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On *Migritude*: An Innovative Form of Feminine Diasporic Identification in the Neo-Liberal Nation State

ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how Shailja Patel's protest narrative in *Migritude* brings to the forefront the histories of the subaltern otherwise silenced. As *Migritude* focuses on the placement and re-placement of black African women and diasporic communities in the discourse of international concern, this article re-conceptualizes what is considered to be 'home' in the queer imaginary by addressing the discourse of the subaltern. This article poses a critique on heteronormativity in order to represent the subaltern, whose concerns are illustrated as the reproduction of systemic violence upon their body. Attentive to the multiplicity of voices, Patel engages with transnational political discourse a gendered heteronormative identification. The unique

experiences of belonging of these female subjects, place them in a new multi-dimensional locus, where a different consciousness of identity arises. Patel's narrative signals toward an innovative recuperation of female diasporic subjectivity that is evidently progressive. The queer female South Asian subject becomes the center of attention and the space it occupies becomes a terrain of possibility.

Keywords: Queer, body politics, diaspora, memory, migritude, India, East Africa

S hailja Patel's *Migritude* can be read as the work of a transnational feminist writer who posits the placement and re-placement of black African bodies in the discourse of international concern. *Migritude* is based on Patel's one-woman theater show that debuted on national and international grounds in 2006. It is a spoken-word performance piece in which Patel employs dance, poetry, and a trousseau of saris. It does not confine itself to a single genre. In this article I demonstrate the inherent dialectics of inclusion and exclusion of the regime of immigration fundamental to the modern nation-state, introducing migritude thought as an antidote to border-thinking and opening up the possibility of a queer dialectic.

Patel brings to the forefront her singular set of experiences as a female migrant which may at first seem completely different from the heterogeneous experiences of the multitude of the Asian diasporic immigrants, however, a number of similarities can be traced in the context of migritude literature. The term migritude has a twofold meaning as it derives from the words migrant and attitude. Patel perceives migritude as the "voice of a generation . . . who speak[s] unapologetically, fiercely, lyrically for themselves.¹ More specifically,

¹ Neelofer Qadir, "Migritude's Decolonial Lessons," *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 3-4 (2018): 143.



on her website she frames *migritude* as a “reassertion of the ‘dignity’ of outsider status in its play on ‘négritude’ and ‘attitude.’”² *Migritude* claims an oppositional politics to Négritude as it advocates for a non-assimilationist politics, but one that brings to the forefront the migrants’ unique identity.

Patel’s project is “a tapestry of poetry, history, politics, packed into a suitcase, embedded in [her] body, rolled out into a theatre. An accounting of Empire enacted on the bodies of women.”³ Embodiment is central in the narrative in the way that gendering occurs through the expression of different meanings from the body. Embodiment is important in the ways that bodies are subject to different meanings such as imperial mapping and in the ways that they express diverse meanings such as gendering. Patel argues that “theatre is [...] a body in front of other bodies. Unfiltered, unedited, unmanipulated. In real time. If I screw up onstage, everyone participates in that moment.”⁴ Patel goes “against the flattening of subjects in migration as data” by connecting their movement with communal history and her private history.⁵ She achieves that by dramatizing the processes of deconstructing imperial remains while exposing the ways in which they are still present and affect the formation of the South Asian subject’s identity. Patel traces her movement as a South Asian African woman in Kenya, Britain, and the United States through unraveling her trousseau of saris. *Migritude* heavily lies on performativity as it is an activist performance through which the imperial histories of South Asia and

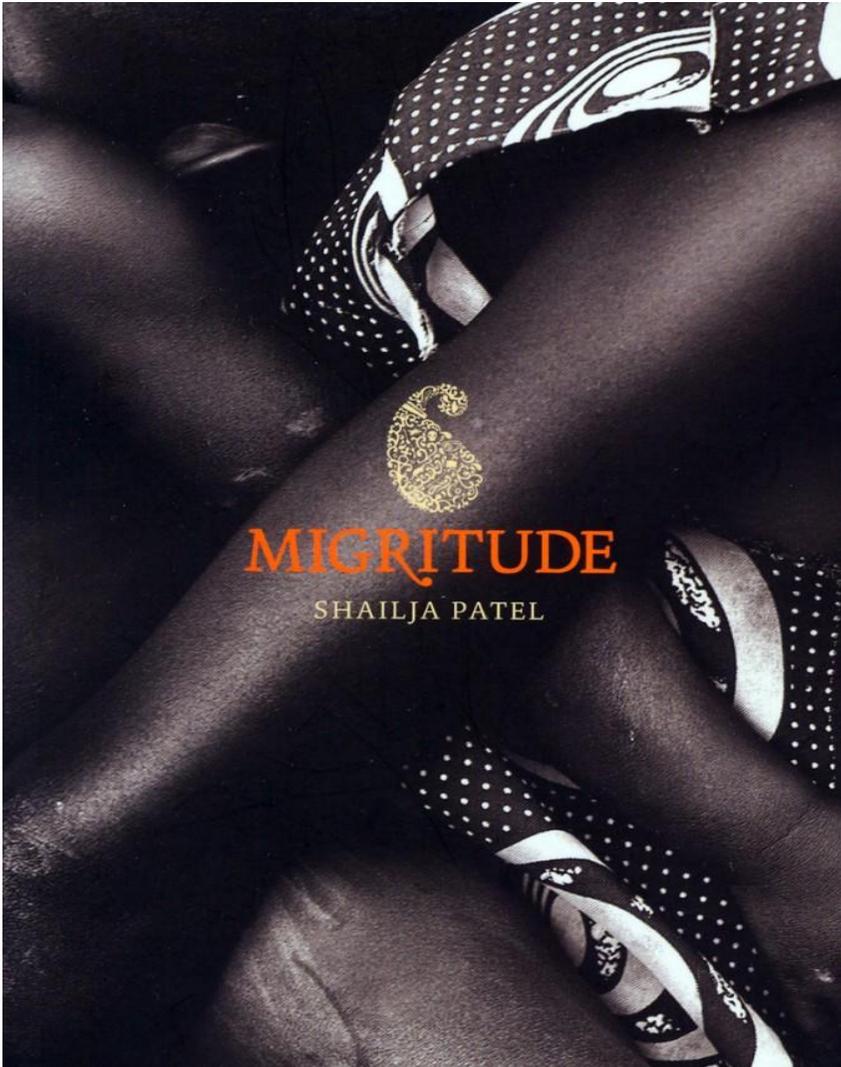
² Shailja Patel, *Migritude* (Los Angeles, California: Kaya, 2010), 143.

³ Ibid, 96.

⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁵ Christopher Ian Foster, *Black Migrant Literature, New African Diasporas, and the Phenomenology of Movement* (New York: CUNY Academic Works, 2005), 8.

East Africa are brought to the forefront and are challenged through the discourse of neo-coloniality.



The front cover of Shailja Patel's 2010 book which is part poetic memoir, part political history, and part performance.

As a body of work, *Migritude* stems from Patel's personal experiences as an African migrant, her family history, and transnational politics. As a transnational feminist Patel has a deep



understanding of intersectional modalities of power dynamics between black female African subjects and patriarchy. Her work functions as a way of decolonizing the boundaries between personal storytelling and Kenya's public history while addressing the silenced discourse of diasporic queerness.

This paper consists of a re-conceptualization of what is considered to be home in the queer imaginary. Through nonfiction literature the boundaries between the public and the private are re-negotiated in order to decolonize the individual's desires. Re-branding the notion of home and constructing an alternative queer identity renders *Migritude* familiar to the Western reader. Through the exposition of the neoliberal values of self-governance, Patel's work is situated in a transnational context of investment in the black African diasporic body. I explore how alternative South Asian sexual identifications and formations come into being in this transnational context. The articulation of queer femininity is linked to narratives of mobility, desire and pleasure, and aspects of neo-liberal values of belonging. In this context, there is not an ideal sense of self as the discourse that queerness falls into a transgressive dialogue of identity norms is challenged, and the strictures of traditional normativity are broken by the constant movement of the South Asian female subject that operates within and outside the framework of the traditional home. The unique experiences of belonging of these female subjects place them into a new multi-dimensional locus, where a different consciousness of identity arises. Queer feminine desire gets displaced from the realms of the nation and diaspora which reiterate patriarchal logic. This disruption of the patriarchal logic feeds the displacement of desire which fuels the constant longing for something almost unattainable.

Patel creates new forms of feminine diasporic identification that exceed a gendered heteronormative identification. Queerness is a destabilization of the roots of a homogenized society whose identity is formed around heteronormative norms. Tracing the “juxtapolitical” register of queerness disrupts the dominant way of framing South Asian identities which are structured from the intersection between the categories of class, race, and gender. “Juxtapolitical” is a term I borrow from Lauren Berlant, but slightly alter, to show how intimacy emerges among South Asian subjects and what their differences are in spite of their proximity. Gender and sexual normativity constricts individuals through twin processes of inclusion and exclusion. Queerness does not replicate the traditional social structures that reproduce the internal logic of South Asian diasporic communities’ heteronormativity. Male heterosexuality lies at the heart of the predominant conceptualization of South Asian diaspora. However, in this context the diasporic female subject comes to the forefront as it crosses the threshold of dominant male diasporic narratives and becomes the centerpiece of South Asian queer sexual formation. Patel enables the emergence of marginalized traditions by giving voice to those with invisible African identities. She puts in the forefront the lived experiences of queer, non-Western women of color that are survivors of colonial and imperial violence. She places together the fragments of one’s queer sexual identification which were destabilized by the empire. She opens up a space for these fragments to fall into a larger narrative, one of queer self-identification.

I expand on the scope of belonging and animate the possibility of an alternative way of being that galvanizes queer desire. This article consists of an initiation of the discussion of queer subversion of identity and the diasporic culture. I create a framework to problematize



the strictures of heteronormative identification of non-Western women whose formation of identity is affected by Western patriarchal and imperialist logic, to explore the possibility for the emergence of an alternative, queer identification. In this context, identity is linked to the vector of difference and functions as a challenge to the Western imperialist and patriarchal logic of compulsive heteronormativity. I challenge the notion of one homogenous, universal experience as universality typically functions as a rhetoric to counterbalance the discourse of colonialism and imperialism which perpetuates the patriarchal logic of heteronormativity. Patel challenges the postcolonial narratives that view “diaspora and nation through the tropes of home, family, and community that are invariably organized around heteronormative, patriarchal authority.”⁶ *Migritude* could be read as an initiation of the discussion of a queer diasporic culture, as claims to a traditional identity are deliberately subverted. Queer feminine desire becomes displaced from the realms of the nation and diaspora which reiterate the patriarchal logic. Configuring diaspora exclusively in relation to heterosexual longings denies the existence of an alternative queer identification which underwrites queer diasporas.

Patel vocalizes her unique set of experiences into an alternative space of communal belonging. Through the intersectionality of race, gender, and class she exposes the gendered and racial violence that stems from the transnational interactions of diasporic subjects. Queerness evolves around a network of bodies, desires, practices, and performances that are negotiated and renegotiated in the churning network of diasporic identification. She examines the public histories of war and imperialism while at the same time particular aspects of the

⁶ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 68.

past are repressed and effaced. A radical diasporic discourse manifested through bodily desires hints at narratives of colonialist and nationalist violence. Through these bodies, the violent legacies of colonialism and nationalism are contested. Patel's narrative signals towards an innovative fixing of the female diasporic subjectivity that is evidently progressive.

New Racialized Queer Femininity

Patel gives rise to new racialized subject formations, in particular queer femininity. The queer female South Asian subject becomes the center of attention and the space it occupies becomes a terrain of possibility. Patel's work resonates with queer South Asian diaspora studies which signal the existence of an alternative form of desire for deriving pleasure. Therefore, she manages to form a connection between these two notions and "opens up temporal and spatial dimensions of interconnectedness between a period of anti-colonial independence movements and the neo-colonial/imperial structures" which are ever-present.⁷ Patel claims that her book "is not about the migrants alone, but about the condition of migration, of "migritude," what it is to live "within the concept of Migrant."⁸

The condition of migration is a universal experience. What is considered to be home needs to be reconsidered in the context of the queer imaginary. Vocalizing queer desire turns to become central in remembering the submerged histories of racism and colonialism. This history drenched in violence resurfaces each time that a queer sense of identity is articulated. Discourses of queer identity are inextricably connected to the prevalent discourses of the continuing history of

⁷ Qadir, "*Migritude*'s Decolonial Lessons," 143.

⁸ Patel, *Migritude*, 12.



colonialism and nationalism. Nationalistic and diasporic discourses tend to erase queer bodies and their history. By exposing systemic violence, Patel contests imperial violence and other forms of systemic oppression. She aims at piecing together the fragments of stories of queer women in order to contest the imperial discourse of violence.

Patel further extends existing discourse by problematizing the way that the right of sexuality has been traditionally theorized in order to center the lived experiences of black queer women. In *Migritude*, Patel exposes the violence of the neoliberal nation-state in order to deconstruct state sanctioned injustice in relation to the right of having a queer identification. She creates a new economy of emotions and brings to the forefront the possibility of agency in the case of migrants with attitude.

More specifically, Patel deals with the experiences of migration that women have within and outside the framework of family and exposes their consistent negotiation of conflicting perspectives shaped by the formation and management of numerous homes. Foster in “Black Migrant Literature, New African Diasporas, and the Phenomenology of Movement” claims that *Migritude* belongs to a tradition of texts that fall into “a new identitarian space,” a third space that illustrates the “disengagement from both the culture of origin and the receiving culture,” as it “operates in a multi-dimensional space, in relationship to four frames of reference: the global, the regional, the national, and the individual.”⁹ The multidimensionality of these different points of reference show that world literature operates simultaneously on multiple levels. Within this space, the formation of a queer identity becomes possible. *Migritude* is cosmopolitan as it goes

⁹ Foster, *Black Migrant Literature, New African Diasporas, and the Phenomenology of Movement*, 8.

beyond the bounds of nationalism. A new terrain of collectivity emerges where queer diasporic forms surface.

The Violent History of Colonialism and the Sari

Migritude's narrative begins with the material history of different textiles and more specifically with the history of how the sari has come into being. In the prelude, "How Ambi Became Paisley," Patel connects the history of ambi which is the material out of which Patel's saris are made of with the dialectic of migration. The production of this material is imbricated in the dialectic of imperial trade embedded with violence. She analyzes how British officers chopped off the thumbs and forefingers of muslin weavers in 1813 and goes on an exploration of how Kashmir was annexed by Britain. The production of the sari is deeply implicated in the violent history of colonialism, trade, and migration. Through the lens of transnational feminism Patel brings to the forefront the ways in which gender is produced, circulated, and consumed across cultural borders.

To the existing imperialist discourse in which the veil is viewed as symbolic of subjection, Patel brings up a different dimension. For her, the sari not only reflects "the violent history of British colonialism in India and Kenya but also more recent histories of violence enacted through neoliberal immigration policies in the US and Britain."¹⁰ More specifically the 1965 Immigration Act underwrote the heteronormative nuclear family structure as the natural site for the reproduction of neoliberal citizenship. However, Patel emphasizes the need for a space where queer migrants can exist, disrupting heteronormativity as the sole site around which one should base their identity. Patel's saris not

¹⁰ Theresa A. Kulbaga, "Sari suasion: Migrant Economies of Care in Shailja Patel's *Migritude*," *Prose Studies* 38, no.1, (2016): 81.



only represent the stories of those with a heteronormative identification but also of those with a unique story of migration. She says that “in the show, when I reveal that Britain, Israel, and the US sponsored Amin’s coup, I’m unwrapping the sari I put on at the start of the piece. I gather it in folds as it comes off my body. Shake the folds together with a snap. Hang the sari firmly on a bar as I say, ‘A man we can do business with.’”¹¹

The cost of this is the “undoing” of women’s value which is measured in the sphere of economy and it is represented by the unwrapping of the sari onstage, losing its form and just turning into a pretty piece of cloth. It, therefore, exposes the emptiness of what is conceived as valuable in the neoliberal economy. The sari could be viewed “as the material legacy of home and family” and it signifies “the women’s value and vulnerability” as it is a reminder of those who have lost their fingers and thumbs to the loom due to colonialism’s violent legacy.¹²

Clothing is highly performative as it invokes particular choices over others, thus invoking queerness—a choice over heteronormativity. Patel, a queer subject, makes a choice herself in the way she is wearing the sari as she renounces traditional feminine traits of grace and elegance, and embodies queer ones. The performativity of the sari could be linked to the queering of the sari which rejects a purely feminine heterosexual identification. The sari has been associated with a culture of Indo-chic designs appropriated by Western women and turned into commodities. As a commodity it is highly recognizable, and globally produced and consumed. Patel tries to recuperate the history of the sari

¹¹ Patel, *Migritude*, 79.

¹² Kulbaga, “Sari suasion: Migrant Economies of Care in Shailja Patel’s *Migritude*,” 84.

as an Indo-chic commodity, as its history is being erased by its global status as a transnational commodity.

The black female body covered in a sari is placed within the realm of the visual transnational economy of the materials of ambi and muslin. The history of these materials is explored in detail, revealing the connection of saris to the politics of what it means to be a woman and what is the relationship of oneself with one's body. The use of the saris in Patel's performance as style commodities leads to the inquiry of the connections that can be made between diasporic performativity and femininity in the realm of the sexual politics it engenders.

My critique develops beyond the engagement with the material aspect of the sari and extends to Patel's sexual register. In Patel's narrative, wearing a sari is an embodied practice that dislodges South Asian formation of identity from the heteronormative practices of femininity that structure these identities. As the sari is a piece of apparel that is worn, held, and felt, it operates as an aggregation of inassimilable characteristics to heterosexuality which function as means for the formation of a unique, queer, diasporic feminine identity. Patel's use of saris as instruments against the violence exerted on the black female body calibrates her relationship to the saris as a means of stereotypical femininity and adds queer nuances to their interpretation. Patel's repertoire of saris exposes a coherent feminine queer identification through performativity. The saris open up the locus for a new identitarian space, a queer one, on which black female South Asian subjects belong.

At the center of the narrative is Patel's beloved trousseau that contains saris and jewelry. The trousseau of saris and jewelry signifies a feminist archive of maternal legacies. The sari is traditionally associated with the normative patriarchal construction of women's



identities. It signifies the status of a married, and unmarried, South Asian woman, but in this context it has a different signification of its association with feminist queer politics. It points at a narrative that does not conform to the normative construction of identity as it signifies an alternative identification. The gendered materiality of the sari is underscored by the psychic investment of the queer subject to this object that denotes queer longings. The sari connotes patriarchal value as it places women in categories of heteronormative worth and desirability. Even though queer longings are viewed as frivolous by normative, hegemonic discourses, they conduce to the formation of an alternative identification of the black diasporic subject. Patel's economy of queerness is associated with a global neo-liberal model of the formation of one's identity which is linked to the discourse of reparations.

I foreground how the saris, despite their association with the neo-liberal values of profit, productivity, and investment, delineate the material reality of a queer identification. The sari functions as a form of sexual capital as its material prowess extends to a network of power that extends beyond the realm of heteronormativity as it has queer nuances. The use of the saris highlights the gendered, sexual, and racial economies giving rise to queerness. Patel occupies a heterogenous social field, one that is not reducible to heteronormativity. I claim that through the material and affective value of the sari, Patel reveals the violence of the narratives of exchange of human flow, and dismantles the dynamics of meaning and power that is associated with them.

Patel, like Indian girls in East Africa, explains that the way she was raised made her bear a certain stigma concerning her sex. Patel's mother draws attention to the fact that she needed to make up for the fact that she is not a boy by being beautiful. Patel develops her

narrative through unfolding and presenting a number of different saris that her mother gave her as a gift representing female beauty. She challenges the construction of mothers as nationalist subjects who are charged with the responsibility to surveil their daughters' sexuality, putting in the forefront the politics of queer black daughters who are considered as disposable bodies by heteronormative strictures. Saris are traditionally given as a marriage gift by the husband to the wife, but as Shailja did not get married, this was a marriage gift she received from her mother for the route that she chose in life. The saris can be viewed as symbols of her mother's unfulfilled longings.

Patel shares how uncomfortable the tradition of East Asian saris was for her. She felt uneasy wearing saris because she felt that she was in danger of getting attacked and not being able to fight back due to her gender. She believed that saris rendered her vulnerable, an easy target of violence. Patel tries to show that the sari is not merely symbolic of stereotypical femininity, but further signification can be assigned to it. Thus, she comes to the realization that the sari signifies way more than just normative femininity.

She discovers that there were women that fought battles in their saris. These were strong-willed women who would not give up and kept fighting. She comments upon the fact that nobody had told her about women who toiled away in their saris. These women were powerful and dynamic. They did not fall prey to their male counterparts. In addition, many women fled Uganda in their saris, hiding their money and jewelry in them, in 1972 when South Asians were expelled by President Idi Amin. Patel's saris, thus, expose the sexual violence to which the black female body had been subjected by the neo-colonial British forces.



Patel, however, diverts attention from the racialized violent rapes of women in saris, acts beyond representation. Her recitation of the brutalization of the black female body in saris aims to defamiliarize the image of the sari as a mere symbol of stereotypical femininity, and to expose its violent abuse under colonial rule. Through defamiliarization, the sari becomes symbolic of anti-colonial violence.

The establishment of the sari as an authentic part of one's identification as a queer subject and its political deployments are obvious. In *Migritude*, however, the sari signifies an alternative way of being. The sari could be viewed as the quintessential Indian female garment that has acquired non-heteronormative attachments, as such an embodiment transcending gender, class, and race. The notion of a politically based identity is challenged as the notion of physical/sexual beauty comes to the forefront of the notion of the sari as an object of beauty. Wearing a sari could be viewed as a practice, a process through which different meanings emerge. The different drapings of the sari are a symbol of alternative female identification, a queer one bringing into the forefront the intersectionality of class and sexual identification. Through the multiple possibilities of the drapings of the saris, new forms of intimacy and alternative loci of belonging emerge. Sexuality becomes a practice in which gendered, racialized, and sexualized processes evolve. The saris function as affective forces that affect severely normative notions of belonging. Wearing the sari signifies the dismissal of an excessive femininity associated exclusively with heteronormative sexual identification and opens up a locus for queer longings. The practices associated with beauty pose a challenge to the neo-liberal construction of belonging.

The Queer Sense of Self

The emergence of a queer sense of self involves psychoanalysis as a valuable heuristic tool for the study of its emergence. Psychoanalysis points out that the mother is the first subject of desire of the daughter. This desire is rendered invisible. During the negative Oedipus complex phase, the little girl escapes from her attachment to her mother that she had previously developed during the pre-oedipal phase. The negative Oedipus complex phase occurs when a woman starts demonstrating her attractive allure towards men. However, when it is not resolved the woman becomes dissatisfied with her body and acquires low self-esteem which interferes with her feminine sexual identification. Silverman suggests that when the negative Oedipus complex “remains hidden from the female subject” she cannot cope with the male subject’s projection of desire towards her.¹³

A reciprocal relationship between the two sexes is, therefore, out of the question. The female emerges as a subject estranged from normative erotic investments. The queer female subject inserts a space of fluidity in terms of libidinal desire in which it can express its unconscious longings. The negative Oedipus complex delineates a sexual divide for the diasporic subjects. So, her symbolic return to her place of origins through the Gujarati language can be viewed as treacherous, as her queer identification becomes invisible because of the non-existent concepts of liberalism, and queer in terms of self-identity. When something is named it becomes legitimized. If notions of queer selfhood are not named in Gujarati, a queer sense of identity is non-existent in that cultural realm. Patel’s continuous movement across invisible national boundaries from the south to the north posed

¹³ David. L. Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” *Social Text* 21, no.3 (2003): 30.



a menace towards her subjectivity. This reformulation of traditional social structures should be viewed as a departure from the assimilation into dominant societal norms.

In regard to the live performance of her work, Patel argues that in the “finale of the show, the audience has finally earned the right to see the saris in all their splendor. Because they’ve engaged with the violence and violation beneath ... Listened to the voices of women from within the footprint of Empire.”¹⁴ As a performative piece, *Migritude* is a diasporic South Asian–African invocation of a queer identity. For Patel, queerness seems to be intricately linked to the experience of immigration. As a system immigration does not solely involve the movement of individuals from one place to another, but rather offers a network of possibility of an alternative sexual identification on a national as well as international level. Immigration, therefore, is an integral part of the modern nation–state as it is conceived in the Western world and it is also an originary component of an alternative sexual identification.

This article situates Patel’s work with the ongoing scholarly conversation about the possibilities and limitations of the discourse of sexualities, seeking equity for non–white, non–Western women. At the end of the narrative, Patel unpacks her trousseau of saris and reveals the bejeweled, colorful saris. Patel has been marked by her maternal legacy and by her identification as an immigrant. She exclaims: “Mother. I will never live the cocoon of safety you dreamed of for your daughters. Do you see? I will always be called to stride across danger zones, to shout forbidden words to other fugitives.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Patel, *Migritude*, 95.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 61–62.

Patel's work could be linked to the works of other transnational, queer scholars who theorize the queer subject outside of the vantage point of its susceptibility to violence. The theorization of the examination of queerness is a way of deconstructing the heteronormative logic which positions the queer other in an inferior position to its heteronormative counterpart. Patel creates new forms of feminine diasporic identification that exceed a gendered heteronormative identification. Queerness is a destabilization of the roots of a homogenized society whose identity is formed around heteronormative norms. Tracing the "juxtapolitical" register of queerness disrupts the dominant way of framing South Asian identities which are structured from the intersection between the categories of class, race, and gender.

Conclusion

Male heterosexuality lies at the heart of the predominant conceptualization of the South Asian diaspora, however in this article I have drawn attention to the new forms of feminine diasporic identification that exceed a gendered heteronormative identification. In *Migritude*, the diasporic female subject comes to the forefront, as it crosses the threshold of dominant male diasporic narratives and becomes the centerpiece of South Asian queer sexual formation.

Patel enables the emergence of marginalized traditions by giving voice to those with invisible African identities. She puts at the forefront the lived experiences of queer, non-Western women of color that are survivors of colonial and imperial violence. She places together the fragments of one's queer sexual identification which were destabilized by the empire. She opens up a space for these fragments to fall into a larger narrative, one of queer self-identification.



I have expanded on the scope of belonging and have animated the possibility of an alternative way of being that galvanizes queer desire. I uncover how queerness actively shapes the transnational flow of black female bodies. Queerness's ability to give rise to heterogeneous forms of embodiment and, therefore, diverse ways of being, reveals the complexity of the conceptualization of diaspora. Queerness disorganizes the dominant ways of conceptualizing diaspora, as it challenges the notion of heteronormativity. Queer subversion of identity challenges dominant diasporic conceptions of gender and sexuality. The South Asian subject becomes the center of attention. The boundaries of one's homeland are constantly trespassed through memory as they seem fluid and negotiable. The diasporic subject's identity cannot be defined by one single space. A different consciousness of identity derives from the multiple movements that Patel underwent, from Africa, to Asia, and then from Europe to America.

Note on the Author

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