

## Shailja Patel appointed NAI Guest Writer 2009

### *Nordic scholarship to female Kenyan writer and dramatist*

The Nordic Africa Institute has appointed Shailja Patel from Kenya to be Guest Writer 2009. Shailja Patel will be active at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala during April–June 2009. Besides developing her own literary activities during her stay in the Nordic region, she will participate in readings and have performances in several Nordic countries. The Nordic Africa Institute is unique among research institutes in the Nordic region in appointing a yearly writer in residence.

Shailja Patel is of Indo-African origin and grew up in Nairobi. She has been mentioned as one of the most interesting young writers in Africa. In 2006 she premiered the one man show “Migritude” which gave her global recognition. Extracts from the show has been broadcast by National Public Radio in the U.S. and by the BBC in the UK.

She was one of eight poets selected to perform at the Poetry Africa arrangement at the World Social Forum in Nairobi in the beginning of 2007.



The Nordic Africa Institute cites Shailja Patel’s “skill and originality in many writers genres: poetry, short stories, dramatisation of national and family history, and for her original take on identity in the ‘Migritude’ age” as the reason for her being selected as Guest Writer 2009.

The ‘Cultural Images in and of Africa’ programme has previously hosted two guest writers, Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana, and Gabeba Baderoon from South Africa. The Nigerian writer Tolu Ogunlesi was the 2008 Guest Writer.

The raison d’être behind the guest writer grant is the conviction that knowledge of Africa is not gained only from social science analysis and facts. Literature and the arts can significantly add another language and meaning, and illustrate the diversity of the continent. The purpose of the grant is three-fold:

- Firstly, to provide an opportunity to sit and write, away from daily chores, teaching or other (the Nordic Africa Institute is also not a teaching institution);
- Secondly, to make possible readings to audiences in Sweden, and one or two other Nordic countries by visits to those countries;
- Thirdly, to add by their presence to the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the Nordic Africa Institute with its researchers and other staff, guests, guest researchers and scholarship students.

## Interview with Shailja Patel



### **Who are you, Shailja Patel?**

"I am a world-citizen, a poet, theatre artist, writer, and activist for global justice."

### **What are you writing?**

"Right now I am working on the second part of Migritude, a cycle of four works. I coined the concept of Migritude to reclaim and celebrate migrant history, voices and culture. Part One is called "When Saris Speaks - the Mother". It is a 90-minute spoken-word theatre show and has already been shown in the Social

Forum in Nairobi 2006, and in other places from Vienna to Zanzibar."

### **What does it mean for you to be an African of Indian origin?**

"My father was born and raised in Zanzibar, my mother was born and raised in Mombasa. My ethnicity is Indian, my nationality is Kenyan. This is who I am. The rest are meanings ascribed to me, the way that ethnicity is a filter through which others view, experience or judge you. It would be quite interesting to see what happened if I published under a non-Indian African name."

"I perpetually meet views of me not being authentic African, but I think it is getting better. More and more people do realise that one nationality can contain people of all skin tones, all ethnicities."

### **What did your almost 8-year long US experience mean?**

"I served my apprenticeship there as a slam poet and a performer. I found space as a woman, as a woman of colour, and as an activist."

### **What do you expect from your three-month stay at the Nordic Africa institute in the spring of 2009?**

"Above all, I look for an uninterrupted, concentrated work on my third part of Migritude. I look forward to drawing on the resources of your library, and dialogue with the community of researchers. Secondly, I want to bring my work to a Nordic audience through readings and performances. I have already been invited by the University of Helsinki and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, and have discussed at WALTIC with the City theatre of Stockholm. And I look forward to performing at the NAI conference "What's Culture Got to do with it?" in June 2009 in Uppsala."

*(Interview by Mai Palmberg, 1 July 2008)*