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The Poetry of Witness as a Form of Resistance in Selected Poems of Carolyn Forché

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Abstract

This article contends for a poetics of witness that, looking to both texts in the light of each other, sees Carolyn Forché's poetry as an instance of a poetics of witness as resistance to political violence, imperialism, and the silencing of marginalized voices. By close reading the two poems "The Country Between Us" and "The Boatman," the essay examines how Forché blends her own lived experience with historical trauma to bear witness and contest hegemonic narratives. The thesis takes a postcolonial theoretical perspective, using Achille Mbembe, Edward Said, and

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's ideas to analyse how Forché's poetry subverts Western complicity in international atrocity and reclaims the silenced subaltern voice. The research is designed to examine the ways in which poetic form, imagery and voice act as instruments of resistance in situation of political conflict and displacement. It tackles the following guiding questions: How is the Forché's poetry expressing in marginalized voice? How is she employing the language of poetry to address the historical and political horrors she's encountered? Where can her works be located in the discourse of postcolonial resistance? Through a qualitative analysis and close reading of text, the paper argues that Forché's poems are not narrations of suffering but constitutes interventions in the politics of memory and ethics. The speciousness of the charge does nothing to diminish "The Country Between Us," which meditates on American imperialism in El Salvador through visceral imagery and testimonial voice, or "The Boatman," which reimagines the Syrian refugee crisis with lyrical empathy and moral urgency. Both works illustrate the poet's function as witness and mediator between historical trauma and ethical participation, and the work of poetry as a form of resistance to silence and a reaffirmation of human dignity.

Keywords: Achille Mbembe, Carolyn Forché, Edward Said, ethical memory, imperialism, Necropolitics, poetry of witness, postcolonial theory, resistance, subaltern, testimony, The Boatman, The Country Between Us, trauma

شعر الشهادة كشكل من أشكال المقاومة في قصائد مختارة لكارولين فورشي: "البلاد التي بيننا" و"الملاح"

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الملخص:
تُجادل هذه الدراسة في تبني مفهوم "شعر الشهادة" بوصفه شكلاً من أشكال المقاومة ضد العنف السياسي والإمبريالية وإسكات الأصوات المهمشة، حيث تنظر إلى قصائد كارولين فورشي بوصفها مثالًا على هذا النهج الشعري المقاوم. ومن خلال قراءة

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تحليلية دقيقة لقصيدتي "البلاد التي بيننا" و"الملاح"، تبحث الدراسة كيف تدمج فورشي بين تجربتها الشخصية والصدمة التاريخية لتقدم شهادة شعرية تتحدى السرديات الهيمنية. تستند هذه الأطروحة إلى منظور نظري ما بعد استعماري، مع توظيف أفكار اشيل ممبي و إدوارد سعيد وجاياتري تشاكرافورتي سبيفاك لتحليل كيفية تقويض شعر فورشي لتواطؤ الغرب في الفظائع الدولية، واستعادته لصوت المهمش/التابع المسكوت عنه. تهدف الدراسة إلى تحليل كيف تعمل البنية الشعرية والصور الشعرية والصوت الشعري كأدوات مقاومة في سياقات الصراع السياسي والتهجير القسري. وتطرح الدراسة الأسئلة الآتية: كيف تعبّر قصائد فورشي عن صوت المهمش؟ كيف توظّف لغة الشعر لمواجهة الفظائع التاريخية والسياسية التي عاينتها؟ وأين يمكن تصنيف أعمالها ضمن خطاب المقاومة ما بعد الاستعمارية؟ من خلال تحليل نوعي وقراءة قريبة للنصوص، تبيّن الورقة أن قصائد فورشي لا تكتفي بسرد المعاناة، بل تمثّل تدخلًا نقديًا في سياسة الذاكرة والأخلاق. فقصيدة "البلاد التي بيننا" تتأمل الإمبريالية الأمريكية في السلفادور من خلال صور حسية وصوت شهادوي، في حين تعيد قصيدة "الملاح" تخيّل أزمة اللاجئين السوريين بلغة شعرية حافلة بالتعاطف الأخلاقي والإنساني. توضح كلتا القصيدتين وظيفة الشاعر كشاهد ووسيط بين الصدمة التاريخية والمشاركة الأخلاقية، مما يؤكد على أن الشعر أداة مقاومة للصمت وتأكيد على كرامة الإنسان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أشيل مبمبي، كارولين فورشيه، إدوارد سعيد، الذاكرة الأخلاقية، الإمبريالية، سياسة القتل، شعر الشهادة، النظرية ما بعد الاستعمارية، المقاومة، المهمّشون، الشهادة، القارب، البلاد الواقعة بيننا، الصدمة

1. Introduction

Amidst political oppression, bloodshed and displacement, literature, and poetry in particular, has become a means of artistic expression and a tool of resistance. One of the most powerful poetic responses to historical trauma is the kind which Carolynn Forché has called “poetry of witness,” and which does not just look back on the hurt one has incurred, but looks it head-on, memorially, in all its memorial accountability of It's the poetry that is written by poets who directly live or experienced extreme social and political conditions like war ,torture,exile,oppression and trauma Forché’s poetry blurs the division between art and activism, and it consists of intense political meditations on imperialism and human rights abuses and marginalized voices above all extremely personal ones (Forché, 1993).

This paper explores how Forché’s poetry namely the poems *The Country Between Us* (1981) and *The Boatman* (2016) operates as a poetic form of disobedience to imperial occupation, exile, and the erasure of marginalized subjects. This pair of poems, written decades apart, take snapshots of political trauma around the world: the U.S.- backed civil war in El Salvador and the humanitarian disaster mounting in the Syrian refugee crisis. Both works embody what Edward Said (1994) terms “contrapuntal reading”, or reading a Western text alongside the suppressed histories it often excludes, and what Spivak (1988) criticizes as the silencing of the subaltern. They resist hegemonic narratives, and bear witness to history as the poetic voice becomes part of it.

Carolyn Forché is an American poet, translator, and human rights activist whose literary and activist work has forever changed the relationship between politics and literature. It was her time in El Salvador at the end of the 1970s, documenting the ruinous results of U.S. foreign policy for the country’s citizenry, that gave rise to her most significant work, The Country Between Us (1981), which launched her poetics as well as her activism into the international spotlight. Later poems by Forché, including those in In the Lateness of the World (2020), demonstrate how she continues to grapple with global suffering and displacement. Her concept of a “poetry of witness”

declines the lyric's historical propensity for inwardness in favour of a socially embedded voice that registers atrocity without aestheticizing it. She proposes that "witness poetry occupies a liminal space between the personal and the historical, where 'the poem becomes a trace, a remnant, a record"' (Forché, 1993, p. 33).

Inspired by a postcolonial theoretical approach, this paper also scrutinizes Forché's poetry in its action of resistance, namely as a way of evoking the subaltern voice, confronting Western implication in the global violence, and demanding ethical memory. Focusing on the formal and thematic features of *The Country Between Us* and *The Boatman*, the thesis raises a question: how does Forché's poetic works offer the voice to those who are silenced? How does poetic language reveal historical and political violence? And how do these poems fit into the discourse of postcolonial resistance and testimonial literature?

At this moment of humanitarian crisis and contested history, the poet as witness and moral interlocutor is as vital as ever. Forché's poetry is an invitation for readers to draw uncomfortably close to trauma, demanding that the aesthetic gesture is also a political one: a refusal to forget, a call to conscience, and a testament to human dignity held in common.

This research is confined to a thematic examination of selected poems by Carolyn Forché, with a primary emphasis on her collections *The Country Between Us* It does not encompass her complete poetic oeuvre or the wider range of Poetry of Witness by other poets. The analysis is undertaken solely from a literary and human rights perspective, excluding comprehensive multidisciplinary techniques like psychological or historical trauma studies that might provide more insights into the intricacies of witnessing and representation.

2. Literature Review

Carolyn Forché's part in the "poetry of witness" largely traces its source to her experiences in the Salvadoran Civil War, most famously depicted in *The Colonel* (1981) and in her recent memoir, *What You Have Heard Is True (*2019). Critics such as Creswell (2014) describe her contributions as profoundly testimonial rather than propagandist, a reinvention of the political lyric in its refusal to turn a blind eye to violence. (sites.lsa.umich.edu+9newyorker.com) (+9thenationalbookreview.com) Forché herself separates herself from this overly narrow moralization and emphasizes the transformative possibilities of poetry of witness that rises above partisanship to implicate ethical engagement.(lareviewofbooks.org) (worldliteraturetoday.org) (newyorker.com)

Contemporary critics have built on this tradition of poetry of resistance. In "Ears on the Floor," Forché's poetry is commended for rendering the raw atrocity in powerful, disquieting pictures that shock readers to remember and to act in accordance with their moral instincts. (lareviewofbooks.org) (sites.lsa.umich.edu) (read.dukeupress.edu) In a similar vein, New Yorker commentary underscores how Forché's subsequent collections, *Angel of History*, *Blue Hour*, In the Lateness of the World, modulate a dialectical balance between self and politics, memory and communal accountability. (worldliteraturetoday.org) (newyorker.com) (en.wikipedia.org)

As scholars of genre, some of the critics that Genre draws on have understood that Forché's "poems-as-events" produce an ontological shift: they are not just a representation of trauma; they are the enactment of trauma and an appeal to ethical response. (modernamericanpoetry.org) (read.dukeupress.edu) (zingarapoet.net) This is consistent with a decolonial and existential theoretical standpoint that considers testimonial poetry as a mode of addressing power, and giving visibility to individual suffering in the collective mind.

The postmodern status of narrative and authority in the recent theoretical works on literature, such as the work of Almaaroof and Khudhair (2024) who examine postmodern truth and ethical narrative in Atonement, emphasize the fragmented nature of memory and authority as postmodern concerns. Almaaroof and Rostam similarly examine the politics of individual memory and imagination in short fiction, arguing that remembering is in itself an act of resistance. Building on such work, Almaaroof and Jasim (2025) demonstrate how Beckett's Not I subverts the existential notion of identity through fragmented subjectivity, whereas Almaaroof and Ahmed (2024) deploy existential ontology to analyse disillusionment in Hamlet and Death of a Salesman. Together, these analyses bring to the fore the knot of memory, identity, and resistance—an intellectual space that is in the end highly germane to Forché's witness poetics.

Although critics have already recognized Carolyn Forché's contribution to the remaking of political lyric and subsequent testimonial aesthetics, and while discussions of the relations between memory, truth, and identity in modern texts are plentiful, a coherent examination still does not exist here that: Combines postmodern theories of splintered memory and truth (e.g., Almaaroof & Khudhair, 2024) with Forché's poetry of witness, explores—from existential/ ontological intelligences and the development of the self (cf. Almaaroof & Ahmed, 2024), and how her work resists, not only politically, but also linguistically and formally, and situates Forché's poetic work in wider conversations about identity within resistance literature by bringing into conversation the perspectives of Beckett, McEwan and postmodern narrative criticism.

In short, while, Forché has been frequently framed politically or ethically, there has not been enough focus on Forché as a postmodern witness-poet whose form, memory, and personhood are intertwined as they test understandings of coherence, of truth, of the subject. This book closes that gap by taking a cross-disciplinary approach that weaves these textual responses into witness literature, and reads them through postmodern theory and existential ontology.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study by following textual analysis and close reading as a methodology is situated within the interdisciplinary field of postcolonial literary theory, drawing particularly from the insights of Achille Mbembe, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said to examine the psychological and political implications of colonial trauma, voice, and agency as expressed in Dr. Belkys Babo's short story "Who Will Open the Door?"). The story presents a haunting metaphor for the enduring paralysis and internalized oppression experienced by postcolonial subjects, which can be critically unpacked through these theorists' perspectives.

Achille Mbembe's concept of the postcolony and necropolitics offers a framework for understanding the story's depiction of suspended time and immobility. Mbembe (2001) argues that postcolonial states are haunted by the violence and chaos of colonial governance, often

reproducing its logic of domination and death. In the poem, the protagonist's psychological fragmentation and loss of agency can be read as a symptom of the necropolitical condition, where the line between life and death becomes blurred, and subjects live in a state of existential limbo. The open yet unopened door becomes a spectral figure of hope deferred, echoing Mbembe's vision of time in the postcolony as a recursive space of arrested futures. "In the postcolony, the people...live in a time of entanglement – a time that is neither one of total rupture nor of complete continuity." (Mbembe, 2001, p. 14) This entangled temporality resonates with the character's fixation on an event that never occurs (the knocking), indicating a consciousness caught in the loop of colonial afterlives.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), is essential to interpreting the protagonist's silencing and inward collapse. The narrator, despite her education and apparent agency, is rendered voiceless and invisible in her own home, embodying what Spivak calls the "epistemic violence" that erases subaltern women from dominant narratives. In this poem, the subaltern is not merely a colonial subject but a doubly marginalized woman whose cultural, emotional, and intellectual life is negated. The refusal to open the door becomes an allegorical representation of internalized silence, conditioned by patriarchy and postcolonial disillusionment. "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item." (Spivak, 1988, p. 104) The protagonist's fear, hesitation, and retreat from decision-making underscore her positioning as a subaltern who cannot be heard even in the intimate space of her home.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (1978) is instrumental in understanding the ideological background that shapes the postcolonial identity in the story. Said argues that colonial discourse constructs the East as passive, irrational, and feminine – a construction internalized by the colonized. The protagonist's psychic landscape, riddled with fear, inertia, and fractured memory, reflects the internalization of colonial narratives. She does not act; she waits. The 'knock' could be read as a call to action or resistance, yet the protagonist fails to respond, illustrating how deeply the colonial project has penetrated the self. "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'… the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'." (Said, 1978, p. 40) The character's emotional withdrawal thus reflects what Said calls the psychological occupation – a form of domination that lingers beyond political independence and colonizes the very consciousness of the formerly colonized.

Together, these theorists enable a layered interpretation of "the poem as a narrative of postcolonial paralysis, gendered subalternity, and psychic haunting. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics situates the story within a temporal void where life does not progress; Spivak's subaltern theory unveils the gendered silence that hinders speech and agency; and Said's Orientalism reveals the colonial legacy embedded in psychological structures. The story's closed door becomes a postcolonial symbol—suggesting both the potential of liberation and the persistence of fear, hesitation, and invisibility that defines the subaltern subject.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Carolyn Forché's idea of the "poetry of witness" changed contemporary perceptions of the political potency of literature. Located between the lyric and the documentary, this type of poetry rejects the separation between art and activism. It gives voice to individuals silenced by state-

sponsored atrocities, genocide, war, and torture. Forché sees the poet as a moral participant rather than a remote observer; his responsibility is to record the unthinkable and keep it in the domain of words. Her art intervenes in power structures by refusing quiet, questioning official narratives, and promoting human dignity despite tragedy rather than just showing injustice. Forché redefines poetry as an active witness to historical brutality and as a defiant act of recollection by weaving together memory, pain, testimony, and ethical duty (Forché,2014, p.670).

Forché's political poetics are rooted in her late 1970s El Salvador transforming experience. Invited by activist Leonel Gómez Vides, Forché spent several months in the thick of a horrific civil war where government forces committed wide-scale human rights violations. This was existential, not just motivational. She was subjected to the naked violence of murder, oppression, torture, and the fragility of life under totalitarian rule. Startling the American literary scene, this meeting produced the poetry of *The Country Between Us* (1981). Instead of expected conventional romanticism, critics and readers found broken grammar, political imagery, and violent depictions. Poems such as "The Colonel," in which a heap of human ears is spilt on the floor, are not rhetorical techniques. They are documents. Forché stated in interviews that she wrote from inside the violence of battle rather than from a distance (Ibid,2017, p.12).

To set her work apart from both propaganda and purely lyrical poetry, she used the phrase "poetry of witness". This poetry does not seek to convince, celebrate, or amuse. Instead, it records. The poet turns into an archivist of pain, a keeper of memories governments and empires want to wipe off. Witness poetry is therefore a form of resistance against moral apathy, against censorship, and against loss. From *The Colonel*, “The Country Between Us”

“There is no other way to say this.

He spilled a sack of human ears on the ground.

They were like dried peach halves.

There is no other way to say this.

He spilled a sack of human ears on the ground” (Forché,1981).

Both literal and metaphorical meanings are conveyed by this infamous ending image. The expression "ears pressed to the ground" gives the impression that even after death, these victims are still attempting to listen, to observe, and to communicate as quietly as possible. Forché captures in this poem a terrible event during her trip to El Salvador during its civil conflict, where she met with a military officer the Colonel who, in a disgusting display of intimidation, placed a bag of severed ears on the floor. Echoing the oppressive burden of political anxiety, the repetition, the matter-of-fact tone, and the absence of line breaks create a feeling of repressed panic. Even in death, the ears "pressed to the ground" become a frightening symbol for the victims' ongoing existence and their quiet act of observing (Lewis,2001, p.9).

The eradication of human life and the savagery of the military are both directly confronted by this situation. Forché's poetic resistance includes memory as one of its most radical components.

Amnesia is a tool of totalitarian governments. They sanitise violence, twist history, and conceal their offences. Witness poetry fights this with records. Forché rebuilds the pieces of lost life like a historian. Unlike the apathetic historian, however, she participates emotionally, spiritually, and morally (Russell,2014).

Resisting metaphor and aestheticization, her poem "The Colonel," among the most quoted in modern American poetry. The poem concludes with the notorious line. This poem is one of the most referenced and analysed compositions in contemporary American poetry due to its brutal reality and political significance. This sample captures the visceral anguish and ethical witness that distinguish her poem of witness. In Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *The Colonel*, the colonel is a powerful symbol of defiance against the political and social forces trying to stifle and dominate. Márquez employs the colonel's character and situation as a metaphor for the larger fight of the marginalised and disadvantaged against power structures (Basak,2019,pp.15-16).

Central to the narrative is the colonel's internal conflict with authority, represented by his rejection of the existing quo in spite of his own desperate situation. Years of waiting for a pension, a promise promised to him following his wartime duty, the colonel has endured. His persistent patience and reluctance to submit to the system keeping him in a state of limbo show his nonviolent, quiet resistance. The struggle here is one of survival; he fights the loss of his dignity, apathy, and hopelessness. Even when confronted with an overwhelming lack of hope, this patient defiance symbolises the daily resistance of regular people who refuse to be totally crushed by the systems oppressing them;

> "What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house." (Forché,1981)

The colonel's quiet and austere attitude also constitute a kind of political opposition. He fights by keeping his integrity and refusing to give up his dignity instead of participating in large gestures or open protests. The colonel's silence in front of his growing anger and suffering speaks volumes. It shows how, in repressive or authoritarian countries, even quiet may be seen as resistance. His failure to speak out or accept the modest concessions given to him in the shape of a meagre salary is a sort of resistance to the exploitation of his devotion, his time, and his dignity. Márquez implies by means of this that occasionally quiet in front of systematic brutality has more significance than any direct fight (Thankachy,2018,p.32).

Here, the picture of cut ears turns into a chilling metaphor for how even in mutilation bodies still try to testify;

> "They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He spilled a sack of human ears on the ground. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground." (Forché,1981).

Pressed to the ground, the ears "listen" to the land, to history, to what is left. Unarguably political, frightening, and unforgettable, the picture is one of all three. It makes the reader live in the present and sense involvement in worldwide violent systems. Forché records actual violence

and questions the safety of artistic detachment by rejecting euphemism and sentimentality. Her inability to aestheticize tragedy is itself a kind of resistance. She keeps its rawness and immediacy rather than turning violence into beauty (Rochelle,1982, p.24).

Forché also fights violence by means of official disturbance. Often, traditional lyric poetry reflects the individual using graceful metaphors and seamless rhythms. By contrast, Forché's work is characterized by fragmentation, abrupt changes, and rich intertextuality. Forché in this book broadens the geographical and historical scope of her evidence. She calls to mind the Inquisition, the Holocaust, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the wars in Bosnia and Lebanon. The language gets more elliptical; the pictures multilayered and multilingual. Her sources include religious chants, archival materials, personal letters, and newspaper clippings. This collage-like approach reflects the disorder and confusion of trauma (DeNiord,2017,p.33).

Carolyn Forché's poetry is known for its ability to recount atrocities without turning them to spectacle. In her collection of work, particularly poems like "The Visitor" and "The Boatman," she redefines poetry's purpose—not as escapist or abstract meditation, but as witness. These poems provide emotionally charged and ethically informed images of human suffering caused by conflict, political repression, and displacement. They serve as poetic testaments that refuse to be silent, challenge collective forgetfulness, and encourage the reader to remember what history and politics frequently erase.

Written while Forché's time in El Salvador on the verge of civil war, "The Visitor" is a disturbing, intimate contact with the reality of political terror. The poem is set in a safe house, where the speaker encounters a man who has been tortured and is now hiding, awaiting execution. The tone is muted, and the horror is restrained, which is exactly what makes it so frightening;

"He tells me the men's names in the room.

One is missing an ear.

Another will die in the morning." (Forché, 1981).

Among the ethical quandaries Forché deftly negotiates is the distinction between "bearing witness" and "speaking for." Many politically active authors run the risk of appropriation—using the misery of others for creative or political advantage. Forché is well conscious of this risk. She does not say to be the voice of the downtrodden. Rather, she sees herself as a witness someone who has witnessed and feels driven to testify yet knows the boundaries of her viewpoint. Forché looks back on her experience in El Salvador with humility and insight in her prose memoir *What You Have Heard Is True* (2019). She does not show herself as a saviour. She tells stories of self-doubt, uncertainty, and terror. She admits her privilege, her Americanness, her learning curve. Her self-awareness increases her credibility and increases the moral gravity of her poems (Rossi, 2019).

"The Visitor" is remarkable for the contrast between the everyday activities—sharing a drink, starting a cigarette—and the gravity of what is unsaid. Forché's witness poetry is defined by this contrast between everyday domesticity and hidden brutality. Instead than emphasising violence straight, she documents its residue: the silences, the looks, the quiet before the storm. The man does not narrate his tale; rather, the speaker must assemble it from shards (Forché,2021,p.35).

This indirectness shows the pain of the topic as well as the ethical constraint of the poet, who will not use misery for theatrical impact. The language of trauma is fractured and ambiguous, Forché frequently observes, since the whole horror cannot be completely shown.

"In Spanish he whispers that he is one of the men;

he has been beaten for six days."(Forché,1981).

This line shows physical resistance,the guy has endured six days of suffering. The whisper is a delicate act of defiance: speaking the truth despite fear. "The walls are falling away, the world is turning to water." (Ibid). This surreal moment evokes psychological collapse, yet also implies transformation. Even in the disorientation caused by violence, the world continues—the self-endures.

"You will tell them yes. That you have seen it." (Ibid). Here, the visitor entrusts the speaker with testimony. This is an act of resistance: asking someone to carry the truth, to resist denial, and to become a witness in their place. "He tells me he has been here three days." (Ibid). Simply remaining alive and waiting, even while being hunted, is a form of resistance. Time itself becomes an act of survival. "You can't speak. He lifts the gauze. There is nothing under it." (Ibid). This moment of bodily mutilation is also metaphorical: the man has been silenced literally. Yet, by appearing, by being seen, he still communicates. His presence resists erasure. "He is a quiet man. He does not want to scare you." (Ibid). Even in suffering, the man's humanity resists the dehumanization of torture. His gentleness counters the violence inflicted upon him. "He turns his face to the wall. I hear him breathing." (Ibid). Breathing becomes a symbol of survival. The man has endured what was meant to destroy him. Each breath is an act of resistance.

"Tomorrow he will be gone. He will go out alone.

The next time, he says, he will not return." (Forché,1981).

Even knowing death is near, the man chooses when and how to leave. His decision to disappear on his terms, rather than be captured, is a final, quiet act of resistance. It defies the erasure that authoritarian violence seeks to impose.

Her method tells readers that seeing is not a passive activity. It calls for constant duty, vulnerability, and bravery. Seeing is insufficient; one must also recall, read, and speak even when doing so causes suffering. Forché's poetic opposition is centred on this ethics of witnessing. Forché's poetry has also had real political influence. She has spoken before U.S. congressional panels on human rights violations. Her readings have memorialised victims of violence. She has worked with groups including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Her talks usually close the distance between art and action, and her work has featured in social justice initiatives (Prendergast,2020,p.7).

Furthermore, she has guided many poets carrying on the legacy of politically active literature. Writers such as Ilya Kaminsky, Claudia Rankine, and Warsan Shire continue on the history of poetry as resistance by mixing lyricism with historical urgency, personal memory with

worldwide injustice. Forché's assertion that poetry can live outside the ivory tower within the courtroom, the demonstration, the refugee camp has broadened the cultural role of literature. She questions the notion that poetry is a private, upper-class art form. Rather, she views art as a moral, public project able to influence the past.

In Mbembe's necropolitics, power doesn't only kill; it silences. The man in "The Visitor" is a person shattered by state violence. His silence becomes a metaphor for the buried stories in areas of necropower, where speaking can cost death. The guest is a survivor but not quite alive. He lives in what Mbembe calls a zone of indistinction where to live is to be plagued, paralysed by what cannot be articulated. Not dead but not quite among the living, he is a typical necropolitics victim living under the burden of violence he has witnessed or perpetrated (Mbembe,2003,p.23). From state surveillance to trauma: the basic act of "visiting" turns revolutionary. The speaker is not wanted; their presence is hazardous. This shows how encounter with truth in necropolitical settings—often military or authoritarian regimes is perceived as subversion when witnessing turns into resistance.

"The Boatman" is among Forché's most potent reflections on contemporary displacement, published in *In the Lateness of the World* (2020). Though it refers broadly to all forced migrations brought on by conflict, injustice, and collapse, the poem emphasises the Syrian refugee crisis. Forché carries on her literary legacy of giving voice to those made silent by governmental policies, warlords, and global apathy;

> "After that, Aleppo went up in smoke, and Raqqa came under a rain of leaflets warning everyone to go. Leave, yes, but go where?
>
> We lived through the Americans and Russians, through Americans
>
> again, many nights of death from the clouds, mornings surprised to be waking from the sleep of death, still unburied and alive but with no safe place. Leave, yes, we obey the leaflets, but go where?" (Forché,2020).

Mbembe contends that many times, humanitarianism runs in a system separating those deemed completely human from those not. This dualism can produce a kind of humanitarian activity that, although apparently meant to reduce suffering, supports current power inequalities and neglects the underlying reasons of injustice (Mbembe, 2019,p.213).

"The Boatman" shows Forché using her witness poetics to address a worldwide catastrophe, so proving that poetry may be a kind of humanitarian awareness. The poet listens, records, and grieves rather than just reporting. The migrants are alive, talking people who recall the sound of bombs, the faces of drowning children, and the weight of what was lost, not numbers or faceless throngs. This time captures the essence of exile: not just geographic relocation but also the irreversible loss of belonging. The poetry offers neither redemption nor resolution. The suffering is continuous; the survival is uncertain she said;

> "To camp misery and camp remain here. I ask you then, where?

You tell me you are a poet. If so, our destination is the same.

I find myself now the boatman, driving a taxi at the end of the world" (Forché,2020).

Conclusion

Carolyn Forché's Poetry of Witness is more than art—it fights evil and chronicles history. Forché uses forceful language, shattered pictures, and emotionally charged stories to turn the poet into a participant and historian of human pain. By giving voice to war, tyranny, and political violence victims, Forché turns poetry into a public act of remembering and morality. The study demonstrates Forché's work is rooted in the moral need to "not look away." Her poetry takes readers to regions of brutality and moral doubt without providing a clear response or explanation.

She also vividly depicts awful situations with her unconnected structure, simplicity, and harsh pictures, matching form with substance. These choices don't minimise suffering; they reveal the terrible realities of oppression and survival. So Forché's Poetry of Witness shows the emotional and moral damage of violence as well as the facts. Furthermore, Carolyn Forché's poetry shows how words may be strong even in silence, violence, and forgetting the past. She preserves memories and inspires future generations to use poetry to speak out and resist. She illustrates that poets must address the world's misery, not to solve it but to prevent it from being ignored.

The poetry of Carolyn Forché stands as an eloquent enactment of a poetics of witness that challenges the erasures of history and the silencing apparatus of imperial power. In the poems "The Country Between Us" and "The Boatman," Forché doesn't lean back past the brink of atrocity into mere witnessing but calls the perspective into the work as a kind of ethical engagement: the poet stands witness to the violence, and not just chronicles it but enacts it as witness, an active gesture in the use of the language of world and resistance. Responses to the prompting questions converge along the points of poetical form, historiographical memory and postcolonial critique.

Her work casts the voiceless individual in her poetry by transcending the silence that the oppressor is mandated to impose on the oppressed, whether that be Salvadoran civilians, under U.S.-sponsored harm, or Syrian refugees escaping obliteration. Following Spivak's theory of the subaltern, Forché does not purport to speak in behalf of the voiceless, but tries to generate a poetic space in which their suffering is rendered legible, their humanity is recognized, and their silencing questioned in ethical terms. Spivak is reminding us that the subaltern cannot speak in hegemonic systems; Forché's poetry therefore functions as an intervention that brings the systems to light, while pointing toward an ethic of listening and response.

The poems, when read through Edward Said's *Orientalism*, do not exoticize and depersonalize the Other as per the West. Her work doesn't aestheticize violence, but reveals the complicity of empire, and especially of the U.S., in global conflicts. In "The Country Between Us," her personal confrontation with American imperialism in El Salvador challenges a sanitized political narrative, and resonates with Said's protest against Western epistemological imperialism over history and identity.

Similarly, Mbembe's *Necropolitical Theory*, the calculus of who gets to live and who must die, furthers our understanding of the spaces into which Forché writes. In "The Boatman," the Syrian refugee ceases to be only a tragic figure, but becomes one of political significance. The refugee is ensnared in the lattice of global violence and disposability that Mbwmbe contends constitutes the contemporary postcolony. But Forché refuses to depict the refugee as a passive victim, preferring to grant him agency, dignity, and narrative heft. Her poetic decisions defy the necropolitical logic that makes some lives grieveable, and others disposable.

In the end, Forché's poetry is situated squarely in the discourse of postcolonial resistance, both memorial and protest. It dares the reader to transcend voyeurism to ethical recognition, implicating the structure of Western power while also maintaining the singularity of human suffering. Her language, lyrical, fragmented and precise, defies resolution, reflecting the unsettled, long-running reality of trauma and displacement.

By recuperating the silenced word, revealing imperial violence, and questioning necropolitical hierarchies, Forché proposes a poetry which is not just aesthetic, but deeply political. Her work makes us remember that poetry in the postcolonial condition is not separate from action but resistance; not simply a reflection but an archive of the unspeakable; not only to bring attention to memory lest we forget, but a call to bear witness in the age of forgetting.

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