

Migrating Bodies: Sexuality, Assimilation and Transnationalism

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Abstract:

The present paper aims to examine the conjunction between sexuality and migration, questions of citizenship—cultural and sexual, notions of heteronormativity and performing the queer in the everyday through Shani Mootoo’s short stories in *Out on the Main Street* and selections from *The Predicament of Or*. Mootoo’s work speaks volumes about the struggles of reconfiguring one’s identity when it is qualified by the status of being migrant and queer. Displacement and migration in order to find a better recognition as the sexual ‘other’ finds place in Mootoo’s work and is a growing social phenomenon. Such migration, especially from third world to first world countries, results in double marginality as immigrants and queers. Alternative sexualities produce the constant need to escape the orthodox social normativities and construct affective economies based on equal recognition and assimilation. The interplay between mobility, sexuality and social relations as regards performing the hetero- or the homonormative constitute the main crux of this paper. It would be the focus of this paper to explore such facets of migration that are inextricably linked with sexuality or deviant sexuality and its implications on global and transnational economies.

Keywords: Sexuality, migration, mobility, queer migrations, globalization, citizenship

Processes of history, colonialism, slavery, capitalism and globalization have been instrumental in shaping human subjectivities. Sexual subjectivities, other than a sense of one’s own gender, have been emergent in recent times and from the 1990s, studies in queer theory opened up possibilities of engaging with questions related to sexual identities and lifestyles informed by globalized processes and ways of being. While queer theory explores the formation of deviant sexual identities and production of alternative sexual subjectivities, sexuality has the potential of forging communities; it is “a regime of power that thoroughly shapes families, communities, state institutions, and economies; and it underscores that sexual norms, struggles and forms of governance always articulate hierarchies of gender, race, class and geopolitics” (Luibhéid, ii). However, sexuality is often the subject of control and under the pressure of being normalized. Deviant or alternative sexualities are disciplined by state forces as they find in it the potential of transgressing and subvert the established power structures. Sexual migration in order to find better ways of expressing one’s sexual orientation or to escape persecution by law gave rise to several transnational queer diasporic communities. The LGBTQIA+ community often faces persecution in their original homeland and their consequent migration from their place of origin, generally from third world countries to the diasporic Western land, brings forth a plethora of complexities. A queer diasporic community faces ostracization on several levels based on their sexuality and status of being a migrant. From the 1980s, due to the spread of the HIV and AIDS, such immigrants

are interned for several years on end in internment camps. In their quest to seek refuge in the liberal states, they are detained as refugees and become an easy prey to the state institutions and officials. The neo-liberal age comes with the promise of the global village, free trade and the global citizen. Assimilation and inclusion are its potential and modelled on these values is its concept of citizenship. Sexual migration in the neo-liberal world today is aimed at the larger means of assimilation and citizenship in a free environment with every freedom of enacting one's sexuality according to one's wish. This is however the ideal one strives for and therefore embarks on the harrowing experience of migrating to a different land. Movement of people from one country to another in order to have a better life with regards to sexual freedom and way of life has seen an upward rise since the 1990s—a new age of migration produced by global processes and flows. However, accelerated globalization processes propagate the danger of a neo-colonial age as well. Sexuality is crucial in this world of nations where it maintains the power hierarchies “through constructs of nation, citizenry, social ordering, and economy – and enforced by expanding state migration controls” (Luibhéid, iv). Through these processes, “binaries of us/them, citizen/migrant, normal/deviant become expressed, mapped onto bodies and places, and struggled over” (Luibhéid, v).

Shani Mootoo's identity as an Indo-Trinidadian settled in Canada informs her work of the experiences of migrancy. Her constant struggle to explore the limits of cultural identity in a multi-cultural setting is represented in her work. An openly gay writer, she has caught the emotions and feelings of being a sexual deviant in a closed-off social and political world in Trinidad and the eventual migration to the west make her work emblematic of the queer migration with all its inhibitions. The aim of this paper will be to examine the queer body and its day-to-day reconfigurations with power structures and normative mode of being. The queer body is the site of resistance and counter-production but not without the danger of falling prey to hetero- or homonormative practices, especially in the context of relocating to a new sociopolitical and geographical space. The performing of the sexual is one of the recurrent concerns of Mootoo's works and it is through the exploration of the culturally and sexually deviant protagonists of Mootoo's work that this paper will resolve to focus on issues of a transnational diaspora based on alternative sexuality, the aftermath of migration, questions of citizenship and assimilation in a multicultural space and the very identity of the individual who is the sexually and culturally othered.

In her short story, “Out on Main Street”, the queer couple, newly settled in Canada, is under the pressure of performing their culture. Manalansan talks about how “sexuality intersects with and through other social, economic, and cultural practices and identities” (243). The brunt of performing the cultural hangs heavy on the couple as they go out in the public space, Vancouver's Main Street, to buy Indian sweets. The very process of remembering the names of Indian sweets before going in to the shop shows the pressure of the performance. One is supposed to perform one's Indianness as well as heteronormativity in ever shifting social and cultural relations in global cities. The plurality of identities is palpably felt throughout the story as the narrator is afraid of being recognized as the non-Indian or Indian-only-through-skin colour. Her Indo-Trinidadian heritage is an impediment in her cultural assimilation. Assimilation in the host nation happens through several stages but instead of cultural pluralism, one is faced with cultural isolation because of one's hyphenated identity. Janet, the narrator's partner, has a feminine grace about her with her elegant looks and long hair. She has the “jiggly wiggly kind of walk” (Mootoo, 48) that the narrator has to practice for her public performance of walking through the street else her tomboyish gait invites violence:

Before going Main Street I does parade in front de mirror practicing a jiggly-wiggly kind of walk. But if I ain't walking like a strong-man monkey I doh exactly feel right and I always revert back to mih true colours. [...] De men dem does look at me like if dey is exactly what I need a taste of to cure me good and proper. [...] And de women dem embarrass fuh so to watch me in mih eye, like dey fraid I will jump up and try to kiss dem, or make a pass at dem. Yuh know, sometimes I wonder if I ain't mad enough to do it just for a little bacchanal, nah! (48)

Ethnicity and gender pose two problems towards assimilation as one is straddling to make oneself at home. In another story, "Upside-downness", Mootoo posits a lesbian protagonist who is painfully made aware of her Indian heritage by a lesbian couple, Meghan and Virginia, both Canadian born and bred but are steeped in Indian values. Here, a huge conflation is deliberately shown by the author to generate ideas about homogenization and how that posits a problem in assimilation. The couple schools the narrator-protagonist about the "Hare Krishna" temples in India and what values it has to offer while being oblivious of the fact that Hinduism is not the only culture of India. Such practices are prevalent in the global cities and the perception of the Indian as coming from a "Hare Krishna" cultural background is severely derided in this story. Homogenizing tendencies pose the greatest obstacle to cultural and sexual citizenship. This is exactly what Bhabha characterizes as "the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its form of collective expression" (205). Such a racialized treatment of individuals hampers their sense of self and consequent assimilation with the dominant liberal culture. Performing standardized Indianness is integral, as Mootoo shows in order to be assimilated. Afraid of "disappointing people" and losing the "chance of making any friends" (117) in a new country, the protagonist buys a cookbook of Indian recipes to impress her friends. However, the narrator's friends do not seem to be forging any new formulations of community irrespective of class or culture. Instead, tethering onto past heritage and culture, they intend to invoke the history and culture of a place that the narrator has already forsaken. Having visited "His Holiness, a White man in orange," and having "frequently visited India" (112), Meghan and Virginia will only allow the narrator to be a part of their racial and classist group only if she conforms to the values and cultural patterns that they have set out for themselves. "Writing in the Canadian context, Eva Mackey explores how 'liberal 'tolerance' is mobilized to manage populations and also to create identities (18). Mackey's argument highlights how power and dominance function through liberal, inclusionary, and pluralistic practices, 'seemingly based on inclusion and tolerance rather than erasure and homogeneity' (16), to consolidate the identity of the dominant Canadian majority as white and anglophone." (Chakraborty, 9). The narrator's friends, therefore, want her to submit to their notion of normative Indianness. This is lacking in several respects as this is uninformed by history and culture and is an Anglophonic vision of another culture. The multicultural hospitality of the global cities offers not only a way of life but also a directive along with it. While the white queers are exempted from such a notion of conforming to a particular cultural or social directive, it is through normalizing them according to the dominant ideology that they are let in to the heartland. Citizenship comes along with relinquishing power and giving into the normative systems of the state.

Identity formation is a crucial aspect of sexual migration. It is in order to be able to forge and develop a sexual identity without the fear of persecution that almost 53% of the migrations take place all over the world (Manalamsan, 243). In Mootoo's stories, the protagonists are identified as "watered-down Indians", not "good, A-grade Indians" (45). The cultural identity is made palpably felt through the gaze and the

expectation of being and performing one's culture. The "half-pitying, half-laughing" (51) enquiry of the salesman at the sweet shop, is a reminder of the protagonist's identity as an outsider. The cultural inauthenticity and inadequacy of the narrator coupled with her sexual orientation makes her the unwanted element in the shop. Her classification as the "cultural bastard" (51) or the "cultural orphan" (117) makes evident the process of assimilation is never fair. Instead, the hospitality of the multicultural global cities is not directed towards an inclusive culture but a homogenized notion hidden under a thin veil of liberalism. Just as the performance of the protagonist's heteronormative act fails when their friends, Sandy and Lise who are "dead giveaways" as to their sexual orientation, come in to the sweet shop, "de brothers and de couple men customers dat had come in minutes before stare dem down from head to Birkenstocks, dey eyes bulging with disgust. And de women in de room start shoo-shooing, and putting dey hand in front dey mouth to stop dey surprise, and false teeth, too, from falling out" (56), so does the diasporic dream of assimilation and citizenship. Deviating from the heteronormative makes the hostility in the hospitality evident. In fact, cultural identity is always under the scanner of power relations and hierarchies of race where the white man is always the bigger and the better and queer identities of colour are always at their disposition. They have to live their lives with a difference which marks them distinct from a broader white queer community.

This is probably why, seeing the state of the queer man or woman of colour that Mootoo in her poem, "Mantra for Migrants", poignantly remarks, "Always becoming, will never be/ Always arriving, must never land/ I pledge citizenship, unerring/ Loyalty, to this State of Migrancy" (81). This is a decisive moment for the queer migrant always in a state of flux, never quite at home. The concept of home lies in the very identity of the migrant's migrancy. Having left home and tried to search for the warmth and love of the familiar in "every person who shares this colour of skin/ in each new 'back home' novel,/ each poem post card conversation film/ in everyone who mutters/ 'I know exactly what you mean'", all the poet got was dejection and the unfulfilled dream of home—the paradise, the promised land—where one can be oneself without censor (79). Therefore, the best one can hope for is the state of a forever becoming, the being is yet to be attained and the dream of attaining the whole self with all its desires is an ideal. In "A Recognition" (84), Mootoo speaks of the possibility of being identified and assimilated into a known and familiar culture, only to be retorted back with "I am Canadian" (84). The very sense of self or identity is enmeshed in the bigger global identity of being a Canadian that refuses to recognize a person of one's own descent. In her "Game of Watch the Migrant Dream #1", the recurring dream of having arrived at the promised land occurs every day but without realization. Realizing the dream is an impossible feat as the "plane of the recurring dream", "travel is horizontal—/ lift-off and arrival, like belief, are suspended" (89). The destination eludes the migrant every time.

The bodies and deviant sexuality become the counter-sites of refuting homogenizing tendencies. Queers of colour who refuse to be integrated within the normative structure where they are to perform heteronormativity by day and can be homosexuals in the dark of night, establish their disparate subjectivities and pluralities of identity through their non-normative being. Sexual migration, however, brings "cultural and racial differences into the mix" and "the movement of people around the world and the globalizing of cultural economic and political institutions have brought divergent sexual ideologies and identities into sharp relief" (Manalansan, 228-9). Divergent sexualities help in understanding global movements and flows better by positing the notion of "subjective mediation" (229). By this, Manalansan hints at the way mass group movement is discarded for individual or subversive experiences that help in understanding processes of immigration and mediated identities better. "[T]ransnational movements

have created emergent hybrid forms that interact with Western or Euro-American sexual ideologies....that create alternative sexual politics, cultures, and identities” (229-30). This in turn helps in forging better understanding of the interactions between the local and the global. Sexual migration is a way of acquiring asylum in the global cities so that divergent sexual identity may be articulated and expressed. However, the process is not unilateral and is laced with difficulties—of assimilation, of acculturation and of conforming to normative power hierarchies. It is an emergent social phenomenon and crucial to individual development. However, the destination is yet “necessarily unattained/comfortably unattained” (Mootoo, 90).

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