

LESBIAN LOVE IN THE SHADOWS: CULTURAL TABOOS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL REPERCUSSIONS IN *PATSY*

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ABSTRACT

Nicole Dennis-Benn's Patsy is at once a searing exploration of the intersections of lesbian identity, cultural taboos, and psychological apotheosis against the backdrop of Caribbean and diasporic contexts. This paper explores the systematic silencing of queer identities within a religiously conservative socio-political sphere, within the context of a post-colonial society in Jamaica. Patsy, the titular character, runs up against a world that expects her to conform to heteronormative ideals (motherhood, for example) while refusing to allow her the freedom to express her sexuality out in the open. The transmission of this suppression to bodies has deep psychological consequences that some people refer to as homophobia within the self, emotional alienation and split identity, and the double trauma of migration that serves as both liberating and alienating. Through an intersectional feminist and queer theoretical lens, this paper critiques the societal structures that perpetuate the marginalization of queer women of color. It accentuates the points of resistance and resilience, showing how Patsy's journey can be extrapolated to speak to the need to dismantle cultural taboos and create inclusivity for marginalised identity.

Keywords: Lesbian Identity, Cultural Taboos, Psychological Repercussions, Queer Diaspora, Migration, Motherhood, Intersectionality, Internalised Homophobia, Queer Resilience, Caribbean Literature.

Introduction

Nicole Dennis-Benn is a modern Caribbean writer whose novels poignantly describe the lives with marginalized groups, especially concerning gender, sexuality, race, and migration. Her second novel, *Patsy* (2019), stands as a bold and necessary critique of the cultural norms and systemic inequalities that continue to oppress queer individuals, and women in particular, in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Through Patsy's journey, Dennis-Benn sheds light on the deep psychological and social burdens that exist for those forced to reconcile their identities against a backdrop of societal taboos and expectations. The novel's intersectional lens renders it a crucial text for understanding how race, gender, sexuality and migration intersect to shape the lived experiences of queer women of color (2, 3).

Cultural, social and psychological forces congeal in *Patsy*, where the Jamaican society's calcified heteronormativity maintains the erasure and co-optation of lesbian identities. Jamaica's history of colonialism and its ongoing religious conservatism have created a climate where homosexuality is stigmatized and criminalized, leading to severe consequences for those who do not conform to societal norms (2, 4). Patsy's love for her childhood friend Cicely is, in this context, an act of transgression, sending her down a shadowy pathway where her desires can't be revealed. Thus, Patsy migrates to

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America, in search of liberation and self-discovery. However, this migration introduces new challenges, such as economic precarity, cultural alienation, and the emotional toll of leaving behind her daughter, Tru (7, 8). Dennis-Benn's nuanced portrayal of Patsy's struggles reflects the broader cultural and psychological realities of queer Caribbean women, both in their homelands and in the diaspora.

This research paper seeks to explore the central question: How do cultural taboos and systemic norms suppress lesbian identities in *Patsy*, and what are the psychological repercussions for the protagonist? Sub-questions include: How does migration act as both a liberating and alienating force for Patsy? How does motherhood intersect with Patsy's queer identity, challenging traditional roles? What moments of resistance and resilience emerge in her journey? These questions aim to unpack the layers of oppression and agency that define Patsy's life.

The paper argues that *Patsy* critiques the oppressive nature of cultural norms while illustrating the profound mental health struggles of queer women navigating societal rejection. Employing an intersectional feminist and queer theoretical framework (9, 12), this study analyzes how cultural practices, migration, and motherhood shape the protagonist's journey. Analytical reading and secondary sources offer a unique angle through which to explore these themes and their interrelations. Drawing attention to the resilience and resistance of queer bodies through the lens of *Patsy*, this paper serves as a directive to dismantle oppressive cultural limitations and create spaces for fostering queer lives.

Cultural Taboos and the Suppression of Lesbian Identity

- **Homophobia in Jamaican Culture**

Jamaica is considered one of the most homophobic countries in the world, where queer people are discriminated against, ostracised, and tortured systemically. This cultural ambience is steeped in colonial histories and the inflexible moral structures added through British colonisation. The queerness that is ever-present in everyday life is seen by Jamaican society as a direct challenge to traditional, patriarchal and religious values (4) by Rosamond S. King in *Island Bodies*. Homophobia is enshrined in law in the form of laws prohibiting same sex relationships and by popular cultural manifestations - for instance, dancehall music which often glorifies violence against LGBTQ+ individuals (2).

Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Patsy* sums this hostile cultural backdrop up vividly. Patsy's love for Cicely must go underground, because open expressions of same-sex desire would be greeted with brutal social and legal consequences. Christianity plays such a big role in creating the expression of homosexuality as a sin and unnatural, which is why this suppression continues to happen. M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* elaborates on how in the Caribbean, religious institutions have acted historically in ways that emulated colonial powers to govern and police sexual behavior (3). In *Patsy*, these external forces are shown in the internal homophobia and shame that Patsy inflicts upon herself as she attempts to mold her desires to the cultures placed on her.

The stigmatisation of queer identities in Jamaica is further perpetuated by the idealization of heteronormativity as the cultural standard. As Thomas Glave's *Our Caribbean* explains, this idealization is reinforced through cultural rituals, language and family constructs that valorize heterosexual relationships while demonising queer ones (2). Patsy's inability to say out loud what she feels for Cicely is symbolic of the kind of societal forces that relegates queer women to the shadows. By exploring the violent homophobia of Jamaican society, Dennis-Benn offers a critique of the cultural cis-terms of oppression that render queer bodies inauthentic and unworthy of living.

- **Compulsory Heterosexuality and Motherhood**

The concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" developed by Adrienne Rich provides a powerful basis for discussing the social forces that prescribe women's roles as mothers and heterosexual partners (11). In *Patsy*, this vision of compulsory heterosexuality presents itself in the cultural expectation that women's ultimate role is to marry men and reproduce. Patsy as a lesbian fundamentally defies this expectation and therefore places her at odds with the world. When she abandons her daughter, Tru, and migrates to America, she defies the oppressive roles society has given her to find her true self.

Motherhood in Jamaica is not just a personal choice but a cultural duty, one strongly connected to ideas of femininity and respectability. Women who do not fulfill this role are often stigmatized, and considered selfish or unfit. Patsy's decision to depart from Tru is seen within Jamaican society as wrongful abandonment, but Dennis-Benn's story made me see it instead as an act of liberation. This article argues that Patsy's exit does not come from a lack of love for her daughter, but rather a bid to find her freedom from a culture that does not allow her to self-identify (1).

Rich's theory also stresses the way heterosexuality is forced into existence by cultural projects that render other sexualities invisible, or which actively marginalize these (11). In *Patsy*, these narratives manifest in the hopes people have for Patsy — her family, her community, and herself. Her mother, embodying what Jamaican society considers to be conservative values, constantly urges her to embrace traditional gender roles. This pressure compounds Patsy's struggles of self, caught between devotion to her daughter and the desire to live as abroad as she does at home. By resisting compulsory heterosexuality, Patsy defies the cultural conventions that have historically limited women's freedoms and possibilities for self-definition.

- **Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality**

Patsy's experiences as a queer Black woman is further complicated by the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. The work of Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality, for example, emphasizes the unique challenges faced by those who occupy multiple marginalized identities due to intersecting systems of oppression (9). Through *Patsy*, these intersectional dynamics are visible in the ways the protagonist contends with the demands of her community while also reconciling her own ambitions.

As a Black woman herself, Patsy is caught in the web of racialised ideas of femininity that run deep in Jamaican culture. Cathy J. Cohen's *Boundaries of Blackness* argues that Black women have been positioned as the moral and cultural backbones of their communities, a role that provides little room to diverge from traditional standards (5). Patsy's queerness thus represents not just a rejection of heteronormativity but a betrayal of her cultural obligations. This dual burden, of race and sexuality, magnifies the psychological price of that suppression.

Patsy's experiences are also greatly influenced by gender norms. As such, Jamaican society has clear expectations of what women are to be—caregivers and nurturers. Patsy is judged and ostracized for rejecting these roles and putting her own happiness first. Unable to feel accepted on any level due to the fact that she is both female and queer, her marginalisation is compounded by her sex and sexual orientation.

Nicole Dennis-Benn's embodiment of *Patsy* highlights the manner in which cultural taboos, layered with intersecting identities, stifle lesbian expression and fuel deep psychological dis-ease. Within such context, the novel challenges the structural oppressive systems, that induce the marginalization of queer Black women through the lenses of intersectionality and compulsory heterosexuality in the book. This critique draws major attention to the pressing emancipatory necessity for cultural reform and expanded inclusion, here in Jamaica as well as in the diaspora.

Psychological Repercussions of Cultural Suppression

- **Internalised Homophobia and Shame**

Jamaica's cultural stigmatization of queerness comes with powerful mental effects, as we witness in Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Patsy* through its main character's stereophonic voice. And growing up in such a culture — one that condemns homosexuality as sinful and unnatural — Patsy internalizes that awful shame about her sexuality. Internalized homophobia can erode self-confidence, incite feelings of shame and disrupt our sense of self. An internalised oppression theory developed by Joy DeGruy represents a voice that tells marginalised group members to internalize negative beliefs that society forces on them, causing self-hate and low self-esteem (13). For Patsy, her inability to publicly demonstrate her love for Cicely only exacerbates her feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness.

Then, Patsy's internalised homophobia is compounded by being raised in a conservative household, a mother who follows religious doctrine so closely that other identities aren't even permitted to exist. The never-ending pressure to attune her true self to the proclivities of people in her social space make her resent self and ultimately, no place leads her guilt to be manifested into the self-loathing. And it turns out the psychological toll manifests itself in the broken relationships, both with herself and others. In showing Patsy's internal struggle, Dennis-Benn also shows how the trauma of cultural rejection haunts the psyches of so many queer people.

- **Mental Health and Emotional Alienation**

Patsy's immigration to the United States—her soon-to-be adopted country initially viewed as a form of release from Jamaica's regulatory cultural mores—engenders additional levels of emotional estrangement. Patsy's queerness alienates her in Jamaica; once she settles in the United States, she endures the isolation of life as an undocumented immigrant. Nadia Ellis's *Territories of the Soul* investigates the emotional alienation felt by those in the diaspora, positing that displaced cultural

references enhance alienation and loss (6). The dislocation is especially pronounced for Patsy, who has to leave her daughter, Tru, behind and can't find any community where all she faces is known.

Patsy is living as an invisible person in America. She is an undocumented worker living on a razor's edge, continually imperiled by deportation and exploitation. But that eternal state of not-knowing comes with its own mental-health price to pay: She suffers from clinical depression and a chronic feeling of hopelessness. The emotional dislocation of Patsy is mirrored by her physical space, which is made up of cramped, sterile environments that are also audiovisual spaces of her alienation. She faces cultural erasure at every turn — as a queer woman, as an immigrant — but this strain only dissolving her dissociation from herself, a reminder of the intersectional nature of her mental health struggles.

- **Fractured Identity and Double Consciousness**

This tension is also legible in Paul Gilroy's "double consciousness," or the tension those subjects learn to feel between dual cultural personas (14), with Patsy's psychological traumas offering insight into its internalized complexities. That tension in *Patsy* between the burdens that the protagonist shoulders in Jamaican society and the freedoms that the United States provides the protagonist is palpable. Where Jamaica's cultural expectations call for her suppression and conformity and her queerness is minimized, the U.S. offers her room to express herself, but the trade-off is being undocumented.

That fractured sense of self makes Patsy feel in constant conflict with herself. At times, she feels pangs of guilt for leaving Tru behind, and asks whether all of her sacrifices have been worth it, whether she has truly achieved freedom, and whether she deserves it. Her yearning for a sense of belonging is complicated by the knowledge that she exists at the fringes of both societies. Gilroy's model underscores how this duality can lead to psychic fragmentation as people find it difficult to bring together the contrasting sides of their identity (14).

Patsy's double consciousness is also embodied in her relationship with Cicely, who has assimilated into genteel society by marrying a man and having a family. Cicely's navigation of Jamaica's cultural expectations is a stark contrast to Patsy's unwillingness to sacrifice her nature, and illustrates the burden of authenticity in a world that demands conformity. In dissecting Patsy's fractured identity, Dennis-Benn illuminates not only the wider psychological toll of cultural repression, but the work of navigating through multiple marginalized identities.

Patsy's internalised homophobia, emotional exile and fragmented selfhood give Dennis-Benn's *Patsy* a more complicated perspective on the psychological toll of cultural repression. The novel paints a damning portrait of the mechanisms that encourage such oppression, but also calls for tolerance and to acceptance for people on the outskirts of the social fabric.

The Role of Migration in Queer Liberation and Oppression

- **Migration as Escape**

Migration is a common escape from repressive cultural conservatism, and Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Patsy* charts the protagonist's journey to the United States as an attempt to free herself from Jamaica's stringent heteronormative ideals. Patsy's decision to leave Jamaica is motivated by her desire for personal freedom — she needs to be able to live openly as a queer woman. In Jamaica, her love for Cicely is demonized, and she cannot express her sexuality without the threat of shame and violence. In making the journey, Patsy hopes to discover a stage where she can break free from the silent stigmas by which she has been defined.

However, migration does not come without challenges. Patsy's new life in the United States is threatened by the perils of being an undocumented immigrant. Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* considers how to be in motion often means to be "in-between," grappling simultaneously with a loss of the cultural just left behind and an alienation from a new context (7). Patsy's status makes her prey for an exploitative work force, only further escalating her intensity of invisibility and vulnerability. Leaving her daughter, Tru, in Jamaica only adds to her psychological cargo. Patsy's yearning for Tru is complicated by guilt, shame and the emotional toll of putting her own liberation ahead of her maternal obligations. Through Patsy's experiences, Dennis-Benn lays bare the duality of migration as a path of liberation and a profound psychological and emotional strain.

- **Queer Diaspora and Cultural Displacement**

In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath offers the concept of queer diaspora as a framework for interpreting the cultural displacement experienced by these immigrant subjects (8). Patsy longs to

reestablish her identity and live authentically in the United States. But her move does not free her from the cultural traditions she was trying to escape from. Instead, she's confronting a new set of hurdles, including racial and economic marginalization. Patsy is a queer Black immigrant whose marginalization puts her in the crossfire of so many forms of oppression that she is unable to feel at home anywhere.

The journey to self-discovery is also made complex by cultural displacement. Her upbringing in Jamaica is still very fresh in her mind, and the cultural traditions of her country are still very much a part of who she is. Wherever Patsy goes, the ties to her past, and Cicely, are never really broken. When it comes to recent diaspora, Gopinath argues that migration places desire and hope of freedom in tension with the past lives that diasporic carry: "Queer diaspora seeks to 'be' in a different place at the same time as it is also 'from' another (and perhaps previous) place, rendering residence, belonging, and desire points of tension filled with the promise of hope." (8). Patsy's struggles demonstrate this tension in the way identity is navigated in the diaspora.

- **Persistence of Cultural Norms**

Even in diasporic communities, the cultural norms that queer bodies might experience in their homeland may continue to affect them abroad. Kamari Maxine Clarke's *Mapping Yoruba Networks* details the way diasporic communities nurture cultural continuity through common practices and values (10). Patsy's peers and community members in the U.S. conform to heteronormative standards of behavior that linger, even if they don't locally exist, in *Patsy*. A dispatch from Kingston: No matter how distant, the insistence of what was Jamaica is omnipresent.

In framing Patsy's emigration — both as a vector of freedom and continued subjugation — Dennis-Benn makes a mess of the idea of migration as unambiguous escape. Through this, the novel details the emotional and psychological burdens carried by those who live in diaspora — and in the case of queer people, about those who endure even more layers of oppression and marginalisation. Patsy's story highlights the perseverance necessary to regain identity and authenticity amid systemic and cultural forces of resistance.

Resistance and Resilience: Reclaiming Lesbian Identity

- **Moments of Resistance**

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- **Psychological Resilience and Queer Liberation**

Patsy's psychological resilience begins here as she reconciles who she is and starts to accept her queerness." Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, articulated in *Gender Trouble*, can be a helpful lens through which to read Patsy's exploration of self-acceptance (12). For Butler, identity is not some pre-defined essence, but a series of performances defined by societal norms. Rejecting these normative ideals, Patsy chooses to live openly as a queer woman, embodying the freedom from performative heteronormativity.

In the course of the novel, Patsy repeatedly shows a resilience of confronting the internalised homophobia and shame that she had carried for so long. Her power to transform her identity and to embrace what she wants in spite of society response says a lot about self-acceptance. By depicting Patsy's slow emancipation, Dennis-Benn highlights the role of psychological fortitude in reclaiming one's identity and resisting cultural erasure.

- **Critique of Cultural Practices**

Patsy, by Dennis-Benn, offers an incisive critique of the cultural practices that keep queer women on the margin, while celebrating their resilience and strength. The criticism of Sharon Patricia

Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism* offers a lens to understand how cultural forms sustain exclusion and dehumanisation (15). In *Patsy*, these norms become manifested through gender expectations that box women into narrow roles, and societal attitudes that shame women for deviating from these expectations. Dennis-Benn critiques these practices, showing the psychological and emotional damage they inflict on queer people.

While the novel depicts the violence of these repressive systems, it also celebrates the resilience of queer women like Patsy who survive them and claim their agency. In giving voice to the already acknowledgeable, *Patsy*, Dennis-Benn refuses to let her readers off the hook, too; you cannot engage with this novel without also grappling with the systems of oppression that let the marginalised — people of color, black women — exist as nothing more than their longings and labors, and imagining somewhere beyond that existence. It's this ability to do both: to critique cultural practices while uplifting resilience, that positions *Patsy* as a bedrock in queer literature and a relentless reminder of the work that still lies ahead for society in the name of greater inclusivity and acceptance.

Conclusion

Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Patsy* beautifully captures how cultural taboos angle lesbian identities into the depths — the dredges of self-silencing that terrorize queer women in a Caribbean or diasporic context. *Patsy* represents the pressures of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and the expectation to conform to the cultural norms at the expense of individual freedom and being true to herself. Via Patsy's internalized homophobia, emotional estrangement and fragmented identity, Dennis-Benn critiques the societal structures that uphold the marginalization of queerness. Yet even in the darkest moments, the novel celebrates acts of defiance, acts of resurrection, highlighting the radical act of reclaiming an identity stripped by structural violence.

Children of Queer Parents: A Commentary on *Patsy*, this piece relies on theoretical approaches such as intersectionality and queer theory, which I think are essential to make sense of the complexities of Patsy's narrative. Intersectionality (9), a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a lens for examining how intersecting systems of oppression—such as race, gender, and sexuality—inform Patsy's lived realities. The idea of gender performativity (12) as per Judith Butler better explains how identity formation is governed by society along with what this rejection of norms by Patsy represents in terms of liberation. Using these frameworks, Dennis-Benn's work builds on an expanding canon of queer Caribbean literature that invites nuanced, intersectional reading.

More attention must be paid first to *Patsy*, but also to queer stories that emerge in Caribbean and diasporic spaces in the study of the Caribbean. By approaching this through comparative studies of queer Caribbean literature—including themes of migration, cultural displacement, and identity formation—systemic oppression would be better understood as it pertains to LGBTQ+ people from various cultures. Also, studying how other works engage with resilience and resistance against pernicious cultural taboos helps situate queer literature's productive power within a broader field of culture.

In the final analysis, *Patsy* brings home the need for creating inclusive spaces and breaking down oppressive cultural practices. Books like *Patsy* are a necessary device for leaping those gaps, to have an avenue to raise the voices historically and presently marginalized, and for readers to build empathy. Dennis-Benn's novel not only takes on society's norms by shining a light on the struggles and triumphs of queer women, but inspires dialogue around acceptance, equality and the right to live authentically. In the process, *Patsy* stands out as a foundational text that invariably alters how we apprehend identity, resilience, and liberation in the realms of queer Caribbean literature.

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