



On Migritude Part 1; When Saris Speak – The Mother

A Conversation with Shailja Patel
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by Emanuele Monegato

SHAILJA PATEL is the author of *Migritude*, “a meditation about processes of colonialism and postcolonialism, especially as they unfolded in Kenya, her native land”. (Piccolo 2008: 10) In addition to such a Kenyan origin, all Patel’s cultural backgrounds are to be found in her work: the fact of being a South Asian brought up in Kenya, an Indian student in England and a woman of colour in the United States merge into her blank verses giving shape to the peculiar oeuvre that is *Migritude*, a journey composed of four different movements related to the Mother (*Part 1; When Saris Speak*), the Father, the Teacher and the Guest.

Migritude Part 1 is divided into 17 fragments represented, in its stage version, through 16 saris (with an Indian dancer as a counterpart) highlighting the tensions between parental expectations and the artistic ambitions of their daughter. “The girl’s voice is heard expounding an unabashedly feminist ‘migrantist’ point of view” (ibid.: 10) through a fusion of poetry, theatre and political reportage culminating with “a kind of ‘reconciliation’ piece in which the daughter summons the mother’s complicity” (ibid.: 12).

Online exhibited by the International Museum of Women¹, the BBC and NPR, *Migritude Part 1* has won several poetry awards and Patel has performed her piece all over the world from 2005 on. As a Performance Poetry, a work-in-progress version of *Migritude* has been touring since 2005, while the complete show premiered in November 2006 and toured all through the season 2007-2008 reaching the World Social Forum in Nairobi in 2007.

¹ Cfr. <<http://www.imow.org/community/index>> (17. 08.2009)



In Italy, Shailja Patel has performed her *Migritude Part 1* since 2006 and the publishing house Lieto Colle has recently published an English/Italian version of the first of her movements proficiently translated by Marta Matteini and Pina Piccolo.

E. Monegato: I will start our interview with a peculiar question: which is your own relationship with questions and interviews? I am asking it because in *Piece 8. The Making/Migrant Song/Sound the Alarm* you state that: "We absorb information without asking questions, because questions can be dangerous. Can make us stand out, cost us jobs, visas, lives. We watch and copy. We try to please."

S. Patel: Those lines refer to the risks involved for migrants, or outsiders of any kind, when they *ask* questions. My relationship to being questioned depends entirely on the purpose of the questioning, and the framework of reference from which the questions come. I get impatient with questions which are ill-informed, or don't recognize the questioner's prejudices. I deeply appreciate questions which open up new ideas for me, and new readings of my work.

E. Monegato: I first got in touch with *Migritude Part 1; When Saris Speak – The Mother* during a Translation Studies Seminar when Marta Matteini, one of its two Italian translators, started quoting the following verse: "If we cannot name it does it exist?" Can you comment upon it?

S. Patel: That line is from the poem *Dreaming In Gujurati*. I am exploring the idea that language defines our reality and lived experience. If we don't have a word for something, it doesn't inform our collective reality.

E. Monegato: "Language is power" is a well known motto. You once answered a question about your favourite language stating that "Poetry is the world's most beautiful language". Do you think we can melt these two sentences and state that "Poetry is power"?

S. Patel: I would say, rather, that language is a tool. Like any tool, its power depends on the skill with which it is wielded, and the choice of the right words for the right moment, used in the most effective way. Poetry, at its best, is a distillation of language and perception to its purest, most intelligent, and powerful essence.

E. Monegato: How much of the political involvement shown in your performance of *Eater of Death* could be found in *Migritude*?

S. Patel: *Migritude* unfurls the voices of women living in the bootprint of Empire. *Eater of Death* is the story of one such woman - an Afghani woman who lost her entire family to US bombs. *Eater of Death* was actually a part of earlier drafts of *Migritude*, and then cut out when my director and I made an editorial decision to focus on women in East Africa. *Migritude* is unabashedly political - feminist and anti-imperialist.



E. Monegato: The story of *Migritude Part 1* is told from a personal perspective and it deals with the world of mothers, women and female writers/performers. How can you describe your peculiar point of view?

S. Patel: My points of view are explicated in the work itself! To describe them would be to describe each poem – and defeat the purpose of the poem.

E. Monegato: In the introduction of *Migritude Part 1* the audience can read: “This coined word [Migritude] also retains distant echoes of Leopold Senghor’s concept of Negritude and perhaps brings it into the 21st century, continuing its trail of resistance”. A “trail of resistance” explicitly linked to the processes of colonialism and post colonialism. Can you explain your political and cultural aim towards colonialism and post colonialism while writing *Migritude*?

S. Patel: I coined the word *Migritude* as a play on Negritude and Migrant Attitude. It asserts the dignity of outsider status. *Migritude* celebrates and revalorizes immigrant/diasporic culture. It captures the unique political and cultural space occupied by migrants who refuse to choose between identities of origin and identities of assimilation, who channel difference as a source of power rather than conceal or erase it. The four works that make up the *Migritude Cycle* draw on my spiritual and cultural heritage, as a 3rd-generation East African of Indian Gujurati descent. Conceived as an *Epic Journey In Four Movements*, *Migritude* references the earliest religious teaching imparted to Hindu children: that of the First Four Gods. The Hindu child is taught that her first god is her Mother. The second god is her Father. The third god is her Teacher. The fourth god is The Guest. *Part I* of the *Migritude Cycle*, *When Saris Speak (The Mother)*, is a 90-minute spoken word theatre show. And now, a bilingual (Italian - English) book. It uses my trousseau of saris, passed down by my mother, to reveal how imperialism and colonialism, in India and Kenya, were - and continue to be - enacted on the bodies of women. It explores what diasporic daughters receive and reject from their mothers; delves into the relationship of migrants to the motherland, the mother tongue, the severing of those relationships and the forging of new transnational identities. Letters from my mother form an important part of the script, bridging the spaces between generations and continents. *Part II* of the *Migritude Cycle* addresses the second archetype in the Four Gods theme: *The Father*. This work will explore constructions of masculinity and race under colonialism. It will examine how the architecture of Empire is codified on the bodies of men: brown, black, and white. The context is the history of the Swahili coast, and the life of my father, who was born and raised under British colonial rule, on the island of Pemba, in the archipelago of Zanzibar. The working title of the show is *Bwagamoyo* – drawn from two Swahili words: *Bwaga* – to dump, and *Moyo* – heart. *Bwagamoyo* was the original name given to two specific locations on the Swahili Coast: the town in Tanzania where slaves were brought from the inland and held for shipping, and a small island in the Zanzibar archipelago that was a holding prison for slaves. Both are now known as Bagamoyo. The original Bwagamoyo was a chilling admonition to the



kidnapped human beings to literally dump their hearts, meaning their humanity, at these spots, since they would no longer use or need them once they left as slave cargo. Bwagamoyo is an equally apt metaphor for the socialization of boys into the kinds of manhood shaped by colonial power.

E. Monegato: In *Idi Amin* you open the alternation between official historical facts (“This is the history I learned in school. Standard 3 – 5, Hospital Hill primary School, Nairobi.”) and personal stories (“This is the history we didn’t learn.”) which could be considered as one of the main key-features of *Migritude Part 1*. Which is the importance given to history in your life and how does it interact with your own activism as a female writer?

S. Patel: History buried becomes history repeated. A whole generation of Africans have been denied the truth of their own history, and so we do not really know ourselves, or our countries. Reclaiming those erased or hidden histories is vital political and creative work, and is central to my purpose as a writer.

E. Monegato: In your work, clothes play an important role: they are both considered a way for integration and as something isolating or putting migrants in a subordinate social position. According to you, which is the prevailing situation?

S. Patel: There is no single prevailing situation – it depends entirely on context, environment, dynamics of race, class, power...

E. Monegato: In one of your interviews published by *Legendaria* you affirm that sometimes you feel like a translator because you forge into poetry facts, data and figures, colonialism and post-colonialist views. Therefore, I would like to ask you about the importance of the Italian translation of *Migritude Part 1*. Don’t you think that such a translation could be seen as a migration of contents, behaviours, thoughts and stories?

S. Patel: Art is a migrant – it travels from the vision of the artist to the eye, ear, mind and heart of the listener. Translation adds another layer to the migration, or is another leg of the journey.

E. Monegato: After having read your work I still have problems in finding a proper definition for it. *Performance poetry, spoken word poetry, fragments and poetic vignettes* are all definitions related to *Migritude*. In my humble opinion they are all reductive and simplistic if considered one by one: the only way to portray *Migritude* is to use a net of definitions describing its multiple souls. In which ways do you normally define your work?

S. Patel: Poetry, Spoken-word theatre, Text-based performance for stage, Fully embodied poetry, Story! I like the definition “multiple souls”. What I do breaks new ground in melding genres and dissolving boundaries – it is fluid, multifaceted, and constantly evolving.



REFERENCES

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Piccolo P., 2008, "Introduction", in Patel S., 2008, *Migritude: An Epic Journey in Four Movements. Part 1; When Saris Speak – The Mother*, Lieto Colle, Faloppio (CO), pp. 111-17.

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