

# Original Research Article

## The Chiasmic Gaze in Warsan Shire's poem, "Backwards"

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### ABSTRACT

The contemporary world has become an inclusive place that accommodates people from diverse backgrounds owing to the sensitising literary contributions. In accordance, the African writers employ the platform of literature to throw light on the ongoing struggles faced by their community. Warsan Shire is one such revolutionary poet who brings to the forefront the unheard voices of the African immigrant women through her cogent poetic narrative. The paper aims to scrutinise her poem "Backwards" through the chiasmic gaze propagated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Highlighting the features of reversibility, invisibility and reciprocity of the chiasmic gaze, the paper underscores that the poem stands as a healing call for immigrant black women and girls.

**Keywords:** Chiasmic gaze, Warsan Shire, reversibility, invisibility, reciprocity

### Introduction

Poetry is a universal language which brings together multifold voices of human experiences. Contemporary poetry records eclectic styles and is often written on themes that people across the globe would relate with and acknowledge. The ever-growing body of African literature is no exception to this as it contributes immensely to poetry in English. The voracious gaze of the African poets encompasses inclusive and outspoken themes through their literary work that echo the rich legacy of the African oral tradition. A multitude of poets celebrate the diversity and glorify the African traditions, cultures and languages. They pen down the brutal and unjust discrimination faced by the Africans and especially, the African women, who are on a continual struggle towards equity.

The postmodern African poets underscore the unique aesthetics of Africa, sporting indigenous images of the bountiful natural resources; the traditional oral renditions and legends, the native rhythm and musical elements; a plethora of cultural and traditional elements and the glory of their motherland. They also talk about the racial discrimination, literary identity crisis, exploitation of women, the unending collision between the past and the present as well as the dark and the unreliable political plight of Africa. The contemporary African women poets express their brutally honest opinions over the predicament of African women. Standing along with the well-acclaimed poets like Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks and Maya Angelou, Warsan Shire also voices out the unheard voices of the African women.

Being an immigrant black woman, Warsan Shire brings into the mainstream poetry, the muffled voices of the refugees and the invisible suffering and helplessness of the immigrant black women. She makes the readers gaze into the immigrant women's trauma by throwing light upon their intense psychological turmoil. Her poetry centers on the familial relationships, a therapeutic role of love that heals them from the traumatic past. Gazing into her poetry

exposes the prevalent intersubjectivity which is one of the significant characteristics of the theory of gaze. Gaze is a political way of seeing things and perceiving the meaning of those images based on the cultural, social and historical frames of reference. Chiasmic gaze is one of the many types of gazes which focusses on intersubjective relations.

### **Objective**

The objective of this paper is to explore the turbulent yet defiant voice of Warsan Shire, an immigrant black woman. It also attempts to bring out the invisibility, reversibility and reciprocity constituted by the chiasmic gaze with reference to her poem, "Backwards." The present paper also aims to delve into the unique and symbolic literary style and devices employed as a tool to complement the message of the poem.

### **Warsan Shire**

Warsan Shire is a British-Somali poet, writer and activist, who was born on August 1, 1988 in Kenya. She is the author of several poetry collections, including *Teaching my Mother How to Give Birth*, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in her Head* and *Her Blue Body* which have been translated in over 20 languages. Shire spent her early childhood in Kenya before her family moved to London when she was just one year old. She grew up in East London and later studied creative writing at Brunel University. She began writing poetry as a teenager and gained prominence through her performances at various poetry slams and events. Shire's poetry explores the themes of identity, womanhood, migration and trauma, drawing on her experiences as a Somali woman living in the diaspora. Her poetic voice is known for its raw, unflinching honesty and its ability to capture the complexities of human experiences.

Besides writing, Shire was involved in teaching and mentoring young people in London. She has also collaborated with various artists and musicians on interdisciplinary projects. Warsan Shire's poetry has featured in the American pop star Beyoncé's 2016 studio album, "Lemonade." Shire has received numerous awards and accolades for her work, including the Brunel University African Poetry Prize and she stands tall as the youngest person to be honoured with the Young Poet Laureate of London Award. She was also chosen as the poet-in-residence of Queensland, Australia in correspondence with the Aboriginal Centre of Performing Arts.

Shire's literary creation has gained widespread critical acclaim and she is regarded as one of the most significant contemporary African voices. Bernardine Evaristo, the British author who won the Booker Prize in 2019 alongside Margaret Atwood, commends Shire's poetry in an interview with The Guardian:

You write with such empathy and compassion that your work transcends these perceived barriers and boundaries around women's experiences. You write beautifully about loss and displacement, the bond between women, and these are all things that women around the world can relate to. I think this book will have incredible global reach. Your work is not depressing; even though you are tackling some really serious subjects, it's uplifting. I think that's a really special skill. [1]

Warsan Shire's poems are often analysed on the grounds of feminism and post-colonialism. Her rebellious themes have made her the face of refugee-rights protests in many countries. Her poem, "Home" went viral when the lines were read out as slogans at the Syrian refugee campaign by the Hollywood actor, Benedict Cumberbatch. She was also elected as a fellow

of 'the Royal Society of Literature' in the '40 under 40' initiative of 2018. Several research papers focus on Shire's prominent voice for the immigrant black women who are often neglected from the mainstream spectrum. However, the chiasmic gaze in her poem, "Backwards" is yet to be probed into and it will be taken up in the present study.

Warsan Shire's widely popular debut poetry pamphlet, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* was published in 2011. This collection is a painful record of the black lives witnessed by Shire. Delineating the immigrant people of colour in most of her poems, Shire exposes the Pandora box, concealed mostly by the white grand narratives and filled with the unfathomable suffering of the refugees and black women. The compilation of 20 poems in this pamphlet subverts the inherently racist portrayal of the African people and their experiences. Reviewing her poems, Antoinette Scully says,

All of these poems feel as if they are written in the blood of their subjects, or maybe even the author's... Sometimes I could feel her words flowing through my veins, as if she were giving me words to express how I move through the world. I didn't know I could have such a vivid image, crafted by just the right words, in so few lines of poetry. [2]

### **Warsan Shire's poem - "Backwards"**

"Backwards" is one among the 50 poems in the collection, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in her Head*. The collection throws light on the daughters of the immigrant black families who are obligated to mother their siblings when their parents are out, working. They are often forced to put up with the sexual abuse of the men who targeted such vulnerable girls. Torn between living their own lives and sacrificing their childhood for their family, the pathetic plight of the African daughters is poignantly recorded in this collection. Shire also brings in God and love that serve as safe and comforting havens for such young girls. The turbulent lives of the refugees who fled their home country in search of better lives, their desperate living conditions and their continual strife to adapt amidst the whites' exploitation in the foreign land is well-chronicled in her poetry collections.

"Backwards" is a powerful poetic piece about the experience of a woman navigating through the aftermath of an abusive relationship in her family. The narrator describes the painful relationship with her step-father who abused her mother, her sister and herself, physically and emotionally. She captures the narrator's feelings of confusion, shame, guilt as well as her sense of isolation and loneliness in a graphic way. The perturbing memories of the past and the trauma associated with them have been explored in the poem. The poem unleashes the traumatic memories of the narrator and helps her heal by giving her hope to rewrite a desired future for her family filled with love, thus undoing the abuse. Despite unfolding the harsh reality of the immigrant black women in the intimacy of their homes, it also serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

The poem, "Backwards" commences with the verse, "The poem can start with him walking backwards into a room", that Shire consciously crafts to engrave the theme and the direction of the poem. In the first stanza, the narrator makes a deliberate attempt to reverse time to bring her father back. She hopes that if she could make the blood from her broken nose go back in and if she could go back to her premature and smaller body, she could give a love-filled life to her sister and herself. She wishes that the perpetrators' hands, that abused them without their consent, would turn into stumps. She wants the drunken step-father out of their lives and yearns to cling on to her biological father who had abandoned them. She is ardent to undo the domestic abuse that her mother undergoes so that everything falls into place and they could dream of a happy life.

The second stanza of the poem sports a determined and resolute tone compared to the wounded and desperate voice of the first stanza. Repeating the verses of the first stanza in reverse starting from the last line, Shire attributes an entirely different meaning to the latter half of the poem. The narrator becomes intent in bestowing a peaceful and happy life to her family at least through her poem. She realises that only she can bring her family back together. The desperate cry for help that quickly turns into staunch resilience is what makes the poem revolutionary, thus giving a boost of hope to the black women and refugees all over the world.

### **Theoretical framework**

Shire's poetry throws light on the immigrant black women who are otherwise invisible to the world. Invisibility is the one of the main characteristic features of the chiasmic gaze propagated by the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Gaze is an ocularcentric discourse which deals with the ways in which humans perceive themselves and the society. The process of gaze involves a subject and an object. The gazer is the subject of the gaze from whom the gaze originates. The object of the gaze is the gazed entity situated inside the subject's visual field.

Gaze theorists opine that this subjective perception of the gazer is based on the historical, social and cultural position in which he/she is positioned. The theory of gaze has its roots in the ideas of Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst. Lacan's views on the gaze led on to many theorists contributing to the theories propounded by Sartre, Foucault, Berger and Laura Mulvey. Lacan's concept of 'mirror stage' explains the creation of identity. When a child within its first 18 months, gazes at its image on a mirror, it creates a self-image for the first time. This reflective gaze establishes the child as the subject as well as the object of its gaze.

While Lacan focussed on the subject, Sartre's philosophy defined the gaze as a lived relation that entitles power. He opines that when a man is seated all alone in a park, he feels superior as the subject in his visual field. As long as there is no object within his vicinity, he enjoys the freedom of being the only person and could do whatever he wants. Sartre promulgated that when an object enters into the visual field of the subject, a sense of shame is bestowed on the subject as he/she loses freedom over its scopic regime. He talks about the subject-ness of the subject being lost as the subject becomes the object when it enters the visual field of the other. The intersubjective relation between the subject and the object is the highlight of Sartre's book, *Being and Nothingness*.

Michel Foucault's outlook on gaze is also based on Sartre's sense of shame associated to the gaze. Foucault talks about the 'absolute gaze' which has the power to control the objects within a visual field. He brings in Bentham's prison model of 'Panopticon' which is a ring-like structure with a watch tower at the centre. Bentham proposed that the guards in the watch tower can see every single cell but the inmates cannot see the guards as the watch tower has one-way glass windows. The inmates gradually internalise the guard's gaze and thus maintain self-discipline. This surveillance model is the pioneer for the modern day CCTV systems that observe the objects in its visual field 24/7.

Laura Mulvey is a popular film theorist and feminist who applied the power of gaze to film studies and threw light upon the pleasure it gives to people through the camera. Her phenomenal work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," focusses on the 'male gaze' which objectifies women who are projected on the screen. She labels visual pleasure as the pleasure of looking as well as the pleasure of being-looked-at. She also talks about concepts like scocophilia, voyeurism and peeping Tom to sensitise people on how deep the male gaze

has affected the society through cinema, a popular medium of representation. The multidisciplinary formulation of gaze institutes it as a political discourse which could be employed to scrutinise literary works.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a major contributor to the perspective aspect of the gaze. He postulates that perception is an interactive process which includes all the senses. Inspired by the phenomenological theories of Hegel and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty declares that the subject and the object of the gaze are in a reciprocal relation. In his book, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he emphasises that meaning of an image is visible but the invisible aspects of the image also contributes to its meaning. He opines that invisibility is not to do with the physical realm but is to do with something that hides behind and underlies the visible:

Meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: The visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*), and in invisible, is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it, it is the *Nichturprdsentierbar* which is presented to me as such within the world - one cannot see it there and every effort to see it there makes it disappear, but it is in the line of the visible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it. [3]

The continuum where the visible and the invisible exist simultaneously is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a chiasm.

Chiasm originates from the Greek word *khiasmos* which refers to the letter 'khi' and is shaped like an X with two lines crossing each other at a point. It popularly refers to the optic chiasm which is the crossing point of two nerve fibres. Merleau-Ponty, however, employs the chiasm to refer to the crossing point where the subject and the object intertwine. He postulates that the self and the other; or subject and the object; or two different subjects overlap with each other and can exist simultaneously. He explains the concept of the chiasm employing the senses of touch and sight as examples. He uses the term 'flesh' in case of touch and 'chiasm' in terms of sight. Touch and sight are the two senses, according to Merleau-Ponty, which are ambiguous and envelop objects on their way. He proposes that such a state is possible in an intersubjective relationship and lists invisibility, reversibility and reciprocity as the three main constituents of a chiasmic gaze.

### Application

Warsan Shire's poem, "Backwards" is **one of the apt works** to be viewed from the point of view of chiasmic gaze as she establishes a chiasm through series of dichotomies like refugee – native; black – non-black; and woman-man. The narrator who is visible in the poem is a black refugee woman and the invisible other side is the white male of the dichotomy who influences the plight of the visible. Shire stands unique in establishing a strong chiasmic gaze in her poetry through the theme as well as the structure of the poems.

Invisibility with reference to chiasmic gaze, according to Merleau-Ponty, refers to the object that could be felt even in its absence. In a chiasm involving the sense of sight, a subject's gaze of the object constitutes the interpreted meaning which is inferred from the visible object as well as from the invisible aspects which contribute to the visibility of the object. He states that the invisible has its influence on the subject's perception in spite of it being beyond the subject's visual field. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawler put forth their views on the invisibility of a chiasmic gaze as:

Merleau-Ponty characterises the invisibility of the visible as *Nichturprasentierbarkeit*. The invisible of the flesh is like the soul of the other into which I can never see, onto which I can never hold, and most important, which I can never know. The other is absent, crossed out. Yet, since the soul has been incarnate, I can still feel it, feel with it, feel into it – *Einfühlung* – and believe. [4]

The chiasmic point in the poem occurs both literally and structurally. In the literal sense, the chiasmic point appears when the time frame of the poem overlaps and becomes invisible. The narrator shares the traumatic incidents of her past with the readers. The sexual abuse by the drunken stepfather, the violence that he exerted over their mother and the abandonment of their biological father are some of the painful memories that she wishes to undo. However, proceeding towards the next stanza of the poem makes the readers wonder about the time frame. The line demarcating the past and the future time frame in the poem becomes invisible as the poet does not overtly indicate the transition. Nevertheless, the readers can hardly comprehend the thin line between the past and the aspiring future of the narrator. **It is evident from the poem** that the traumatic events of the past are encroached by the ideal life dreamt by the narrator, thus causing a chiasm.

Shire places the other side of the dichotomy on the invisible part of the chiasm. The poem records the poignant tale of an immigrant black woman only. Nevertheless, the other side encompassing the native, non-black, man is absent and invisible and in its invisibility is concealed the sole reason for the discrimination and oppression of the visible side of the dichotomy. Warsan drags the oppressive and invisible sides of the dichotomies into the limelight. In the refugee-native dialectic, Shire underscores that the refugees are not accepted by the natives and are exploited for cheap labour. In the black-non-black dialectic, she registers that the non-black people disregard the discrimination faced by the black people and still treat them as slaves. She also talks about the woman-man dialectic where the men take advantage of the oppressed women for their sexual desires. Shire's poem, "Backwards" thus documents the deep roots of discriminatory cycle by incorporating the invisibility of the chiasmic gaze.

The second aspect of the chiasmic gaze is the reversibility of the intersubjective positions. **Merleau-Ponty stresses** that the chiasmic relation between the subject and the object overlaps and intertwines but also is reversible. He advocates that at the chiasmic point, the subject could become the object and the object could become the subject. He elaborates with the example of hands elaborating on the sense of touch. The 'flesh' has two dimensions: the tactile experience of touching and being touched. He goes on to explain that only when a person knows the feeling of being touched, he /she could create the tactile experience in another person. Therefore, the roles between the subject and the object of this chiasm are reversible. Kierran Horner defines the reversibility of the chiasmic gaze,

...there is a reversibility between the subject and the Other that incorporates both as individuals within the same world: the chiasmic relation. While entwined, however, the subject and the Other remain separate entities, like strands of hope... inherent to the concept of intersubjective relation, and especially its reversibility, are the ideas of vision, seeing and the gaze. [5]

The poem "Backwards," bears testimony to the reversible intention of the narrator. The entire poem is a desperate cry of the narrator to reverse the events of her life. She wishes to reverse the abandonment of her father, the sexual abuse undergone by her sister and herself and the domestic violence experienced by her pregnant mother which had led to the

loss of the baby: "The poem can start with him walking backwards into a room. / He takes off his jacket and sits down for the rest of the life; / that's how we bring Dad back" [6].

Reversibility of the chiasmic gaze in the poem highlights that the hierarchy inherent in the dichotomy could be reversed anytime. The duality between refugee-native, black-non-black, woman-man exists on the notion that one side is superior to the other and that the other is oppressed and discriminated. Once the power relation is reversed, the plight of the groups could be reversed. With reference to Merleau-Ponty's concept of reversibility, the gaze of the natives towards the refugees can become reversed when the political plight of the country changes. The change in conditions or the social context can easily reverse the position of the superior subject and the oppressed object. Shire's subtle references to the inherent dichotomy reflect the reversibility of the chiasmic gaze.

The final aspect of the chiasmic gaze is its reciprocity. Merleau-Ponty underscores that a chiasm thrives on the possibility that the active and passive sides of the dichotomy are in a reciprocal relationship with each other. The mutual involvement of the perceivers and their environments contribute to the reciprocity of the chiasmic gaze. Based on the notion that the beings that are visible can evolve into beings that see, reciprocity goes a long way in determining the essence of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm. In his book, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he asserts that:

The flesh of my finger = each of them is phenomenal finger and objective finger, outside and inside of the finger in reciprocity, in chiasm, activity and passivity coupled. The one encroaches upon the other, they are in a relation of real opposition. [7]

Merleau-Ponty thus insists on the significance of reciprocity in determining the essence of the chiasm.

Warsan Shire's poetry is significant for the reciprocity exhibited in her poems. Being an immigrant black woman, she inscribes the experiences of the women she meets and the stories she hears. The readers of any cultural and regional context can feel the pain of the narrator's traumatic experiences brought to life through her words. With some autobiographical elements evident in her poetry, Shire uses her poems to heal the trauma of her past and also aims to do the same for the readers. In an interview with Kameelah Rasheed in 2012, Shire states that, "I either know, or I am every person I have written about, for or as" [8]. This reciprocity is possible only with the chiasmic gaze between the reader and the narrator.

Reciprocity is also attained through the structure of the poem. The interesting and unique structure of the poem employs the poetic device called 'chiasmus' which is a form of literary repetition in which the same words, sentences, or ideas are reversed and repeated, potentially resulting in a new interpretation. Chiasmus is an extensive method that can recur throughout a poem, going beyond the repetition of words or phrases. The poem "Backwards" stands as an adept example of reciprocity where the second stanza reciprocates the emotions of the first stanza. The desperate cry for hope is answered by the resolution to rewrite their lives. The line "Maybe we're okay kid?" of the first stanza gives an answer in the second stanza "Maybe we're okay kid" with the question mark removed. The first and the second stanzas could be considered as two different subjects existing in an intersubjective relationship. **The poet is suggestive that** the past events of the first stanza could become the future events imagined by the persona in the second stanza if their positions are reversed, thus attaining reciprocity.

The structural chiasmic point is found between the first and second stanza, where the narrator's past becomes invisible in the face of the future. The chiasmic structure that repeats the poetic lines in a reverse order exhibiting different meanings is a unique feature of Warsan Shire's poetry. Often found in the ancient epic poetry, chiasmic structure employs the pattern: A, B, C, D, D', C', B', A'. Shire in the poem "Backwards" brings in the chiasmic structure with 15 lines in the first stanza and repeats the 15 lines in a reverse order in the second stanza thus changing the meaning of the lines. This proves that the structure of the poem overlaps with the denotative meaning of the poem retains the distinct feature and establishes yet another chiasmic point.

### Conclusion and Findings

Shire creates an image of an immigrant black woman, exposing the poor living condition and the suffering they undergo. She then goes on to reverse the image wherein they are reunited with their father and imagines a happy future for them. The astute employment of the chiasmic structure thus reflects the inherent invisibility, reversibility and reciprocity pertaining to the theme of the poem. Merleau-Ponty strives to explain the ambiguous existence of the subject and the object in an intersubjective and dynamic relationship which can reverse their position under any circumstance. Jack Reynolds equates chiasm to an image and describes the encroachment of the subject and the object of the gaze as,

The chiasm, then, is simply an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment can take place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence, in that touching and touched are obviously never exactly the something. [9]

The poem "Backwards" thus serves as a perfect example for the chiasmic gaze reiterating the overlapping intersubjective chiasmic relation between the subject and the object. Through her poem, the readers are able to subjectively experience the objective existence of the immigrant black woman, which stands as the ultimate intention of Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic gaze. Thomas Baldwin attempts to explain the chiasmic gaze in his introduction to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as "...an ultimate notion; a concrete emblem of a general manner of being; which provides access both to subjective experience and objective existence" [10].

The literal, structural and the metaphorical chiasms, in the poem "Backwards" by the London-based Kenyan-born Somali writer Warsan Shire, thus accentuate the turbulent yet defiant voices of the immigrant black women. Accommodating the invisibility, reversibility and reciprocity attributed by Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic gaze, the poem brings in the dichotomies of immigrant-native, black-non-black and woman-man. The unique style and the chiasmic structure complement the sensitising message campaigned by the poem. The chiasmic gaze of the poem reveals that it stands as a healing call for the marginalised and the oppressed people.

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