Diasporic Narratives and Migrant Memories in *The Teak Almirah* by Indian Jewish Author Jael Silliman

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Abstract
Diasporic literature posits itself as a space of vision in which to prompt ruptures, go beyond prescriptive and proscriptive limits, and imagine new ways to identify and belong (Parmar 2016). This is what makes the novels by Jael Silliman worth reading and apprehending in the contested and complex scenario of contemporary Indian literatures in English, further allowing an analysis of the role of English in constructing historically complex communities of readers in a transnational and transcultural perspective. At the crossroads of literature, anthropology and history, Silliman's novel *The Teak Almirah* (2016) evokes times and places of colonial India, re-casting them in a new performance where both the characters and the readers are compelled to follow the shadows, the rumours, the hints and the traces that are defined an emotional geography and a "cartography of diaspora" (Brah 1996).

Key-words: Baghdadi Jews, diaspora space, diasporic literature, migrant memories.

1. Introduction

In a recent interview, the Indian Jewish author Jael Silliman, a descendant of the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora of Calcutta, restated the privileged status that her community enjoyed before Indian Independence: "Jews were very well respected and thrived in many professions. They truly had a global footprint and their contributions was [sic] way larger than the number of Jews living in Kolkata would suggest" (Dresner 2020). Religion, more than language or ethnicity, was a mode of performing identity for this diasporic community, which arrived in India at the end of the eighteenth century and became one of the most successful colonial élites of the

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British Raj. Despite being well integrated into the colonial economic system, however, the Baghdadi Jews constantly worried about the threat of 'assimilation' and strived to distinguish themselves on a social, cultural and, most of all, religious level. Reduced to a tiny and marginal group, renamed by some as the Kolkata Jews after their recent identification as one 'minority' in the frame of India's religious pluralism, their visual and literary archives of memories are recently resurfacing.

The presence of the Baghdadi Jews in important port towns in the 'Orient' – from Basra to Bombay, from Calcutta to Rangoon up to Singapore and Shanghai – are emerging and gradually reconstituting the history of a forgotten Jewish diaspora to the East[1]. Historical documents, memoirs, diaries and scholarly works are unearthing the history of the Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, retracing their journey from Iraq, Syria and Yemen towards the eastern shores of India and China, Singapore and Burma. It is left to other writings, made of more intimate remembrances, to unearth the mystery that was life in colonial India.

Indulging in nostalgia and adopting literature as a strategic practice of history-writing and world-making, Jael Silliman has been engaging in an archaeology of cultural performance aimed at retrieving the past along the "sensory geographies" of Calcutta/Kolkata. Anna Guttman, in her book *Writing Indians and Jews. Metaphorics of Jewishness in South Asian Literature* (2013), has argued that "diasporic South Asian writers have sometimes tended to associate Jewishness with the past, and to transform Jewish characters into a haunting presence" (p. 127). The characters in Silliman's novels, however, are all but ghostly presences. Despite displaying certain nostalgic undertones for the place that Calcutta once represented, Silliman presents a narrative rooted in history,

[1] According to historical documents, diaries, letters, and memoirs, the first Baghdadi Jew to reach the shores of the river Ganga was a man called Shalom Cohen. He arrived in Surat, Gujarat, in 1798 and then moved to Calcutta, in West Bengal, where he set up a successful business, hence establishing one of the most thriving Jewish communities of Asia. As Joan Roland has highlighted, some important scholarly works have been emerging and retracing this partially forgotten history. See Roland (2018; 2019).

autobiography, and ethnography. Calling into question the idea that the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta belong to the past, her characters are rooted in their present and projected towards the future.

Coming to terms with a complicated past, revealing many intricate plots of friendships, allegiances, love affairs and family histories, her latest novel *The Teak Almirah* (2016) talks of secrets, dreams and aspirations and questions the requiem for Calcutta, celebrating instead the potential of the modern, ambiguous, more fluid but not less charming Kolkata. In this sense, Guttman is right when stating that "[e]ven while narrating the shrinkage of Indian Jewish communities […] these writers resist any simple nostalgia and refuse the figures […] of the last man and the last Jew" (2013: 128). This statement is also supported by Navras Jaat Aafreedi, who has dedicated many studies to the Jewish communities of India[2]. Writing about the relevance of Indian Jewish literature to a thorough understanding of the life and culture – and historical importance – of the Jews in India, Aafredi comments:

> Fiction produced by any community depicting itself provides an invaluable insight into its sensibilities and sensitivities that fields like anthropology, sociology and history can only do to a limited extent. Indian Jewish literature deserves more attention, and this could be done by introducing it into Indian academia within the larger framework of Indo-Judaic Studies. This field has been neglected for far too long, perhaps due to the absence of Indo-Israel diplomatic ties for over four decades. There has generally been a widespread lack of awareness of the Jewish presence in India, with Jews often mixed up with Muslims, Parsis and Christians. That they constitute just 0.0004 percent of the Indian population does not help their cause. Scholars, too, including Jews, have been so preoccupied with Jewish vicissitudes in the West that they have largely neglected the study of Indian Jews. Southasia would undoubtedly be much poorer without the historical and contemporary presence of this ancient community (Aafredi 2014a).

I agree with Guttman and Aafredi that indeed South Asian history and literary tradition would be much poorer, as the contribution of Jewish entrepreneurs, artists and writers has been important and is in need of a more serious reassessment. While the history of the

[2] Regarding the contribution of Jewish artists and authors to Indian arts, literature and cinema, see Aafreedi (2014b).

Bene Israel community of Indian Jews has been acknowledged and has reached an international readership thanks to the literary works of Esther David (1945), who was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English literature in 2010, other Jewish authors who write in Hindi or other Indian languages have not achieved the same success. In 2013, for instance, Sheela Rohekar published her novel *Miss Samuel: Ek Yahudi Gatha* (*Miss Samuel: A Jewish Saga*), where she also depicted life from the perspective of the Bene Israel community in India. Despite being praised for her accomplished novel, the choice of writing in Hindi made it more difficult for Rohekar to reach a broad and international audience. The same can be said of other Jewish writers who wrote in Marathi or other Indian languages and whose writings are not even included in the Indian literary canon.

Perhaps conscious of the need to engage in an archaeology of history and memory *through* the English language, a few members of the "diaspora of hope" (Silliman 2002) that constituted the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta have begun to articulate cognitive and sensory mappings of the urban space where this forgotten community is re-materialising, via nostalgic recollections, the traces and the textures of a city once called home. While the Kolkata Jews of Arab descent are reduced to less than forty people, the majestic synagogues, the sumptuous villas, the beautiful gardens, and the delicious *mélange cuisine*[3] are still there to speak of, and for, a glorious past. Besides the architectural and cultural heritage left behind, the history and the life stories of this community and its contribution to the making of colonial Calcutta into a cosmopolitan and thriving city has been almost completely erased from Indian historical archives. Through

[3] After the sensation created by *Calcutta Stories*, a restaurant run by Flower Silliman (mother of Jael Silliman) with the purpose of popularising the Indian Jewish recipes of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta, many other initiatives followed. Indian women began attending courses and offering events where Indian Jewish food is served. See, for instance, the story of home chef Pia Promina, who "invites you to her beautiful home for a unique Calcutta Jewish feast" in Mumbai. See, for instance, the stories reported in: https://www.authenticook.com/meal/jewish-calcutta/15/
See also: Mini Ribeiro, "Hubba, chitanee, alu makallah: A guide to the cuisine of India's Jewish communities" in: *First Post* (published 20th December 2017) https://www.firstpost.com/living/hubba-chitanee-alu-makallah-a-guide-to-the-cuisine-of-indias-jewish-communities-4262805.html

long-term processes of identity construction that characterised the colonial enterprise, the Baghdadi Jews actively engaged in a negotiated restructuring of their own identity to occupy those privileged places granted to the colonial élites. However, they failed to be acknowledged as 'Europeans' by the British and were left to occupy an in-between space of constant uncertainty (Roland 2019). In 1947, when India became independent, the Jews of Calcutta left in fear of losing those economic privileges they had managed to secure for themselves in almost two hundred years of successful, but difficult, 'adjustments'. They had rejected Arabic, their mother tongue, to embrace English. They had discharged their traditional dress and clothed themselves in western fashion. They had built synagogues and schools to teach Hebrew to their children, but they had also opened English schools and built libraries and hospitals. Some Baghdadi Jewish women had even become famous Indian actresses and entered the Bollywood star system. It was mostly in the private sphere of the house that the Baghdadi Jews proved to be more attached to certain 'traditions', mostly religious ones. Recently, with the publishing of essays, books, memoirs, blogs and novels, the Baghdadi Jews of India have been trying – once again – to recast their position in Indian history, opening new venues for engagement with India's present. "India is very proud of its Jewish heritage and the Bagdadi [*sic*] Jews of Kolkata are very grateful to India, a host country that was their home for more than two centuries", Stacey Dresner (2020) concludes in her interview with Jael Silliman. We may argue that Silliman's fictional writings, together with the documents she has been collecting in her digital archive (www. jewishcalcutta.in), are creating a set of "prosthetic memories" (Landsberg 2003; 2009) that contribute to place the Jews of Arab descent in the cultural mapping of what she names "Jewish Calcutta". Her writings and documentation help to create a set of memories among readers that "are not the product of lived experience but are derived from engagement with a mediated representation" (Landsberg 2009: 222). The idea of the Baghdadi Jews as a legitimate part of the history of colonial Calcutta, entitled to reclaim a place as a 'religious minority' in today's Kolkata, is mediated by life histories, autobiographies, memoirs and documentaries that allow for the emerging of "prosthetic memories". As Landsberg elaborates:

In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which a person sutures him or herself into a larger historical narrative. In this process, the person does not simply learn about the past intellectually, but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live in the traditional sense. These prosthetic memories […] might help to condition how a person thinks about the world and might be instrumental in articulating an ethical relation to the other or in advancing egalitarian social values. (2009: 222)

If it holds true that Jael Silliman's novels[4] make it possible for us *to feel* this connection, fractured and yet not broken by the historical events of the post-Partition decades, it is also worth noticing that this occurs in a particular historical moment, when Hindu majoritarianism is rampant and it becomes difficult not to be suspicious of any move towards religious pluralism made by a government which does not hesitate to disenfranchise and disempower its *other minorities*. Even the reclaiming of such a label – minority – is something which cannot leave us indifferent to the signifying practices that are affecting those who have been clubbed into this political frame. As Avtar Brah (1996) remarks, there are good reasons to be sceptical of any discourse which reiterates the minority/majority dichotomy. As she puts it:

What category of person is 'minoritised' in a specific discourse? Are dominant classes a 'minority' since, numerically, they are almost always in the minority? If the aim is to use the term as a synonym for subordination and thereby to become all-inclusive by bringing all subordinate classes, genders, ethnicities or sexualities within its orbit, then there would seem to be even less to gain by jettisoning the language of subordination which, at the very least, signals inequities of power. As an alternative, I do not wish to offer some all-embracing panacea, but rather to insist that, in so far as it is possible, the conceptual categories we employ should be able to resist hegemonic cooptation. (Brah 1996: 185-6)

[4] Jael Silliman is a scholar, a writer and a women's rights activist born in Calcutta to a family of Baghdadi Jews. She moved to the USA to pursue an academic career and presently lives between Kolkata and New York. Her book *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (2001) retells the history of the Arab Jews in India through the stories of four generations of her family. Silliman also developed a digital archive of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta, named *Recalling Jewish Kolkata*. She currently works as a consultant on gender and development, women of colour and reproductive rights, and gender and environmental issues.

Brah importantly points out that "'minorities' are positioned in relation not only to 'majorities' but also with respect to one another, and vice versa" (Brah 1996: 186). This is of no secondary matter in discussing Silliman's novels and the Baghdadi Jews' sense of belonging to India and to a city called Calcutta: while her writings are infused with a profound sense of gratitude for a place that marked her subjectivity and sense of belonging, her positionality complicates self-contained and simplistic identity labels. She is always intent on avoiding the slippery path of essentialisms and polarised dichotomies and appears focused on consigning the memories of the city of her youth to the reader to make him/her conscious of the psycho-archival process of creation that gives shape to her literary works. This is perhaps deeply connected to the fact that she writes from a "diaspora space", a site of entanglement, as Avtar Brah explains, where it is possible to witness "the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'. The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*" (1996: 205). Maya Parmar (2016: 235) intriguingly points out that "within the conceptual term 'diaspora' is a sense of fragmented and splintered belonging, a longing for home, and a forfeiture of a well-defined cultural identity: it is this that a scattering of an imagined community of people engenders" (p. 235). Yet, she further argues "the diaspora can also be a space of creativity, of innovation, and the productive rupturing of boundaries and prescribed limits" (p. 235). In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie also states that human beings are "wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions" (1991: 12). He maintains that we need to make sense of our world, even when meaning-making processes are complicated by our failure to grasp the wholeness of things. Meanings, then, can be constructed only through "scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved" (p. 12). The relevance of literature, for Rushdie, does not abide in its capacity to offer easy answers to the existential queries – like religion or politics may do –, but rather in its power to raise further questions, of positing itself as a tool of examination: "If religion is an answer, if political ideology is an answer, then literature is an inquiry; great literature, by asking extraordinary questions, opens new doors in our minds" (1991: 423).

Diasporic literature, hence, challenges limits of identity and

imagines new ways to belong, prompting ruptures and allowing for a move beyond prescriptive and proscriptive boundaries. As Brah highlights, "[t]he *concept* of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins* (Brah 1996: 189, emphasis in the original). This homing desire condenses into literary forms that provide mappings of imaginary journeys while avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and rigid identity constructions. As Pheng Cheah argues, fiction is also world-making, it is a cosmopolitan act of creation: "since one cannot *see* the universe, the world, or humanity, the cosmopolitan optic is not one of perceptual experience but of the imagination. World literature is an important aspect of cosmopolitanism because it is a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world" (2008: 26). Among the literary genres, the novel appears as the most suited to provide such space of imagination, contestation, and understanding. The novel offers its support in coping with the modern condition of "rejection of totalized explanations" (Rushdie 1991: 422) because the novel is "the form created to discuss the fragmentation of truth [...]" (p. 422). Rushdie himself has become one of the most famous authors to employ the novel as a site of controversy and inquiry. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1992), for instance, Rushdie tells the story of Moraes Zogoiby, heir to a four-century dynasty of Cochin Jews, whose previous generations contributed to the making of the Indian nation. It is exactly the Indian nation, its history and its doomed fate (epitomised by the rise of Hindu fundamentalism) which is allegorically presented through the destiny of the da Gama-Zogoiby family and the hybrid, mixed self of the Moor. As Dohra Ahmad has underlined, "the history of Jews in India serves Rushdie's purposes remarkably well. His own justification for the apparent marginality of his subject is that Indian Jews represent the ultimate test of the category of 'Indianness' to absorb diverse subjects" (2005: 4).

While Jael Silliman writes from a different position to Rushdie, her novels are also a way of testing (and, in her case, positively asserting) the place of a 'minority' community in Indian national consciousness. Her characters move between Jewishness and Indianness, Parsiness and Jewishness, Englishness and Indianness, to name just a few of the binaries embodied in *The Teak Almirah*'s

characters. The multiple belongings, and the fear of not belonging at all, are constant elements of her novels. Her writings are relevant in the contested and complex scenario of contemporary Indian literatures in English, as they engage in a meaning-making process *and* an identity-making practice, while also allowing investigation of the role of English in constructing historically complex communities of readers in a transnational and transcultural perspective.

2. The Jewishness and Indianness of a "Ductile Diaspora"

The idea that it is necessary to have a "homeland in order to conceive of a diaspora" (Cohen 2007: 4) has been discussed and contested by many scholars. Avtar Brah, for instance, has argutely underlined that "a homing desire" is very different from "a desire for a 'homeland'" (1996: 16). Pointing towards the "multiaxiality of power" and the need for "a cartography of the politics of intersectionality", Brah substitutes the unsatisfying concept of *diaspora* with that of "diaspora space", a conceptual category "'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous" (1996: 178). In what she calls "the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" there exists a site of possibility, in which to think through the concept of diaspora in relation to various forms of power and relationality. This relationality is constructed also through re-tellings of memories of a place called home. "The concept of diaspora", Brah states, "delineates a field of identifications where 'imagined communities' are forged within and out of a confluence of narratives from annals of collective memory and re-memory" (1996: 193).

Robin Cohen has also debated the question of the changing notions of home and homeland in contemporary times[5], suggesting different versions of home/homeland: "*solid* (the unquestioned need for a homeland), *ductile* (an intermediate, more complex, idea of homeland) and *liquid* (a post-modernist rendition of virtual

[5] Cohen's article was first delivered as a working paper at a conference on *Dispersione, "globalizzazione" e costruzione dell'alterità: diaspore e migrazioni nel bacino del Mediterraneo ed oltre (XIX-XX secc.),* hosted by the Laboratorio di ricerche mediterranee di Marsala (Sicily, 19-21 September 2007).

home)" (p. 4). The 'solid' homeland, clearly defined in terms of a delimited territorial space and characterised by the nation-state model, is usually the one idea of homeland mostly referred to by diasporic communities. People who live in a diaspora tend to *look back* at their place of origin as the mythical land of roots, invested with "an emotional, almost reverential dimension" (Cohen 2007: 5, note 16). The second and third categories proposed by Cohen are less territorialised and increasingly more fluid and "ductile", verging on virtual liquidity. Citing the work by William Safran on the Jewish diaspora, Cohen agrees that the associations between hostland and homeland are becoming more fragile, yielding to "softer notions of a 'found home' in the diaspora and to a 'virtual home' in a summer camp – perhaps augmented by occasional visits to Israel rather than permanent settlement" (2007: 7). A step further is the notion of a virtual homeland, of a "liquid home", as Cohen (2007, note 31) calls it, which is based on Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, where nomadism is regaining ground over notions of territoriality and settlement. Picking on Bauman ([2000] 2012), Cohen proposes to name *deterritorialised diasporas* those diasporic experiences which can be considered unusual, because some "ethnic groups can be thought of as having lost their conventional territorial reference points, to have become in effect mobile and multi-located cultures with virtual or uncertain homes" (Cohen 2007: 10). In this situation, the ideas of home and homeland are bound to those places that have come to constitute the cultural, religious, and economic centres of the diasporic community. Instead of supporting the post-modern theory of a necessary one-way movement from a solid home towards a liquid one, Cohen highlights the importance of researching the "empirical and historical support for any notion of home/homeland" (p. 14). He stresses how the intermediate category of a ductile home is increasingly more important to understand and theorise certain diasporas that have not abandoned the idea of a solid homeland but, for various reasons, may have deferred it indefinitely or created a virtual one in another land (p. 14). Ultimately, Cohen posits a question which remains at the core of any research on diasporic communities and mobile individuals, also providing an answer to it: "How then do we mediate between the three uses? One possible way of dealing with this escalation is to allow self-declaration to prevail. Home and homeland is what you say it is. Who are we to object?" (p. 14).

Allowing for self-declaration to prevail means also letting unheard or suppressed voices to surface; more nuanced and complex notions of identification to replace the straitjacket of clear-cut identities; and multi-vocal narratives of home, diaspora and belonging to emerge and add complexity to the misleading, historically linear, and experientially untenable, stories of mobility and *impossible returns*. We may say, in Brah's words, that it is the "homing desire" the defining concept and the point of arrival of these diasporic rendezvous. The notion of solid, ductile and liquid homes provides a heuristic frame within which to discuss the case of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta: Cohen's theory offers flexible tools of analysis, which we can adopt, adapt and even reverse, adhering to the wise suggestion that identification prevails on fixed identity's notions and that "[h]ome and homeland is what you say it is" (p. 14), even when searching for them in the lanes of the old colonial Calcutta. Among the debris of its once splendid villas and luxurious gardens, nowadays often concealed or completely replaced by the kitschy shopping malls and crowded flat compounds which dot the modern city, it is possible to partly retrieve the history of this diasporic community which had elected Calcutta as its home/homeland. Through a ductile period of adjustment, before the state of Israel (1948) could provide those territorial grounds to reclaim a *real homeland* on the geopolitical map of the postcolonial world, Baghdadi Jews invented for themselves multiple deterritorialised diasporas which were dispersed across Asia and yet strongly united by a common religious and cultural background. Despite the dismissal of the Arabic language and the *Oriental* clothes and ways of dressing – quickly and strategically substituted by the English language and a style then deemed fashionable among the colonial élites – the Baghdadi Jews proudly retained their religious practices, performing their rituals with meticulous care. Skilfully exploiting the economic advantages offered by the new trade opportunities at the core of the British Raj, the Baghdadi Jews who moved to Calcutta from the end of the eighteenth century and lived there until the dawn of Indian independence (1947), came to constitute a *ductile diaspora* capable of tactically adjusting to the new climate and creating for themselves a new life, without betraying their sense of belonging to a tightly knit ethnoreligious community that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, was scattered from the peripheries of the Ottoman Empire up to the coastlines of China.

Feeling insecure in the newly formed Indian nation, this tiny community migrated towards what they thought were better shores. Some went to England, Canada, America, and Australia. A few others decided to stay back, in the city that had by then become their home. Israel, established in 1948, was the promised land of their dreams. And yet, for those who had lived most of their lives on the tropical soil of Bengal, Israel did not hold out promises of a cherished homecoming. Among those who left India, some eventually decided to return, to go back home. Returning to Calcutta, to a foreign geographic space that under the Raj had been transformed into a familiar place full of memories, feelings, and symbolic values, meant declaring themselves an integral part of the history of that country – India – and of those people – Indians – that the Baghdadi, during the 150 years of their colonial sojourn, had never truly embraced as their own. Confronted with the choice between a solid homeland in Israel and a liquid life of nomadic mobility, some Baghdadi Jews decided to go for the *in-betweenness*, for a ductile home, made of an idiosyncratic mix of Indianness and Jewishness which is best represented by the *masala kosher* food of Calcutta's colonial melting pot.

Jael Silliman, as some other writers before her, chooses the novel to convey this story of a love affair between the cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial Baghdadi Jews and the warm and embracing city of Calcutta. Despite having dedicated a scholarly book and great effort to compile an archive of history and migrant reminiscences, it is in her two novels that we find the vivid retelling of stories of love, betrayal, happiness and distress, full of those feelings and emotions that make for real-life histories. Wandering through these "sensescapes" (Lahiri 2011), the novels by Jael Silliman take us on a nostalgic journey of memory and commemoration that also traces a newfound way of feeling Indian and Jewish in postcolonial India.

Moving away from the crumbling manors of contemporary Kolkata, in her first novel *The Man with Many Hats* (2013) the author had narrated the story of her family and, in doing so, presented the history of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta that she had previously recollected through the lives of the women of her family in her book *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* (2001). In the Selmans' house[6],

[6] Selman and Silliman are variants of the spelling of the family name. The author chooses the variant 'Selman' in her novel.

we were enraptured by the glamorous and translocal lives of the members of an affluent Baghdadi Jewish family living in the former economic and cultural capital of the Raj, Calcutta.

Throughout her second novel *The Teak Almirah*, we are transported inside the dense lives of those Baghdadi Jews who have decided to stay back in Kolkata and have – willingly or unwillingly – become witnesses of the disentangled existences of those who go there *searching for their roots.* Silliman's second novel, perhaps literarily less accomplished than the first one, is worth reading for the nostalgic requiem sung to the mosaic that Calcutta was (Banerjee, Gupta and Mukherjee 2009). Both the glorious past and the complex present of this vibrant city cannot be entirely assessed without telling the stories of the migrant communities which contributed to transforming it into a cosmopolitan urban centre.

3. *The Teak Almirah*: a diasporic novel of material memories and emotional geographies

Novels such as the one that I address here are created through engaging narratives, which mix realistic plots – sometimes based on real events – with a rich archive of memories capable of stirring emotions. At the crossroads of literature, anthropology and history, Silliman's novel *The Teak Almirah* evokes times and places of colonial India, re-casting them in a new performance where both the characters and the readers are compelled to follow the shadows, the rumours, the hints and the traces that define an emotional geography. As Hemer and Dundon (2016) have recently posed, "space is composed through the senses and emotion" (p. 2) and this relationship between the feelings that people experience and the spaces they come to inhabit is central to the understanding of the human relation to specific places as treasured sites embedded with the spirit of home-place and belonging. Emotional topographies, as Hastrup (2011) defines them following the concept of *topophilia* ('love of place') developed by geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1974), and emotional geographies (Davidson and Milligan 2004; Bondi et al. 2005; Hemer and Dundon 2016) are related to the way individuals feel at home or feel displaced, in a certain familiar *place* or in an unfamiliar *space*. These "relations between sensate bodies, spaces and places, and emotions" (Hemer and Dundon 2016: 3) are mutually

constituted and nurture each other. As Frank Vanclay (2008) argues, it is indeed worth underscoring the way a general space become *a place*, that is "a space that is special to someone" (p. 3), with such specialness becoming "embedded in people's memories and in community stories" (p. 3).

Elaborating on the way this process of place-making evolves, Vanclay (2008) conceives of the power of storytelling as transformative and constitutive, at both individual and collective level, of what he calls "the sense of place". Not just a space is recast into a special place, rooted in people's personal stories, and simultaneously providing roots to people's future existences. It is important to also consider the "sense of place" that is produced in both "visceral (embodied) and cognitive (intellectual)" ways, depending on the nature of the connections established between the people and the space in question. Some attachments, Vanclay argues, are born from the lived experience of the place, but some others are "imagined", not truly born from direct experience of a specific space but connected to fantasies, ideas, projections that the individual may have of an imaginary place. In both cases, the deep-felt connection to a space that has been made into a special place is sustained by narratives.

In the case of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta, who reclaim the city as their home and homeland by recasting themselves as a 'new' Indian religious minority, this process of place-making is particularly relevant and the proliferating of recent works in the newly established field of Indo-Judaic studies, together with the effort by Indian Jewish writers and artists to bring to the surface the (until recently) quite invisible history of this community, remains particularly relevant. As we shall see reading through the latest novel by Jael Silliman, the space accorded to religion is crucial for defining the *specialness* of the Calcutta's Jews: through an archaeology of memory and cultural heritage, the novel navigates the otherwise invisible topographies of these special sites, bringing to light not just the synagogues and the villas that have ostensibly survived the attack of 'modernisation', but also those less detectable places that once upon a time meant 'home' for the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta. Through the mourning pilgrimage of Mordy Ezekiel and the exciting journey of (self) discovery of Tamara Silas, we enter the house of Seemah, and we come to know her distressing story of love and betrayal at the hands

of her Parsi lover Parvez, but we also discover special dishes of the Iraqi cuisine, some ancient, some readapted to the locals' taste for spicy masalas. And we admire, together with Seemah's best friend Annie – an Anglo-Indian – the old and beautiful *almirah*, polished but still empty, that is kept like a treasure basket ravaged by thieves. It stands, mute and sturdy, waiting for a 'special someone' to walk in and fill it again of life, love, and new dreams for the future.

The novel, hence, begins with a short prologue dedicated to this silent and evocative witness of history:

> The handsome teak almirah came home as part of a wedding trousseau. Golden brown, its grain was as smooth and polished as when it was handcrafted in Tomlin's furniture shop more than eighty years ago. […] For more than fifty years the almirah had been filled with clothes, shawls, and evening bags. Then, rather suddenly, its contents had all been emptied out to make space for a special person to come back and use it. Two gold bangles, a gold locket, a small stack of letters and sepia photos tied in frayed mauve ribbon were in one of the locked drawers. Empty and waiting, the teak almirah stood witness to loneliness, longing, and pain. Secrets, fears, and hopes for the future were stuffed inside its locked doors. We all make space for those we love and too often keep our dreams locked away until we find whatever it is we have been seeking. (Silliman 2016: 1)

The prologue suggests that the novel is about a search: in Clifford's words, a search for *roots* and a search for *routes*. When an individual or a group is caught in a dimension of simultaneous mobility and locality, in a transnational condition of diasporic *ductility* similar to that of the nomad who constantly moves around and then, from time to time, pins his tent down and 'makes space' for his 'home', such dynamics of place-making acquire a relevance that cannot be ignored. As Janine Dahinden has rightly pointed out, "transnational arrangements are maintained or even enforced through mobility. In this sense, 'roots and routes' (Clifford 1994b) are both present in different transnational formations, but they may appear in different combinations" (Dahinden 2010: 51).

Because of the possibility of "different combinations" that come to define these mutually nurturing processes, the stories that Silliman weaves in *The Teak Almirah* seem even more representative of the difficulty of defining the diasporic condition of the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta, who simultaneously pledge their *topophilia* for the city

they consider home, manifesting a 'sense of place' that leads some of them to reclaim a sort of 'indigeneity' embedded in the history of colonial India[7], but also feel a strong attachment to a transnational dimension of belonging, which is related to the *imagined homeland* as a non-territorial entity, a global space and an elective affinity bound to the religion they profess[8]. This complexity, which Silliman condenses, without trivialising it, into a sensitive and evocative literary narrative of nostalgia and hope, remains the unsolved conundrum of many transnational mobile people today, who live across and beyond. It is interesting to note that Janine Dahinden, to elaborate on the notion of transnational mobiles, chooses the case study of cabaret dancers in Switzerland. She writes: "These dancers represent a heterogeneous group and embody a particular form of female mobility that corresponds in our typology to the *transnational mobiles*" (2010: 60). However, as Dahinden further elaborates, not all cabaret dancers are able to exploit to their advantage this condition of transnational mobility, ending up as what she terms "transnational outsiders" (p. 60). The difference is mostly tied to the capacity of certain dancers to navigate the grey areas and "establish a whole series of vertical, locally anchored relations". In so doing, these women "can avoid exploitation and stay mobile, and they get to know where they can earn the most money with the fewest risks" (p. 62).

I have reported this example of female transnational mobility because – perhaps not by chance – one of the main characters of the novel, Tamara Silas, is a flamenco dancer. She is, at the beginning of the story, the only 'real stranger' to the city. Born in the UK from a Baghdadi Jewish father and a British Anglican mother, Tamara has

[7] As Anna Guttman has highlighted, "It is worth noting that Baghdadi Jews, whose presence in India dates to the eighteenth-century, have not been idealized in the contemporary Indian press (Egorova, Jews and India 90). The British colonial government was anxious, particularly during World War I, about the fact that some of them had Turkish ancestry, and imposed restrictions on them under the Foreigners Act (Jews in British India 62-63). Scholars, too, such as Roland, have read them as less authentically 'Indian' (Jews in British India 56-57). Thomas Timberg also questions their indigeneity, while pointing out that they identified with Indian culture (146)." (Guttman 2013: 14).

[8] This was further complicated by the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, which territorially defined the homeland and materially provided the place to be.

lived all her life in England and has only vague and rather exotic memories of the city of her father's childhood. She knows even less about Judaism and the history of the Baghdadi Jews of India. When she finally manages to obtain a scholarship to go to teach flamenco in Calcutta, she embarks on an exciting journey of discovery that is characterised by her skilful ability to connect. Exactly like a dancer on an empty stage, Tamara slowly traces her movements, counts her steps, measures the distances and progressively inscribes her trajectories on the blank platform that is Calcutta: the people she meets enter a familiar space and yet discover, thanks to Tamara's passionately choreographed dance, new places and new paths that they had thought were either closed or forbidden to tread.

Tamara, whose gender, and ethnic and religious *fluidity* are highlighted by the way she connects with the people she meets and the environment she comes to explore, is like the skilful cabaret dancers in Dahinden's study: capable of shifting from the status of 'transnational outsider' to the one of 'transnational mobile'. Tamara establishes a local foothold in Calcutta/Kolkata, finally finding 'new' parents in Seemah and Mordy, a 'new' sense of belonging in the Jewish community of her natural father, 'new' vibes in the possible love with the Bengali dancer Rita. Through her love for life and her passionate curiosity for the Jewish religion within the Indian culture, Tamara fills with hope and aspiration the neglected *almirah* that Seemah had kept for her natural daughter Firoza, taken away from her at birth and secretly given to a Parsi couple in faraway Puna.

With Firoza, Tamara only shares a sense of 'lack' but, unlike her 'twin sister', she is keen to embrace her adopted parents and let Indianness and Jewishness pervade her being, preferring a ductile sense of emotional identification to a rigid, and ultimately fake and constrictive, identity label. Whilst Firoza is full of anger and feels betrayed at the discovery that her Parsi parents were 'just' her adoptive ones, Tamara is keen to be adopted by Seemah and Mordy through *elective affinities*: in a Goethean sense, she is ready to step out of social conventions and choose according to her heart and desires. Brah's 'homing desire' makes her feel at home with Seemah and Mordy, without the necessity of biological genealogies. While Firoza panics at the realisation that her Parsi religious identity is falling off like a broken mask, Tamara happily dances through life

and embraces her layered subjectivity. The fact that Silliman chose as the novel's main character a flamenco dancer, an art whose origins are to be found among the gypsies of India who migrated to Spain in the fifteenth century as part of an 'Indian diaspora', is in itself very telling. Through her dancing body, Tamara fully embraces the heritage of her father's Jewish Calcutta, whilst delving with all her heart into the possibility of loving Rita, a Bengali woman whose attractive looks and reserved behaviour convey the mystery of Calcutta/Kolkata, at the same time charmingly traditional and ambiguously modern, its secrets secluded in the symbolic slash that signals both a boundary and a line of passage.

Tamara travels between the UK, India, and Australia (where Mordy lives), maintaining transnational ties that nurture her dreams. Like the successful cabaret dancers, Tamara creates for herself a transnational family that is dispersed in space, and yet not emotionally displaced, because all these places progressively and centripetally converge towards the centre of life, which is the exciting 'new' Kolkata, where Tamara envisions hope for a homosexual love with the Bengali dancer Rita, whose religion, ethnicity, language and gender add to the excitement rather than creating fear of rejection. It is through a deep-felt wish to 'feel at home' in the world that it is in Calcutta/Kolkata that Tamara finally manages to connect to the people, the places and the memories that constitute her newly found 'family'. As Hemer and Dundon (2016) have pointed out, "the nexus of senses, spaces and emotions revolve around processes, practices and experiences of engagement, performance, composition and transformation" (pp. 4-5).

Transferring to the public stage of the world her talent as a transnationally mobile flamenco dancer, Tamara engages, performs, composes and transforms – through her sensate body – the place and the people that occupy it. It is this alchemy of emotions that make of *The Teak Almirah* a really "poignant" novel, as defined by the historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee and by writer and publisher Navin Kishore on the back cover of the first edition. *The Teak Almirah* posits itself as a theatrical novel where all the characters are engaged in a performance of love, faith and belonging: love for the people and the places that these people contribute to make *special*; faith in religion but also in an enlarged sense of trans-religious humanity; belonging beyond identity labels and rigid categories.

4. Conclusions

The Baghdadi Jews were among the most important pieces of the multicultural jigsaw of colonial Calcutta (Banerjee, Gupta and Mukherjee 2009). Although their almost invisible status in postcolonial Kolkata makes it difficult to assess their great contribution, the narratives of their history of settling and growing on the shores of the river Hooghly[9] shed light on the diasporic history of so-called Oriental Jews and help to discover those forgotten stories of individuals and families who came to India in search of a better life.

Silliman's novel *The Teak Almirah* is a work capable of adding "voices that might not otherwise be heard, voices that might not emerge through the ordinary fieldwork process, but still are needed for understanding of the culture under consideration" (Tallman 2002: 13). Allowing "a polyphonic, heteroglossic, multigenre construction" (Rose 1993: 218) to take the place of classic ethnography, Janet Tallman (2002) also highlights the importance of such writings, born from serious academic involvement in the subject under scrutiny, but also from the insider's perspective of the author who writes them, as s/he can create and depict "through imagination and art, a picture of a culture with its own coherence, as seen from the inside, with its underlying assumptions taken for granted but present and available for discovery" (2002: 20).

These voices bodily emerge in their flesh and blood in *The Teak Almirah*, a novel of lost and found love: tender love for a place once called 'home', nostalgic love for a past that is never going to return, passionate love for a future that appears increasingly uncertain and yet full of optimism. Or, we may prefer to say that the Baghdadi Jews of India are full of *pessoptimism*, expressed by Silliman in a style which, paraphrasing Rushdie[10], could come to be interpreted

[9] The Hooghly (also spelled Hoogli or Hugli) is a distributary river of the river Ganges. It is also called Bhāgirathi-Hooghly. Bengali people often refer to it simply as the 'Ganga', or Kati-Ganga.

[10] In his interview with Edward Said, published in *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie asks him a question regarding the *real* existence of the Palestinian Nation. Said replies in an elaborate manner, concluding that "the Palestinians are a people who move a lot, who are always carrying bags from one place to another. This gives us a further sense of identity as a people. And we say it loudly enough, repetitiously

"as a first manifestation of the attempt to write in a form which appears to be formlessness, and which in fact mirrors the instability of the situation" (1991: 174).

The tiny and fleeting Baghdadi Jewish diaspora, which kept itself mobile and transnational, marrying across borders and oceans whilst disregarding allegiances with the other Jews of India, has decided to reclaim its place among the communities that inhabited the *grey town* of colonial Calcutta[11]. Asking for legal recognition in the pluralistic religious and cultural landscape of India, Baghdadi Jews have been re-investing in cultural and symbolic capital, materially represented by the synagogues, the houses, the cemeteries, the restaurants, and the bakeries that still survive in the fast-developing new Kolkata.

The crucial importance of this diasporic novel, at the crossroads between autobiographical memoir and historical essay, lies in its unique capacity to delve into the culture and religious practices of this almost forgotten community, whilst at the same time defining it beyond the lines of the community itself. While it is crucial to keep in mind Avtar Brah's warning that "diasporic or border positionality does not *in itself* assure a vantage point of privileged insight into and understanding of relations of power" (1996: 204), it is also important

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enough and stridently enough, strong in the knowledge that they haven't been able to get rid of us. It is a great feeling – call it positive or pessoptimistic – to wake up in the morning and say: "Well they didn't bump me off.' (1991: 174). The concept of pessoptimism is an interesting one when engaging with floating and mobile communities, especially those ones who need to repeatedly perform and assert their belonging to a place called home despite the risk of being erased from these imaginary national maps.

[11] In between the 'White Town' of the Europeans and the 'Black Town' of the Indians, there was a *grey zone* where different migrant communities came to settle, progressively establishing their business and building their homes. This was the so-called 'Grey Town' of colonial Calcutta. "Tiretta Bazaar sat within colonial Calcutta's "Grey Town", the flourishing commercial centre that developed from the mid-eighteenth century. Scores of immigrant communities made the city their homes. Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Parsis, Chinese, Anglo-Indians and Muslims, all lived in this grey town in neighbourly camaraderie", writes scholar Rinkoo Bhowmik, who names this part of Calcutta the "Heritage Strip" (2018: 258). Bengali scholar Ranjit Sen also writes of this intermediate zone which was inhabited by different communities and "acted as a buffer" zone between the White and the Black towns (2019a; 2019b).

to acknowledge, as Brah herself does, that autobiographical accounts concur to "create a space in which experiential mediations may intersect in ways that render such understandings more readily accessible" (p. 204). It is such a space that is relevant in this cosmopolitan literature as world-making literature. Giving *space* to the details, the hidden memories, and the secret aspirations of the people – Jewish and not – who bring to life the characters of these novels, these writers allow untellable secrets, melancholic songs and other precious mementoes to come out from the teak *almirahs* of the Baghdadi Jewish houses.

Jael Silliman, choosing to narrate otherwise forgotten micro(hi) stories, allows the reader to access an archive which is both private and public, both personal and collective. As Aafredi puts it, "[t] hese novels help bring nuance to this sense of Jewish difference in Indian society – it is possibly the careful and unhurried portraits of these communities that are their greatest strength" (2014a). Through these bonds and connections, a deep and long-lasting relation has been created between human bodies and geographical spaces, a space that the characters of Silliman's last novel navigate with both fear and excitement. This novel of nostalgia by Jael Silliman, which appears as a requiem for the lost Calcutta but is instead, in its deeper sense, a song of hope for present-day Kolkata, charmingly reflects the history of this religious diaspora, whose heritage lives on in the majestic synagogues and residential buildings of the urban architecture, but whose legacy is far more reaching, and presently worth re-assessing, in the complex political, social, and religious space of contemporary India.

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