

Of Suitcases and Gunny Sacks: The Poetics of Travel in M. G. Vassanji and Shailja Patel

Jennifer Leetsch
University of Würzburg

Abstract: *In his work on Indian Ocean crossings and Coolitude, Khal Torabully delineates how the routes of migrant workers and indentured labourers create a wide-reaching web that spans across oceans and continents, connecting India, China, and Oceania to African and European shores. Taking up Torabully's thinking on global encounter and exchange, this article turns to M. G. Vassanji's The Gunny Sack (1989) and Shailja Patel's Migrant (2010), two literary texts which interlink East Africa with India via the water space of the Indian Ocean. It will argue that both expand the oceanic passage at the heart of their stories to address other, less geographically graspable poetics of travel. By connecting an early, seminal novel of the East African Asian diaspora with a more recent and experimental text, I will extrapolate the ways how these two texts give voice to journeys between Asia and East Africa across the Indian Ocean, and, situated at the borderlands between Africa and Asia, shed light on multiple, often contested, South-South connectivities.*

Keywords: M.G. Vassanji, Shailja Patel, Indian Ocean, kala pani, East African Asian literature

1. Introduction

You from Goa, from Pondicherry, from Chandannagar, from
Cocane, from Delhi, from Surat, from London, from Shanghai,
from Lorient, from Saint-Malo, people of all the ships,
who took me to my other self, my stardock,
is my itinerary, my freedom, my vision the
ocean, which we are all crossing, even though we did not
see the stars from the same perspectives.
(Torabully 1992, 89; transl. Ette 2017, 113)

This passage is taken from *Cale d'étoiles: Coolitude*, a poetry collection commonly referred to as the founding text of Coolitude, published by the Mauritian poet and cultural theorist Khal Torabully. In it, Torabully discusses the crossing of the Indian Ocean by so-called coolies, (mainly Indian) Asian indentured workers who travelled, and were forced to travel, to Africa and the Caribbean. Coolitude thus references the specific experiences of indentured workers and, by giving voice to the historically muted, reconfigures a term of abuse.¹ By way of linguistic as well as cultural strategies of self-affirmation and empowerment, the violence inherent to the conception of the 'coolie' is made intelligible, processable. The

coolie is not only “the one who is without the text of his/her voyage” (Torabully 1992, 71), but ultimately the one who needs to write the story of his/her passage or crossing (cf. Bragard 2008, 40). For Torabully, however, Coolitude also expands beyond its historic specificity in order to encompass the experiences of geographical and cultural migrants throughout the world, reaching from Delhi to London, from Shanghai to Saint-Malo, from Goa to Cocane. It is the “ethical, poetic, and poetologic attempt to formulate a vision for the future, which, relying on the principle of including those who have been excluded from history and its futures, reflects and revises historical and current processes of globalisation” (Ette 2017, 112). Torabully has thus created, in the words of Ottmar Ette, a “poetics of global migration” (113) which, as I argue, foregrounds the shared experience of ocean crossing, as referenced in the poem above.

In accordance with this definition, Isabel Hofmeyr posits in “The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean” that “the central motif of Coolitude is the voyage, which becomes the site of trauma and loss” (2007, 9). At the heart of Torabully’s thinking is what he calls the *Book of the Voyage* (Carter and Torabully 2002, 15), which foregrounds the ocean crossing and which enables ways of making legible the erased experiences of indenture and migration. In the light of this shuttling between legibility and intelligibility, Véronique Bragard argues that “the nightmare transoceanic journey” can be read

as both a historical migration and a metonymy of cultural encounters. The crossing of the *Kala Pani* constitutes the first movement of a series of abusive and culturally stifling situations. By making the crossing central, Coolitude avoids any essentialism and connection with an idealized Mother India, which is clearly left behind. It discloses the Coolie’s story which has been shipwrecked (‘erased’) in the ocean of a Western-made historical discourse as well as a world of publication and criticism (1998, 104; emphasis in original).

Kala pani means dark or black waters and refers to the religious restriction of crossing the sea in Hindu Indian culture, especially for high-caste Hindus (cf. DeLoughrey 2011, 71). This taboo arises from the notion that by leaving the shores of the subcontinent, one would be cut off from the regenerating and healing waters of the Ganges, therefore ending one’s reincarnation cycle.² For the majority of Indians who made these journeys, then, this crossing also meant the breaking of family and social ties: “as a term it powerfully encodes the dissolution and even negation of identity beyond national soil or [...] motherland” (ibid.). The water passage across the Indian Ocean thus is marked by trauma, disappearance, disconnection and isolation, but as Torabully argues, it also “posits an encounter, an exchange of histories, of poetics or visions of the world, between those of African descent and of Indian descent, without excluding other sources” (Carter and Torabully 2002, 150). For Torabully, then, the routes of migrant workers and indentured labourers create a wide-reaching web that spans across oceans and continents, connecting India, China, and Oceania to African and European shores.³

It is with this notion of encounter and exchange that I want to turn to two literary texts which interlink East Africa with India via the water space of the Indian Ocean and expand the Indian Ocean passage at the heart of their story to address other travels. M. G. Vassanji's seminal novel *The Gunny Sack*, which was published in 1989 and which received the Commonwealth Writers prize for the African region, offers a deep archive of different forms of belonging and displacement playing out along various locales on the East African coastline. The novel explores inextricable entanglements as past meets present, and slaves, traders, and runaways encounter each other. A more recent text, Shailja Patel's work *Migritude* (2010) also provides a series of encounters: here, old South Asian diasporas entangle with new Asian-African networks of solidarity, and the effects of British imperialism intersect with both historic and contemporary Kenyan and Ugandan politics. In Vassanji's novel, the characters travel from Junapur in India across the Indian Ocean first to Zanzibar, then to Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, before migrating to Canada. Similarly, Patel's *Migritude* traces the journey across the *kala pani* from Gujarat in India to Kenya and Uganda, then to California, and ultimately back to East and South Africa. By connecting these two very different texts, I am drawing a line between one of the earliest and arguably most influential literary texts of the East African Asian diaspora and one that is more contemporary, and in many ways a critical continuation of the former. Both *The Gunny Sack* and *Migritude* give voice to journeys between Asia and East Africa across the Indian Ocean, and, situated at the borderlands between Africa and Asia, they shed light on the multiple connectivities across the Indian Ocean.

One of the aims of this article is to interrogate how historical patterns of connection between East Africa and the Indian subcontinent across the Indian Ocean interlink with, become realigned along, and ultimately disrupt "binary poles of Western modernisation" (Clifford 1997, 5) – and in what kinds of journeys and movements such interlinkage and realignment results in. I argue that by focussing to varying degrees on the moment of crossing the water, both texts pose this critical question and point towards different possibilities to describe discrepant and contentious travels. In her work on Indian Ocean histories and cultures, Isabel Hofmeyr has argued that "much contemporary work on transnationalism operates on North-South axes and invokes older categories of empire and nation, of the dominating global and the resistant local. These categories – domination and resistance, colonizer and colonized – arise from post-independence revisions of colonial history" (2012, 589). But, as she goes on to argue, the Indian Ocean "requires us to take a much longer perspective, which necessarily complicates any simple binaries" (ibid.). Taking to heart this call for complication and complexity, it will become clear in my discussions that neither text merely represents littoral interconnections, nomadic networks of trade, transnational communities and worlded encounters, but that they themselves constitute a passage between South East Asia and Africa, weaving a material connection across the water.

To enable me to trace these different depths and layers and to excavate the various textual and visual strategies of crossing in both texts, I will utilise a recurrent topos that lies at the forefront of both narrations. Both texts are connected by the epitome of travel and movement: the suitcase. This piece of luggage, in one case a worn-down burlap bag, in the other a red leather suitcase, functions as a means to articulate the entanglements and simultaneities of departure, crossing, and arrival. Here, luggage – even though it is all too often penned as standing for movement and rootlessness – also acts as a tether to the past and to certain geographical spaces. In the following I will thus use the two suitcases presented in Vassanji's and Patel's texts to draw out the ways they make visible multi-routed entanglements between Africa and Asia and to illuminate how both utilise the suitcase as narrative device and as a material reminder of displacement. In both texts, these symbols of travel and wandering activate the retelling of history and the rediscovery of memories; cross-generational connections are being expressed through more or less arbitrary objects stored in luggage pieces which safeguard the past, but which also make it possible for that past to spill out, to be unfolded from its containers.

2. *The Gunny Sack*: Memoryscapes and Ocean Crossings

In a recent interview with *The Punch*, Vassanji has stated that “[f]or a person who's gone away from his roots, memory is of crucial importance. (The first word of my first book [*The Gunny Sack*] happens to be ‘memory’). But the idea for a novelist is not only to remember, but to *go beyond*: what to do, how to cope with memory” (2017, emphasis added). In his stories, novels, and in his travel writings, Vassanji has exemplarily gone beyond: he has re-created memoryscapes⁴ from the nineteenth century to the present by looking at the individual and communal experiences of South Asian migrants in India, East Africa, Europe, and in North America. As one of the earliest East African Asian writers tackling the intersected and complicated concerns of inhabiting the world from different positionalities simultaneously, he has been “recognized as a major voice of the East African diaspora” (Desai 2011, vii). The following will look at Vassanji's aforementioned first novel. It has often been relegated to Vassanji's ‘African’ fiction (cf. Mukherjee 1994), and while this is certainly true and very much one of its core themes, the focus of the discussion below lays more so on the travels and crossing depicted in *The Gunny Sack* which expand both its Indian location of departure and its African space of arrival. I argue that the titular gunny sack serves as a technique to initiate the retelling of intersecting narratives, across the Indian Ocean and along other travel routes. As Brenda Cooper has argued, “physical objects in Vassanji's fiction such as a heavy trunk, a gunny sack, or an ivory-handled fan signify a material reality that exceeds the ability of colonial metaphors to capture it” (Cooper 2004, quoted in Bookman 2014, 2). Eluding capture by colonial paradigms, *The Gunny Sack* foregrounds South-South relationality while never ignoring the political structures and perpetrators of power of its East African setting.

The novel tells the story of Salim Juma, the great-grandson of an Indian trader and an African slave. *The Gunny Sack* follows four generations of a South Asian family “who migrate from the West coast of India to East Africa in the late nineteenth century – they travel and work throughout Tanzania, the coastal islands, and Kenya during the colonial period, before eventually making their way to North America after Tanzanian independence” (Kalliney 2011, 300). The text portrays Salim’s attempt to recover the buried history of his family specifically and of the South Asian community in East Africa more generally. Salim initiates his narrative after the death of his great-aunt, called Ji Bai, who bequeaths him an old, worn-down gunny sack. This gunny sack, a sort of rough travel bag made of hessian burlap, harbours memories, secrets and a family history: “[i]t holds an assortment of objects which themselves have little material value, but they acquire symbolic significance as Salim uses them as an occasion for the production of familial and communal history” (Kalliney 2011, 302). Each of the objects procured from the sack propel the narrator to unearth a piece of his family’s obscure past: the sack thus turns into an intricate poetic device, building up a sequence of narrative frames out of which it proffers a convoluted, non-linear collection of stories and transit lines.

From the very start of the novel, the gunny sack is imbued with life-like characteristics, turning into a personification of memory and history itself:

Memory, Ji Bai would say, is this old sack here, this poor dear that nobody has any use for any more. Stroking the sagging brown shape with affection she would drag it closer, to sit at her feet like a favourite child. In would plunge her hand through the gaping hole of a mouth, and she would rummage inside. Now you feel this thing here, you fondle that one, you bring out this, and everything else in it rearranges itself (3).

The sack sits beside Ji Bai like a child, its opening resembles a mouth out of which it speaks of the family’s collective past. Each object randomly pulled from its depths is linked to a point in time and to one of Salim’s relatives: “Ji Bai opened a small window into that dark past for me. [...] And a whole world flew in, a world of my great-grandfather who left India and my great-grandmother who was African, the world of Matamu where India and Africa met and the mixture exploded in the person of my half-caste grandfather Huseni” (135). *The Gunny Sack* is not only the telling of these individual fates, but a retelling of the “whole world”, a “world of changing Africa where Europe and Africa also met and the result was even more explosive, not only in the lives of men but also in the life of the continent” (ibid.). And so, the narrator – who at the time he starts his narrative is living in a dark basement room in North America – travels back into his past, to the earliest possible moment of his genealogy as offered by the gunny sack: to his ancestor Dhanji Govinji who decides to leave India in the nineteenth century.

Taking up the notions of *kala pani* as traumatic and intelligible crossing developed in the introduction to this article, it is interesting to take a closer look at this initial journey across the waters that spawns so many other travels throughout the

novel. At the start of his voyage, Dhanji Govindji travels from his home in Junapur to the port city of Porbander in Gujarat where he has to wait before setting out on a dhow for Zanzibar. Zanzibar for him is an idealised point of arrival: “Zanzibar! The Jewel of Africa, isle of enchantment. There are those who still weep tears for the Zanzibar that was. Dhanji Govindji had heard of Zanzibar, had dreamt of Zanzibar as a boy” (8). Zanzibar is stylised as a dream, and it is hence not surprising that while the novel painstakingly details its departures and arrivals, the moment of crossing, the *kala pani* itself, is hardly spoken about. While Dhanji Govindji, a member of the fictional Shamsie sect,⁵ cannot be subsumed under the category of the coolies, Torabully’s *Coolitude* and its focus on the oscillations between illegibility and intelligibility can be fruitfully applied here. The ocean journey is not talked about, even remains fully in the dark, but at the same time needs to be read and understood as the fundamental basis for all the other journeys that happen throughout the text: crossing from India to Zanzibar, from Zanzibar to Kenya, from Kenya to Tanzania to Uganda, from British and German colonisation to pre- and post-independence political struggles like the Mau Mau Uprising and Idi Amin’s rise to power. Following from this, as Peter Kalliney has contended, “the text goes to some lengths to portray the region as an exhilarating and painful ‘contact zone’ for a wide range of people, languages, religions, ideas, and objects” (2011, 302). This becomes quite apparent when looking at the moment of arrival:

What emotions stirred in Dhanji Govindji’s breast as the low-lying island came into view eastwards, a dream city suddenly risen from the ocean, with its brilliant, luxuriant verdure, the shimmering white of the Arab houses in the foreground, the numerous dhows, boats, steamers and naval vessels of different flags in its harbour? As he stepped of the boat pushing aside Arab and Swahili guides babbling in Swahili, English and Cutchi? As he walked among the throngs that crowded its narrow streets, black, white and brown, slaves, masters and freedmen, businessmen, hustlers, beggars and prostitutes, sailors, diplomats and explorers? [...] Zanzibar ... here Indians had lived and traded for centuries (Vassanji 1989, 8–9).

Here, his home back in India is forgotten, and Dhanji Govindji fully emerges himself into the new world he has discovered, shuttling between different languages, cultures, and origins. Zanzibar as “a nodal point for trade and commerce, the place where dispossessed immigrants can make themselves anew” (Kalliney 2011, 302) is marked as always having been a point of contact. As scholars of the Indian ocean trade system have explained, this intersection between East African mainland, the Indian Ocean islands, the Indian subcontinent, and the Arabian Peninsula had always been a fulcrum, even before European colonial powers arrived in the nineteenth century (Bose 2009, Pearson 2003, Chaudhuri 1985). While the actual ocean crossing is never fully realised narratively, the novel conveys the politics and poetics of travel in other ways, by referencing the deep historicity of Indian Ocean crossroads.

Salim’s great-grandfather goes on to travel to the African mainland to build himself a home in Matamu in then Tanganyika, and he puts in motion the

host of events that make up the novel when he has a son with Bibi Taratibu, an African slave: “Matamu. [...] It is the town where my forebear unloaded his donkey one day and made his home. Where Africa opened its womb to India and produced a being who forever stalks the forest in search of himself” (39–40). And this is exactly what the rest of the novel sets out to do: it traces various characters – all intricately connected to this initial union between an Indian trader and traveller and an African slave woman – who desperately attempt to find themselves in a thicket of political alliances, personal misfortunes, and cultural and geographical displacements. Carrying the sense of having multiple different fixpoints from the initial ocean crossing into the rest of the narrative, the characters and stories that spill out of the gunny sack are continuously confronted with ambivalent and questionable choices. Throughout the novel, the narrator and his Indian East African family are uncomfortably positioned in-between colonial forces such as the English (and Germans) and the revolting Kenyan and Tanzanian nationalist militant movements. One of many instances of such battling loyalties can be found in the latter half of the novel, when, set during Salim’s childhood in Kenya, his family is confronted with the Mau Mau uprisings in the 1950s and 1960s:

The gunny would like to throw out one more bad memory. Spit out a pang of conscience that’s been eating away at the insides, like a particularly thorny pip that’s been swallowed. Operation Anvil again. Hundreds of Kikuyus, guilty and not guilty, were sent away every day to await further screening; thousands waited at Langata. One night, fearful Mary [...] knocked on the door. With her was a man (77).

Mary is an old Kenyan friend of the family and the man she brings is her son – she begs the family to hide him as he is being searched for by the British for partaking in anti-colonial revolts. Salim’s father, however, decides to betray their old family friend and tips off the local police, effectively sealing son’s and mother’s fate. Salim, in retrospective narration, spitting out the thorny pip that has been eating away at both his and the gunny sack’s insides, unpacks his family’s traumatic past while simultaneously illuminating their involvement in the colonial project. He thus pays tribute to his past and to “a friend from another world who came periodically and then once at night in an hour of need – whose memory we now carry branded forever in our conscience” (78). Paralleling across geographical space and historical epochs different forms of oppression and power hierarchies, it is noteworthy how the arbitrary way in which objects and people jostle against each other in Vassanji’s fiction “serves as a check against a single memory or a single story dominating all other narrative possibilities” (Bookman 2014, 4). As Vassanji himself has stated, “I did not see, nor wanted to give the impression of, a simple, linear, historical truth emerging” (Kanaganayakam 1991, 22).

The Gunny Sack excels in portraying hurtful encounters that are marked by shame and the desire to forget – it traces the trauma of colonialism, only to carry it into the diasporic present, never content with just one single perspective. Wildly

oscillating between stasis and movement, the novel offers to the reader enmeshed memoryscapes where the imaginaries that tumble from a cluttered gunny sack expand the national scales of India, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda in a truly worldly fashion, all the while functioning on a deeply personal, intimate level of family, friendship, romance: as Ariel Bookman has argued “the most secret interior space – the inside of a sack – is at the same time a global space, subject to the vagaries of Great Power politics” (2014, 10). By using the gunny sack as a structural and poetic device, Vassanji not only reflects on the paradox of a piece of luggage – mired simultaneously in movement and rootedness – but also expertly decentres the narrative, having it originate from different points in time and space, while not once sacrificing its connectivity. What thus arises in Vassanji’s work are landscapes of migration and memory in which the dichotomies between Africa and India as supposedly self-contained, mutually exclusive spaces dissolve and instead result in embodiments of a transregional history of interconnectedness. Yet, despite all this, the novel ends on a wish to be finally able to end the continuous cycle of departure and arrival: “Let this be the last runaway” (268). In light of Salim’s plans to finally return “home”, this showcases a desire to haul back each and every story strand that has escaped from the gunny sack and reign it in:

Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, [...], even if it means for now [...] to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves, our wounded dreams, and pretend they’re still there intact, without splints [...] [W]e dreamt the world, which was large and beautiful and exciting, and it came to us this world, even though it was more than we bargained for, it came in large soaking waves and wrecked us, but we are thankful, for to have dreamt was enough (268-269).

Referencing a world of soaking waves, the initial watery crossing of the *kala pani* that had unsettled every foundation – irrevocably interlinking India with East Africa with Salim’s present in Canada and his brother’s transatlantic travels – needs to be redeemed. Via the device of a gunny sack, the novel has created a world that is more than everyone has bargained for, but once the sack has been emptied and all the world has been dreamt, the desire for intactness, without splinters or cracks, prevails.

3. *Migritude*: A Red Suitcase Filled with Saris

Whereas in Vassanji’s text, the gunny sack and its contents remain fictional, made only graspable through their imaginative power and importance for the migration stories of the novel’s characters, in Shailja Patel’s *Migritude* the suitcase is very real. *Migritude* can best be described as multi-modal and hybrid: in its embodiment as a book, it is a conglomeration of poetry, art, letters and interviews, autobiography, and female historiography. Originally, however, *Migritude* premiered in 2006 as a spoken-word theatre and dance performance, to be performed on stage, and subsequently toured across the globe, encompassing locations from San Francisco to Zanzibar, from Kenya to Austria,

from Italy to Zimbabwe.⁶ At the heart of both show and book lies a suitcase full of saris that Patel inherited from her mother and that form the fundamental fabric of *Migritude* – “through them [the suitcase and the saris], she reveals an inheritance of emotions, of histories bound up in journeys from India to Kenya to the United States. The sari, a piece of cloth, binds continents and families” (Prashad 2010, iii-iv). Patel was born and raised in Kenya as a third-generation South Asian African by parents with Indian Gujarati heritage. She was educated in the UK and the United States, where she lived for a long time before moving back to Africa where she currently divides her time between Nairobi, Kenya, and Johannesburg, South Africa – *Migritude* thus can be described as the story of Patel’s own migrational movements across the world intertwined with her family’s trans-oceanic migration stories, and thus also one possible narrative of the Asian African diaspora. As Vijay Prashad argues in his foreword to *Migritude*, “[t]hree cross-continental migrations shape her story: the early 20th century march of South Asians to East Africa; the mass expulsion and emigration of East African Indians to the Global North from the 1970s onwards; and finally, Shailja’s own emigration out of Kenya – first to the United Kingdom and, eventually, to California” (2010, iii). The suitcase, and the saris in it, constitutes the source for Patel’s engagement with her family’s migrational history but also provides a way to address historical and contemporary politics in Kenya and Uganda during and after colonisation. Using the suitcase and the saris it holds as a springboard for her narratives, like Vassanji, she manages to connect past and present, extending the travel of her ancestors across the waters of the Indian Ocean to address her own travels.

In the following discussion, I want to focus on two modes of mobility and travel which are embedded within this hybrid text: Firstly, like *The Gunny Sack*, *Migritude* encompasses the space of the Indian Ocean as a transitory place, it traces the history of South Asian migration across the ocean and describes the treatment of migratory Indians in Uganda and Kenya, to then follow their routes to Europe and the US. Secondly, *Migritude* embodies mobility and metamorphosis in its very form. As I will show, the suitcase and the saris it contains embody a mobility that is deeply indebted to non-essentialist records of crossing the water and of transoceanic routes, unquestionably continuing the themes prevalent in Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* but even more so foregrounding the interconnective notion of the ocean as a lived and storied world. In Patel, it is not the cutting of family ties so prevalent in notions of the *kala pani* taboo which is at the forefront of her writing and thinking, but the renewed weaving of relationalities across the ocean, across countries, times, and histories.

In her discussions of the poetics of *kala pani*, Véronique Bragard has astutely shown that it is a deeply gendered term, which, under closer inspection, appears to be “charted around loss and female invisibility” (2008, 56).⁷ Similarly, Brinda Mehta’s feminist approach to Indian Ocean crossings reveals that *kala pani* needs to be regarded as “a gendered discourse of exilic beginnings that simultaneously reclaims and contests otherness by highlighting the traditional

invisibility of female historical subjectivity in androcentric colonial and nationalist narratives” (2006, 24). In *MigrITUDE*, the female traveller across the seas, so often made invisible, rewrites herself into visibility. Throughout both text and show, the trauma of the oceanic passage as well as the trauma of arrival on the African coast is made visible through female voices who generate connection and relation through embodied encounters:

But Mummy, look.
I am forging a ship of glittering songs
to sail your jewels in,
staking a masthead of verbs
from which to fly your saris!
This work that filigrees and inlays
all your legacies,
that snakes across borders,
dodges visa controls,
this
is my intention (“Born to a Law,” 62).

The daughter re-tells her mother’s *herstory*⁸ by forging a ship made of words and songs, using the sari cloth as a sail, i.e. as a device which propels the narrative forwards across borders. *MigrITUDE* can thus be read as a “tapestry of poetry, history, politics, packed into a suitcase, embedded in [Patel’s] body, rolled out into the theatre. An accounting of Empire enacted on the bodies of women” (96). This accounting takes two routes which both trace the transoceanic, transcontinental routes of *MigrITUDE*’s women, be they the diasporic third generation East African Asians of Patel’s generation, or the Indian grandparents and elders who made the journey across the Indian Ocean.

One route is an intertextual and multi-lingual one: as Gaurav Desai has argued, “the long history of trade and contact between Africa and India has meant not only the exchange of commodities such as cloth, ivory, gold, and slaves, or cultural practices such as cuisine, but also the exchange of linguistic elements, philosophical concepts, and political ideas” (2013, 6). *MigrITUDE* is wrought with Gujarati proverbs which are displayed in their original language positioned at the beginning of new sections and then translated: “*Raat thodi ne vesh jaja*, the proverb I grew up on. *The night is short and our garments change*. Meaning: Don’t put down roots. Don’t get too comfortable. By dawn, we may be on the move, forced to reinvent ourselves in order to survive” (10, emphasis in original). Indian language and literature as such reach across the ocean and connect to the lived realities of the Indian East African diaspora. It transforms the East African home and makes it more porous, more inclusive of varied identity constructs and multi-placed concepts of belonging. The poem “Dreaming in Gujarati”, for example, delineates the violence but also the power inherent to multi-lingual existences:

Listen:
my father speaks Urdu
language of dancing peacocks
rosewater fountains
even its curses are beautiful.
He speaks Hindi
suave and melodic
earthy Punjabi
salty-rich as saag paneer
coastal Swahili
laced with Arabic
he speaks Gujarati
solid ancestral pride.
Five languages, five different worlds [...] (52).

Yet, Patel also describes English which has given her “words that don’t exist in Gujarati,” such as “*Self-expression / Individual / Lesbian*” (51, emphasis in original). Oscillating between mother tongue and other tongue, she positions herself as a woman who does not fit into one language – and through that pays tribute not only to her ancestor’s migrations but also to the complex and queer struggle of feminine survival in her own present. The proverbs and other Gujarati expressions scattered throughout *Migritude* and their immediate translations point towards how the transoceanic crossing has not completely resulted in isolation and loss but instead proliferates in a multi-lingual and multi-directional belonging that bridges India and Africa.⁹

The other route which hints at the transoceanic trajectories across the Indian Ocean is fashioned along paratextual pathways, using illustrations and graphic art to keep alive the connection across the *kala pani*. They add visual layers of meaning to the already multi-nodal and multi-lingual text of *Migritude*. The most obvious of these visual graphic markers of the transoceanic passage can be found in the reproduction of seascape etchings, tellingly positioned at the beginning of “Part I: Nairobi, Kenya 1972–1989” (9) and “Part II: United Kingdom and United States 1990–2004” (31) as visual chapter introductions: the first image shows two shorelines with a large body of water between them, which can be interpreted as the Indian Ocean. Across the water, two figures are stood opposite each other, looking at each other. Linking to the linguistic and literary interconnectivity described above, the picture is subtitled with the already mentioned Gujarati proverb “Raat thodi ne vesg jaja. *The night is short and our garments change*” (9, emphasis in original), expressing the unsettling experience of (forced) migration across oceans and continents. The picture of the sea thus introduces Patel’s ruminations on various experiences of migritude and bears witness to the trauma (and potential relational possibilities) of *kala pani*. The second picture found at the beginning of Part II shows an open water space.

Instead of the link between two countries (India and Kenya) implied in the first picture which introduces the Kenyan part, the second part moves to the UK and the US. The picture of the open ocean without any geographical markers such as shorelines and without the inclusion of human bodies implies a much more open and fluid concept of diaspora – one which has moved from the perceived safety of a grounded geographical belonging and the fixity of coast lines into a wide-open space of travel and migration.¹⁰ This second water passage then leaves the implied one-way directionality of *kala pani* behind and promises multi-routed possibility and futurity: this is again underlined by the Gujarati proverb below the picture which says: “Jagia tyanthi savar. *Whenever you wake up, that’s when your morning begins*” (31, emphasis in original).

Less immediately discernible than these pictures are the other graphical allusions referring to the transoceanic crossing strewn throughout *Migritude*. Referencing not only the personal migration story of Patel and her family, but also the century-long diasporic trade routes across the Indian Ocean, the *ambi* and its graphic representations depicted in the book become the fabric holding together Patel’s tales of trauma and resistance. The *ambi*, or *boteh*, is a teardrop-shaped motif used in fabric weaving and is often found on saris – its shape travels across the pages of *Migritude*, spilling out of the real-world suitcase to activate layers of history and migration. The book’s “Prelude” describes the long genealogy of *ambi*:

It began as a teardrop in Babylon. [...] The *boteh*. Stylized rendition of the date-palm shoot, tree of life, fertility symbol. It danced through Celtic art, until the heavy feet of Roman legionaries tramped over the Alps. Then it fled the rage of Mars and Jupiter, dove underground as the Empire rose. Some historians claim it travelled to Mughal courts from Victorian England [...]. But a legend in Kashmir calls it the footprint of the goddess Parvati (4).

This poetic descriptions of the etymological and mythical origins of the *ambi* is mirrored by a historical timeline positioned at the end of the book (subsumed under part IV, “The Journey”), which starts with the sixth-century BCE records of the “earliest depiction of the *boteh* / *ambi* / paisley motif in Central Asia”, followed by the 800–1500 “flourishing Indian Ocean Trade between inland African Kingdoms, East African Coast, Arabian Peninsulas, India, and SE Asia”, in turn followed by the advent of colonialism in 1600, when the “British East India Company awarded charter trade to India” (129). With the help of the *ambi* pattern on her saris, Patel thus describes not only transcultural exchange and transoceanic trade, but also the horrors of the Empire. She delineates how the British shut down fabric production in Iraq and India, selling the cloth on their own market for much higher profit “weighed with an 80% duty”, and how they “hunted down the terrified weavers, chopped off their index fingers and thumbs” in order to “force India to buy British cloth” (5). Kashmiri shawls, patterned with

ambi, were taken to Britain where they were regarded as luxury good, weaving “their way through the dreams of Victorian wives like the footprint of a goddess no one dared to imagine” (6). This account is paralleled with a description of the poor working conditions faced by the weavers in the Scottish village Paisley, who “to keep their index fingers and thumbs” “learned how to churn out imitation ambi, on imitation Kashmiri shawls” (6, 7).

Tracing these developments and showing how Kashmiri became cashmere, mosuleen muslin and ambi paisley (and how a hundred years later, “chai became a beverage invented in California”, 7), Patel makes visible how history is erased and then re-materialised, how it travels across the ocean and across continents, only to then arrive at the very saris Patel constructs her own show out of. The “material and affective legacy of the sari” (Kulbaga 2016, 76) as a traditionally female garment brings to light the experiences of those usually muted: the saris evoke the trade routes and circuits of capital of Empire, but also the specifically gendered stories connected to displacement and diaspora, “the voices of women from within the bootprint of Empire” (95). I argue that the woven, ambi-patterned fabric of the saris can be read as a symbol of the oceanic passage as they voyage across the Indian Ocean from India to Africa to Europe and America, continuously connecting to female narratives throughout the book: “The saris in *Migritude* as word materialised – yes. They are the circulation of global capital, of histories erased. And in the making of the show, I also experienced them as generative – tellers of stories, texts in themselves, palimpsests of art, weaving, culture, trade, Empire” (2015, n.p.). True to this notion of the palimpsest, the ambi not only travels across epochs and geographical distances, but throughout the book; it re-appears in variants of the same pattern of drops and swirls, swimming alongside poems, historiographies, and herstories. According to the themes of each individual poems, the ambi pattern mutates as it incorporates depictions of suitcases or pearl necklaces when they feature in the story narrated through the poems. These recurrences weave visual connections between the textual fragments.

As suggested above, then, *Migritude* in *itself* constitutes a passage between Asia and East Africa, a textual and visual connection between India and Kenya made possible by the transoceanic trajectory of *kala pani*. The sea is engaged with in a visual and meta-textual way, the text itself re-creating the connective and relational properties of the watery space of the Indian Ocean. Embedding the poems in *Migritude* within a global history of Empire, textile trade and the multi-directional network of the Indian Ocean, Shailja Patel, then, creates deeply gendered, textual and material encounters which span across the water.

4. Concluding Thoughts

Extending the travels across the Indian Ocean, in both the show and the textualised version of *Migritude* Patel describes the experiences of her Indian ancestors in East Africa, delineating how Idi Amin expelled all Asians from Uganda in the 1970s (11) or the wrecking and looting of Asian businesses in

Nairobi in the 1980s (27). She expands on these traumatic histories by incorporating not only the Asian experience in East Africa, but by outlining the upheavals during and after colonisation, for example by drawing attention to the Maji Maji uprisings in Tanzania (16), the Mau Mau uprisings in Kenya (17), or the sexualised violence directed at East African women by British soldiers stationed in Kenya from 1965 to 2001 (44). Like Vassanji, then, Patel traces histories and stories that remain forever unsatisfied with a single story. What both texts explore, instead, are multiple crossings – not only the geographical travels across the ocean, but crossings that entail the sometimes reluctant, sometimes enthusiastic traversal of linguistic, cultural, political, material, and affective borders. At this point, I want to return to Khal Torabully’s manifesto of the ocean crossing as articulated in *Cale d’étoiles: Coolitude* in which he describes his vision of the ocean as a universal crossing experience, a poetics of global migration, “even though we did not / see the stars from the same perspectives” (1992, 89). I argue that both *The Gunny Sack* and *Migritude* illuminate these different possible perspectives. While *The Gunny Sack*’s travels spin out into the past and across space, they nevertheless remain within the frames of the novel, firmly confined to the inside of the gunny sack and the insides of the book’s covers. The novel ends in both hopeful and helpless resignation, wishing not only for all these crossings and travels to end, but also for new beginnings. In Patel’s *Migritude*, which I have read as an indirect continuation of Vassanji’s first novel, the saris – and with them the tales Patel tells not only about her personal history, but about generations of East African Indians – escape the suitcase and escape the printed book’s confines, spilling over the stage of the performance into the audience, and travelling across worlds. Still, what both texts have in common is the way they foreground South-South connections that cross time and space, and that expand the boundaries of nation-state and even continental formations. But, and as important as these expansions are, what is also present in these texts, is the incessant articulation of the Global South as an inhabited and inhabitable space, as a political and cultural vantage point that unapologetically relates to the world.

Notes

¹ “Coolie” was a term used to designate unskilled indentured labourers from South Asia, South East Asia and China within the indentured migration movements, metonymically acting as a derogatory term of abuse or slur for people from Asia in general. The etymological origins of the word are not completely clear, but for the most part thought to come from the Tamil word for work, “kuli.” Another explanation is that the word came from the Hindustani “quli” which itself comes from the Turkish word for slave “kul.” (“coolie”, *OED*) For a reclaiming of the term, cf. Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013).

² For more extensive discussions of the historical background concerning this taboo, see not only DeLoughrey but also Rehana Ebr.-Vally’s *Kala Pani: Caste and Colour in South*

Africa (2001) and Brinda Mehta's *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (2004).

- ³ For Torabully's universalising, but ultimately de-essentialising, approach to Coolitude as a heuristic to understand processes of migration and globalisation, cf. also his letter to Amitav Ghosh, publicised on the latter's website in 2011 under "'Coolitude' and Khal Torabully."
- ⁴ My use of the term "memoryscapes" is closely aligned with an approach employed by Kendall R. Phillips and G. Mitchell Reyes in their volume *Global Memoryscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age*. Here, the memoryscape, an extension of Arjun Appadurai's "landscape/scape" metaphor (1990), is theorised as "a useful concept for imagining the ways that global forces impact local memories, the ways that international encounters create and transform memories, and the ways that memories change and adapt as they move across the global landscape" (2011, 19). The reciprocity of localised, national and global memory and memory practices, as much as the transformational and relational potential of memory, are at play in Vassanji's work, in which "[...] memories can also be seen as moving across national boundaries, transported by individuals and technologies" (ibid.).
- ⁵ For further discussion on Vassanji's tactic to substitute the Ismaili community with the fictional Shamsis, cf. Rosemary M. George: "The Shamsi sect [...], though invented by Vassanji, is similar to existing religious organisations. The sect has a world-wide network that serves as a support system for wanderers or immigrants who need to be made at home in an unfamiliar place" (1994, 285).
- ⁶ While it is important to keep in mind the intricate interlinkage between stage show and printed book, this article will focus on the most recent textualised version of *Migritude*, the 2010 Kaya Press edition of the book. It is also noteworthy that before Kaya Press published its multi-modal version of the book, there existed another textualised version of the *Migritude* show, the bilingual English/Italian edition by LietoColle, which was published under the title *Migritude I: When Saris Speak* (2008), and which features a photograph of Patel with her red suitcase on its cover.
- ⁷ *Kala pani*, like the Middle Passage, is often denoted by the mainly male encounters arising from the traumatic journey onboard the ship. As DeLoughrey argues, "the fictional rendering of the transoceanic crossing has been predominantly a male-authored genre focused on the interactions between shipboard fraternities. From inscriptions of the Middle Passage to Indian indenture, novelists have utilised shipboard space to explore the complex cultural and ethnic relationships in order to complicate the racial homogenisation instilled by their colonial captors. Thus in these narratives we can see the process of migration shifts from specifically rooted ethnic identities (defined by caste, village, language, and religion, etc.) to a new routed formation of racialized masculinity" (2011, 72). Patel, instead of subscribing to these narratives traditionally coded as male, emphasises specifically female affiliation and relation.
- ⁸ The term "herstory" is commonly used to signal feminist re-evaluations of officially told histories, foregrounding often dismissed female points of view or emphasising a feminist perspective which destabilises patriarchal forms of historiography. Cf. Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín 2013.
- ⁹ While this constitutes an important aspect of Patel's writing, it is also pertinent to note a certain orientation towards a predominantly English-speaking audience. While the text engages in complex translational work, in itself a crossing of boundaries, *Migritude* also asserts boundaries – boundaries that speak of the perceived economic value of anglophone postcolonial literature and the marketing and publishing strategies connected to it (cf. Koegler 2018). What we as readers are confronted with is perhaps not only a text that reaches across the Indian Ocean to connect Asia and Africa, but also one that is firmly implicated (and complicit) in other global routes of capital.

¹⁰ Additional to these drawings of the ocean, there are also several pictures of ships inserted into the text – in the poem “Shilling Love Part II” there is a ship sailing on tempestuous waves (58), and in “Born to a Law” a bigger ship is positioned next to a stanza I have already quoted: “But Mummy, look. / I am forging a ship of glittering songs / to sail your jewels in, staking a masthead of verbs / from which to fly your saris!” (62).

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