

Book Review

Jael Silliman, *The Man with Many Hats* (Kolkata: Jael Silliman; New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Pvt Ltd., 2013). ISBN 978 81704 6 350 4

Reviewed by Shalva Well

Jael Silliman's book *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* was a pioneering masterpiece exploring four generations of her own Calcutta Jewish family. It began with her maternal great-grandmother, Farha, and continued with the story of her maternal grandmother Miriam. It moved to her mother Flower and ended up with a reflexive sketch of herself. Even in Silliman's great-grandmothers' day, when family businesses extended throughout the East from Calcutta to Rangoon to Singapore and China, Farha traveled extensively, but social interaction with others took place exclusively within the confines of the Jewish community; the influences upon her were heavily Judeo-Arabic. Miriam, by contrast, called herself Mary and led a far more Anglicized existence, hobnobbing with the British colonialists and enjoying tennis and English tea. Jael's mother, Flower, lived through Indian Independence and the immigration of many members of her community to English-speaking countries and to Israel.

The "Baghdadi" Jewish community, as it became known, settled in two major centers in India: Calcutta and Mumbai. One of the legendary founders of the Calcutta Jewish community was Shalome Cohen, a merchant born in Aleppo, Syria, who settled there in 1798. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thousands of "Baghdadis" lived in Calcutta; at their height during the Second World War they numbered 5,000 souls. As many as eight synagogues operated regularly, and several publishing houses simultaneously translated holy texts into Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. The Jews of the Raj had a glorious life, complete with servants, summer houses, clubs, and race horses, the historical illusion only to be shattered by Indian independence in 1947. The "Baghdadis" were different from the British in color, religion, and status. Yet, in different contexts, they identified with those very colonizers. After the withdrawal of the British from India, with whom they had associated as non-Indians, many Baghdadi Jews decided to immigrate to the United States and other English-speaking countries. *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* belongs to a genre of books, notable among which can be mentioned *Hooghly Tales*, *Jews of the Raj*, *The Jews of Calcutta*, and *Turning Back the Pages: A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry*, all of which attempt, in their own individual manner, to record and preserve historical memory of the fading Jewish life in Calcutta by interspersing personal recollection with community history. They are all written by educated, members or ex-members of the Calcutta community, who, like Silliman, feel the urge to record for posterity the curious history and day-to-day life of this remarkable tiny community, which impacted India in such a relatively short time. The originality in *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* was the feminist narrative and the attempt to uncover history matrilineally.

In *The Man with Many Hats* Silliman has returned in a new Indian reincarnation and instead of the family history intertwined with communal, national, and international episodes she had narrated in *Jewish Portraits*, she now presents to us a personal novel based on her own life-story and on other Calcutta Jewish figures. Silliman claims that it is a work of fiction inspired by characters she knew in the Calcutta Jewish community. She admits that some of the incidents are derived from her own experience. A battery of relatives and close friends helped her bring the novel into being, and, according to Silliman, at times, the characters acquired lives of their own.

The novel is interesting for researchers of Indian Jewish communities or scholars of ethnic minorities in India, and specifically for members of the once thriving Calcutta Jewish community. It recalls an India that has all but disappeared and the post-independence Jewish community of Calcutta before its final demise. Featured in the novel are descriptions

of the Jewish institutions such as the synagogue or the Maccabi sports club, as well as of Calcutta's numerous non-Jewish institutions frequented by the Jews, such as the Metro cinema (inaugurated in 1935 to promote Metro-Mayer-Goldwyn films) or Loreto School, the prim school run by the Irish Roman Catholic nuns, to which many of the wealthier Jewish girls were sent.

The passages on the Jewish festival recapture a past never to be repeated. The heroine's brother had a bar mitzvah at Neveh Shalome synagogue on Simchat Torah. Silliman writes: "Over 80 parokhet (sic) hung from the ladies' gallery. The large, brightly coloured velvet hangings were richly embroidered with coloured and metal threads... The warm glow of the oil lamps hanging from the high ceilings of the inner sanctuary threw intermittent patterns of flickering light on the multicoloured tile flooring that encircled the inner sanctuary. Community members and relations from the Maghen David and the Beth El synagogue came for Jacob's maftir (sic)..." (p. 74).

However, *The Man with Many Hats* is not a very good novel. There is no plot, no adventure, no story, just a never-ending narrative on fragmented lives. The book is in fact a quasi-autobiographical account of the authoress' trajectory with detailed explorations into her relations with her father, whom she had almost obliterated from *Jewish Portraits* in that it was a matrilineal history. In *The Man with Many Hats*, her father is the major character, but for the reader, it is much like reading psychoanalytical reports emanating from dozens of sessions on the couch. The novel examines the bullying and negative traits of the heroine's (and author's) father and her eventual reconciliation with this lonely character after her own marriage crumbles. Rachel is the main character and narrator: Her natal family disintegrates, her Orthodox Jewish grandmother departs for a secure Jewish community in Golders Green in London, her mother and brother immigrate to Israel, her father remains in Calcutta and turns their home into a bachelor pad replete with drinking and card parties throughout the night, and she herself immigrates to the United States and marries a Bengali Hindu. In turn, Rachel's marriage disintegrates after many years, when she discovers that her husband is cheating on her; coming full circle, she returns to reside in her ancestral home in Calcutta.

While Silliman's own personal history is interesting portraying a new type of Indian, born in 1955, yet part of a postcolonial world, which is on the one hand more cosmopolitan, and on the one hand, more Indian but distinctly less Jewish, the novel itself fails to retain interest. In fact, parts of it are quite boring, even to a person such as myself who loves historical depictions of Jewish life now gone. Nevertheless, the novel remains an important ethnographic document with valuable descriptions that will never be able to be reconstructed again.

Calcutta today is a miserable place for Jews. Only one synagogue is open occasionally—if enough tourists visit to make up a *minyan* (quorum). There are less than 25 Jews residing in the city. Even Nahoum from the mouth-watering bakery in New Market passed away in March 2013 leaving a void difficult to express.