

# From Rhetoric to Reality: Warsan Shire's "Home" and the Refugee Crisis

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## Abstract

This paper examines Warsan Shire's poem "Home" within the context of the contemporary refugee crisis driven by civil wars in various countries. The paper also discusses how, despite the ideals of open borders and the right to seek safety advocated by globalization, human rights, and the United Nations, refugees frequently encounter difficulties such as humiliation, xenophobic aggression, and discrimination in host nations. Applying Emmanuel Levinas's "politics of hospitality" and Gordon Allport's "contact hypothesis" as theoretical frameworks, this study argues that genuine hospitality, marked by positive interactions and proper integration, is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical principles and the practical treatment of refugees in the domains of human rights discourse and globalization. This study makes a significant contribution by highlighting the challenges faced by asylum seekers in host countries and urging humanity to offer genuine hospitality to mitigate the fears of civil war, terrorism, and other forms of violence.

*Keywords:* contact hypothesis, globalization, hospitality, human rights, refugees

## Introduction

In the 21st century's interconnected world, civil wars and political violence have created a global crisis, displacing countless individuals who, in search of safety, become refugees and move to different countries for shelter. However, these displaced individuals often encounter xenophobic aggression, jingoistic attitudes, and racist sentiments in host countries rather than a welcoming environment. The growing trend of such hostile responses raises serious questions about the principles of globalization and the discourse on human rights.

The principle of open borders promoted by globalization and the welcoming ethos declared by human rights discourse often appear more as

rhetoric than reality, as refugees frequently undergo hardships in their quest for safety. This paper examines common struggles of refugees, such as finding one's identity, coping with the emotions of leaving home, adjusting to new places, and dealing with the impacts of violence.

By exploring these themes, the paper aims to reveal the disparity between the claims made by globalization and human rights discourse and the reality. It also argues that the poem "Home" is influential in engaging readers with the refugee crisis, appealing not only for compassionate responses to genuine refugees but also for a global effort to eradicate war and violence to promote human rights.

### Literature Review

The past studies on the aforementioned poem indicate that critics have overlooked the rhetoric of globalization and human rights discourse concerning the refugee crisis and their status in host countries. In this connection, Majeed Hammadi Khalifa (2023), in his article "The Use of Homeland Voice in Warsan Shire's (2023) 'Home' Poem: Analytical Study," notes the plight and predicament of people in their homelands caused by civil war. The poem, he argues, "recounts the harrowing journey of refugees fleeing the unrest in their home country in search of safety, shelter, and comfort from the tumultuous circumstances there" (107). In his reading, the critic also points out the difficulties faced by refugees in host countries. The criticism, however, falls short regarding how this poem unveils the rhetoric of globalization and human rights discourse in terms of free mobility and global citizenship.

Similarly, Bridget Grogan (2020), in her article "Refining Contrapuntal Pedagogy: Reflections on Teaching Warsan Shire's 'Home' and W. H. Auden's 'Refugee Blues' to First-Year Students," juxtaposes "Home" with "Refugee Blues" to reveal how both poems explore similar themes of refugee displacement, alienation, fear, and loss, allowing students to reflect more deeply on the refugee experience and the complexities of human emotion. As she argues, contrapuntal pedagogy encourages "students' observations on poetic voice, racial identity, transhistorical and transcultural human experience, trauma, and empathy" (1). The critic here suggests that contrapuntal teaching helps students explore different elements of poetry like the poet's voice, racial identity, and shared human experiences. She also highlights poetry as a potent medium to depict human challenges around the globe. However, she does not address the issue of globalization and discussions on human rights in her critique.

Correspondingly, Ali Gunes (2019), in his article "Why Do Refugees Have to Leave Their Sweet Home 'Unless Home is the Mouth of a Shark'? An Analysis of Warsan Shire's Poem

'Home,'" shows his empathy for refugees and critiques humanitarian agencies that are indifferent to the trials and tribulations refugees undergo to survive in host countries. According to him, blame should be placed "on politicians, international agencies, civil rights groups, non-governmental organizations, the United Nations, and the media because they are not eager to comprehend and resolve the problem" (p. 30). The critic highlights the indifference of humanitarian agencies towards the challenges refugees face in host countries. However, he pays little attention to the efforts of human rights agencies and global organizations in addressing the refugee crisis per their core principles and values.

The critics Uchenna Frances Ob and Raphael Chukwuemeka Onyejizu (2021), in the same way, analyze Warsan Shire's poems "Home" and "Conversation about Home (at a Deportation Center)," focusing on diasporic identity and the notion of home amidst displacement. They point out that the poet's use of language, symbols, and imagery emphasizes the harsh realities faced by Somalian immigrants in deportation centers, shedding light on the refugee crises in modern times. As they note:

Warsan Shire's Poetry explores how female Somalian refugees grapple with the complexities of dwelling and belonging in diaspora after being displaced by the Somalia civil war. Through her poetry, Shire illustrates the challenges immigrants in diaspora face that results in the quest for a return to home, despite the absurdities still prevalent in the homeland. (p. 2)

Shire's poetry depicts the struggles of Somali women who had to leave Somalia because of the civil war. They find it difficult to feel at home in new countries as refugees. Even though Somalia has its problems, they still long to return. However, their criticism does not fully address the rhetoric of human rights discourses and globalization.

Likewise, Nurhadianty Rahayu (2020), in her article, "The Subjectivity of Forced-Migrants

in Poems of and by Refugees," discusses three poems: "Home" by Warsan Shire, "The Icebreaker" by Yovanka Paquete Perdigao, and "Empathy" by A.E. Stallings. She focuses on the emotions these refugee poems express. Rahayu highlights how these poems make readers feel and think about the experiences of forced migrants:

The poetic expression in the three poems reveals the powerful poetic voice that engages in refugees 'powerful knowledge-making and social discussion trigger while at the same time; construct the question of privilege in refugee discourse. By considering the dual viewpoints of refugees, forced-migratory experience, the three poems reconstruct the meaning-making process that triggers the readers in the spirit of solidarity for humanity and a more inclusive community and social interaction. (p. 125)

The affective power of poetry lies in its ability to evoke emotions and empathy in readers. Through vivid descriptions of the violation and violence experienced by refugees, the poems compel readers to confront the harsh realities faced by displaced individuals. This emotional impact drives readers towards a sense of global solidarity, advocating for justice and support for refugees. However, this criticism does not fully address the broader discourse of human rights and the theory of globalization, which advocate for free mobility and welcoming attitudes with a strong sense of hospitality.

The aforementioned critical studies of the selected poem commonly highlight themes of civil war, forced migration, and the challenges faced by refugees in their host countries, including unwelcoming attitudes and the hardships experienced by displaced individuals. However, they underestimate the rhetoric of human rights discourse and globalization, which advocate for treating refugees with a great sense of hospitality and acceptance. The reality is that refugees often undergo agonizing experiences in host countries,

despite the ideals promoted by human rights discourse and globalization. This paper aims to bridge this gap by exploring how concepts such as globalization and human rights can be practically applied to address the growing refugee issue.

Home: Warsan Shire's Poetic Response to the Refugee Crisis

"Home" is a poem by Warsan Shire, a renowned British-Somali poet and winner of the Brunel University African Poetry Prize in 2014. Her poems often explore themes such as identity, displacement, and the refugee crisis in various countries. This poem portrays people in a restless state as they seek refuge in other countries while their own country is ravaged by civil war. However, seeking asylum in host countries is not always positive. People often endure xenophobic aggression, humiliation, and various other forms of discrimination and degradation. The first few lines of the poem reflect the imagery of death and danger caused by the devastation of war in their home country.

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well  
(Shire, lines 1–4)

The image of an entire city fleeing to other countries out of fear of death in a civil war reflects the grim reality of war. The imagery of a "shark" evokes thoughts of death and insecurity. This metaphor further suggests that individuals only abandon their homes when remaining there means becoming a victim of a predator (war).

As the poem progresses, it reveals the poignant atmosphere of being forced to leave one's home—a place of love and security—due to conflict, violence, or persecution. The following lines reflect the harsh realities of displacement and the profound impact it has on individuals and communities:

the boy you went to school with  
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin  
factory

is holding a gun bigger than his body  
you only leave home

when home won't let you stay. (lines 6–11)

The phrase "home won't let you stay" suggests that circumstances within one's home have become dangerous, making staying no longer an option. This departure is not by choice but by force. Leaving home, despite the desire to stay, reflects the painful decision that refugees and displaced individuals often have to make. It also highlights the trauma of leaving behind loved ones and memories. The reference to the boy who once kissed the speaker behind the old tin factory, now holding a gun bigger than his body, draws attention to the loss of innocence and how individuals are compelled to take up arms due to conflict or violence. The use of "you" similarly suggests that the experience of leaving home is not individual but rather shared by many who find themselves in similar circumstances. It also shows how displacement affects society as a whole.

When people escape political violence to find safety, they often have no choice but to seek asylum in other countries. The importance of their national identity becomes evident when they recall their national anthem while fleeing for safety.

no one leaves home unless home chases you  
fire under feet  
hot blood in your belly  
it's not something you ever thought of doing  
until the blade burnt threats into  
your neck  
and even then you carried the anthem under  
your breath (lines 12–19)

The line "no one leaves home unless home chases you" conveys the idea that people do not leave their homes by choice but are compelled to flee due to violence, persecution, or other forms of danger in their home country. The reference to "blade burnt threats into your neck" suggests that people are forced to leave their homes under the threat of physical harm or death. The phrase "the anthem under your breath" evokes the power of

one's identity and sense of belonging even in the face of adversity.

We see the most harrowing image of tearing one's passport at the airport to mark one's status as a refugee in the following lines, which capture the profound sense of loss and displacement experienced by refugees and those forced to leave their homes in search of safety and a better future.

only tearing up your passport in an airport  
toilet  
sobbing as each mouthful of paper  
made it clear that you wouldn't be going  
back. (lines 20–22)

The act of tearing up one's passport in an airport restroom conveys the emotional turmoil of leaving one's homeland behind. Destroying a passport symbolizes a detachment from one's identity and nationality. The act of sobbing further emphasizes the anguish and sorrow of being forced to leave one's homeland.

The poet poignantly depicts the struggles and plight of asylum seekers, using powerful imagery to convey the difficulties faced by those seeking safety. The following lines further unfold the risky journey of people escaping violence or persecution in their homeland and the trauma that follows:

that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land  
no one burns their palms  
under trains  
beneath carriages  
no one spends days and nights in the stomach  
of a truck (lines 24–29).

These lines evocatively tell us that people only resort to risky methods, such as putting their children on a boat or hiding under trains, when they have no other option. They also highlight the hopeless and desperate circumstances that force individuals to take extreme risks to escape dangers such as war or persecution. The poet further depicts the harrowing conditions of refugees in camps and prisons in host countries and ironically asserts that life in these camps and prisons is better than

the war-torn homeland. The poet also captures a growing trend of inhospitality towards refugees through the following lines:

no one chooses refugee camps  
or strip searches where your  
body is left aching  
or prison,  
because prison is safer  
than a city of fire  
and one prison guard  
in the night  
is better than a truckload (lines 35–41)

These lines reveal the severe difficulties faced by refugees, who often endure uncomfortable conditions such as body inspections and confinement in camps or prisons. Despite these challenges, they view such places as safer than the war-torn cities they flee. This comparison highlights the extreme dangers they escape from and the difficult choices they must make to seek safety.

Italian political thinker and philosopher Giorgio Agamben elaborately discusses the living conditions, legal frameworks, and humanitarian issues surrounding refugee camps in his celebrated book *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. According to Agamben, “rather than increasingly including migrants and refugees in political membership, humanitarian camps accomplish precisely the opposite: they depoliticize migrants and refugees by treating them as mere human beings” (qtd. in Nail, 2006, p. 192). Agamben argues that rather than helping migrants and refugees, humanitarian camps actually strip them of their political agency and treat them as if they are not important, merely basic humans with few rights. The camps are potentially lethal, liminal, and unpredictable spaces where the normal rules and protections of society do not apply.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in Article 14, states that everyone who is threatened with persecution in their homeland and who is not involved in any serious crime has the right to seek asylum and enjoy protection in other

countries. As the article maintains, “Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations” (qtd. in Sharma, 2010, p. 136). Article 14 of the UDHR asserts that if someone is in danger in their own country and has not committed any serious crimes, they have the right to seek safety in another country. This means that people should not be punished or sent back to where they might be harmed if they are seeking safety. This ideal of the UDHR is often ignored, as refugees frequently experience dehumanizing treatment in host countries.

The following lines depict a deeply unwelcoming attitude prevalent in host countries towards marginalized groups, particularly refugees and immigrants. These sentiments are guided by jingoism, xenophobic aggression, racism, and various forms of prejudice.

go home blacks  
refugees  
dirty immigrants  
asylum seekers  
sucking our country dry  
niggers with their hands out  
they smell strange  
savage ( lines 49–56)

The phrase “go home, blacks” suggests a demand for Black individuals to leave, reflecting racial discrimination and a refusal to accept them as part of the community. Similarly, terms like “dirty immigrants” and “asylum seekers sucking our country dry” reveal xenophobic attitudes towards outsiders, portraying them as burdens rather than individuals in need of support and compassion. The politically incorrect terms “niggers” and “savage” dehumanize individuals based on their race, reflecting deeply rooted racism and a lack of empathy. The phrase “smell strange” further exhibits the xenophobic and prejudiced attitudes present in the host country.

Gordon Allport (1954), in his masterpiece *The Nature of Prejudice*, explores the psychological roots and manifestations of prejudice, focusing particularly on racial and ethnic prejudice in American society. Allport defines prejudice as a "feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on, actual experience" (p. 19). He discusses different forms of prejudice in his book—stereotypes, discrimination, ethnocentrism, etc. In their article, "The Contact Hypothesis and Racial Attitudes among Black Americans," Christopher G. Ellison and Daniel A. Powers (1994) discuss Allport's "contact hypothesis." They explain, "This hypothesis states that contact, particularly close and sustained contact, with members of different cultural groups promotes positive, tolerant attitudes" (p. 385). To put it more pointedly, spending time with and getting to know people from diverse backgrounds can help facilitate understanding and acceptance between different groups, mitigate prejudice, and promote social harmony.

While prejudices against asylum seekers, who have escaped war, are commonplace, Allport's contact hypothesis becomes even more relevant. Through meaningful interactions between asylum seekers and host communities, people can combat discrimination and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone. This approach has the power to make the world a more peaceful and harmonious place. The following lines also reflect the negative attitude towards refugees by the communities of the host country.

messed up their country and now they want  
to mess ours up  
how do the words  
the dirty looks  
roll off your backs  
maybe because the blow is softer  
than a limb torn off (lines 57–63)

These lines convey a hostile attitude towards refugees or immigrants, blaming them for problems in the host country. The phrase "messed up their country and now they want to mess ours

up" suggests a belief that refugees are responsible for issues such as conflict, instability, or economic hardship in the host country. However, the speaker suggests that these negative reactions are less traumatic than the physical harm indicated by the phrase "limb torn off."

The following lines in the poem illustrate the impact of violence and violation in the homeland and depict the painful experiences endured by refugees amidst the insulting and humiliating environment in the host country.

or the words are more tender  
than fourteen men between  
your legs  
or the insults are easier  
to swallow  
than rubble  
than bone  
than your child body  
in pieces. (lines 64–72)

The speaker contrasts the emotional impact of verbal insults with the physical harm caused by violence and war. The speaker suggests that although insults and verbal abuse can cause emotional pain, they are far less severe compared to the traumatic impact of experiencing physical violence and witnessing the destruction caused by war. The comparison of words being "more tender" than "having fourteen men between one's legs" suggests that verbal insults, though hurtful, do not cause physical harm like sexual violence does.

i want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore  
unless home told you  
to quicken your legs  
leave your clothes behind  
crawl through the desert  
wade through the oceans (lines 73–82)

The lines depict the plight of asylum seekers who are forced to flee their homes due to violence,

persecution, and devastation caused by war. The imagery of home as "the mouth of a shark" and "the barrel of a gun" reflects the danger and threat these individuals face in their own countries. The dangerous journey across both sea and desert highlights the lengths to which people will go to escape violence and find safety.

The poem reveals the horrors of war in one's homeland and sheds light on the difficulties asylum seekers encounter even after reaching places they hoped would offer safety. The rejection, humiliation, and hostility they face from host communities expose the failure of these societies to uphold the ideals of compassion, hospitality, and interconnectedness. In this context, the lack of hospitality in host countries not only contradicts the principles of globalization, which advocates interconnectedness and mutual understanding, but also reflects a growing failure of humanity to empathize with the Other.

Emmanuel Levinas proposes the concept of the "politics of hospitality," where the notion of "radical alterity" is central. This idea emphasizes the ethical imperative to welcome the Other unconditionally. David J. Gauthier (2007) explained Levinas' idea of the politics of hospitality as follows:

[...] hospitality operates in two distinct realms, the ethical and the political. In the ethical realm, the self is morally compelled to welcome the individual stranger into the private space of the home. In the public realm, the self is politically obligated to welcome the whole of humanity into the public space of the homeland. However, since politics is violent and totalizing, the practice of political hospitality requires an ethical transformation of the public realm. For Levinas, such a transformation entails the creation of political and juridical institutions that are fraternalistic, monotheistic and messianic in nature. It is found that Levinas's hospitality ethic is compromised by the fraternalistic, monotheistic and messianic aspects of his political vision. (p. 159)

Levinas's idea of hospitality spans both ethics and politics. Ethically, it involves welcoming

strangers into our private space; politically, it extends to welcoming all humanity into our public space. However, because politics can be violent, true political hospitality requires transforming public institutions to reflect values such as brotherhood, monotheism, and messianism.

In the context of host countries, Levinas's framework places the highest premium on the ethical obligation to cultivate environments of openness and acceptance, where the dignity and humanity of all individuals are upheld, free from distinctions of caste, creed, and custom. The idea of hospitality provokes important reflection on the moral obligations and possibilities within contemporary political discourse.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Shire's poem highlights the struggles of civilians fleeing civil war and seeking refuge in other countries. It also reveals how many host countries respond with hostility and discrimination towards asylum seekers, driven by xenophobic aggression and prejudice. The rising xenophobic attitudes and discriminatory practices in host countries threaten the ideals of global citizenship and the right to free mobility to escape war and persecution, as championed by globalization and human rights discourse. The poem encourages reflection on the current refugee crisis and advocates not only for compassionate responses to refugees but also for active efforts to eradicate war and violence worldwide. By addressing these issues, we can contribute to making the world a better place, reducing the threat of war, terrorism, and other forms of violence and violation.

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