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## Memory, Displacement, and the Inescapability of Violence in Warsan Shire's *Home* and Benjamin Zephaniah's *We Refugees*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the interconnected themes of memory, displacement, and the persistence of violence in poems *Home* by Warsan Shire and *We Refugees* by Benjamin Zephaniah. Both poems challenge reductive views of refugees by highlighting the psychological and structural dimensions of forced migration. Drawing on trauma theory and postcolonial perspectives, the study shows how memory functions as both suffering and testimony. In Shire's poem, memory appears fragmented and intrusive, revealing the lasting psychological effects of violence, while in Zephaniah's work, it becomes collective, resisting erasure and affirming shared human experience. The article further contends that displacement is not merely physical relocation but a rupture that destabilizes identity and belonging. Refugees are portrayed as existing in liminal spaces between home and exile. This condition is intensified by ongoing violence, which extends beyond initial displacement to include xenophobia, exclusion, and marginalization in host societies. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how poetic techniques such as imagery, repetition, and direct address humanize refugees and critique dominant narratives, ultimately presenting violence as an enduring condition embedded in both memory and global structures.

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## Introduction

The refugee crisis is one of the most urgent humanitarian challenges of our time. Across the world, millions of people are forced to leave their homes because of war, persecution, political unrest, or environmental disasters. In leaving, they lose not only their houses and communities but also their histories, identities, and sense of belonging. Exile is not simply about crossing borders; it is a deep rupture that breaks apart memory, safety, and community. “Refugees are not statistics. They are mothers, fathers, children, with dreams and hopes. They are people who have lost everything but their dignity” (Nayeri, 2019).

The journey of displacement is filled with danger, humiliation, and violence. Refugees often face exploitation and abuse, and even when they reach places that promise safety, they are met with hostility, xenophobia, and rejection. In order to understand the refugee condition, we must see how violence and uprooting reshape both personal lives and collective histories, leaving scars that go beyond geography and reach into identity and memory.

Warsan Shire’s *Home* and Benjamin Zephaniah’s *We Refugees* speak powerfully to these realities, though they do so in different ways. Shire, a Somali-British poet known for her vivid and emotional language, captures the painful truth of leaving when home itself becomes unsafe. Her poem makes clear that departure is never a choice but a desperate act of survival. Zephaniah, a British poet and activist with Jamaican roots, takes a broader view. He reminds us that displacement is not unusual but something that could happen to anyone, stressing the shared human vulnerability at the heart of the refugee experience.

Together, these poems highlight how violence, memory, and displacement are deeply connected to the refugee condition. Shire focuses on the physical and emotional scars of forced migration, while Zephaniah places exile within a wider history of human struggle and solidarity. Read side by side, their works show that the refugee experience is both personal and universal. They urge readers to respond not only with empathy but also with reflection, recognizing that displacement is a continuing human crisis that demands compassion and meaningful action.

## Memory as Trauma and Testimony

Memory plays a central role in both poems, serving as both a heavy burden and a form of testimony. “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first



instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth, 1996). The speaker’s recollections are not nostalgic but filled with images of war, destruction, and fear. Her famous line, “no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark,” captures the pressure behind migration and shows that memory cannot be left behind. It remains within the body and mind, resurfacing in fragments and images that refugees cannot control.

The poem’s fragmented structure reflects the broken nature of traumatic memory. Instead of a clear, linear story, Shire offers a series of intense images that convey the psychological disorientation of displacement. Past and present collapse into one another, making it impossible for the refugee to fully inhabit their new environment. Memory intrudes constantly, shaping how the refugee perceives and experiences the world around them.

In contrast, Benjamin Zephaniah’s *We Refugees* uses a direct and conversational tone, but memory is just as important. The speaker repeats the reasons people are forced to leave, reminding us that exile is never freely chosen. Here, memory works as resistance against erasure. By recalling the circumstances of displacement, Zephaniah affirms the humanity of refugees and challenges stereotypes that portray them as opportunists or burdens.

Unlike Shire’s deeply personal style, Zephaniah speaks for a collective, presenting exile as a shared experience. Memory in his poem is not only individual but communal, reflecting the lives of many who have been forced to leave their homes. This collective memory points to the systemic nature of violence and displacement, showing that these are not isolated events but widespread problems tied to global inequality.

Together, the two poems demonstrate how memory functions both as trauma and as testimony. Shire reveals the inner, psychological scars carried by individuals, while Zephaniah highlights the collective voice that resists forgetting and demands recognition. In this way, memory becomes a powerful force, ensuring that the refugee experience is acknowledged and understood.

### **Displacement and the Crisis of Identity**

Displacement in both poems is not merely physical but deeply psychological and existential. In *Home*, displacement is portrayed as a rupture that destabilizes identity. The speaker’s sense of self is intimately tied to the idea of home, which is both a physical space and an emotional anchor. When that space becomes unsafe, the resulting displacement creates a profound sense of loss and disorientation.



Shire's poem shows the refugee as living in a liminal state, caught between two worlds but not fully belonging to either. The speaker's identity is fragmented, shaped by the tension between past and present, home and exile. This in-between condition is made even harder by the hostility faced in host countries, where refugees are often treated with suspicion or outright rejection.

Benjamin Zephaniah's *We Refugees* also explores the sense of alienation felt by displaced people, but it places stronger focus on social and political issues. The poem points out the unfairness of borders and questions the divisions that separate people into groups of belonging and exclusion. The speaker stresses that anyone could become a refugee under certain circumstances, challenging the belief that refugees are fundamentally different from those who reject them.

In both poems, displacement leads to a crisis of identity. Refugees are forced to renegotiate their sense of self in unfamiliar environments that often deny them recognition and dignity. This process is marked by uncertainty and instability, as the loss of home disrupts not only physical security but also cultural and emotional continuity.

### **Violence as a Continuous Condition**

Both *Home* and *We Refugees* reveal that violence is not a single event but a continuous reality that shapes the refugee experience. In Shire's *Home*, violence is immediate and visceral, conveyed through stark images of war, destruction, and fear. Her speaker describes the unbearable conditions that force people to flee, making clear that leaving home is never voluntary but a desperate act of survival. Yet the poem also insists that violence does not end once refugees leave their homes. It follows them into new lands, reappearing in forms such as xenophobia, discrimination, and dehumanization. Shire's fragmented style mirrors the fractured nature of trauma, showing how violence travels with refugees, haunting them even in supposed places of safety. Her use of repetition "no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" underscores the inevitability of flight and the persistence of danger.

The journey itself is marked by peril. Refugees face exploitation, abuse, and the constant threat of death. Even when they arrive in countries that promise protection, they often encounter hostility and exclusion. Shire's poem captures this ongoing vulnerability, emphasizing that displacement does not free refugees from suffering; instead, violence changes form and continues in new ways. The psychological scars of exile are compounded by the external hostility of new environments, leaving refugees trapped in a cycle of fear and rejection.



Zephaniah's *We Refugees* reinforces this idea by exposing the systemic nature of violence. His speaker points to political decisions, structural inequalities, and rigid borders that sustain refugee crises. Violence here is not only physical harm but also the denial of rights, the enforcement of exclusion, and the stigmatization of displaced people. Zephaniah's conversational tone and collective voice make the poem accessible, while his repetition of reasons for displacement such as war, famine, persecution reminds readers that exile is never freely chosen. By stressing that "we can all be refugees," he dismantles the illusion of distance, showing that displacement is a shared human vulnerability.

Together, the two poems present violence as pervasive and multifaceted. Shire emphasizes the psychological scars carried by refugees, portraying how trauma infiltrates memory and identity. Zephaniah highlights the collective injustices that perpetuate displacement, situating exile within broader social and political structures. Read side by side, their works challenge simplified narratives that treat refugee experiences as temporary crises. Instead, they reveal the lasting impact of violence on both individuals and communities, insisting that displacement is an ongoing condition woven into the refugee journey.

By presenting these perspectives together, Shire and Zephaniah call for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of displacement; one that recognizes violence as continuous, demands empathy, and requires systemic change. Their poetry transforms suffering into testimony, urging readers to confront the realities of exile not as distant tragedies but as urgent human struggles.

### **Poetic Strategies and the Representation of Suffering**

The effectiveness of both *Home* and *We Refugees* lies in their use of distinct poetic strategies to represent the complexity of refugee suffering. Shire's *Home* relies on vivid imagery and repetition to capture the psychological dimensions of displacement. Her repeated phrases emphasize the inevitability of leaving home, while her striking images immerse readers in the speaker's lived reality. This style forces readers to confront the emotional weight of exile, evoking empathy and making the refugee's pain immediate and personal.

Zephaniah's *We Refugees* takes a different approach, using a conversational tone, direct address, and irony to highlight the systemic nature of violence and displacement. His accessible style draws readers into reflection, while his emphasis on political structures, social inequalities, and rigid borders exposes the broader forces that sustain refugee crises. By speaking in a collective voice, Zephaniah shifts



attention from individual trauma to shared experience, showing that exile is not an isolated event but a global condition rooted in injustice.

Despite their differences, both poets use their craft to humanize refugees and challenge dominant narratives that often reduce them to statistics or stereotypes. Shire's personal, image-driven style emphasizes the inner scars of memory and trauma, while Zephaniah's collective, political voice underscores the external forces of exclusion and inequality. Together, their poems act as testimony, bearing witness to experiences that are frequently ignored or misrepresented.

By weaving memory, displacement, and violence into their work, Shire and Zephaniah show that the refugee experience is both deeply personal and profoundly political. Their poetry insists that suffering must be acknowledged, not dismissed, and calls for empathy, compassion, and systemic change. In this way, the two poets transform literature into a powerful tool of witness and resistance, urging readers to recognize the shared humanity at the heart of displacement.

### **Memory, Displacement, and Violence: An Interconnected Framework**

The themes of memory, displacement, and violence are inseparable in both *Home* and *We Refugees*. Memory ensures that the experience of violence is not erased, keeping alive the pain and struggles refugees have endured. Displacement unsettles identity by breaking the bond between people and their homes, forcing them into unfamiliar environments where they must rebuild belonging. Violence, meanwhile, is not confined to the past; it continues to shape the present through exclusion, discrimination, and hostility. Together, these elements form a cycle: violence creates displacement, displacement intensifies memory, and memory preserves the reality of violence. This cycle shows that the refugee experience is not a single moment of departure but an ongoing condition that affects every aspect of life; psychological, social, and political. By presenting these themes together, both poems highlight the enduring struggles of refugees and challenge readers to see displacement as a continuing human crisis rather than a temporary event.

Shire's *Home* emphasizes the psychological dimensions of this cycle. Her poem reveals how displacement affects the inner world of individuals, showing the emotional weight of memory and the personal struggles of identity. Refugees carry their past with them wherever they go, and Shire's imagery captures the pain, confusion, and loss that come from being forced away from home. Her fragmented style mirrors the fractured nature of traumatic memory, making the reader feel the disorientation of exile.



Zephaniah's *We Refugees*, in contrast, foregrounds the social and political dimensions of displacement. His poem highlights the external forces such as inequality, borders, and prejudice that sustain refugee crises. By stressing these systemic issues, Zephaniah shows that violence and exclusion are not only personal experiences but also collective problems rooted in political decisions and social structures. His direct, conversational tone makes the poem accessible, while his collective voice underscores the shared nature of exile.

Together, the two poems complement each other. Shire reveals the inner, psychological scars of displacement, while Zephaniah exposes the outer, structural forces that shape refugee lives. This dual perspective makes clear that the refugee condition is both deeply personal and broadly political, shaped by memory, displacement, and violence at every level.

By examining these themes together, it becomes clear that refugee experiences cannot be understood in isolation. They are shaped by a complex interplay of personal and collective histories, structural inequalities, and ongoing conflicts. Shire and Zephaniah remind us that displacement is not simply about movement across borders, but about the transformation of identity, the persistence of trauma, and the endurance of violence. Their poetry insists that the refugee experience is a human reality that demands empathy, recognition, and action.

## Conclusion

Warsan Shire's *Home* and Benjamin Zephaniah's *We Refugees* both offer profound insights into the realities of displacement, using poetry as a means to bear witness to suffering and resilience. By exploring themes of memory, identity, and violence, the poems challenge readers to reconsider their assumptions about refugees and the forces that shape their lives.

Both poets show that displacement is not simply the act of moving from one place to another; it is a profound transformation that touches every aspect of existence. Memory functions as both a burden and a testimony, preserving the experiences of violence that compel migration. Violence itself is revealed as continuous, extending beyond the moment of departure and reappearing in new forms—xenophobia, exclusion, and systemic inequality—throughout the refugee journey.

Shire emphasizes the psychological dimensions of exile, portraying the inner struggles of individuals who carry their memories and fractured identities wherever they go. Zephaniah, in contrast, foregrounds the social and political structures that perpetuate displacement, showing how prejudice,



borders, and inequality sustain refugee crises. Together, their poems provide a dual perspective: the deeply personal scars of memory and trauma, and the collective injustices embedded in political systems.

Ultimately, both poets call for empathy, understanding, and recognition of shared humanity. By giving voice to those who are often silenced or marginalized, Shire and Zephaniah remind us that the refugee experience is not an abstract issue but a deeply human reality. Their work insists that refugees deserve attention, compassion, and meaningful action. In doing so, these poems transform literature into a powerful act of testimony and resistance, urging readers to confront the ongoing crisis of displacement and to respond with justice and care.

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