

Refugee Mother and Child

No Madonna and Child could touch
that picture of a mother's tenderness
for a son she soon would have to forget.

The air was heavy with odours
of diarrhoea of unwashed children
with washed-out ribs and dried-up
bottoms struggling in laboured
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most
mothers there had long ceased
to care but not this one; she held
a ghost smile between her teeth
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's
pride as she combed the rust-coloured
hair left on his skull – and then ;
singing in her eyes – began carefully
to part it ... In another life this
would have been a little daily
act of no consequence before his
breakfast and school; now she
did it like putting flowers
on a tiny grave.

Chinua Achebe

Comment [B1]: Portrays a mother// another way of saying portraying Mary & Jesus – this is a religious image of care, affection and tenderness. Mary also had to watch her son die on the cross, so there is a similarity there and it may also suggest that even prayer cannot help these refugees now

Comment [B2]: The stanza length is short compared to the other// it foregrounds the mother's love for her son & that she won't give up on him considering the fact that he's about to die soon which suggests a lot of compassion from the mother. This short positive stanza indicates that there is very little hope or goodness in the lives of the refugees – most of their life is like the struggle depicted in the second stanza

Comment [B3]: Enjambment

Comment [u4]: The sibilance of the description of the unhealthy and suffering children, emphasizes the hardships they face in the refugee camp// intensifies the picture of unpleasantness, the way they describe how dirty and ill the other children are.

Comment [B5]: The other mothers in the refugee camp didn't care about their sick child/children dying since they know that nothing can save them// seems that other mothers don't care about their child/children anymore. This makes the mother in this poem seem even more heroic / tragic

Comment [B6]: Means like she's faking it because of her sadness. She's just forced to smile trying not to think that her child is close to death. Ghost has obvious connotations of death and the fact that the smile is being held between her teeth bespeaks her desperation

Comment [B7]: Connotation of death. Repetition of this word emphasizes that the mother's child is dying// "ghost of a mother's pride" – the memory of happiness she had with her son before they were in the camp and before her son got sick.

Comment [B8]: Shows that the mother still has a tiny bit of happiness that her dying child is STILL alive. How she's sort of positive in situation like this. She shows that she doesn't want to "cease to care" like the other mothers did to their children// contrast to the poem because of the slight happiness present – makes the scene even more touching and tragic

Comment [B9]: Connotations of death// shows how unhealthy and how sick the boy is// sets the idea that his sickness is terminal

Comment [B10]: She's trying to avoid feeling sad while she watches her son dying// trying to remember the happiness she spent with her soon before he got ill. Or alternatively the contrast reflects our lives and how lucky we are not to be living in a situation like this. Alternatively it might reflect how her life could have been if only she were luckier or the war had not happened

Comment [B11]: The relatively positive picture of flowers contrasts sharply with 'grave' in the next line. We are lulled into a false sense of security by the these three or four lines that paint a normal day to day life that we are once again shocked when we are brought back face to face with death

Comment [B12]: Connotation of death// ending the poem with the word "grave" and the punctuation makes the poem more morbid and definite.