not Want to Be Touched.” As Obi and Onyejizu remark, Shire “uses the female body to describe the unrest war creates.”⁶¹ In “Ugly,” the closing stanza suggests that this history does not need to be silenced or shrouded in shame, but instead her resilience and independence make the daughter possessor of a different kind of beauty: “But God, / doesn’t she wear / the world well?”⁶²

Bernardine Evaristo characterises Shire as “a poet who writes about women inhabiting an intimate micro universe of mothering, support, sisterhood, sensuality but also betrayal.”⁶³ Rupture and conflict between women manifest as rivalry over a man, for instance, in “The Kitchen” and “Fire.” In the latter poem, a woman who survived domestic violence is hurt by the words of her mother, who tells her on the phone that physical abuse from a husband is expected.⁶⁴ *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* uses as an epigraph a line from a Somali lullaby, *Hooyo ma joogto, kabaheeda qaadatay*, which translates as “Your mother isn’t home, she left the house and took her shoes.”⁶⁵ The rift between mother and daughter is nowhere more evident than in “Beauty,” which involves the construction of beauty as both empowering and dangerous. The speaker is the youngest of two sisters, who watches her sister washing herself after going out at night. The closeness between the two young women prevails over any judgement about the older sister’s sexuality. Although the speaker recalls that “When she was my age, she stole / the neighbour’s husband,”⁶⁶ and describes how “she winks at me, bending over the sink / her small breasts bruised from sucking,”⁶⁷ her love for her older sister and her admiration of her beauty take the place of moral judgement. In contrast, the girls’ mother “has banned [the eldest daughter] from saying God’s name.”⁶⁸

Even if the older girl is accused of “stealing the neighbour’s husband,” it is likely that, because of the reference to her youth, it is the older married man who should be regarded as guilty of statutory rape. Other words in the poem, such as “cheap perfume” and “dying flesh” suggest that,

⁶¹ Obi and Onyejizu, “No One Leaves Home,” 4.

⁶² Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 28.

⁶³ Bernardine Evaristo, Preface to *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us*, by Warsan Shire (Sleepy Hollow: Slapring Hol Press, 2014), 5.

⁶⁴ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 16.

⁶⁵ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 9.

⁶⁶ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 14.

⁶⁷ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 14.

⁶⁸ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 14.

while the girls have been taught that “*boys are haram*”⁶⁹—forbidden or unlawful according to Islamic law—it is the eldest girl who is seen as unclean or impure. This girl is a disruptive presence in the house whose very voice is regarded as taboo; therefore, “Anything that leaves her mouth sounds like sex.”⁷⁰ “Filial Cannibalism,” in the more recent collection, utilises this vocabulary of pollution and abjection to denounce how “mothers from ordinary / homes, much like our / own, feed on the viscid / shame [of] their daughters”⁷¹ although it is ultimately patriarchal control that leads women to “cannibalise” each other. In “Beauty,” the older sister reminds the younger girl of the prohibition to approach men sexually, but still, she winks as she utters that phrase, signalling irony and complicity with her sister, and her attempt to prevent the younger girl from being shamed and blamed as she was.

Unfinished Journeys

This final section will deal with those poems that commemorate and mourn the girls who died before becoming adults or consider the pain that interrupts the growth of girls, ceasing their movement and reducing their bodies to a permanent smallness. Such is the case of the girls who battle eating disorders portrayed in the poems “Bone” and “Bless the Bulimic.” In “Bone,” the speaker finds “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.”⁷² In “Bless the Bulimic,” the speaker is an immigrant, an “[i]nsolent youth,” who asks God to forgive her because her desire for thinness seems oblivious of the “famine back home.”⁷³

In the final section of *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*, “Testament,” Shire turns to girls who suffered violent deaths: Kadija, whose fall from a building is not explained,⁷⁴ and Victoria, an eight-year-old girl who died because of neglect and physical abuse from her guardians. Shire’s poem “Victoria in Illiyin” is based on a real criminal case and envisions the child entering the highest level of paradise and being treated with utmost care: “arms outstretched / in joy,” “gently carried out of the water on the shoulders / of angels, tenderly placed on the upturned palm of

⁶⁹ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 14.

⁷⁰ Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 14.

⁷¹ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 34.

⁷² Shire, *Teaching My Mother*, 11.

⁷³ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 28.

⁷⁴ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 73.

God.”⁷⁵ “Drowning in Dawson’s Creek” poignantly alludes to the popular teen drama television series to give voice, through prosopopoeia, to a young Somali woman, a fan of the show, whose body is found in the woods and whose murder case is never solved.⁷⁶ Finally, the motif of thwarted growth is frequently associated in *Bless the Daughter* with Hooyo, the mother, as a person whose youth should have been different. Hooyo’s own girlhood is described as “an incubation for madness,”⁷⁷ and the poem “Barwaaqo” (“Utopia”) imagines an alternative reality for Hooyo, where she is “young again,” and her body is compared to the bright colours and lovely scents of ripe fruit. The poem depicts her as young, beautiful, and carefree, with “desert flowers tucked in her hair,” and in this alternate history, Hooyo’s “war-mottled future [is] blown away into space.”⁷⁸

The last poem of the book, “Nail Technician as Palm Reader,” resorts again to a feminised space associated with beauty rituals. The manicurist looks at the speaker’s palm and says, “I see your daughters / and their daughters.”⁷⁹ Afterwards, the speaker dreams of giving birth to a girl who leaves her body with a C-section scar that “heals / into a tight smile.”⁸⁰ After the birth, she is taken care of by “the person [she loves],”⁸¹ and there is no sign of the disapproval and rejection seen prior to the announcement of the birth of a girl. The speaker awakes from the dream as she foresees the birth of a second girl. The words employed to describe the birth of the second baby speak of confidence in her future as she “crawls / head first up” the speaker’s throat, and she is “a flower, blossoming / out of the hole in [her] face.”⁸² Childbirth metaphors have an established history in poetry by women about female creativity: the “hole” in the poet’s face is her mouth, and the nail technician could be anticipating how, through her speech, she will give birth to poems that bring her own story, her peers’, and her mother’s into focus.

Conclusion

The discussion of representations of Black girlhood must be mindful of the ways in which Black girls are admonished for growing up

⁷⁵ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 77.

⁷⁶ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 31.

⁷⁷ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 47.

⁷⁸ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 80.

⁷⁹ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 82.

⁸⁰ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 82.

⁸¹ Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 82.

⁸² Shire, *Bless the Daughter*, 82.

too fast while simultaneously pressured to grow up sooner. Aria S. Halliday writes, “For many of us, as Black girls, we were regularly castigated for carrying ourselves in so-called womanish ways, and yet also disciplined for the abuses of men in our lives. Our joy in our bodies and pleasure in being fully ourselves were squelched or demonized for fear of what Black men or white people would do to us.”⁸³ This commentary offers important insight when read with poems like “Beauty.” On the other hand, Tonjie Reese cautions against a tendency to “adultify” Black girls, perceiving them as more responsible but also making them vulnerable to inappropriate comments, to sexualisation, and overall creating dangers and threats that Black girls are made responsible for avoiding by “abiding by the rules.”⁸⁴

This chapter presented an overview of how the themes of sexuality, shame, beauty, and gender-based violence figure in Warsan Shire’s poems about girls, teenagers, and young women whose journeys into adulthood are complicated by intersecting systems of oppression. Besides their age and gender, the sexual violence during wartime, the characters’ immigrant status, and the racism and Islamophobia in destination countries result in a coming-of-age process that cannot follow the traditional patterns of success and acceptance among institutions that were built on discriminatory foundations. The trauma that mothers endured often renders them unable to guide their children into a safe adulthood, and daughters are left by themselves to figure out their identities and their places in the world. Poetry and storytelling can be valuable in this process, as suggested by Audre Lorde’s epigraph. Moreover, young women draw joy and strength from female friends and kin, and even the bodies that are seen as reminders of suffering, or excluded as “unclean,” can be represented as resilient, lovable, and beautiful. In a sense, *Bless the Daughter* also represents the poet’s own coming-of-age as she has moved from the online platforms and brief chapbooks to a full-length collection of poems that were nominated for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection of the Forward Arts Foundation. Nevertheless, Shire’s continual reworking of her previous work (many poems in *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* expand on or modify previously published poems) suggests that these narratives of development do not reach definite conclusions but instead attest to identity’s fluid and dynamic qualities. Warsan Shire’s work represents an indispensable contemporary response to bell hooks’s call in her own autobiography *Bone*

⁸³ Aria S. Halliday, “Introduction,” *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*, ed. Aria S. Halliday (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2019), 7.

⁸⁴ Tonjie Reese, “The War Against Black Girls: Addressing the Adultification Bias,” *California Partnership to End Domestic Violence*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.cpedv.org/post/war-against-black-girls-addressing-adultification-bias>

Black: Memories of Girlhood that “to understand the complexity of Black girlhood we need more work that documents that reality in all its variations and diversity.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), xiii.

CHAPTER 2

“LONDON BLUES,” BLACK WOMEN, AND DIASPORIC RACIAL DISUNITY

CAMILLE S. ALEXANDER

Introduction

Caribbean migration narratives in the decades post-WWII abound, but, until the 1970s, these narratives were largely penned by male writers. Therefore, these migration narratives were absorbed with more traditionally male concerns. The publishers of these male-centred narratives reflect, not only a publishing industry influenced and monitored by males but audiences who were not interested in reading about ‘foreign’ women and their experiences. The male-centred Caribbean literature produced many immigrant writers living in the UK during the Windrush generation represented a specific time in literary history—one that, by the 1980s, had changed. In the early 2000s, black British writers, like Zadie Smith and the late Andrea Levy, represented another wave of black British literary history—one crafted by the children of Windrush generation immigrants. Yet, between these literary generations—Windrush and their children—is another group of writers comprised of Caribbean women migrants, who did not necessarily make the UK their permanent home but travelled there for a specified time and returned to their home countries. One of those writers is Eintou Pearl Springer, an Afro-Trinbagonian poet and cultural influencer who lived in the UK during the 1980s, crafting poetry based on her experiences abroad.

In the 1980s, Springer, then a single mother of three daughters, migrated to England to earn a master’s degree in library studies with her children. As both a single mother and a non-traditional student, Springer was an atypical island scholarship winner among a sea of young, male, traditional students sent to the Mother Country to matriculate at Oxford and Cambridge. In addition, Springer’s decision to focus on her daughters and family, choosing to have them accompany her abroad rather than morphing

them into the famed ‘Barrel Children’, was a rather radical decision at the time. Island scholarships were not necessarily awarded to students like Springer; therefore, her presence in this group and at that time in history was singularly impressive.¹

Springer’s poetry typically engages in probing the margins, challenging disparate social structures while advocating for real and meaningful changes on the micro and macro level. She is concerned with those gendered issues that her male counterparts might well ignore, such as family, love, and commitment between migrants experiencing a diaspora. One of Springer’s poems addresses these issues, focusing on Afro-Caribbean, heterosexual relationships. The poem “London Blues” from Springer’s collection *Loving the Skin I’m In*² is likely set in the 1980s—decades after Caribbean independence from the British Empire and the Windrush period. The poem explores the feelings of abandonment that Afro-Caribbean women might experience when, during a diaspora, they are essentially cast aside by Afro-Caribbean men, who reject them in favour of white, British women.

Race, Romance, and Immigration

The element of race in romantic and/or sexual relationships is a constant theme in Windrush era writing produced by Caribbean men. Perhaps the most well-known text of the era that succinctly addresses the element of desire between Afro-Caribbean men and white British women is Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*.³ In this novel, the Afro-Caribbean male characters seem quite obsessed with white women. Daniel, who often treats white women to the ballet, mentions, “I want them to feel good that we coloured fellars could take them to those places.”⁴ When the protagonist, Moses Aloetta, remarks, “You spending your money bad... Them girls ain’t worth it,”⁵ he also observes that “Daniel does feel good when he do things like that, it give him a big kick to know that one of the boys could take white girls to them places to listen to classics and see artistic ballet.”⁶ Even Tantie, an older Jamaican woman, observes “White girls... is that what sweeten up

¹ Springer’s biographical information is taken from interviews the author of this chapter conducted with her between 2012 and 2013.

² Eintou Pearl Springer, “London Blues,” in *Loving the Skin I’m In* (Port-of-Spain, Trinidad: Lexicon Trinidad Ltd, 2005), 14-18.

³ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin Books, 1956/2006).

⁴ Selvon, 43.

⁵ Selvon, 43.

⁶ Selvon, 43.