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## **Revisiting Jewish Calcutta through the Prism of *the Teak Almirah*: A Chronicle of Cosmopolitan Heritage**

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### **Abstract**

*A thriving Jewish diaspora, which made Calcutta its home in the early nineteenth century, now has only twenty members left. While the mercantile prospects of colonial Calcutta drew them to the city, the religious tensions ensued by the Partition in 1947 and the economic insecurities of newly independent India drove them away to other Western countries and Israel. Using Jael Silliman's novel 'The Teak Almirah' as the case study, this paper will reappraise the trajectories of Jewish identity and belonging in the city of Calcutta. It will analyse the novel from three main perspectives – past, present, and future. Taking into account the narratives of the old Jewish families portrayed in the novel, this paper will examine them in the context of the sentiment of this dwindling community of Calcutta. Here, it will also map the changes that took place in the city over the years through the eyes of its Jewish residents and analyse how they have struggled to keep their legacies alive. Moreover, it will reflect on how the Jewish people living in other corners of the world approach the city on their visits and attempt to re-discover or self-discover their Jewish roots here. Hence, this paper will attempt to depict the political, economic, and cultural life of the Jews in twentieth century and present-day Calcutta using the multiple narratives of the characters portrayed by Silliman. This, in turn, will help us understand how their encounters and exchanges with Bengali and other Indian cultures contributed to the development of Calcutta as a cosmopolitan city.*

**Key words: Jews, Calcutta, Jewish Literature, Identity, Legacy, Cosmopolitanism.**

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**1. Introduction:** This paper seeks to examine twentieth century and present-day Calcutta through the lens of Jewish literature. It will focus on Jael Silliman's *The Teak Almirah* (2016) as the primary case study, and problematise and recontextualise the trajectories of Jewish identity and belonging in the city of Calcutta. Through her narratives, this essay will look at the historical conditions which precipitated the Jewish advent in and departures from Calcutta and gradually analyse the portrayal of the present-day city from the perspective of those historical trajectories.

In the process, the novel will be reappraised from three main perspectives – past, present, and future. Firstly, this essay will focus on the narratives of the old Jewish families

portrayed in the novel, and examine them from the perspective of this rapidly waning community of Calcutta. Here, it will also explore how these Jews visualise the city of Calcutta, and thus map the socio-cultural, economic, and political changes that took place over the years through their eyes and examine how they have struggled to keep their legacies alive. Furthermore, it will look at how the Jewish people living in other corners of the world view the city of Calcutta on their visits as they attempt to re-discover or self-discover their Jewish connectivities here.

As such, this paper will attempt to analyse the political, economic, and cultural life of the Jews in twentieth century and present-day Calcutta through the analysis of the different contexts and narratives portrayed in *The Teak Almira*. This, in turn, will enable us to comprehend how their encounters with Bengali and other Indian communities led to a series of diverse inter-cultural exchanges and how that contributed to the development of Calcutta as a cosmopolitan city.

**2. Recontextualising Jewish Advent in and Exodus from Calcutta:** Jael Silliman (2016) recounts the historical context of Jewish advent in India. The ancestors of the present-day Jewish residents of Calcutta had migrated into the fertile Indo-Gangetic plain from the arid regions of Syria and Iraq in the early nineteenth century. They intended to develop their mercantile prospects in Calcutta. Shalom Cohen, who was the first Jew to settle in Calcutta in 1798, had arrived from Syria via Surat. Gradually, others migrated from Aleppo, and many Jews from Iraq followed suit in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were popularly known as the Baghdadi Jews. Most of these immigrants were traders who had travelled to British India in search for better livelihood (Mukherjee, 2009). As Mavis Hyman (1995, p. 1) explains, The era of war and trade which dominated the eighteenth century gave way to peace and settlement in the nineteenth century, ushering in a period of stability, and these changed political circumstances encouraged Jewish merchants from the Middle East to establish communities in Bombay and Calcutta.

The Jews accumulated a good fortune during the British Raj as they involved themselves in silk and indigo exports and also the jute and opium trade. They engaged in commercial endeavours with both Indian and European parties. But their relationship with India and colonialism was thoroughly nuanced; they assumed the role of an outsider by participating in the colonial project of economic exploitation of India (Roland, 1980). Moreover, racial distinctions between the Indians and the British, which were propagated by colonial ethnographic ventures, also impacted the outlook of the fair-skinned Baghdadi Jews. They aspired to be acknowledged as Europeans, both politically and socially, and did not identify with the so-called natives culturally. They also distinguished between themselves and the other Jewish diasporas of India. As such, when India gained independence, most of them left as they could no longer embrace the socio-political environment of decolonised India. Furthermore, they were also unsure of their economic prospects in a newly independent nation (Roland, 1995).

During the Second World War, Calcutta had a flourishing Jewish community of 5,000. However, the terrible Hindu-Muslim massacre after the Partition in 1947 precipitated the Jewish insecurity in Calcutta. And, unfortunately, the once bustling community had been reduced to a population of even less than 40 Jews in 2010, with the average age hovering around 75 (Hirschfield, 2010). The Jewish immigration away from Kolkata to Britain and Australia started in large numbers in the 1940s and the 50s as these countries offered better economic opportunities (Silliman, 2016). They also moved to the state of Israel after it was created in 1948 and the United States (Marks, 2013). While the Jews never encountered any anti-Semitic tendencies in India (Silliman, 2016), most of them left when the British rule ended in India. The new government's proposition of nationalising the banks made the Jews unsure about their business prospects in India. As such, many wished to continue their living under British rule, and with the end of the Raj, they earned a 'natural' passage to Britain or other Commonwealth countries (Hyman, 1995). The Jewish community in Calcutta now comprises of just 20 members (Nandi, 2017).

**3. Calcutta in Transition: Through Jewish Vision:** Jael Silliman's novel, *The Teak Almira*, documents the transition of Calcutta over the course of the twentieth century from a nostalgic Jewish perspective. In this section, this essay will analyse the topographic, demographic, commercial, social, and political changes that have re-fashioned the trajectories of the city and also how they have impacted the Jewish lives here.

As Silliman narrates (2016), the Park Street area of Calcutta has been a popular destination of the Jewish families from the colonial era to the present day. In the twentieth century, the Park Street was a glamorous avenue displaying an array of exclusive shops and rich clientele. It was well-known for its chic nightclubs and exquisite restaurants. The streets displayed the artistic fervour of the popular bands, jazz groups, and cabaret artists from all over the world. However, the ambience of the present-day Park Street has changed as the area has transformed into a local market with hawkers occupying the pavements and pedestrians bargaining with them over cheap goods. Popular restaurants like the Sky Room have been shut down over the years. The old Elite and Metro cinemas, which were once so grand and offered cheap tickets, have now run out of business under the pressure of rising multiplexes. The city's businesses and industries have been adversely impacted by the radical trade unions. On the positive side, hand-pulled rickshaws have been restricted in the Park Street area and cows have been banned in the city precincts, making the traffic considerably light in the area. The other parts of the city, although, have not been very fortunate as the onslaught of cars, taxis, autos, and buses has made the air almost unbreathable. It is surprising to note that before Independence, the streets were washed down every morning by fellows called *bistiwallahs*. As there were not many cars during that time, the level of pollution was also considerably low. Only the rich could afford cars and there were models like Chryslers, Chevrolets, Studebakers, and the Hindustan 10. The taxis that plied the roads back then were not the yellow Ambassadors that we see now, but Chevrolet Fleetmasters and other big American cars. Clubs and other social institutions in Calcutta have also incorporated new changes over the years. For instance, while the rules of formal

dressing and etiquette at the Calcutta Club have not been changed since its inception in the colonial period, the positive change that has been introduced in the last decade is that women are now allowed upstairs in the club. However, many of the majestic mansions which made the city prominent are now crumbling under disrepair.

While the area around Esplanade and Park Street once housed many Jewish families, it was the Bentinck or Grant Street that was essentially Jewish, where practically every home was a Jewish one – a Jewish *mohalla*. In the recent years, inflation has made sustaining the old lavish Jewish lifestyles in the city very difficult. Earlier, most homes had very large rooms with high ceilings and sturdy teak furniture. However, many of the old majestic Jewish residences, gardens, and clubs have crumbled under the pressure of economic turmoil during the regime of the Left Government; several have been converted into shopping malls. Even two decades back, *matzahs* (unleavened flatbread – an integral part of Jewish cuisine) were still baked on the synagogue premises, supervised by the Matzah Board. The *matzahs* were then placed in cane baskets, and carried by rickshaw and coolies to Jewish residences across Calcutta (Silliman, 2016). What at one point of time used to be a bustling community with large and closely-knit families, now only has a few individuals left. These large joint families used to be a trademark of the Jews of Calcutta (Gupta, 2015). The sentiments of the last few Jewish individuals residing in Calcutta express this nostalgia. Zack Marks's (2013) piece in *The New York Times* documented Silliman's sentiment, "We thrived here. We had Jewish schools and our own newspapers. But now it's mostly memories. In a few years we'll all be gone."

Silliman (2016) also illustrates the shifts in the political atmosphere of the city. At the peak of the Naxalite Movement, political ideologies had rekindled the imagination of many young minds. Many students in Calcutta's premiere educational institutions got involved in the political turmoil, and as a result, many had disappeared or had gone underground as brutal counter-insurgency on the part of the state ensued. While some of the Jews sympathised with their idealistic cause, they never supported the means by which the revolutionaries attempted to achieve their political goals. However, the novel also notes how the political environment has changed considerably in the recent years: the communist government has fallen and the new one has been attempting to bring in more capitalist opportunities and business ventures to the city. But, the ethical aspect of politics has radically degraded over the years as the current government, the party, and its representatives have repeatedly engaged in anti-social and vandalistic behaviors. The novel also narrates how the preservation of Jewish heritage sites like the synagogues require constant dealings with bureaucrats who have their own narrow political agendas and are not genuinely interested in the preservation of this heritage.

*The Teak Admirah* also comments on the social life of the Jews and other communities in Calcutta. Marriages into other religions and communities were strictly prohibited amongst the Jews of Calcutta. If a Jew married outside the religion, he/she was usually cut off from the family (Silliman, 2016). *Probashi* quotes Flower Silliman on the fact that since the Jews did not approve of assimilation, girls were not usually permitted to mix with boys of other

communities. The dress code was very strict and the food was essentially kosher. However, the World War II altered these conditions as the frequent air raids led to the uprooting of many Jewish girls from the Jewish environment of Kolkata and their relocation to Anglo-Christian communities elsewhere. The community was apprehensive that this cultural assimilation and religious proselytisation might convert young Jews to Christians. But, these restrictions have considerably been curbed over the years as several Jewish women like the educationist Hannah Sen and lawyer Regina Guha married into Hindu families. Indian dressing culture has also been adapted by some Jewish women as they started dressing themselves in Indian costumes like the *Salwar Kameez* (Gupta, 2015). *The Teak Almirah* also explores the themes of sexuality and social taboos in this part of India by elaborating how the freedom to choose one's sexual preferences are still extremely limited and the idea of same-sex relationships is looked down upon severely (Silliman, 2016).

The novel thus bears witness to how Calcutta has transformed over the course of the last century and what these changes entail for the Jewish community here. The Jews have gradually reappropriated and assimilated Indian traditions into their own culture. However, with the mass departures that began in the mid-twentieth century, the future of the community here has become bleak. While some developments have been satisfactory so far as the city's commercial prospects are concerned, the spirit of old Calcutta has been impaired, threatening the livelihood and heritage of the Jewish community here.

**4. Rediscovering Jewish Calcutta: Through the Eyes of Jewish Visitors:** Silliman (2016) documents how Jewish individuals, whose earlier generations had moved away from Calcutta, are eager to visit the city and rediscover their Jewish roots here. These discourses can be analysed from two perspectives. The Jews, who once lived in the city, perceive Calcutta on their visits with a sentiment of nostalgia as they strive to re-discover their Jewish roots here. However, the later generations of Baghdadi Jews who have never visited the city before generally arrive with a sense of adventure as they try to self-discover the roots of their families here. Quoting Silliman, "A few of the younger folks – the children and grandchildren of Calcutta Jews – come back to discover their roots" (2001, p. 22). As such, on their visits to Calcutta now, both the old and the new generations try to resuscitate their forgotten traditions and culture by visiting the synagogues, the cemetery, the grand residences, or the institutions that their ancestors had built in the city (Silliman, 2016).

By participating in the traditions of Jewish prayers and festivals like the *Sabbath* and the *Simchat Torah*, the visitors who once resided in the city, re-visualise the once vibrant Jewish Calcutta. The architecturally intricate synagogues, which were once filled to capacity during the High Holidays and other social occasions, are now almost deserted. The Jews also visit the Narkeldanga cemetery which houses the graves and epitaphs of many of their ancestors, thus reviving their emotional ties with the past. They also attempt to re-explore the old landscape and surroundings of Calcutta where they grew up – the residences, the gardens, the lanes, and so on (Silliman, 2016). Memory thus plays a significant role in reviving the essence of the old Jewish Calcutta.

The new generations, who now reside in different corners of the world, have generally grown up hearing stories about India and Calcutta – the culture, the food, the language, and so on. The tradition of elderly family members re-telling the stories of old Calcutta or their own childhood experiences of participating in community prayers and festivals have developed a conceptual landscape of Calcutta in the minds of the new generation. And this vision has guided the experiences of these new generations of the Calcutta Jews who have visited the city over the years. The performing of common rituals like lighting the candles on *Sabbath* or reciting the *Bracha* brings the new visiting generations and the older residents of Jewish Calcutta together. Furthermore, by staying at historic hostels like the Fairlawn where many famous theater personalities, artists, and intellectuals had once stayed, the Jews visiting Calcutta try to introduce themselves to the heritage that their ancestors cherished (Silliman, 2016). The fact that the old Jewish Calcutta cannot be revived anymore has inspired the new visiting generations to preserve their legacy which is still surviving within the diverse traditions of the city.

Moreover, Silliman (2016) explains that global Jewish symbols and constructions like that of the Star of David and *geniza* that adorn the synagogues and cemetery help the Jewish tourists to reconnect with the culture that they practise back at home. Food has also enabled the Jews to preserve their memories and taste of Jewish Calcutta abroad as they indulge in the spicy Indian and Bengali dishes served at Indian restaurants abroad. The Jewish visitors usually reconnect with the old residents of the city, visit their homes, and listen to their accounts of old Jewish fervour in Calcutta. They also recount the history of their ancestors and families by exploring the old photographs that have been sincerely preserved by the last remaining residents of the Jewish community here.

**5. The Trajectories of Calcutta Cosmopolitanism: Interacting Jewish and Indian Cultures:** *The Teak Almirah* narrates how Calcutta emerged as a cosmopolitan city over the centuries through the premises of trade. As the British developed the city for trade and commerce in the late eighteenth century, traders from many communities – European, Middle-Eastern, Indian, and Chinese – moved to the city for its lucrative economic opportunities (Silliman, 2016). It is the interaction between these diverse communities that engendered the cosmopolitan nature of the city.

The Jewish and Bengali cultures have interacted at several junctures over these years, such as cuisine. According to Lauren Razavi (2005), Bengalis find ‘Nahoum and Sons’, located in the Esplanade area, offering the best of Bengali desserts at an affordable price. While tourists visiting Kolkata indulge in the delicacy of this place, the core customer base is 99.9 per cent non-Jewish now. The restaurant, ‘Calcutta Stories’, has also been attempting to preserve Kolkata’s Jewish heritage. It is striving to awaken people’s interest in the migrant cuisines that took root in Kolkata, including Indo-Jewish fusions. The Jewish portion of the menu was designed by Flower Silliman, who has been documenting the Jewish-Calcuttan cuisine as an attempt to preserve a significant identity of the community’s culture (Bhattacharya, 2016). Over the course of these centuries, Middle Eastern cuisines have interacted with Indian ones, creating a cosmopolitan flavour profile. One of the most

popular Jewish-Calcuttan dishes is probably the *aloo makala*, a dish which has both Jewish and Bengali roots (Silliman, 2016). The fusion of Jewish and Bengali food culture involved the gradual assimilation of strict Jewish dietary regulations and Indian culinary expertise. While Jewish food is mild and bland in the Middle East, it became spicier and heavier as the Jews of Calcutta incorporated Indian culinary traditions into their lifestyles (Bhattacharya, 2016). For instance, *The Teak Almirah* elaborates how *dawls*, vegetable *bhaji*, chicken curry with coconut, *bamia khatta*, *baigan achar*, mango with lime, ginger, and hot red peppers, cheese *sambusaks*, and several others have become popular delicacies among the Jews of Calcutta (Silliman, 2016). Bengali, Anglo-Indian, Armenian, Parsi, and even Muslim dishes are part of the everyday culinary traditions of the Jewish community of Kolkata now, as long as they are kosher (Nair, 2016).

The two schools, the Jewish Girls' School and the Elias Meyer Free School & Talmud Torah, both still flourishing and well endowed, serve as a centre of interaction between Jewish and Bengali culture as most of the current students are Hindus and Muslims (Hirschfield, 2010). It is the cosmopolitan nature of Calcutta that has enabled the miracle that while there has been animosity between Jews and Muslims all over the world, 90 per cent of the students at the Jewish Girls' School are currently Muslims, signifying the triumph of culture and knowledge over religion. While the Muslim girls leave their homes dressed in *Salwar Kameez* and *hijab*, they change over to the school uniform of skirt and blouse as they enter the school premises (Dharmadhikari, 2015). This example shows how tradition is kept alive alongside the trends of the contemporary world. Moreover, the fact that several generations of caretakers of the Beth El and Magen David Synagogues have been Muslims reveals how Muslim custodians have been sincerely protecting the Jewish legacies in the city (Gupta, 2015). The religious syncretism of Calcutta is exhibited in the fact that the Jewish synagogues, and the Armenian, the Portuguese, and the Scottish churches stand right next to one another in the city.

In the early twentieth century, the Jews had also adopted several European sports like horse-riding, as the Calcutta Race Course started organising professional events. In 1936, a Jewish man opened a club for body building enthusiasts and weight lifting in Calcutta. The forty or so members were both Jews and non-Jews, and included women, which was quite progressive, considering the contemporary socio-cultural regulations. It was a Jew who won the title of Bengal's Strongest Man in 1939. Sport was often accompanied by socialising, or seen as a means of enjoying a social gathering. There were several Jewish people who expressed their talents and abilities in drama, music, dance, and in course of their participation, they often joined groups of people with starkly different religious affiliations (Hyman, 1995). Sports thus created a space for allowing interactions between different communities, enabling people to appreciate the beliefs of others.

Calcutta has emerged as a major confluence of diverse communities and different religions from all over the world. While different communities have contributed to the development of its cosmopolitan facade, the efforts of the Baghdadi Jewish community have been particularly pioneering. Through their interactions with Bengali, Indian, and

other foreign cultures, they have created a vibrant atmosphere of innovation and adaptation – a heritage of accommodating other cultures and yet preserving one's traditions. Silliman (2016, p. 129) aptly summarises Calcutta's cosmopolitan nature in this expression, "It's so Calcutta to bring together Greek statues, Mughal courtiers, Hindu apsaras, British sepoy, and Indian rajahs in this medley of devotion."

**6. Preserving the Jewish Legacies of Calcutta: Concluding Reflections:** Over the course of the last two centuries, the Jews who have settled in Calcutta have made monumental contributions to the development of the city – in the fields of commerce, cuisine, culture, architecture, and many more. Zack Marks (2013) quotes Amlan Das Gupta in this regard, Kolkata used to be a very cosmopolitan place, but East India has not prospered the way other parts of the country have, and most members of the once vibrant Jewish, Armenian and Chinese communities have left. The extent to which Kolkata is a diverse, multiethnic city is not as evident as it once was, but the Jews contributed a great deal to making it the city that it is today.

What the Jews still represent in present-day Kolkata is a legacy of mansions, schools, hospital wards and more. They came up with three Synagogues, two schools, prominent buildings like Chowringhee Mansions and Esplanade Mansions, business houses like David Sassoon & Co. and E. A. D. Sassoon & Co, Ezra Hospital (which is part of the Medical College), a legendary confectionery shop (Nahoum's confectionary), Hebrew printing press, and the Narkeldanga Jewish Cemetery. At least three streets in Kolkata, namely Belilios Street, Ezra Street, and Synagogue Street indicate a Jewish connection. The Jewish community of Calcutta has excelled in many fields over the years and contributed not only to Calcutta but to India in multiple ways. Some of the prominent Jews of Calcutta include the hero of Bangladesh War Lt. General Jacob Farj Rapheal, Samuel Solomon of the Indian Civil Service, film director and Padmashri recipient Ezra Mir, famous magician Eddie Joseph, sculpture artist Gerry Judah, first Miss India Pramila (Esther Victoria Abraham), educationist Hannah Sen, first women dentist in India Dr. Tabitha Solomon, lawyer Regina Guha, and many more (Gupta, 2015).

The burning question that arises, therefore, is regarding the future of the Jews and their legacy in the city. In spite of the significantly low number of Jewish population in Calcutta, they have strived to keep prayer services running in the synagogues, host weekly *Sabbath* dinners for the congregation and visiting Jewish tourists, and maintain the tradition of annual community *Seder* service (Lentin, 2016). This particular aspect makes the Jews of Calcutta unique. However, within a few decades, when the last remaining Calcutta Jews will be no more, who would preserve their glorious legacy? This responsibility now rests on the shoulders of Jews scattered across the world. Particularly, the Jewish individuals and families whose ancestors had moved away from Calcutta would have to be more involved in keeping their Jewish heritage alive here. Also, the residents of the city, the government, and institutions like A.S.I. would have to be more sincere in conserving the old Jewish residences, synagogues, cemeteries, and other buildings and institutions constructed by the



Jews so that the future generations of both Jews and Indians can learn about this vibrant community, which travelled thousands of miles to make Calcutta its home, further enriching its cosmopolitan visage.

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