

Women's Agency: A Response to Masculine Configuration in the Poems of Warsan Shire

Haider Ihsan Dawar

Postgraduate Student, Department of English
Forman Christian College University, Lahore

Maria Shah

Postgraduate Student, Department of English
Forman Christian College University, Lahore

Abstract

This paper explores the construction of masculinity and its intersectional effects on women in Somali society in Warsan Shire's *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*, a collection of poetry. Drawing upon R. W. Connell's conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity, Louis Althusser's concept of ideology, with additional support from other feminist theorists, the research studies how the patriarchal system socially engineers gender and develops unequal power relations. The analysis uncovers the manifestation of masculinity in Somali culture via social institutions that privilege men while subordinating women across gender, racial, and class hierarchies. Shire's poetry portrays these structures through vivid depictions of domestic, sexual, and economic oppression, demonstrating the internalisation and perpetuation of patriarchal ideology through cultural narratives and social practices. Moreover, Shire's work voices resistance—asserting knowledge, solidarity, and self-awareness as forms of empowerment. Within the framework of feminist, masculinity, and cultural theoretical paradigms, this research establishes Shire's work as both a critique of systemic oppression and an articulation of women's agency in reclaiming subjectivity. Ultimately, the study underscores Shire's contribution to Somali and global feminist discourse, highlighting her poetic reconstruction of gendered identities as a call for social transformation and equality.

Keywords:

Masculinity, Resistance, Ideology, Oppressions

1. Introduction

The construction of masculinity within Somali society delineates a complex hierarchy in which men occupy dominant positions, while women are systematically subordinated. This social organisation, deeply embedded within cultural, political, and economic institutions, is not natural but socially constructed, shaping perceptions, behaviours, and roles from early childhood. Feminist scholars emphasise that “gender refers to the social processes that fit us into the highly distinct (though falsely so) categories we have named male and female”¹ (Lynne M. Woehrle and Donna Engelmann 2008, 859). Such categorisations reinforce inequalities, privileging masculine subjectivity and legitimising women’s marginalisation².

Furthermore, to argue the formation of gender and the materialisation of patriarchy in the forms of masculinity, which oppresses women in a structured manner, this paper preserves Warsan Shire’s *Bless the Daughter Raised By a Voice In Her Head*, a collection of poetry, as a primary source. Shire’s poems offer a vivid portrayal of these dynamics; alongside, it reveals how hegemonic masculinities, expressed through gendered expectations, racial hierarchies, and economic dominance, constrain women physically, emotionally, and socially, while providing men with unchallenged authority³.

Moreover, the study opts for a mixed theoretical framework composed of Connell’s conceptualisation of gender as a social practice and the “two patterns of violence”⁴, masculinities, and Louis Althusser’s concepts of ideology and ideological apparatuses. Moreover, the framework is supported by other feminist theorists as well in theoretical terms. This study interrogates not only the forms of male dominance but also the nuanced ways in which women contest and resist these structures.

Through the poetic lens, this research explores how women perceive, experience, and respond to systemic oppression. The study considers the socialisation of gender norms, the institutionalised violence inherent in patriarchal systems, and the strategies employed by women to challenge these inequalities. In doing so, it investigates how Somali women navigate the intersections of race, class, and gender, and how their acts of resistance (both subtle and overt) represent a critical engagement with social hierarchies. Shire’s poetry illuminates the tension between oppressive masculinities and emergent feminist consciousness, demonstrating that while patriarchal dominance remains pervasive, women’s collective

awareness and activism have the potential to reshape societal structures. By connecting textual analysis to broader socio-theoretical frameworks, this research contributes to an understanding of the interplay between masculinity, oppression, and women's agency in a context often overlooked in feminist discourse.

Literature Review

Gender identity is one of the long-standing issues in feminism. Scholars from across the world have contributed to the discussion on feminism with multiple views, such as masculinity, femininity, lesbianism, and the related concepts, but the discussion has not yet received any conclusive remarks, as the subjective nature of the concept makes it open to discussion and more debate. Feminism, from one perspective, deals predominantly with "...a way of looking at the world, which women occupy from the perspective of women"⁵; however, bell hooks' idea of feminism in her essay "understanding patriarchy" contradicts and expands the definition of feminism. Her discussion reveals the fact that feminism is not only the representation of women, but it also highlights the oppression of men by the patriarchal structure. For example, to indoctrinate boys into the rule of patriarchy, we force them to feel pain and deny their feelings⁶ (hooks 1984, 38). Nevertheless, this research work focuses on the former definition of feminism that explores the ways to understand the presentation, representation, and the depiction of women in a "patriarchal world represented by men folks"⁷.

In a world dominated by men, women are mostly placed in a subordinate position on the ladder of the social hierarchy. Male considers his dominancy as their right and a natural gift, which, although feminists and experts of gender studies deny the authenticity of the male dominancy on the basis that "Patriarchy is not an autonomous oppression system, but a system deeply rooted in imperialism, racism, and capitalism"⁸. This decentralises the system by questioning its naturalness. Moreover, the author adds that "Masculinity, as one of the particular manifestations of patriarchy, is a social construction built upon ideas of 'virility', 'honor' and 'power'"⁹. Man exercises his powers because the system of patriarchy has made him powerful, but on the other hand, feminism works in the field to deconstruct the male gender dominance.

The battle of keeping the centre intact and decentralising is not a story of the recent past, but for quite a long time, feminism in its various forms has tried to decentralise the system of patriarchy. Feminism opts to liberate women from the oppressions of men,

which are exercised "...through... social, political and economic institutions"¹⁰. In this regard, writers from the past few centuries have been working to highlight the issues that women face in society. These writers have always faced the obstacles of their particular social structure, for instance, in the nineteenth century, women were not allowed to publish their works under their names; they used pseudonyms, e.g., "the Brontë sisters created the pen names of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell"¹¹. Although the proponents of female representations have always made their way. A research scholar, Divya Hariharan, in her research article, begins with a comparison of Shire's poem "For Women Who Are Difficult to Love" with "The Rights of Women" by Anna Laetitia Barbauld. According to the research scholar, the two represent "their own society through these poems and have focused on the thoughts of patriarchy set by the male chauvinistic sections..."¹². The two poets belong to two different societies and ages, but they both focus on the aspect of female liberty. This aspect of their writings reveals the unending struggle of the "women [who] still strive to come out of the pre-societal norms set by the patriarchal world"¹³. Women of different ages, though with the slightest improvement in the present century, have been kept marginalised by social and economic machinery. In the analysis of the two poems, the researcher remarks that Shire "tries to produce thrusts in her women readers by showcasing women as unique away from the stereotypical expectations"¹⁴, which is one of the obstacles in Shire's social surroundings.

Shire is one of the most accepted poets in the contemporary era; research scholars show great interest in her poetic work as it addresses some of the problems of the contemporary world in general and of the Somali society in particular. According to research scholars, who highlight, yet keep it open for further studies, write that the central themes of her works are "...traditional gender roles and the desire for freedom and self-expression"¹⁵; along with that, "war, migration, trauma"¹⁶ also reflect as the centre of her poetry.

A woman's picture designed by a man with the help of stereotypes such as traditional gender roles in a society has kept women marginalised in the expression of their sexual orientation. Societal structures and roles mutilate female sexual desire by performing female circumcision that strips girls of the ability to express their sexuality. This process "strips [girls] of their ability to discover themselves... [which is an] ... extension of [their] voice"¹⁷. The author of the article focuses on the trauma of the girls who have

undergone female genital mutilation (FGM). Although the study points out the suffering and trauma of the females, it falls short in shedding light on the fundamental aspect of why a *father* performs such violence. Michael has highlighted this fact to an extent that a father does so “to control her sexual impulses”¹⁸, but it needs to explore the reasons for violence, which contributes to one of the research objectives of the present study.

Besides the stereotypes against women, which are designed by society, research studies identify the diversity in Shire’s works. The scholars trace the dimensions of war and migration in the works of the poet. Her poem, “The House”, deals with the sufferings of the people who leave their homes due to wars and conflicts. “The house” identifies the origin of an individual; that is to say, a house or home shows the identity linkages of a person to a certain social background, which one loses during the time of conflicts. Researchers write that Shire “highlights the marginalised position of refugees and analyses the structures that deny them a sense of belonging”¹⁹. Khalifa explores, while analysing her poem “Home”, the theme of nostalgia for her country and people. According to the researcher, in the poem “Home”, Shire tries to connect to her people and raise her voice against the injustices and mistreatments of the Somalians. This poem reverberates a “homeland voice” through which the poet has discussed “the circumstances that force one to abandon one’s beloved country, residence, and possessions”²⁰. This research study, though not explicitly, but in the form of a desire or nostalgia, traces the traumatic past of the poet. The “Home”, as per the opinion of the scholar “illustrate[s]... the country’s situation ... as horrible...and messy”²¹. While the theme of the war, marginalisation, and sense of loss of belonging is identified in relation to “the oppressive nature of power structures”, which the researchers identify in particular with the political structure, the marginalization and sense of loss of identity is not confined to the only structure, that is political. Shire’s work is diverse in its theme; restricting themes to only political causes does not do justice to the subject matter of her literary work; other structures in society are responsible for the marginalisation of women, to mention it in particular. Therefore, this aspect needs to be explored from the perspective of structural or institutional violence.

Keeping the above studies in consideration, it can be concluded that the centre of concentration of Shire’s works is limited to some of the major themes such as refugees, identity and trauma,

but there is a gap to look deep down in her poetry about the kinds of masculinity, the structural oppressions that women of the Somalia face, and a group of the modern women who challenge the established social inequality in terms of gender. Therefore, this research will attempt to fill the gap by studying the selected work of Warsan Shire.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of gender, power, and identity in Warsan Shire's poetry requires a framework capable of accounting for both the social construction of gender and the structural conditions that sustain inequality. Feminist theory provides a foundational lens, emphasising that gender roles are socially constituted rather than biologically determined, and that literature can both reflect and challenge these roles. By centring women's experiences, feminist theory illuminates the ways in which patriarchal norms shape social expectations and restrict agency. As bell hooks argues, feminist analysis must interrogate not only women's subordination but also the mechanisms by which men are socialised into dominance, creating a comprehensive understanding of patriarchal structures²².

Furthermore, supported by Intersectionality, it complements feminist theory by highlighting how multiple axes of identity, i.e., race, class, ethnicity, and migration status, interact to produce unique forms of oppression²³. In the Somali context, gendered vulnerability is compounded by displacement, cultural expectations, and economic precarity, which shape both women's marginalisation and the performance of masculinity. Intersectionality thus allows for a nuanced understanding of how social inequalities are not uniform but contextually contingent, operating differently across social, political, and historical landscapes²⁴.

Central to the analysis is the study of masculinities, particularly as conceptualised by R. W. Connell. Connell's framework distinguishes between hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalised masculinities, emphasising that gender is relational: men's identities are constructed in relation to women's roles and societal hierarchies²⁵. In Shire's poetry, depictions of male figures often reflect the pressures of hegemonic masculinity, including violence, emotional suppression, and authority, as well as the vulnerabilities produced by these same norms. By applying Connell's typology, this study situates male behaviour within broader structural and cultural systems, moving beyond individualised readings to explore systemic patterns. Alongside, Louis Althusser's concepts of

ideology and ideological state apparatuses²⁶ are utilised to frame arguments in terms of the ideological workings of patriarchy. For this reason, his concept of “interpellation”²⁷ has also been brought into use.

By integrating feminist, intersectional, and masculinity studies perspectives within the broader spectrum of ideologies, this theoretical framework enables a comprehensive examination of Warsan Shire’s poetic narratives. It situates gender not as a static characteristic but as a socially and culturally mediated performance, shaped by intersecting forms of oppression and opportunity. Shire’s portrayal of women’s resistance, male complicity, and societal constraints can thus be critically analysed within a robust theoretical scaffold that foregrounds both structural analysis and literary interpretation.

The Construction: Masculinity in Somalia

Masculinity, standing “...with an essentialist definition [Freud] equated masculinity with activity in contrast to feminine passivity [; however,] later authors' attempts to capture an essence of masculinity have been colourfully varied: risk-taking, responsibility, irresponsibility, aggression, Zeus energy”²⁸. The definition of the term masculinity, in its essence, is quite subjective and arbitrary at the same time. Connell, while concluding her comments on the meaning of the term, defines Masculinity as “a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture”²⁹. The definition proposed by Connell leads us to the understanding that masculinity or “gender is a way in which social practice is ordered”³⁰. To elaborate, social practice encompasses the day-to-day activities of individuals that range from perceptions to practices, for instance, games, dances, songs, fashion, and the performance at the banquet or self-display in a class, and the associated aesthetic sense of masculinity and femininity to them, which are further labelled into two main categories of male and female genders by the institution of patriarchy.

This division or the gender formation according to Connell has no relation with bodies biologically; it is based on the “social practice[s]”, perceptions and comprehensions of each other³¹. These social practices are social constructions that carry cross-association to masculinity and femininity; the two are designed to display the masculine-feminine conformity. The genders, in other words, are made to follow the established dogmatic relation to a particular

gender: male or female. Hereby, masculinity manifests patriarchal ideology in its various forms, as elicited in the succeeding paragraphs; however, before exploring the forms of patriarchal manifestations, it is necessary to ground the understanding of this process of formation.

The social construction of gender is a long-term phenomenon. Societies do not create something over a short period of time; rather, it is carried out gradually in the form of ideology or a social norm. The young minds are instilled with the knowledge of binaries at an early age, as the patriarchy exists in the social atmosphere in the form of multiple ideologies and codes. In the case of maleness and femaleness formation, as a part of the patriarchal ideology, Somali is no different. The ideology and the powers around it dwell in the society, which are interpellated in the young children, making them convinced that gender divisions are “natural ways of seeing the world”³². The social institutions, such as family, schools, or bureaucratic structures, narrate the genders, their roles, and the duties to the children in the society at a naïve age to ensure the installation of masculine and feminine practices in the child. From the study of Warsan Shire’s poem “Bless the Qumayo”, the distinction between female and male shines brightly. She says:

who upon hearing news of a girl
child, lit torches of contempt to welcome
us onto this planet, stalking us
through our mothers’ birth canals,
ululating, born on the month of isku
xishood—have some shame—the goat
slit from ear to ear.³³

An in-depth analysis of the verses explores the perceptions that exist in the society of Somalia. The verses open the idea that a female child is not a blessing in the mentioned society, rather she is welcomed and resumed to the world in the light of the ‘torches of contempt’. Shire adds that during the initial stages, when a girl child is in the womb, the external world, with all its claimed civilisation and technological advancements, considers her existence as shameful. The notion of symbolising a female as a shame we think is the first installation and “configuration of gender practice”³⁴ by the societal structures in all individuals. These interpellated individuals, as a result, perceive this configuration as the natural conformity that nourishes a female psychology as weak and fragile³⁵. Men, on the other hand, in the form of masculinity, use the misconception of

“frailty; thy name is woman”³⁶ as their right to power and maintain the complex social order of patriarchy.

Furthermore, a man holds the position of the head of institutions in a patriarchal society, which succeeds him as the director of the power and knowledge nexus. He uses his power to regulate the knowledge and frames what is good/bad, strong/weak; the good and strong on the left side, where the men stand, and the bad and weak on the right side of the slash, which is the side of the female sex. That is to say that the patriarchal structure that works as “ideological [social] apparatus”³⁷, that defines maleness or femaleness.

Warsan Shire’s poetry offers a profound insight into the lived experiences of Somali women, capturing both the subtleties and the overt expressions of patriarchal domination. Her work reveals how masculinity is socially constructed and maintained through cultural, racial, and class hierarchies, producing multiple forms of oppression. Drawing on Connell’s conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity, Shire’s poems illustrate how men assert dominance over women, often through violence, emotional control, and institutional authority. In other words, patriarchy is exercised via forms of masculinity; the three different forms: men (black) against women (black), men (white) against black working-class and consumers (women).

Each type of masculinity is characterised by certain patterns of practices and behaviours. Based on the features of each form, the first kind of masculinity as identified in the Somali society is that of gender; black men vs black women. This kind of masculinity is featured by “risk-taking, responsibility, irresponsibility, aggression, [and] Zeus energy”³⁸. Man, in this society, as discussed earlier, takes the help of the patriarchal structures, and defines male and female, attributing to himself the above-stated qualities. These qualities are designed by man for the interests of man; therefore, this kind of masculinity has an influence on sexual and power-related dynamics. In terms of sexuality, men have a certain mindset of being oppressive and in power. Shire draws the misuse of such privileges in sexual relations in her poem “Unbearable Weight of Staying” as such:

I don’t know when love became elusive.
My mother’s laughter in a dark room.
What I know is that no one I knew had it.
My father’s arms around my mother’s neck.
A door halfway open.
*Fruit too ripe to eat.*³⁹

The above lines by Shire sketches an image of a father and mother's sexual relations, which were smooth for some time, but the love got changed into an 'elusive' kind, because the masculine psyche of the father narrates to his mind the lessons of masculinity that she is supposed to give "pleasure [and he is supposed to]... receive..."⁴⁰ it, and thus to keep women under the name of man.

Moreover, the power assigned to (black) man by the patriarchal configuration is used institutionally, and (black) man, defining himself as more energetic and expert in physical activities such as war and conflicts or weightlifting and alike, surrounds the social institutions, i.e., military, statesmanship and families, etc. They practice their powers (entrusted by society) against women as a license to violence and the "subordination of women and dominance of men"⁴¹. For instance, Shire portrays "fishermen..., astronaut..., [and] dictator" as elements of institutional power held by men, as highlighted further.

Another form of masculinity in the society of Somalia, which is identified in the work of Shire, is based on race: the white race and the black race. This form of masculinity is constructed of white men against black men and women. The white man's masculinity has different features from those of the black man. Here, the physical power's conception shifts into an intangible, institutional and social status. A white in this category is defined as a prince and a hero, while a black is labelled as a beast. Shire explores the formation of white masculinities in her poem "Drowning in Dawson's Creek". She writes that in her early girlhood, she used to "dream... of white boys" in terms of marriage and sex. She thinks of the whites as handsome and more worthy of marriage and sexual relations than those black men, (which reveals the marginalization of the black men by the white men); therefore, she discloses her longing for the "white boys" as in these verses; "I dreamt all night of their [, the white boys] scurrying, climbing/ in and out of me"⁴². Shire's dream here is used as a metaphor for the idea of white supremacy, which she accepts to the extent that she is "willing to disown"⁴³ her identity.

In the same fashion, black males of the Somali society also have dreams of escaping their society, for they believe foreign countries, i.e., European countries, are more blessed and richer than African countries. The people of Somalia are influenced by the idea of Eurocentrism. European land, culture, and people are new, unique and superior to the blacks. Shire writes that "if the moon was Europe,

my father was an astronaut who died on his way to the moon”⁴⁴. She adds that her father was “blinded by the space”⁴⁵. Moreover, the people of Somali irrespective of gender, “dream... in the language of whites”; they are under the impression of “white god/ stretching his white arm from/ out a white sky, while a white/ limousine waits at [their] door”⁴⁶. The quoted lines from Shire’s poem “The Baby-Sitters Club” reflects on the “ideology [of] white supremacy”⁴⁷; the ideology that white people are more honourable than the black people by comparing them using the metaphor of ‘white sky’ for Europe and while ‘white arms’ extend to them ‘white limousine’ which is used as symbol for wealth, prosperity, and advancement of the Europe.

Furthermore, a third form of masculinity that is prevalent in the poems of Shire is related to the “production relation”⁴⁸ or social class. This kind of masculinity is attached to the production of resources. As described in the preceding paragraphs, man has been given control of social institutions and organisation; politics, “power, authority... [,] leadership”, management and capital or economy come in “the men’s domain”⁴⁹. As a result, Somali society proves to be a male-dominant society, as the sources of income are in control of a man. This aspect “marginalises women economically”⁵⁰. In the society of Somalia, masculinities, besides the gender and racial differences, are also developed against working and consumer women. The male of society considers work outside as the only work, while the house workers, who work at home as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives, are not considered to be workers. The treatment of women in terms of work is reflected in the poem “Bless the Real Housewife”:

Blessed be those who sit and wait
so hooyo sits, waiting for him to die.
Calcifying her one human body, staying
for the sake of the kids, then staying
for the sake of staying, enduring,
abstaining, waiting for the angel of death.⁵¹

Connell opines that “an ideal of working-class manliness and self-respect [is] constructed in response to class deprivation...[of] working-class women”⁵². In the lines above, the poetess expresses the life of a housewife in an ordinary Somali household. She draws the experience of a housewife, “hoyoo” who stays home, who does the most basic job of ‘calcifying’ and nurturing the kids, while she knows herself being deprived of the earnings and social life. She stays home and raises the children because society has instilled in her the notion

of “What would people say?”⁵³. She, in her own house, is kept marginalised and as a slave. Therefore, the writer portrays the hoyoo’s life as absurd, meaningless, and so she is “waiting for the angel of death”⁵⁴ to take her life and free her from the house like hell.

The above discussion explores the kind of masculinities named as man (black) against women (black), white masculinity against black people, and elite or working man masculinity against houseworkers, women, prevailing in the society of Somalia. Among these masculinities, white man masculinity in relation to black people is an uncommon and unique aspect, whereas man vs woman is common. Beyond this point, the relation among all the masculinities is hegemonic and one of subordination. The hegemony and subordination of the relations among the masculinities bring an imbalance in society, which leads to violence and conflicts, especially on the part of women. These oppressions that a woman faces, and which result from the non-peaceful relations among the masculinities, are discussed in the next section.

Oppressions and Women in the Society of Somalia

The previous section of the analysis dealt to a greater extent with the question of what kind of masculinities are present in the society of Somalia. In addition, it is highlighted that the relation among these masculinities is hegemonic. This section explores the consequences of the hegemonic masculinities in the form of women's oppression.

Before delving into the discussion of oppressions, it is necessary to define what hegemonic masculinity is. Connell opines that “The concept of 'hegemony'... refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life”⁵⁵. She adds that “hegemonic masculinity... [is the] figuration of gender practice which ...[legitimate] patriarchy... [and justify] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”⁵⁶.

The first kind of masculinity developed in the society of Somalia is the men vs women. In a kind of masculinity, the relations are tense and hegemonic. Women in the Somali society face structural violence, with variations of domestic violence, sexual violence, and economic violence. The idea of “structural violence... articulates that violence is not merely the direct physical attack but can also come from institutional inequalities”⁵⁷. Therefore, most of the oppressions at the hands of man are the result of the institution of patriarchy and its configured social structures. Men of the society consider women as a symbol of curse, shame, and a cause for the loss

of social status. Shire, in her poem, reasons that a father in the discussed society considers a “*daughter [to be] synonymous with traitor*”⁵⁸. The statement given by Shire represents the social understandings and considerations regarding women in society. With a socially shaped mindset, the associations of male and female lead to hegemonic relations rather than cooperation. Men, based on their understanding, always tend to demote and keep silent the women in society.

Many of the poems of Shire bear a strong theme of the social mistreatment of women. She explores in one of her poems that “she [, the daughter] knows loss intimately” because when she was born, society interpreted her birth as a curse and a bad omen. The stanza:

As an infant forced to gargle rosewater,
smoked in uunsi to purify her of whatever
unclean thing she inherited.⁵⁹

explores that a female child is considered impure and impious; therefore, they force ‘an infant...to gargle rose water’ as an act of purification⁶⁰. In another of her poems, Shire remarks on the treatment of a female that “upon hearing news of a girl child...[the world labels her as a] flag of dishonor,... [and so she] witnesses... love slowly abandons” her. The lines elucidate the attitude owned by the world as the domino effect of the ideological engineering-patriarchy.

Moreover, the mothers face the consequences of hegemonic relations between the two genders in their domestic and sexual lives. Men, over the women, comprehend “their advantage as natural”⁶¹. Therefore, rationalising their superiority, Shire, in her poem “Photographs of Hooyo” sketches the image of the “Hoyoo [who] exiting her/ bedroom, tears in/ her eyes, sorrow in her/ colostrum... [spends her day] ... in the kitchen”. Shire adds that Hoyoo spends her life silently and never speaks against the social inequalities. She adds that hoyoo, after her youth, sees her “negatives” and flings them as the hoyoo full of youth and liveliness in the negatives symbolically is “dead”⁶².

In addition to the domestic violence and deprivation of women from life, they also face sexual violence, just as Connell writes, “intimidation of women ranges across the spectrum from wolf-whistling in the street, to office harassment, to rape and domestic assault, to murder by a woman's patriarchal 'owner', such as a separated husband”⁶³. Moreover, women are understood as the culprits for bringing a female child into the world. Shire writes that

men do sexual violence as their right because the term violence is installed in men as a pattern of “violence... to sustain their dominance”⁶⁴. With a lame rationale of “love is not haram [whereas] after years of fucking/ [the] women who are unable to pronounce [the men’s] name” they leave the women like a “bitch”⁶⁵. Furthermore, in a marital scenario, women are forced, [as it is in the control of a female] to secrete [viscid] from glands/ formed in the favor of men”⁶⁶.

In addition, the masculinities explored in the previous section of the discussion have another form of violence, the economic violence. The masculinities based on gender, race or class have a similar pattern of economic violence. In the gender-based masculinities, women are kept dependent and under the earnings of the male. Women are not given opportunities to develop their lifestyle. This approach, which is hegemonic in its nature, Connell states, establishes “only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual... [and this develops an in] direct violence [which] supports the authority” of men⁶⁷. Shire, in her poems, has referred to several of the intuitions and professions, such as “fishermen..., astronaut..., [and] dictator”⁶⁸ as associated with man, and that this association is a collaboration of cultural, social ideals and practices with institutions and professions of power. She highlights the profession of women as housekeeping and child-rearing; professions considered as non-empowered professions. This aspect of the relation among the masculinities identifies the economic oppressions of the women who are dependent on a man for a single penny. Nevertheless, this social order, which is male-dominated, is not a permanent structure of society. Women in the modern day do strive to overthrow the patriarchal structure.

Response of Women to the Oppressions

The previous sections extrapolated the social engineering of gender, the manifestation of patriarchy, and the oppressions women face in a Somalian society; vis-à-vis, this portion focuses on the reaction (women’s response) to the action (masculinities/ patriarchy) and its effects (women’s oppressions). In words other than that, the “battle of the sexes”⁶⁹ has been drawn upon in a society where men wriggle a long-existing battle to maintain their patriarchal status quo under the “ideology of supremacy”⁷⁰ of man. On the one hand, if the game of social power has put man in an oppress-and-win situation. Consequently, the patriarchal structures in society continuously and

structurally oppress women, i.e., domestic violence, sexual violence, and economic oppression, etc. Nonetheless, since the patriarchal structure has the flaw of unequal treatment of the female gender, which results in the creation of an opposite ideology/narrative to substitute the already established order with another more convenient structure. Connell states that: when conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony. The dominance of any group of men may be challenged by women⁷¹.

Following the concept of the challenge, women in society are divided into two groups of interests. One "...interest group is concerned with defence, and ... [another] interest group with change"⁷². Shire, in her poetry, while standing with the group of change, strives to organise the women's community against the patriarchal order, first by identifying the injustice and inequalities by the masculinities in the society, and then provides a map for response to these ill-treatments. She proposes the establishment of a balanced and just order of society; it is necessary to prepare women on the intellectual front, professional level, and economic front. Her poems reflect the idea that women need knowledge, which is necessary in a Foucauldian sense for the creation of such a new social structure.

According to Foucault's understanding of power and knowledge, the two are interrelated. In fashion other than this, the women's agency needs to gain power that may produce knowledge, as in reverse, it produces, enhances and strengthens power-feminine power. This approach is in contrast to the patriarchal agency, which acts on the principles of "exclusion, blockage and repression"⁷³ of the other gender. Shire comprehends the difference of approaches between the two; thus, she writes that women must learn "the language of birds", ⁷⁴ which is metaphorically used for the knowledge about their rights and freedom (Shire 2022).

To further the power-knowledge idea, Shire begins women into knowledge beings with the knowledge of the biological self of the women, as mentioned in her poem "Bless This School for Girls". She explains that women should know "periods, uterus contractions, early symptoms/ of cysts, signs of infertility, abortions and where/ they were punishable by death, miscarriage..."⁷⁵. In the given lines, Shire makes the girls aware of the basics of being a woman, and reveals how the sexes and the related process, i.e., 'abortion and miscarriage', are socially designed because in either of the two cases,

they are handled inhumanely by the men of the society. Moreover, the knowledge about the biological self of a woman liberates her from the lenses of femaleness, which "...has always been conceptualised on the basis of masculine parameters"⁷⁶.

Alongside the need for knowledge and awareness, Shire, through her poetry, makes the women know the masculine psychology. A man who imagines everything to be handled simply by using physical force, which regulates their minds to violate the sexuality of a female. Shire adds that:

Mother says there are locked rooms inside all women.

Sometimes, the men—they come with keys,

and sometimes, the men—they come with hammers⁷⁷

The poetess explains the psychology of a man through a mother. She explores how some men use romantic ideology, and at other times the ideology of man as supreme and powerful. In parentheses, Shire expresses that women of today know the value of themselves, and they hence celebrate their femininity. Shire celebrates the women's body and writes, "*this* [the female body] is where men come to die"⁷⁸. With this line, Shire blows a new spirit in women's gender by making them realise their importance; hence, shifting the knowledge about when the 'locked rooms' are to be opened, and when not.

Moreover, to amend the structure of society, a feminist movement is a dire need. Women need to stand by those women who fight for their rights. These steps, which are against the patriarchal standards, are the core of breaking from the system of patriarchy and towards amending it. Shire in "Angela Bassett Burning It All Down" focuses on the break of the women from the patriarchal order. She adds that "the wives in my family packed secret suitcases, / eyed the front door, fumbled with lighter fluid"⁷⁹. Moreover, the response of the women to the patriarchal structure is termed by men as "*Bitches' Hysteria* [while a] *natural response*, the women name it"⁸⁰, emphasised in the original. The term used by men for the feminist movement reflects the play (in Derridean terms of deconstruction) in the patriarchal system, which is maintained by the ideology of violence. Whereas, the women name it 'natural response', which can be interpreted as women are certain in their approach to amendments in the established system of society.

The poet in her poems convinces the women of her society about the social constructions, configurations and practices designed by men. She preaches the idea of progression and the belief in

women's capability to stand independently. Her writing from a male perspective is destructive and seems that she and those like her are all alike, crying in bewilderment, but in basics from the perspective of the oppressed, Shire's writings are the voice of the Somalian and other women across the world. Her writing makes sure the women of the world know that the world will be more beautiful and peaceful if women have equal chances and opportunities as are for man. She and many others like her, the movement is not impossible in its attainment, although it does need a long time to break a thousand-year-old system of patriarchy.

Conclusion

Warsan Shire's poetry presents a compelling interrogation of masculinity and its intersectional consequences for Somali women. Through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, her work demonstrates how power is enacted across gendered, racial, and classed hierarchies, producing a spectrum of oppression that spans the personal, domestic, and structural spheres. Shire's portrayal of gendered violence, economic dependency, and social marginalisation underscores the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms, while her vivid depictions of women's lives render the human cost of these hierarchies impossible to ignore.

At the same time, Shire foregrounds women's agency and resistance, illustrating that oppression is neither absolute nor uncontested. Women navigate patriarchal constraints through knowledge, solidarity, and subtle acts of defiance, reclaiming authority over their bodies, emotions, and social positioning. By documenting these acts of resilience, Shire's poetry not only critiques the structures of power but also imagines spaces for empowerment and transformation.

The interplay between theory and literary representation in this study underscores the significance of Shire's work as a site for exploring gendered power relations. Hegemonic masculinity, as theorised by Connell, provides a framework for understanding the mechanisms of dominance, while Shire's poetic voice offers an intimate, nuanced account of their effects on women's lives. Together, theory and literature illuminate how oppression is both systemic and personal, and how resistance can emerge in multiple, often inventive, forms.

Ultimately, Shire's poetry is a testament to the resilience of women who confront intersecting forms of marginalisation. Her work challenges readers to acknowledge the complexities of masculinity

and the persistent inequalities it produces, while affirming the transformative potential of women's agency. In doing so, Shire contributes not only to Somali and diasporic literary traditions but also to broader conversations on gender, power, and resistance, offering both critique and hope in equal measure.

* * * * *

References

1. Lynne M. Woehrle and Donna Engelmann, "Gender Studies," *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*, 2nd ed. (2008), 859.
2. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities University of California Press." *Berkeley, Los Angeles* (2005), 82.
3. *ibid*, 71-72
4. *ibid*, 83
5. Divya Hariharan, "A Transformation in the Feministic Poetry of the Past and the Present: A Comparative Study of the Poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Warsan Shire- The Rights of Women and For Women Who Are Difficult to Love," *Research Journal Of English (RJOE)* 5, no. 3 (2020): 327–33, 327.
6. Bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).
7. Divya Hariharan, "A Transformation in the Feministic Poetry of the Past and the Present," 328.
8. Sánchez, Mayte Cantero. "'Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth' A feminist approach to Warsan Shire's poetry." *Blue Gum*, no. 3, (2016): 56–63, 58.
9. *Ibid.*, 58.
10. Divya Hariharan, "A Transformation in the Feministic Poetry of the Past and the Present," 327.
11. Cotten, Savannah. "21 Famous Authors and Their Pen Names." *enotes.com*, February 2, 2018. <https://blog.enotes.com/2018/02/02/21-famous-authors-and-their-pen-names/>.
12. Divya Hariharan, "A Transformation in the Feministic Poetry of the Past and the Present," 328.
13. *Ibid.*, 328.
14. *Ibid.*, 329.
15. Jakhrani, Muhammad Haroon, and Muhammad Hassan Shaikh. "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Warsan Shire's Poem 'The House.'" *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 3 (September 8, 2023): 5–10, 5
16. Sánchez, Mayte Cantero. "'Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth'", 57.
17. Micheal, Janito. "Malevolent Dogma and Frigidity: Collective Trauma in Warsan Shire's 'Girls.'" *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education* 13, no. 2 (2017): 583–87, 585.
18. *Ibid.*, 585.
19. Jakhrani, Muhammad Haroon, and Muhammad Hassan Shaikh. "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Warsan Shire's Poem 'The House.'" 8
20. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head: Poems*. Penguin, 2022.
21. *Ibid.*, 2022.

- Haider Ihsan Dawar / Maria Shah 21
22. Bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 45
 23. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299, 2141.
 24. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 221.
 25. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 77-88.
 26. Althusser, Louis. *On the reproduction of capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*. Verso, (2014), 79.
 27. Ibid., 79.
 28. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 68.
 29. ibid., 71
 30. ibid., 71.
 31. ibid., 71.
 32. Tyson, Lois. "Critical theory today." (2006), 57.
 33. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022
 34. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 72.
 35. ibid., 72.
 36. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet The Prince of Denmark*. London: BLACKIE - AND- SON - LIMITED, 1902, 24.
 37. Althusser, Louis. *On the reproduction of capitalism*, 79.
 38. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 68.
 39. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
 40. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 74
 41. ibid, 74
 42. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
 43. ibid., 2022.
 44. ibid., 2022.
 45. ibid., 2022.
 46. ibid., 2022.
 47. Brown, Christopher. *White bodies, Black gaze: Constructions of White masculinity in White-male elite discourses on leadership and diversity*. (2010), 45.
 48. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 72.
 49. Keynan, Hassan A. "Male roles and the making of the Somali tragedy. Reflections on gender, masculinity and violence in Somali society." In *Proceedings of EASS/SSIA International Congress of Somali Studies. Variations on the theme of Somaliness*. Centre for Continuing Education, Åbo Akademi University, 2001, 244.
 50. Ibid., 245.
 51. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
 52. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 75-76.
 53. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
 54. ibid, 2022
 55. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 77.
 56. ibid, 77
 57. Lynne M. Woehrle and Donna Engelmann, "Gender Studies", (2008), 861.
 58. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.

59. ibid., 2022.
60. ibid., 2022.
61. Lynne M. Woehrle and Donna Engelmann, "Gender Studies", (2008), 862.
62. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
63. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 83.
64. ibid., 83.
65. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
66. ibid., 2022.
67. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 83.
68. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
69. Connell, Robert W. "Masculinities, (2005), 82.
70. ibid., 83.
71. ibid., 77.
72. ibid., 82.
73. Foucault, Michel and Colin Gordon. "Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977." (1980), 59.
74. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
75. Ibid., 2022.
76. Irigaray, Luce. *This sex which is not one*. Cornell University Press, 1985, 23.
77. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
78. ibid., 2022.
79. Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter*, 2022.
80. ibid., 2022.