

Migration and Melancholia: In Search of Self through Jasmine Warga's *Other Words for Home*

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Abstract: In this article I will read Jordanian American author, Jasmine Warga's middle-grade verse-narrative *Other Words for Home* (2019) to examine how the young, twelve-year old protagonist, Jude, combats her loss and pain and how she retrieves her self-esteem in an emblematic manner as she migrates as a Syrian refugee to the United States. Drawing from my theoretical discussion on melancholia I will argue that introjecting any loss does not impoverish the ego, but can also invoke alternative ways toward emancipation and self-worth. Consequently, my discussion will highlight how children's voices are required to be heard to reimagine the complexities of migration and melancholia in promising ways. It will also emphasize the need for re-considering the unfortunate predicaments of forced migrations as it contains opportune ways of generating a sense of conviviality in the midst of similarities and differences.

Keywords: melancholia, migration, home, middle-grade, verse-narrative, Jasmine Warga

INTRODUCTION

People migrating from one place to another in search of work or economic opportunities, or to escape violence or persecution, or even to avoid natural disasters or other environmental factors, is not a recent phenomenon. However, migration has increasingly been perceived as a sensitive global issue given the fact that it not only involves diversely distinctive geographical locations and cultures, but it also focuses on the complex socio-economic and political contexts that generate multiple modes of migration. Moreover, the staggering rise in the number of refugees and asylum seekers around the world is rapidly coalescing into a global crisis in the recent times. Issues of identity and

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belonging, national security and solidarity have begun to dominate the global political discourse.

International Organization of Migration (IOM) in their recent *World Migration Report 2022* records that there are about 281 million international migrants worldwide, out of which 26.4 million are refugees, and 55 million are internally displaced people (IOM 2022, 10). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) notes that at the end of 2021, 89.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations (UNHCR). It also highlights that more than two-thirds of the displaced people worldwide came from just five countries — Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. The highest source country is the Syrian Arab Republic from where 6.8 million people have been displaced due to the decade-long civil war. UNHCR Global Trends 2021 report also points out that children account for 41 percent of all forcibly displaced people worldwide (UNHCR).

The statistics on child migration thus shows that children are being displaced, both internally and across the borders, in an alarmingly large number. Children are particularly vulnerable at all stages of migration process. It could range from lack of education or healthcare leading to different psychosocial issues to becoming victims of violence, abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and detention. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) specifies that child migration can occur in different circumstances and children are affected by migration in distinctive ways as well. For example, children could be left behind by migrant parents, they could be brought along with their migrating parents, they could find themselves forced to migrate alone, independently without any parent or guardian, or they could even get affected if their communities or localities they inhabit send or receive large number of migrants. Several working papers published by UNICEF suggest that children who migrate with their parents face different opportunities and challenges. While they face marginalization and discrimination in their country of settlement, and suffer from social and cultural dislocation along with their parent's economic insecurity, as well as barriers to accessing social services, most migrant children “flourish and contribute positively to their new communities; and policies and programmes can be devised to support and protect those children who may become vulnerable” (UNICEF “Migration”). Consequently, it is imperative to pay attention to

listening to these children's voices, who define their own migration narratives in their own ways, in order to reframe and reimagine migration to develop strategies for providing enhanced protection, rights, and opportunities. The Chief of Child Rights and Protection at UNICEF-Innocenti, Ramya Subrahmanian, rightly emphasizes: "Migration is often framed in terms of risk rather than opportunity" (UNICEF "Children's Voices"). She charts out the possible actions that could be implemented by the governments and stakeholders by outlining that "we must put children's migration experiences at the heart of policies. Listening to and including children's experiences is crucial to better policymaking and investments ... we must protect and provide for all children, regardless of their reason for migrating" (UNICEF "Children's Voices").

Given this context, in this article, I will focus on reading Jasmine Warga's verse-narrative *Other Words for Home* (2019). It is a middle grade novel, aimed at 8-12 years old readers, and written in verse, which traces a young twelve-year old girl, Jude's journey from her homeland, the war-torn Syria, to Cincinnati, to escape the violence at home and stay with their relatives abroad. A *New York Times* Bestseller and a 2020 John Newbery Honor Book, *Other Words for Home* on one hand, poignantly articulates the pain and confusion of a young girl, who has to leave her home, her father, and her elder brother, and become a refugee, along with her pregnant mother, striving to make another home in a socially, culturally, and politically different land, which mostly disapproves her as a strange intruder. But on the other hand, it paints a hopeful picture, where a sense of loss could be transformed into a spirit of discovery—not just of other words for home, but an unfolding sense of an encouraging space where everyone could be their own selves in their own unique ways.

Jasmine Warga, an American author, who was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, to an American mother and a Jordanian father, asserts that she felt alienated while she was growing up. Being a biracial child, she never felt that she was "enough of either" (Rosenzweig-Ziff). Warga explicates that she has always wanted to write middle grade books as she was not just a lonely child, but she felt that she needed books more than she ever did while she was in middle school as children of that age have "lots of questions about the world" and she enjoys the opportunity of shaping "how young people feel about themselves and feel about the world" (Rosenzweig-Ziff). Similarly, Warga's Jude in *Other Words for Home*, who has been abruptly transported from her

familiar, culturally homogeneous, homeland Syria to a strange, culturally different, multiracial America, has to confront complex questionings about her home and identity. Therefore, she is compelled to invent her own path of life's journey to negotiate with her suddenly transformed life, in search of "those places of belonging, places of feeling, ... [where] they can be their truest selves in a safe way" (Earle). As I read *Other Words for Home* I primarily notice Jude's constantly conflicting feelings of sadness and happiness as she is struggling to adjust herself to unfamiliar circumstances. Furthermore, I also particularly observe how Jude, as a young girl, not only endures her complex melancholia with great fortitude, but also how she combats her loss of home and pain of displacement, and how effectively she could retrieve her self-esteem, home, and belongingness in an emblematic manner along the way. Consequently, in the following section, I will initially examine the concept of melancholia and explore how the idea transcends from a perpetual sense of grief and loss to a potent symbol of endless opportunities in this age of migration and displacement. Following this, I will focus on reading Warga's verse-narrative to probe how articulations of a twelve-year old could reimagine the complexities of migration and melancholia in promising ways.

MELANCHOLIA: THE PAIN AND POSSIBILITIES

The multifaceted motif of melancholia has undergone many a transformation in its idea, concept, perception, and representation since the time of Hippocrates (c. 450-c. 380) to the present day. Predominantly identified as a unique emotional state, marked by grief and pain, emanating from a sense of loss, melancholia has been regarded as widely as an affective disorder, resulting in depression (Telles-Correia & Marquez 2015), to an "epiphenomenon of, or even as a prerequisite for outstanding cultural and political achievements and deep philosophical insight" (Mildeke & Wald 2011, 1). Historically considered as a pathological condition, melancholia was believed to be caused by the presence of an excess of black bile in human body by Hippocrates and later, by Galen (129-216), the Greek physician and philosopher of the Classical period, and in the Roman Empire, respectively. Andreas Laurentius (1558-1609), who was appointed as Professor of Anatomy at Montpellier in 1586, and assumed the role of royal physician later in 1600, documented and interpreted melancholy as a disease in his *A Discourse of the*

Preservation of the Sight: of Melancholic Diseases; of Rheumes, and of Old Age (1599). He discerns melancholy as “a dotage, not coupled with an ague but with fear and sadness” (Laurentius 1599, 88). Robert Burton’s encyclopaedic work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which was first published in 1621, and then expanded and altered in five subsequent editions, has charted the nature and explored the possible cures of melancholy in an expansive, complex, and erudite fashion.

Since the turn of the twentieth century the discussions on theoretical, social, and cultural connotations of melancholia have acquired a wider reach and greater significance. Sigmund Freud’s seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) highlights the difference between these two terms. Freud argues that while both mourning and melancholia could be stemmed from a painful sense of loss of a loved one, or an object, or an idea, they eventually results in imparting differential impressions on human psyche. Mourning can work through a sense of grief and loss towards overcoming the loss over a period of time and space. Alternatively, melancholia refuses to accept the loss, and gradually incorporates the loss into the self unconsciously, which not only impoverishes the ego, but also triggers self-criticism as the object of loss has been internalized as a part of the self. Freud (1953, 244) distinguishes such features of melancholia as “a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment”. Thus, Freud’s notion of melancholia unpacks a symbolic dimension of the concept as he asserts that even though the self is aware of the loss, it is “only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him” (Ibid., 245). Therefore, melancholia could also be characterised by not only a sense of loss of an object or an idea, but also by an unspecified sense of void and emptiness lingering within one’s own self. As a consequence, a melancholic mind responds to its personal, social, and cultural predicaments through quiet introspection which often culminates in different forms of artistic creations and aesthetic expressions.

However, Andrew Gibson expands the understanding of melancholia by identifying the emotion in cultural and epochal terms. He considers melancholia as a “cultural pathology” (Gibson 2003, 134) and discerns an abiding strain of melancholy perpetuating the present day, marking “the contemporary aesthetic realm ... [as] a melancholic space” (Ibid., 136). Gibson emphasizes that, given the

present predicament, melancholia could no longer afford to be considered only as a sense of personal loss, as Freud has contended earlier, but it should also be examined against the existing social, cultural, and political contexts. He argues that melancholia, these days, is “precisely a question of political and cultural disaster” (Ibid., 127) and “it is social conditions that prevent the objective realization of happiness or closeness” (Ibid., 128).

With the phenomenal rise in migratory movements across the globe along with its associated political issues and cultural complexities, melancholia has now been perceived as one of the appropriate theoretical constructs for cultural analysis of postcolonialism, diaspora, migration, and heterogeneous ethnic and racial identities. Paul Gilroy in his influential *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) applies the Freudian concept of melancholia to identify symptoms of “postimperial melancholia” in Great Britain which is prompted by “the loss of a fantasy of omnipotence” (Gilroy 2005, 99). He advocates the term “conviviality” to signify “the processes of cohabitation and interaction” between diverse cultures, which should ideally aim at making “multiculture an ordinary feature of social life” (Ibid., xv), overcoming “the supposedly impermeable boundaries of race, culture, identity, and ethnicity” (Ibid., xii). Sara Kaplan develops the idea of diasporic melancholia in her discussion on black diaspora and argues that the contemporary understanding of the idea of melancholia could be perceived “as an embodied individual and collective psychic practice with the political potential to transform grief into the articulation of grievances that traverse continents and cross time (Kaplan 2007, 513). Kaplan further asserts that such articulations of diasporic melancholia, on one hand, contain “the impossibility of forgetting, the irremediable nature of the loss”, and on the other hand, could reinscribe “a geography of political possibility” (Ibid., 522).

Focusing on the predicaments of the Asian-American and the African-American communities Anne Anlin Cheng (2000, 24) signifies racial identity “as a melancholic formation”. She argues that the acknowledgement and the sustenance of the racial other in the society generate distinctive feelings of melancholia, as the immigrant non-whites, by incorporating the white ideologies, create a critical dissociation from their non-white selves, while, the dominant white identity continues to operate melancholically as it is cognizant of the perplexing sense of “guilt and the denial of guilt, the blending of shame and omnipotence in the racist imaginary” (Ibid., 12). In a recent

volume *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation* (2018), David L. Eng and Shinhee Han document an extensive and significant study on how psychic processes of racial melancholia and racial dissociation identify the various ways by which Asian American adolescents and young adults are “assimilated into, as well as excluded from, the social and political domains” (Eng & Han 2018, vii). Referring to specific case histories and commentaries of particular students and patients, from both Generation X and Generation Y, Eng and Han examine the social dilemmas they endure and the psychic mechanisms they practice in order to process their diasporic predicament of loss and grief, discrimination and exclusion. The study is noteworthy as it investigates how these young adults strive to recognize, express, and reconcile with not only what they have lost, but also what they have gained in the course of their perpetual journey through migration, displacement, and diaspora. Consequently, the following section will focus on the lived experiences of Jude in Warga’s *Other Words for Home* and explore how home, belongingness, and self-worth could be perceived differently through the lens of migration and melancholia.

IN SEARCH OF SELF THROUGH *OTHER WORDS FOR HOME*

Jasmine Warga divides her verse-narrative into six sections, namely, “Changing”, “Arriving”, “Staying”, “Hoping”, “Growing”, and “Living”, thus drawing a full arc of her young, twelve-year old protagonist, Jude’s life-journey, tracing how her life has changed in her homeland to how she has started living a different life in a foreign land. The novel is set in both Syria and Cincinnati, and contextualized against the early days of Syrian civil war, as well as against the aftermath of the disastrous 9/11 in the US, which has triggered Islamophobia and a disturbing binary of “us” and “them”. Warga astutely portrays how a young Syrian refugee in America, who is unaware of the political implications of rapidly changing global socio-political configurations, and her small multiracial circle of classmates, teachers, friends, and relatives, are not only passively reconciling themselves to the difficult predicament, but how they are uniquely developing their own ways of engaging with each other, evoking a sense of conviviality, leading to a sense of belongingness in similarities and differences.

Warga reveals how the idea of the book germinated early in 2013 at a dinner table of a close family friend’s house where she was introduced to the members of their extended family who had arrived

from Syria to escape the violence. As she watched the cousins from Syria interacting with the cousins in America, she realizes that they are still family although they live on the different sides of the Atlantic and their experiences are also vastly different from each other. Herself having her own family members in Jordan, which is a neighbouring Arab country, and being regularly swamped with the news of increasing violence and atrocities of war in the US media, Warga disturbingly detects not only silence and apathy, but also a growing contempt for these people who are trying to flee the war zone around her. She confesses: “They made me confront things that I had long ago buried within me—knowledge of prejudice against Arabs and Arab-Americans, Islamophobia, and America’s often cool indifference to the suffering of brown people” (Warga 2019, 335). She considers that giving a voice to Jude is giving a voice to her younger self on a personal level, when she felt ashamed of her biracial heritage and tried to hide her identity. She emphasizes that Jude’s voice is even more significant as it lends symbolically a voice to those children who have been displaced, despised, and marginalized, and whose “dreams, hopes, and fears are as valid as anyone else’s” (Ibid.). Drawing Jude with a magnanimous heart and boundless optimism, even while in pain and despair, Warga intends to convey that the children fleeing violence and war are the same children who are only in search of “the same things all of us do—love, understanding, safety, a chance at happiness” (Ibid., 336).

The novel starts with Jude’s uncomplicated life in Syria where she lives with her parents and her elder brother, Issa, in a small seaside town, which is also popular with the tourists. She loves watching classical Hollywood movies with her best friend, Fatima, and wishes to become a film star. However, as the political situation gets unstable and the conflict is getting closer to home, in addition to when Issa becomes a part of the revolutionary forces, thus rendering the entire family more vulnerable, Jude’s father decides to send Jude and her mother who is pregnant with a third child, to Cincinnati where Jude’s maternal uncle resides before the situation gets further untenable. Jude recalls how their regular family dinners have changed and laments: “...I just want to live in a country where/ we can all have dinner again/ without shouting about our president/ or rebels and revolution” (Warga 2019, 17).

In an interview, Warga reminds the readers that the scope of the experiences of Jude as a Syrian refugee in America is quite narrow as

she has conceptualized Jude along the lines of her own family friends, who have Jordanian or Arabian or Middle-Eastern roots but have family and relatives in the United States. Therefore, Jude represents one of those privileged migrants who have family in America and who could afford flight tickets. Hence, expectedly her experiences of migration are bound to be “different than someone else’s escape via a much less privileged route” (Grochowski). However, this apparent vantage position of Jude provides her with opportune time and space where she can vow: “I am going to have to learn how to be brave/ We’re all going to have to learn” (Warga 2019, 57), which indicates the possible potential of transforming her melancholia incurred due to the loss of her home in Syria to reclaim an alternative sense of home and self, amidst difference, and with conviviality as Gilroy has proposed. Despite deeply missing home and her father, who does not want to leave Syria leaving his business and store behind, and suffering agonizing days and nights worrying about her elder brother’s whereabouts who has left home to fight in Aleppo, the epicentre of the war-zone, Jude could still live with her mother in her Uncle Mazin’s house along with her Aunt Michelle and cousin Sarah, and could attend a regular American school where her cousin also studies, and could even summon enough courage to try-out for the famous school musical, in spite of having a thick accent and not being able to speak English like a native.

However, her supposedly advantageous position does not make her immune to the existing socio-cultural prejudice. From being dismissed by her own cousin, Sarah, being judged for wearing scarves on the streets, to being shouted at: “Go back to where you came from.../ We don’t want you here” (Warga 2019, 263), Jude also has to witness the Middle Eastern restaurant, that is run by the parents of her friend, Layla, to be splashed with red paint spelling “Terrorists” (Ibid., 275). Such distressing predicament of refugee migration recalls Gibson’s observation that the contemporary aesthetic realm could be inscribed as a melancholy space. As Gibson rightly points out that today’s melancholia is mostly triggered by the complex socio-political conditions, Warga’s verse-narrative or Jude’s story also reflects Kaplan’s views on diasporic melancholia. Kaplan contends that the psychic practice of transforming grief into articulations of grievances does not obliterate the loss but contain endless possibilities that could traverse across different geographical borders. Accordingly, Jude’s learning curve of “how to be/ sad/ and happy/ at the same time” (Ibid.,

49) contains immense possibilities for reclaiming the lost sense of self and reinscribing alternative perceptions of home.

Jude correlates her anguish and anticipation symbolically with the motif of a shedding tree. While she often feels “like when I boarded that plane/ to fly to America/ I left my heart behind / beating and lonely on the other side of the ocean” (Warga 2019, 83), she also wonders time and again: “if it is exhausting/ to be a tree./ To lose something,/ year after year,/ only to trust that it will/ someday grow back” (Ibid., 157). Jude, who particularly aches for her home in Syria, and perceives that to be impressed by anything in America would have been a betrayal to her father and her home, that she has left behind, eventually forces herself to be receptive to the idea which is similar to a shedding tree. She begins to trust that in every loss there could always be the promise of a new beginning. Therefore, when her Uncle Mazin responds to her mother’s query: “I don’t see anything from home here” with “This is home” (Ibid., 88), Jude realizes that an idea or an object could also be perceived beyond the expected and the accepted boundaries.

Such recognition leads Jude to question the uncomfortable practice of labelling as stereotypes without delving into the specifics. She observes: “Back home/ food was/ rice/ lamb/ fish/ hummus/ pita bread/ olives/ feta cheese/ za’atar with olive oil./ Here, that food is/ Middle Eastern food./ Baguettes are French food./ Spaghetti is Italian food./ Pizza is both American and Italian,/ depending on which restaurant you go to./ Every food has a label./ It is sorted and assigned” (Warga, 2019, 91). Similarly, she also discerns that such assortments are not just meant to be limited to food items or other daily consumables. She, as an individual, is also marked by stereotypical labels in the US: “I am a Middle Eastern girl./ A Syrian girl./ A Muslim girl./ Americans love labels./ They help them know what to expect” (Ibid., 92). Labelling an individual as such indicates stripping a person of his/her personality and dignity and imposing of a bureaucratic identity. Roger Zetter (1991) rightly identifies that such labels are embedded with political implications and unequal power relations. Fiona Anthias (2008, 7) similarly affirms that such impositions of ethnic markers are implicitly translated as hostile identities “whose cultures and ways of life are seen to be incompatible or undesirable within Western societies”.

As newspapers and various media in the US continue to report the escalating violence in Syria and how innocent people get trapped and

fail to move anywhere for safety because most of the international borders are increasingly closed for these unwanted refugees and asylum seekers, Jude's mother repeatedly reminds Jude about how lucky they are. Jude's anxiety about her father's and brother's safety in the war-torn Syria and her contrasting experiences in the US has transformed her understanding about the precarious positions of people like her. For example: "kids whose English is sticky and slow/ kids who were from somewhere else,/ but are here now" (Warga 2019, 104). Therefore, her initial confusion of "how strange to feel lucky/ for something that is making my heart feel so sad" (Ibid., 66) while clearing the immigration at the airport in the US for the first time, is later transmuted into a clear understanding: "Lucky. I am learning how to say it/ over and over again in English./ I am learning how it tastes—/ sweet with promise/ and bitter with responsibility" (Ibid., 168). She determines to participate in the try-out in the school musical, even though her friend, Layla warns her that it is not meant for the girls like her. Her singular resolve to prove to Sarah that she can figure out how to belong, to declare to Layla that she wants to be in the try-out because she wants to reclaim their space, and to give the musical-theatre director, Mrs Bloom, who does not even bother to say her so-called unpronounceable family name, "a reason to know how to say my name, / my full name" (Ibid., 223), eventually wins her a small role in the school musical.

Warga ends her novel with this climactic vision of Jude, on the stage, during the first night of the performance: "I hold my breath./ The curtain lifts/ and I step out onto the stage./ The theatre lights are brighter than/ I imagined./ I squint a little,/ but then I adjust to the spotlight" (Warga 2019, 332). By endowing a voice and a space to Jude, a Syrian in America, in search of safety, Warga strives to equip the loss, the pain, and the grief of all the displaced children en masse around the world with the strength and confidence to find, in Jude's words, "roles where we feel seen/ as we truly are" (Ibid., 324). Warga's conviction that "the Judes of the world deserve to have their stories told" (Ibid., 335) echoes UNICEF's recommendation to consider child migration experiences as significant in policymaking. Jude's story, similar to the studies done by Eng and Han on Asian American adolescents and young adults, unravels that displacement does not merely signify any permanent loss but it can also contain the seeds of gaining an additional and alternative perspective. Realizing that both her Uncle Mazin's old, creaky house in Cincinnati and her

father's family house in Syria are her homes, Jude agrees with her Uncle: "It's not a contest between here/ and there./ You don't have to choose" (Ibid., 297). Consequently, drawing from my initial discussion on melancholia and through my reading of Jasmine Warga's *Other Words for Home* I contend that in this age of migration and displacement introjecting the loss no longer impoverishes the ego, as Freud has argued earlier, but emancipates, who the world stereotypically see as the Other, by incorporating the spirit of Gilroy's conviviality, as differences and multiplicities reiterate the values of individuality and self-worth.

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