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Reclaiming Victimhood and Agency in Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015)

ABSTRACT This chapter analyses Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) through the prism of Michael Rothberg's concept of 'implicated subjects.' It shows how both works complicate notions of victimhood and agency by depicting complex precarious subjects who question the categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator.' The texts under study orient us towards Fiona Robinson's praxis of care by generating "joint attention" (Citton 2017) and engaging with the bodies of readers/spectators, turning the latter into augmented 'implicated subjects.' While Sahota's work calls for general recognition of shared vulnerability, Patel's text and performance draw our attention to the archival nature of bodies and garments alike, while her very own body connects stories, female subjects, and bodies through her performance. Both works offer possibilities of collective attending to entangled histories of oppression, past and present, and shed light upon the specific predicament of female subjects as victims of continued forms of oppression through history.

KEYWORDS agency, archive, attention, body, care

The point of this chapter is to offer a comparative analysis of two literary works from the Indian diaspora, Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015), to study how the works invite us to ponder the notions of victimhood and agency (with the former term being often associated with precarious figures in the Global South), to question empathy, and to consider alternative forms of solidarity.

Migritude by Shailja Patel is a multi-modal work, a work of resistance in all possible meanings: it resists colonialism and its contemporary forms, but it also resists interpretation and categorisation by its very shape. It is, indeed, a composite work: the book is made of four parts, with two

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having the same titles, while Part 3 is composed of poems and Part 4 contains more paratextual information. Many drawings can also be found throughout the work.[1]

Migritude was initially a 90-minute performance; in Patel's words, "a tapestry of poetry, history, politics, packed into a suitcase, embedded in my body, rolled out into theatre. An accounting of Empire enacted on the bodies of women" (Patel 2010, 96).[2] It was born out of a case of saris that Patel's mother gave her as her wedding trousseau when she realised her daughter, a lesbian woman, was never to marry within a heterosexual frame, but she still wanted to pass on something to her. *Migritude* tackles the history of British colonisation in Kenya, the forced migration of Asians under Idi Amin's dictatorship in 1972,[3] but also Patel's experience of discrimination as a Kenyan of South Indian heritage while she was studying in the US and the UK. The title of the book/performance is a pun drawn from Aimé Césaire's concept of 'negritude' (see Césaire 2004), but it also echoes the notion of "migrant with an attitude" (Patel in KQED video, 2007).[4] Patel does not hide the activist nature of her work, as she presents *Migritude* as "the voice of a generation of migrants who speak unapologetically, fiercely, lyrically, for themselves" (Patel 2010, 143).[5] The choice of the term "voice" particularly resonates with the fact that *Migritude* was

1 In her analysis of Patel's work, Jennifer Leetsch shows how the drawings partake of "not only a sensitive retelling of the often-violent linkages between textile and trade routes, but also a visual materialization of these intersections" (Leetsch 2021, 700).

2 To find out more about the project, see KQED Spark—Shailja Patel (YouTube). I have not been able to see the stage production, so my analysis will focus on the textual object. To read more about the stage production, see Leetsch (2021).

3 Leetsch introduces Patel thus: "Patel herself grew up in Kenya as the daughter of second-generation West Indian Gujarati immigrants at a time of political upheaval during the rule of Daniel Toroitich arap Moi (1978–2002), a decade after Kenya's independence in 1963 and a few years after Idi Amin, 'the villain of her childhood,' had seized power in Kenya's neighbouring country Uganda and expelled Uganda's eighty thousand Asians in 1971 (Patel 2010, 78)" (Leetsch 2021, 693).

4 The concept is a combination of emigration and negritude. 'Negritude' refers to the experiences of deportation, displacement, and cultural erasure which are common to African peoples and are foundational of their collective memory and identity. It used to refer to francophone African writers, but now often refers to transnational writers who discuss migration, among other topics.

5 Given the specific context in which this article is written, it is essential to highlight Patel's repeated vocal calls for a ceasefire in Palestine after the Israeli state has meted out relentless violence to mostly civilians in Gaza in retaliation for the attacks perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023.

initially thought of as a performance and only became a written work in a later stage of the project.[6]

In comparison to Patel's multimodal work, Sahota's Booker-Prize-shortlisted novel about the experience of Indian refugees in Sheffield over the course of a year is a seemingly less complex object of study, albeit worthy of interest. Given that Patel's and Sahota's works are very recent, they have not elicited much critical literature, but they have been read in the context of renewed interest in refugee and migrant literatures[7] at a time when migrant and refugee figures have been foregrounded in the news in the aftermath of the Syrian war, and the current wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

A comparative analysis between the two works enables us to see how they question stereotypes concerning 'Global South' victimhood, but they also call our attention to the specific aspects of the condition of 'Global South female migrants.' The generic difference between Sahota's novel and Patel's work will help us investigate how drama, poetry, and novels provide distinct perspectives to explore precarious lives lived in an alien land. Patel's work, for instance, brings new insights into the articulation between the (female) migrant condition and corporeality, while the female body in Sahota's work remains 'textual.'

Both works also complicate the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators. This chapter will, therefore, draw upon Michael Rothberg's concept of the 'implicated subject': a subject which is neither a victim nor a perpetrator but may occupy several positionalities through time: "implication comes in diverse forms: it describes beneficiaries and descendants, accomplices and perpetuators, and it can even attach to people who have had shattering experiences of trauma or victimization and are thus situated within 'complex implication'" (Rothberg 2019, 200). A close examination of these works will show how they call the general public's attention and urge us to care about 'real-life' migrants. As both works imply communities—of readers, of spectators—they are likely to generate not just attention but "joint attention" (Citton, 2017). Drawing on Yves Citton's work, Jean-Michel Ganteau argues that "joint attention implies a *connivance* between two or more participants *about a same object* [and is the] *condition for*

6 Leetsch traces back the history of the work: "Patel initially wrote *Migritude* in 2006 as a spoken-word one-woman theatre show, to be performed on stage at La Peña, a community cultural centre in Berkeley, California. In 2010 Kaya Press (an independent non-profit publisher of writers of the Asian and Pacific Islander diaspora) published a print edition which arose from the show, the materialized text of *Migritude*" (Leetsch 2021, 692–3).

7 See, for instance, Maryam Mirza (2022) on Sahota; Jennifer Leetsch (2021) on Patel.

the emergence of a collective or at least communal attention" (Ganteau 2023, 15; my emphases). This may be articulated with Rothberg's theory of action which derives from his conceptualisation of the implicated subject:

> Since we live among others, our models of responsibility must leave behind the individualist assumptions of liberal legal culture and its emphasis on individualized guilt and consider instead what it means to act collectively—which also means indirectly and at a distance—both for good and for bad. (2019, 48)

My claim is that both works, by engaging us through reading and *attending* a performance, in Patel's case, may turn us into augmented 'implicated subjects,' not just ones aware of their implication but subjects likely to act for future justice.

Sahota's Novel: A Challenge to 'Migrant Victimhood'

Sahota's Indian characters are shown to experience dreadful living conditions in the UK: they sleep in overcrowded rooms, live in fear of police raids, experience discrimination and hardly eke out a living:

> Avtar studied the four small piles he'd made of his money. The first pile was for the monthly repayment on what he owed Bal. The second for the loan taken out against his father's shawl shop. The third pile was meant to help his parents with their rent and bills and, lastly, a pile for his own expenses here in England. No savings pile. There'd never been a savings pile. (Sahota 2015, 100)

The quotation highlights the discrepancy between the number of piles the character has and his final sense of dispossession, which is epitomised by the absence of any savings pile. Avtar had to sell a kidney to obtain a student visa, another character entered the country as an 'illegal,' as the press would say, and yet another entered into a sham marriage with Narinder, a British-born Indian woman with an orthodox Sikh lower-middle-class background.

Adding to these bleak images of refugee life, Sahota's novel offers nuanced characters, such as Randeep, who is a victim of racism and class-based discrimination in the UK while he is considered a perpetrator at home, as he sexually harassed a student while he was in India. Two other characters, Savraj and Kavi, who are siblings of Indian origin struggling to make ends meet in Sheffield, discriminate against those they call 'chamaars,' members of a Dalit sub-caste. One of them once exclaims:

"There are no jobs. […] Or if there are jobs they go to the fucking chamaars with these government quotas" (Sahota 2015, 287). The association between the derogatory term used to refer to the caste and the offensive adjective "fucking" leaves no doubt as to the character's feelings toward the people he has just mentioned. The language used by Kavi to refer to a Dalit Indian woman is even more offensive, as he associates her 'Dalitness' with the fact that she may be sexually exploited: "she's just one of the chamaars. She gets passed round. I'd never treat one of our own girls like that" (Sahota 2015, 279). On the one hand, the use of parataxis is a way for the character to equate in his speech the woman's 'caste identity' with her 'exploitability.' On the other, the use of the pronoun "our" participates in the 'we vs them' frame, which is one recurrently deployed in anti-immigration rhetoric.

While readers may be willing to sympathise with characters experiencing racial discrimination in England, it is difficult to overlook their discriminating practices based on gender and caste. As Maryam Mirza argues: "Savraj's lack of compassion for and antagonism towards the Dalits, who have endured centuries of oppression and discrimination, and her brother's sexual exploitation of lower-caste women complicate our sympathy" (2022, 96). Sahota's novel is a useful reminder that caste is not annihilated overseas but that it lives on among the Indian diaspora.[8] This certainly makes it more complicated for readers to simply side with the precarious characters depicted in Sahota's novel, as the latter may occupy both the positions of 'victim' and 'perpetrator.'

While Sahota's novel calls our attention to 'Indian migrant victimhood,' Patel's work challenges the particular trope of 'Indian female victimhood.'[9]

Patel's Migritude: Challenging 'Global South Female Victimhood'

Patel debunks two strong orientalist stereotypes about women in saris: "Indian women in saris are exotic, mysteriously alluring, sexy, mystical" and "Indian women in saris must be oppressed, uneducated,

8 Sonja Thomas (2018) analyses the persistence of caste among Indian Christian communities in the US. The passage also recalls Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*, even if she focuses on gendered violence in contexts of migration: "It would be false to assert that violence against women ceases with emigration. It doesn't, and it hasn't. Indo-Caribbean women in Canada, the United States and Britain continue to be victims of domestic abuse" (2013, 211).

9 To read more about stereotypes assigned to Indian women, see Mirza's discussion on the female characters in Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2022, 89).

un-cosmopolitan, not fluent in English" (Patel 2010, 142). The stereotype itself draws on what Chandra Mohanty called the monolithic construction of the 'Third World woman' in Western feminist discourse:

> I would like to suggest that the feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular "Third World woman"—an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. (Mohanty 1991, 53)

Patel's narrator recalls the association she drew as a child between women and passivity, echoing the link often made between victimhood and lack of agency: "As a child, I knew of women strangled in their saris. Women doused in paraffin and burned in their saris. Saris made you vulnerable. A walking target. Saris made you weak" (Patel 2010, 21). The passive form grammatically associates the aforementioned women with a state of non-agentic victimhood. Women here become the objects of a type of violence carried out by agents aptly made invisible by the passive form, which emphasises the impression that they only exist as victims of such invisible violence. The noun "women" is also the direct object of the verb "to make," which consequently objectifies them as vulnerable and weak—two characteristics often associated with victimhood. The staccato rhythm even produces an effect of rigidity, echoing the freezing of the very possibility for Indian female agency to emerge in such a discourse.

But Patel counters the discursive creation of 'third-world female victimhood,' particularly that of "the passive downtrodden South Asian woman" (Puwar 2003, 25), by drawing our attention to the very agency of women wearing saris: "No one told me about women who went into battle—in their saris. Worked the fields—in their saris. Why didn't anyone tell me about women who laboured on construction sites in their saris?" (Patel 2010, 21). In this series of questions, not only is the grammatical subject "women in saris" re-visibilised but "women" are made the grammatical subjects of action verbs such as "went into battle," "worked," "laboured,"[10] which enables the speaker to claim the female subjects' agency.

To counter the association between victimhood and passivity (and its corollary, voicelessness), Patel has women who were victims of sexual

10 This passage may remind the readers of the 'Gulabi gang,' a gang of women dressed in pink-coloured saris, led by the vocal activist Sampat Pal Devi, who promote ideals of social justice for girls and women in rural areas in India. See https://gulabigang.in.

violence in the context of British colonial rule over Kenya speak in testimonial form. *Migritude* first challenges official history by giving us the experience of a 'history from below': "it all began with a battered red suitcase filled with untold stories and unseen beauty" (Patel 2010, 2). The parallelism underlined by the adjectives "untold" and "unseen" points to the invisible/inaudible nature of the story (until then) and echoes what French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc argues in *L'Invisibilité sociale*, namely that neo-liberalism creates a context where the monopoly of some experiences makes other lives invisible, and by extension, other voices inaudible (Le Blanc 2009). Patel's work counters this by making such (his) stories, or rather 'herstories,' seen and heard. In the poetic section of her book, Patel clarifies her intention by quoting Adrienne Rich's "Every poem is the breaking of an existing silence" (Patel 2010, 100). The text centres the voices of the women who experienced British violence in Kenya but also Idi Amin's dictatorship in Uganda, especially the violence it imposed upon Asians. Patel's work therefore complicates too simplistic a scheme which would equate perpetration with Western power and victimhood with countries from the Global South, here Uganda and Kenya. The speaker/narrator also highlights the system of complicities that existed between Western powers and the dictator, which made it possible for the latter to thrive, taking us back to the concept of 'implication': "Secret documents, declassified in 2001, show that Britain, Israel, and the US instigated and backed Idi Amin's military coup" (Patel 2010, 11). Apart from complicating historiography, Patel's *Migritude* also sheds light upon 'victimhood' and 'solidarity' by particularly emphasising notions of commitment or 'engagement' and the body.

A Call to Reclaim an Embodied Space to Speak From

> All I heard was: You have to be careful in a sari. You're exposing (whisper) the body. Don't let the pallav slip under the breast. That's obscene. Don't let the petticoat show the panties. That's obscene. Allure without being sexual. Be beautiful without being aware of it. Attract without meeting anyone's eyes. You must never act as if you owned your body. (Patel 2010, 22)

Patel evokes Indian society's injunctions and interdictions regarding the female body to better reject them. In another passage, after alluding to colonial violence with the "baskets of severed hands presented at day's end/to Belgian plantation masters in the Congo/thumbs chopped off Indian weavers by the British," Patel's speaker exclaims: "I make this work/because I still have

hands" (Patel 2010, 35). In both instances, readers/spectators are reminded that bodies are objects of violence and instruments of resistance. The mention of the speaker/performer's hands can also be articulated with Rothberg's concept of "complex implication," namely, the fact that "people can occupy multiple positions at the same time (as victims, perpetrators, and collaborators, for instance)" (2019, 40). While Patel's speaker, who we may assume is a double figure for the author, is certainly located at the intersection of racial and gender oppression, the artist's positionality makes her a privileged subject compared to the subjects she conjures up in her work. The mention of the artist having "hands" refers to the writer/performer's relative privilege,[11] compared to the 'direct' victims of colonial and dictatorial violence.

After sections entitled "this is the history we didn't learn" and "this is the history we read in school," the speaker adds: "This is the history we didn't read": "Oral testimonies from women who survived the camps" (Patel 2010, 17). Patel's endeavour consists in archiving, in both written and performative form, the silenced stories of violence against women in the context of British colonialism in Kenya. An effect of hyper-visibility is produced by the use of italics and the staccato rhythm "*The white officers had no shame. They would rape women in full view of everyone. Swing women by the hair. Put women in sacks, douse in paraffin, set alight*" (Patel 2010, 17; emphasis in original). A shift from the impersonal noun "women" to the "we" pronoun progressively occurs: "they burnt us with cigarette butts. Forced us to walk on hot coals" (Patel 2010, 17), which underlines a move from women being thought of as individual subjects to them considering themselves as part of a collective.[12] The voices of a community of survivors are finally given for us to listen, especially those of "Survivor 1," "Survivor 58," and "Survivor 613," while the numbers pinpoint their substantial amount. Such references prevent singular stories from being homogenised and reduced to "newsworthy" matter and statistics. By centring these testimonies, Patel's work engages with the notion that victims are not passive objects but, as Rebecca Stringer puts it in *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*, "agentic bearers of knowledge" (Stringer 2014, 14).

11 As Rothberg argues: "The implicated subject is not an ontological category and does not always or necessarily correspond to our stereotypical images of privilege (the 'straight white cis-gendered man,' for instance)" (Rothberg 2019, 22). In his discussion of "complex implication," he also evokes the particular positionality of descendants of victims.

12 In Leetsch's terms: "[I]n Patel's show, the performance with and through the sari cloth can be seen as a strategy of not only addressing trauma but also of creating connection and community, of not only claiming voice but also of claiming voice together" (2021, 702).

Patel also offers a declaration of sisterhood: "I carry my history. I carry my family. Over my saris, I wear my sisters" (Patel 2010, 41). The quotation highlights the bodily continuum between the children's bodies and the performer's as it reappropriates Roland Barthes's (1973) articulation between text and texture with the fabric acting as support for a weaving together of voices and stories.

Patel's work underlines a specific relation between physicality, narrative and agency: "I walk a lot of my writing, the way you walk a dog—it completes itself in motion" (Patel 2010, 77).[13] As the saris become narratives, Patel's body turns into text as well: "How the distance of arm from torso, the amount of energy in a leg, are physical text that the audience reads without even knowing that they are reading it" (Patel 2010, 86). Victims in her work are, therefore, not just agentic bearers of knowledge: they become agentic bodies as they regain their voices and bodies by proxy, through Patel's retelling of their stories and her physi(ologi)cal commitment in the performance: "At *Something is bursting the walls of my arteries*, energy surges through my body. Like a rocket ignited, I am propelled into motion […] every cell charged with joy" (Patel 2010, 92).

The specific references to body parts and the mention of terms like "energy," "physical," or "propelled into motion" are reminiscent of physics but also of Frantz Fanon's discussion of the centrality of the body in anticolonial politics. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, the Caribbean psychiatrist and thinker of anticolonialism famously evokes an interaction taking place between a white child and a black man on a train. The child is afraid of the black man ("'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened!"), which triggers the following reactions: "Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible" (Fanon 1967, 112). The interaction ends up with both of them trembling, out of cold and/or fear. The situation depicts an interaction that could be found in a colonial context. It also shows the physical interaction at stake—the fact that one somatic reaction triggers another. Patel exposes how such mechanics may exist within members of the same "minoritised"

13 In the shadow book, which is a sort of double version of the text to be performed, Patel explains how her body is what literally makes it possible for words to be uttered: "[T]he end of the footbeats is my cue to open my eyes and begin" (Patel 2010, 76). The connection between walking and writing/creating is one that was particularly central to Frantz Fanon, as Matthew Beaumont recalls: "Fanon's prose is shaped by the propulsive force of his pacing" (Beaumont 2024, 7). It is no accident that Patel's focus on mobile bodies may be articulated with Fanon's phenomenological approach to racialised subjects, as will be shown later in the chapter.

community and articulates it with a stance of resistance. Collective, revolutionary potential may therefore exist in the mere exchange of energy between anticolonial subjects. As Neetu Khanna argues, also drawing on Fanon's work, "the visceral requires the body of the 'other' to set off its somatic response" (Khanna 2020, 20). One can expand this reflection on energy transfer to a process occurring between actors and spectators, or between an author and their readers, as Patel explains: "theatre is relationship. A body in front of other bodies. Unfiltered, unedited, unmanipulated. In real time. If I screw up on stage, everyone participates in the moment" (Patel 2010, 85). If one considers Patel, and the receivers of her work, as implicated subjects—each one being specifically positioned in relation to history—it becomes clear how collective agency could involve "commitment to transforming structural injustices in future-oriented actions" (Rothberg 2019, 50).

Patel's specific reference to the "energy in a leg" (Patel 2010, 86) may also be articulated with Fanon's discussion of the muscularity of the colonised subject's body in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

> The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride. (Fanon 1963, 52)

Fanon adds: "The native's muscles are always tensed […] That impulse to take the settler's place implies a tonicity of muscles the whole time" (Fanon 1963, 53). Patel's reference to energy and physics—"it completes itself in motion" (Patel 2010, 77)—therefore seems to address how Fanon reads muscular effort as the "muscular manifestation of the subject's revolutionary consciousness" (Fanon 1963, 53). Both Patel's and Fanon's texts emphasise the articulation between the postcolonial body and revolutionary agency, but Patel's work also highlights how central the relationality between bodies 'implicated' in the act of bearing witness to the victims of violence is.

Patel's insistence upon the physicality of the body reflects the archival nature of the body. Her work is reminiscent of historian Gyanendra Pandey's observation: "When and how do we archive the body as a register of events; or gestures, pauses, gut-reactions; or deep-rooted feelings of ecstasy, humiliation, pain?" (Pandey 2013, 7). *Migritude*, with its insistence on physicality, invites us to conceive of the body alongside Pandey's terms, i.e.

as a record of historical events, as an archive and a source of knowledge, just as the sari.[14] Speaking about the visual production, Leetsch observes:

> Generously spreading the saris across the stage floor and thus sharing them with the audience, Patel constructs not only a personal connection between herself and the people in the room, but she also creates a textile connection that reaches from the weavers whose hands were chopped off in nineteenth-century India, to those expelled from their homes in Uganda under Amin, to the survivors of rape in twentieth-century Kenyan camps, and right into the present. Sharing both material and histories with the audience, Patel engages spectators physically and emotionally. (Leetsch 2021, 708)

Patel's bodily performance and the way she 'engages' her audience partake of an exploration of implication. Finally, both works disrupt the dichotomous logics of caregiver and object of care, while retaining their respective perspectives on the matter.

Raging against the Humanitarian/Colonial Machine

Beyond this slightly provocative subtitle, what is at stake is, of course, not to launch a gratuitous attack on the people working in the humanitarian sector. Patel indeed denounces "humanitarianism" when it turns into a system and/or a career. As she makes clear: "So I make this word from rage" (Patel 2010, 35).[15]

In the poem section of the work, a similar line, "make it from rage" echoes a line from the previous stanza, "make it with your body" (Patel 2010, 122), which is strongly evocative of the link between rage and the body in one's assertion of agency—the latter being suggested by the occurrences of "make." This echoes the ways in which bell hooks has highlighted the fruitful nature of rage and its imbrication with resistance:

14 Drawing on materialism, Leetsch reads the sari in *Migritude* as "an archive or repertoire for the memories and trauma connected to empire's structures of oppression and violence, but more importantly also as an emotional marker for resistance. The saris in all their stubborn and porous material existence wilfully bear witness not only to Patel's performances, but also to histories of women's suffering" (Leetsch 2021, 697).

15 In Sahota's novel, a memorable passage about anger is associated with Narinder, who goes against her parents' will and turns against their religion: "'I've never been so angry. When they said what I was doing was wrong, I just wanted to scream. I wanted to shout. I've never been like that'" (Sahota 2015, 267). In this section, I wish to focus on rage in Patel's work, as it draws on more diversified elements than those that can be found in Sahota's novel.

> Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct. Then and now I understand rage to be a necessary aspect of resistance struggle. Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action. (hooks 1995, 16)

Rage in Patel's work is particularly audible thanks to her use of an accusatory second-person pronoun. The immigrant's anger is expressed in another collective voice—a community the poet belongs to: "We recoil when you joke about how your kids will do social justice work in Palestine as teenagers. As if Palestine will never be anything but a social justice summer camp. A case study in genocidal oppression for wealthy American teens with wanna-be-radical parents" (Patel 2010, 34). Patel criticises the extent to which empathy can be delivered on a short-term basis and is not envisaged as unconditional. The transformation of Palestine into a "case study" and the striking oxymoron "social justice summer camp" underline the incongruence of having "social justice" time-circumscribed and context-conditioned, with "summer camp" recalling a holiday hobby.

Rage is also rife in *Migritude*'s denunciation of climate injustice: "Pepsi buys up water rights in Central Africa, but keeps the water dirty" (Patel 2010, 36) which leads to an impassioned call for equality: "I want the gutters of Berkeley to float plastic bottles, like the ditches of Nairobi. I want the poodles of New York to choke on plastic bags like the cows and goats of Zanzibar" (Patel 2010, 36). This poetics of rage, which relies on the anaphoric repetition of "I want" at the beginning of each new sentence underscores the "coloniality of power," to borrow from Anibal Quijano's terminology (2007), which implies the persistence of colonial practices beyond historical decolonisation when it comes, for instance, to waste management.

The speaker's anger is also perceptible in the denunciation of historiographical practices, especially those ruling over the narratives of colonial history. Patel's text combines historical information and reflections on indoctrination: "In Kenya's war of independence, fewer than 100 whites and over 25,000 Africans died" (Patel 2010, 19). This appears right after the mention "We learned in school that we attained independence peacefully. Without bloodshed" (Patel 2010, 18–9), which stresses the distortion between disembodied statements, reminiscent of the writing of historical textbooks, and a more personal, at times angered, voice: "We were the model the rest of Africa was supposed to look to! A happy, multiracial nation where Whites, Asians, and Africans all lived in harmony" (Patel 2010, 19). The use of exclamatory punctuation and the enumeration of the peoples said to live in harmony draw the readers' attention to the veneer of historical

narratives hence made palatable and the fact that more entangled facts are to be found under the narrative surface of historical accounts.

Rage against colonialism and its aftermath takes the shape of a curse in Patel's work, turning the narrator/speaker into a prophetess of sorts: about the British soldiers who raped many women and children (650 rape allegations made, covering more than 35 years, between 1965 and 2001), the speaker exclaims: "May the redness overtake them. May red ants feast in their groins. Scorpions nestle in their beds. Blood vessels explode in their brains, organs rupture in their bellies. Wherever they go, may the land rise up in redness against them" (Patel 2010, 47). The number of anatomical references and the variety of verbs used ("overtake," "feast," "nestle," "explode," and "rise up"), all connoting proliferation, emphasise the speaker's desire for no single part of the colonisers' bodies to be spared. As violence has been exerted upon colonised bodies, the migrant's voice—in solidarity with the former, and despite the distance that separates her from the events which occurred in history—responds with rage by voicing verbal violence aimed at the perpetrators' bodies. It simultaneously invites the readers and spectators to share this experience of enraged solidarity by bearing witness to the victims of past and present violence, through the acts of reading and attending the show.

From Empathy to Praxis of Care

The move from empathy to care mentioned in the subtitle partakes of a certain defiance towards empathy which, as Suzanne Keen notes in *Empathy and the Novel*, can be seen as "yet another example of the Western imagination's imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to 'feel with,' in a cultural imperialism of the emotions" (Keen 2007, 148). Patel's and Sahota's works appear as calls to precisely move away from empathy to privilege care. Fiona Robinson argues that one has to wonder about the unequal power relations which may remain in acts of empathy. She invites people in the Global North to "rethink the implications of [their] 'moral' actions" (Robinson 2016, 173): "it compels us to reflect on the harm we may be doing in 'doing good'" (Robinson 2016, 173). Robinson adds that "what is important about care is its *necessity*—it *must* be done; and its *ubiquity*—it is *always* being done" (Robinson 2016, 171; emphasis in original). In Patel's work, as is visible in

the passage about Palestine as summer camp, empathy becomes something that can be bestowed upon others often thought of as subalterns.[16]

In this reflection about empathy, I wish to refer to Leetsch's assertion that

> the connection between voicing trauma and the creation of empathy and systems of solidarity lies at the forefront of Shailja Patel's art. The auto/fictional collaborative testimonies provided in her performances and poems create communities within the work and also, through their collaborative character, open themselves up to the reader, providing access to traumatic histories and ultimately producing the possibility of an ethical engagement across cultures. (Leetsch 2021, 707)

While I agree with how solidarities are created within *Migritude*, I would not speak of a creation of "empathy" in regard to Patel's work. Patel's dry, staccato writing imposes images upon the readers/spectators which hinder the identifying processes at the core of empathy: "1982 / gunshots in the streets of Nairobi / military coup leaders / thunder over the radio / Asian businesses wrecked and looted / Asian women / raped / after the government / regains control / we whisper what the coup leaders / had planned" (Patel 2010, 27). The paratactic effect prevents us from directly identifying with the victims and, therefore, appropriating their experiences. This process of impossible identification echoes Rothberg's discussion about the slogan "We are not Trayvon Martin" in the wake of the latter's murder:

> rather than understanding this enunciation as an act of disidentification, I read the slogan as a way of resisting appropriation that has the potential to open up a new political space for examining unwelcome forms of implication […] "We are not Trayvon Martin" becomes an occasion to mark another kind of belonging: the speaker's implication in the conditions that contributed to Trayvon's murder. (Rothberg 2019, 6)

In her poem "Eater of Death," about Arab children killed by a drone, the poet says: "their names will not be remembered, They are not *Amrikan*. Museums will not hold their relics, they are not *Amrikan*" (Patel 2010, 112; emphases in original). The poet counters this logic of erasure by literally

16 Carolyn Pedwell (2013) discusses the unequal power relations at stake in empathy, especially how the beneficiaries of empathic feeling, often emanating from the North, are often people from the Global South: "in the vast majority of these [liberal] texts, it is an imagined subject with class, race and geo-political privileges who encounters 'difference' and then chooses whether or not to extend empathy and compassion […]. The act of 'choosing' to extend empathy and compassion can itself be a way to assert power" (Pedwell 19).

'incorporating' these names without appropriating them: "I will keep them safe—in the cracks of my teeth / in the pit of my pelvis / in the raw raw flesh / beneath my eyelids" (Patel 2010, 113). The past events are connected with the future (as the use of "will" highlights) in each iteration of Patel's performance, which shows that "implication emerges from the ongoing, uneven, and destabilizing intrusion of irrevocable pasts into an unredeemed present" (Rothberg 2019, 9).

Sahota's Politics of Recognition

Against a conception of empathy which sees some subjects as the exclusive providers of empathy and others as its receivers, Sahota's novel invites us to think alongside Nancy Fraser's concept of "transformative recognition" (Fraser 1998, 448), which she sees as preliminary to a "politics of care" and, I would add, a praxis of care. In the novel, Tochi, a Dalit character whose silent attitude is frequently recalled, explains the violence his family and himself have experienced as Dalits:

> He told her everything. About his father's accident, his sister's wedding, his attempts to make it as an auto driver. The riots that engulfed them and killed his family. His two years working in a brick factory in Calcutta and the travel across to Europe by plane, ship and truck. His weeks on the streets of Paris and the year in Southall and, finally, the trip up to here, Sheffield. (Sahota 2015, 125)

The riots that killed his family imply "overkilling" (Taraud, 2022) acts.[17] "Her" in the quote is Narinder, the Sikh British-Indian woman who is determined to provide care to the people around her. The revelation of Tochi's personal history of victimhood leads to the birth of a special connection between the two protagonists, regardless of their respective castes and genders. In a later response to Tochi's unveiling gesture, Narinder relinquishes her religion by symbolically taking off her turban. The passage may be read as Narinder showing herself as vulnerable in response:

> She raised her fingers to her head, to her turban. She lifted it off and put it on the table. [...] She stared at him, her arms arranged over her chest *as if she were naked*. Candlelight on her long hair. He came forward and knelt

17 I am referring to Christelle Taraud's concept of "sur-tuer" in the context of feminicide—the fact of exerting extreme violence before or after killing somebody in the form of mutilation, dismemberment, or rape, among others (Taraud 2022).

> beside her and put his head in her lap. He felt her hands lightly touch him and they both wept for all they had lost. (Sahota 2015, 433; emphasis added)

This passage is illustrative of Robinson's contention that "transformative recognition ensures that practices are based on a picture of mutual vulnerability and interdependence, and a shared need both to care and be cared for" (Robinson 2016, 163). Narinder leads a life defined by an "ethics of care. But by acknowledging Tochi through touch—Tochi who is a member of the caste formerly called 'Untouchables'—and giving him her vulnerable self to see ("as if she were naked"), Narinder acknowledges both his vulnerability and hers. The mention of their skins touching emphasises Robinson's idea of sharing, which is central to her reading of care. Mutuality being at stake in the praxis of care is finally highlighted by the use of the term "both." The acknowledgement of mutual vulnerability leads to the creation of new, unexpected solidarities and to the dismantling of the "object of care–care-giver" binary. The shift in the narrative from her to him and, finally, to the "they" pronoun literalises the nascent solidarity between the two characters, echoing Robinson's statement that "acts or practices of care and recognition can only occur *in relation*" (Robinson 2016, 165; emphasis in original). Sahota's novel depicts an evolution from Tochi and Narinder each eating dinner on their own to them progressively cooking and eating dinner together:

> She divided the sabzi and put a plate of white bread in the centre of the table. She sat down. He was looking at the food.
>
> […] "Are you making roti?" she asked, curious. She joined him at the sink.
>
> He was using his hands, the wet dough hanging off his finger-tips in stiff peaks. "You made the sabzi, I'll make the roti." […] That became the shape of their evenings: *one of them* cooking up the dhal or sabzi*, the other* making the rotis*, and then a meal together, quietly, peaceably* (Sahota 2015, 426; emphases added).

The passage literalises the fact that care relies on reciprocity. The evolution in the use of pronouns shows how the two characters are initially considered separate entities ("You made the sabzi, I'll make the roti") before being envisaged as a collective: "that became the shape of *their* evenings" (emphasis added). This evolution toward mutual solidarity, one that is oblivious of caste or gender, is epitomised in the last sentence of the passage, with the parallel phrases "one of them cooking" and "the other making" leading to the melting of their separate selves into the collective "and then a meal *together*" (my emphasis). By taking us into the kitchen of this Sheffield flat and depicting seemingly plain gestures, Sahota shows us

a praxis of care being carried out by characters who "perform unnoticed, invisible tasks and take care of basic needs" (Laugier 2015, 218). Care is particularly highlighted by the use of the action verb "make"—a reminder that care, indeed, consists of *acts* of care.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to underline how the two works draw our attention to the particular case of female precarity in contexts of colonialism and immigration. Patel's writing and performance can be read as a tribute to the victims of colonialism and forced migration and a denunciation of the British colonisers and Ugandan perpetrators of violence against Asians. *Migritude* also hints at the specific female victims of colonialism and at present forms of oppression, as women remain the main subjects of globalised precarity. This is also shown in Sahota's novel with Narinder, who is a British citizen experiencing both racism in England and patriarchal oppression embodied by her father and brother who predicate the honour of the family upon her way of living.

Both texts question stereotypes about victimhood but complicate the positions of victim and perpetrator, which makes their analysis through Rothberg's concept of implicated subject enlightening. Sahota's novel engages us to think beyond categories that are not as clear-cut as could be imagined and not mutually exclusive. One may be a victim of systemic racism on the one hand and a perpetrator of gendered oppression on the other. Patel's and Sahota's works complicate the simplistic scheme according to which perpetration is necessarily on the part of Western colonial powers, while victimhood would only be associated with a character, or a country, from the Global South.

Both works also examine how the past continues to exist in the present, be it through Tochi's experience of caste discrimination that played a part in his departure for the West, where he re-experiences caste discrimination coupled with a type of racism that finds its origins in colonial history, or in Patel's evocation of the organic link between past and present victims of gendered and racial discrimination in Uganda, Kenya, and Western countries. Both consequently call our attention to everyone's role as more or less distant 'implicated subject,' making us all witnesses of entangled histories in the continuation of which we participate in various degrees. But Patel's work, drawing on a multimodal endeavour embracing drama, poetry, journalism, and testimonial discourse, centres female corporeality and voices as it claims the archival status of both bodies and saris, with the

body of the performer acting as vital principle connecting subjectivities, lives, stories, and narratives—past and present.

Both works finally reclaim a specific 'victimhood status.' *The Year of the Runaways* highlights the limits of individual Indian female agency in the West, as Narinder cannot ultimately rescue her friend Savraj. According to Mirza, "Savraj's vanishing from Narinder's life, and from the narrative, is a powerful reminder of the vicious tenacity of some forms of precarity which resist being overcome in an individual's life" (2022, 100). This is a reminder that the move from victim to survivor is often seen to depend on individual agency. It is, of course, a great achievement when victims manage to heal from traumatic events at an individual level. But the two works oppose the neoliberal tendency that views the path of healing as one implying an individual leaving the state of victimhood to embrace that of survivor. They call our attention to systemic forms of oppression leading to states of victimhood which need to be reclaimed and acknowledged collectively. The initial stage of the process is carried out through the "joint attention" triggered by Sahota's and Patel's literary and artistic gestures. Such collective attention drawn to the same object(s) is what may then lead to effective praxis, which includes recognition and the provision of acts of care. Through our experience of the works' bodily poetics, we can imagine becoming augmented implicated subjects, not just by acknowledging our responsibility in the continuation of past processes in our current world, but by becoming actively implicated in bearing witness to ongoing processes of discrimination which create persistent victims whose status we may collectively acknowledge, while resisting such historical continuities. Renewed politics may emerge in such embodied practices of reading, seeing, and listening as are generated by Sahota's and Patel's works.

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