



Exploring the Bi-Fold Tale of Homelessness: A Reading of Paul Bettany's *Shelter*

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Abstract

She held a coffee cup for change and a worn cardboard sign that read- "I USED TO BE SOMEONE".

In an endearing tale of love and redemption, Paul Bettany's *Shelter* recounts the harrowing experiences of the countless multitude of the many nameless and faceless inhabitants through Tahir and Hannah. The movie addresses the emotional and psychological ordeals of a refugee in both literal and metaphorical sense and the associated phenomena of homelessness. The paper endeavours to problematize the phenomena of homelessness by delving deep into the bi-fold depiction of the said phenomena through two characters scrounging for their identity that is both lost and undermined in a ruthlessly fleeting city.

Keywords: Refugee, Homelessness, Bi-Fold, Identity

A man who lives everywhere lives nowhere.

- Martial

The sense of safety and security provided by a home can never be undermined. While a huge majority of the world's population takes rest in the comfort of closed doors and a roof over their heads, a large number of people remain homeless. Poverty is considered to be the most common reason for being homeless. People who are forced to leave their homelands due to political turmoil and other conditions often seek asylum in other countries. Very often, they carry hopes for a better future with their family in the new-found land. The increasing number of asylum-seekers/ refugees/ immigrants also leads to the ever-increasing issue of homelessness.

Immigrants and other refugees are forced to sleep on the floor and on streets with no access to even the most basic facilities. While the governments of most nations have specific laws for refugee immigrations and try to 'provide' for their housing and welfare, many tend to turn a blind eye towards them. They are left unnoticed and neglected along the sidewalks of urban living in the metropolitan cities across the globe. A great cause of anxiety among the asylum-seekers, housing insecurity has also led to a large number of suicides. Refugees are often driven to homelessness and destitution, which have become inevitable consequences, due to glitches in the system that deals with their rehabilitation.

Not only are the dreams and aspirations of such people let down, they are also made to endure further setbacks. They who were forced to flee their homeland under adverse circumstances are further robbed of their dreams regarding a better home. Their lives are thus caught up in an unending gyre. Paul Bettany's directorial debut *Shelter* is a movie that examines this element of homelessness from two different perspectives- of a homeless illegal immigrant and a heroin addict who is homeless in her own homeland.

The story, which deals with the lives of two homeless individuals on the streets of New York, depicts their budding relationship in an unconventional setting. Hannah, a native, has been living on the streets of New York battling with heroin addiction and suicidal tendencies, after her husband's death. The chance encounter she has with Tahir, an illegal immigrant from Lagos helps her get her life back on track. The movie which makes use of our empathy, portrays how their mutual dependence grows on to become love. While Tahir helps Hannah become sober and to recover from her addiction, Hannah helps Tahir find redemption for his terrible past as a terrorist.

As the movie opens, both of the characters are similar in one way- being homeless. At the same time, they are different in many ways. While Tahir is a homeless immigrant in a foreign country, Hannah is a homeless addict in her own homeland. Tahir believes in God and Hannah does not whereas Hannah believes in drugs and Tahir does not. The movie, takes on all of these factors and weaves a narrative which details the ordeals they have to endure- sexual assault, substance abuse, depression, imprisonment, lost dreams and grief. Bettany, with his dramatic approach, visualizes the plight of the homeless in New York with utmost care. The movie highlights the inefficiency from the part of bureaucracy in helping the homeless find shelter and settle down. On a closer reading, Bettany's *Shelter* moves on from being a narrative on homelessness to be one that focuses on how the homeless are judged and evaluated in a society.

In order to evoke the feeling of empathy amongst the viewers, Bettany has carefully chosen his protagonists. Tahir is an illegal Nigerian immigrant, an ex-terrorist, a former Boko Haram member. Even as his visa has expired, Tahir who survives by busking on his plastic-bucket drums, is not considered a "deportation priority" by the officials. Hannah is portrayed as the worst that a woman can be in our culture- a drug addict who has abandoned her child and family.

They've both done terrible things in their pasts, and have succumbed to unpardonable acts, but they haven't lost hope. It is this hope and a sense of belonging that rekindle in them once they start being together. Tahir's gentlemanly behaviour wins the trust of Hannah that turns into a mutually beneficial partnership and then romance. The second half of the movie focuses on how Hannah and Tahir push through their despair, the dangers and the doubts rising up around them. They find home in each other, but fail miserably as they try to find a shelter in the ruthlessly fleeting, snowy New York. All of these combine to make the audience feel sympathy towards the characters who are on the run to escape their past and build towards a future.

The idea of a home is different for both the protagonists. Tahir escaped his homeland to move away from his eventful, dark past that made him take up arms and join a terrorist organisation like Boko Haram. Still he holds beautiful memories of his homeland when it comes to his deceased family. On the streets of New York, Tahir is a changed man, a devout Muslim who seeks advice from his priest every now and then. He is on his path to redemption and aspires to wash off the sins from his past. Hannah, on the other hand, is homeless in her own homeland. She left her home when she could not bear the death of her husband and took up heroin addiction to help her ease the pain. Frail and vulnerable on the snowy streets of Manhattan, she is doubly

marginalised as a woman and a homeless person. She does not seek to get back to her real home. Instead, she looks forward to having a proper home with Tahir. As an initial step towards her hopes, she even attends recovery group meetings, to break away from her addiction.

As the latter part of the movie shifts to the ordeals the homeless protagonists have to face while searching for a shelter, as viewers we are given a glimpse of the bureaucracy that prevents them from getting help and finding shelter. Hannah, as a young homeless woman, is taken advantage of, by her own people, in her own homeland. The disturbing ordeals she has to go through in order to find a shelter above their heads, proves the manifold ways by which the homeless are exploited and subjected to unending abuse in even the most 'welcoming' and 'refugee-friendly' states. Her gender makes her face more issues and troubles than those faced by a real refugee- Tahir. In their quest for a shelter, they come across options to be alone and safe, like staying at separate shelter homes. While Tahir tries to force Hannah into taking it up, she declines. Hannah knows she needs Tahir to help her remain sober and get back to her life. In her futile attempts to earn them a shelter, she is subjected to physical and sexual abuse. She is made to pay in her flesh for a night's shelter. Later, on two other occasions, she is forced to sell her body for money- to buy medicines for Tahir and to afford two train tickets to take them back to her real home. Though an ex-terrorist, Tahir is a changed man, and has high regard and respect for Hannah. He tries hard to protect her from the abuses she has to come across. Trying to break her free from the clutches of the man taking advantage of her for paying her \$500, he unintentionally murders the man. The bureaucracy that showed no interest in him as a homeless man, has now become more concerned of him, as he has been tagged a 'murderer'. Even as a sick and homeless person, Tahir could not succeed in finding a shelter for him and Hannah. The only shelter they manage to find, does not protect them, but instead takes advantage of their positions as weaklings and vulnerable vagrants in the society.

The only real shelter they manage to find is the consolation through the company of each other. Even as they try to proceed towards a future, they are constrained and taken advantage of, by society. As Tahir breathes his last, battling his sickness on the snowy streets of Manhattan, he finds shelter in God- the only true thing he believed in. When Hannah pushes his lifeless body to the flowing river, the act becomes metaphorical of Tahir's perpetual homelessness, both in life and death.

In the desolately complex life of the homeless, every day is a question of survival. Displaced and in quest for the safety of a roof that they can call a 'home', they are forced to trust strangers, the strangers who often exploit them. To the rest of the world, they are like rats, disgusting creatures, their numbers spiralling out of control each time they cross the streets. In that aggressive position that the rest of the world occupy, judging the homeless and their homelessness as somehow being their fault, we are slithering away from any or every responsibility that we may have for them. Every dollar bill that we give them is to satisfy our inner ego than to actually help them. Even in their multitudinous number, they have become invisible to the rest of the world, having to fight their way to survive each time. *Shelter* succeeds in making the viewers aware of the ways by which the society judges the homeless with preconceived notions and misconceptions. The brief moments of security and happiness they experience at the apartment they break into, is portrayed as a dream-like sequence that soon makes them feel unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with. Through his various shots and scenes, Bettany makes us feel the same discomfort while narrating the tale of homelessness; reconfirming their status as "someone".

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