

Transnational Ethnoscape of the Contemporary Indian Jewish Diaspora in

Jael Silliman's *The Man With Many Hats*

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Diaspora and transnationalism are quite overlapping terms with not so clearly defined boundaries. The term diaspora is an old one which has profusely entered the domain of both public and academic discourses. However, the term 'transnationalism' is a recent one which has gained frequency of reference since the 1990s. Diaspora is, by default, a part of transnational ethnoscape but that also subverts the very existence and structuration of a particular diaspora, such as the Jewish diaspora in India. The process of migration of people across national boundaries asserts a fluidity that is an essential component of the diaspora. There are certain factors based on which we can draw some sort of a partition between the two concepts. Diaspora involves a certain level of compulsive migration. It has connotations of a forced migration that may be on account of threat to the existence of the members of a community or due to other economical and social pressures. Being transnational on the other hand is not so much a matter

of compulsion, as that of choice. Individuals and communities that migrate in search of better financial opportunities or living conditions, are perhaps better represented as transnationals. Once these individuals or groups of people begin to settle in a country other than their native one, they forge communal ties with the other migrant people of their own origin and formulate a community of their own in the host land. They may send a part of their earnings to their families in their homeland or may even support some social movements of change or organizations working for the upliftment of their people, but the element of deep-seated nostalgia or a longing to be united with their own land is not so pronounced, and sometimes even absent. Though they may not fully acculturate in the foreign culture and retain their social and religious identities, they assimilate in the routine life of their host nation to the full extent. They celebrate the local festivals, cherish their occasions, participate in social events, live and work as one with the people of the host country, but inside the bounds of their homes, their own identity is preserved and they keep the elements of their native culture alive. But, it is quite pertinent to ask that just as transnational ethnoscares are created, so can they be dissolved, and to what effect? The answer is yes, and this is proved by the specific case of the Jewish diaspora in India, enough members of which have consciously moved out of their ethnoscape, thereby reducing the mass of the diaspora and rendering it vulnerable to disappearance. Author and scholar of Jewish diaspora, Jael Silliman published a novel, *The Man With Many Hats*, that portrays the concerns of the rapidly shrinking Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta, in India. This paper attempts to

explore the novel to analyse how the concept of transnational ethnoscape applies to the Indian Jewish Diaspora.

Although the two terms defy strict taxonomical specification, scholars of diaspora and transnationalism have persistently striven to establish a thin line between the parameters that define the two concepts. Noted scholar of diaspora and transnationalism, Thomas Faist proposes that the concept of diaspora has existed for a long stretch of time and there have been multi-dimensional additions to its original implications. He divides the concept of the diaspora into three basic characteristics and subdivides them based on the earlier and newer uses of each characteristic. Broadly, these characteristics are: the cause of dispersal, the cross-border experiences of the migrant population, and the integration of migrants into the host country. The newer uses of the term diaspora differ diametrically from these pristine implications and give rise to the concept of transnationalism. In the newer uses, the cause of dispersal is not necessarily a forced migration rather, in most cases, it is a deliberate choice, such as trade diasporas. Also, the inundating desire of return to the home country is replaced by continual cross-border links wherein the settlers begin to see the host land as home too, and the transnational ethnoscape become their new reality. Faist comments with regard to transnationalism:

While the term ‘diaspora’ always refers to a community or group and has been heavily used in history and literary studies, concepts such as transnationalism –

and transnational spaces, fields and formations – refer to processes that transcend international borders and therefore appear to describe more abstract phenomena in a social science language. By transnational spaces we mean relatively stable, lasting and dense sets of ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states. (Bauböck & Faist, 2010, p. 13)

The concept of transnationalism entails its own set of fresh implications and stresses on the structuring of lateral ties between the two countries of migration. Moreover transnationals try to obtain a dual citizenship of the home country as well as the host country and never actually leave their place of birth eroding the very ground of the structuration of diaspora which implies a sort of loss of the earlier occupied territory. The transnationals continually juggle between the two countries of their origin and destination thereby emphasizing the element of mobility which is not so much a characteristic of the diaspora.

Jael Silliman's *The Man With Many Hats* narrates the experiences of a fast dwindling Baghdadi Jewish community of the Indian city of Calcutta (now Kolkata). The prime focus of the novel is the Selman family which belongs to the class of Calcutta Selmans who are Sephardic Jews and migrated to India mostly from Syria and Iraq. Morris Selman's family was one of the earliest Jews to settle in India around the year 1780 when the British had placed themselves as a trading company in India and the colonization was yet distant. The significant thing to note here

is that the Selman family was not a part of the diaspora in the original sense of the term as their migration to India was more rooted in transnational implications. Morris' ancestors settled in India owing to the business opportunities that were available to them. That they made India their permanent home distinguishes them from the original implication of a diaspora where the families often longed to return to their homeland. Moreover, they were quite at home in Calcutta and never once mention, even faintly, a longing to return their place of origin. Morris acknowledges at one point: "Like my ancestors, I intend to continue living here for the rest of my life. I love this city, and even if I say so myself, this city loves me." (Silliman, 2013, p. 43) Thus, the Jews were completely at home in India and engaged themselves mostly in business such as real estate, foreign exchange, opium farming, shipping, among others. Not only they did not experience any anti-Semitic tendency in India, they received ample opportunities to grow under the British Raj and the testimony to the fact is the well-established and opulent family background that the protagonist boasts of. In fact, in the 1960s Calcutta became a transnational hub in itself:

At that point in time, in the early sixties, there were still fairly substantial communities of Jewish, Armenian, Anglo-Indian and Chinese families in Calcutta. In any case, as the commercial hub of India and because of its proximity to Burma, Calcutta's population was very much a crossroads of peoples from all parts of India as well as from other parts of the neighbouring world. There was

also a shifting population of Europeans, British and Americans visiting or living in Calcutta for pleasure or for business. (Silliman, 2013, p. 6)

Thus, the Jews in India established a community of their own and prospered just like any other native communities, even more so. They left India in huge numbers following its independence in 1947 and that greatly diminished the size of their transnational ethnoscape. But there were families such as that of Morris Selman, who preferred to stay back in India as they found India to be their rightful home. This raises several puzzling questions as to the concept of home. Is home in such cases to be defined as a geographical entity or is it defined more by one's relations and identity? The latter seems to be the case of the Selmans in the narrative.

The oldest member of the Selman family, Sarah's mother Mozelle is the only one who shows a genuine and quite staunch regard for the Jewish traditions and customs. She is very particular about the manner in which the people of her daughter's generation as well as that of her grandchildren, Rachel and Jacob, conduct themselves both at important events of the community as well as on routine days. Everything in her life had to be strictly in consistence to the Jewish Halakha. But, Sarah was a modern educated girl, living in a completely different, multicultural setting than her own and so she followed the Jewish customs only to the extent they suited her. She was so suffocated of the hard rules of her childhood that Morris's spontaneity and carefree temperament immediately appealed to her and she took a decision to

marry him in order to escape the conservative home of her mother and their Jewish community where “everybody knew everyone else and all their business too” (Silliman, 2013, p. 53).

However, Morris too, was proud of his Jewish traditions. Though he was not a frequent synagogue visitor, he made sure that his children celebrated the Jewish festivals with full enthusiasm and that the family visited the synagogues as on those days in order to stay in touch with their identity: “He made it a point to walk with his children, and Hannah and David, all the way to the Neveh Shalome synagogue on Yom Kippur day, the holiest day of all in the Jewish calendar, for them to comprehend the significance of the Day of Atonement.” (Silliman, 2013, p.

11) However, the newer generation or the third generation of the Selman family is not so sympathetic towards traditions and customs as is evident by Rachel’s remark that the Maghen David synagogue is so much bigger and better than the Neveh Shalome and looks much better. It signals that the newer generation, born and brought up in India, has no deep-seated regard for the traditional customs and also do not have any longing of return to an idealized homeland.

Another central symbolic reference to Jewish customs in the narrative is that of the mezuzah which is a Jewish parchment scroll usually affixed to the doorposts in order to signify the Jewish identity of the inhabitants, as well as it comes with a metaphorical significance of prolongation of the life of the members of the family, as per the divine commandments. At the very beginning, the otherwise ebullient Morris is shown paying respects to the mezuzah at the main entrance of his house, after which he again retains his usual high-spirited demeanour:

“Morris bowed his head and closed his eyes for a solemn moment to touch the mezuzah on the handsome teak doorframe. Putting his hand to his lips in a grave kiss he prayed for God to bless and protect his home. Then, back in Morris style, he rang the bell noisily.” (Silliman, 2013, p. 4)

At one point, Mozelle uses the mezuzah as a reference for the bare symbolic marker of the Jewishness of the household, devoid of any deeper significance: “Mozelle impressed on Sarah how important it was to observe Halakha. ‘Sarah, except for the mezuzah on your front door, you wouldn’t know there are Jews living here’.” (Silliman, 2013, p. 56) She also feels that Morris has made quite a mockery of Sabbath by turning it into a holiday where friends get together, hang out and pass a merry time. This is in line with what Caryn S. Aviv and David Shneer highlight when they observe:

Although the majority of contemporary Jews no longer use bathhouses and traditional schools as their way of making home, many still perform acts of marking Jewish space by hanging a mezuzah on a doorpost. Ask most American Jews, and they’ll say that hanging a mezuzah is one of the most important symbols that visibly and publicly renders a home as “Jewish.” (Aviv & Shneer, 2005, p. 6)

The mezuzah thus, becomes just a symbolic marker of their Jewish identity. With the next generation of the family, even the allegorical mezuzah loses any profound connotations. One

afternoon, in a hurry to get home Rachel ran through the streets of Calcutta and when she reached home, she “barely skimmed the mezuzah with her right hand” (Silliman, 2013, p. 20).

This evinces her following a custom by way of formality rather than with any sense of regard for the communal traditions like her father or grandmother.

Settling in Israel, the imagined homeland for all the Jews scattered around the world, seemed to be the ultimate end to grandmother Mozelle’s generation: “You know I will get each of you the papers you need to make aliyah to Israel after you finish school.” (Silliman, 2013, p. 68) But when Rachel moved to study and then later settle in the U.S., she never once visualized Israel as her ideal home. This evokes a part of the transnational existence which is not characterized by an ingrained nostalgia for an idealized homeland. Although, studying in America had been a great disturbance in her routine life, and at first she did not quite fit in. This spatial parameter is one of the prime aspects of the transnational communities. The people living as transnationals in places other than that of their origin develop a milder concept of home rather than conceptualizing home as a physical entity somewhere far away in an idealized homeland. After marriage, Rachel builds a family with Ronen and considers their home in America as the ‘home’ with the comfort of family and the love of relations that holds all the possibilities of a safe and secure future. Hence, she does not visualize Israel as the ideal homeland in the manner her grandmother does. Moreover, she sees India as her ideal homeland and thus frequently

returns to India during her holidays. This is not the case with Sarah, who sees a probable happy future in Israel following her imploding marriage with Morris:

After all, she was not yet fifty and a new life was still possible. And what better option than Israel? Jacob could come along with her as he had just completed his high school, and was young enough to adapt and make a life for himself in Israel. She hoped Rachel would join them. And she had many relatives and friends from Calcutta who had settled in Israel over the years. (Silliman, 2013, p. 102)

However, it was rather a compulsion for her to leave for Israel as her marriage had ended on an ugly note owing to her abusive husband who had extra-marital affairs with another woman.

Therefore, 'home' for Sarah too, was more defined by the relationships she was bound to and the geographical space she had come to inhabit all her life, rather than a nostalgic notion of an idealized homeland. Also, she would be granted an immigrant status in Israel, something which punctures the idea of it being home to all the Jewish people in the world. Even Indian Jewish immigrants of the Bene Israel group of India were, at first, specifically refused to be considered as legitimate Jews by the native authorities of Israel because of the allegation that they engaged in intermarriage and hence were not 'pure' Jews. Shalva Weil notes that the Bene Israel took the traditional Indian joint family system to Israel and exhibit a similar family system transnationally. (Weil, 2012)

Mobility is an important factor that separates the concept of transnationalism from that of diaspora. Janine Dahinden makes an acutely penetrative observation in this regard:

My central argument is that transnational formations result from a combination of transnational mobility, on the one hand, and locality in the sending or/and receiving country, on the other. Mobility is to be understood here as the physical movement of people in transnational space. Locality means being rooted or anchored – socially, economically or politically – in the country of immigration and/or in the sending country; it means developing/having a set of social relations at specific places. (Bauböck & Faist, 2010, p. 51)

In the novel, even Rachel becomes a member of the local society of America, by having a family and a tenured job as a professor there but, she also maintains frequent ties with India from where she had migrated to the U.S. Both she and her Bengali husband Ronen have social relationships in America as well as in India. She made sure to come back to India during holidays thereby fulfilling the aspect of ‘mobility’ that is a key parameter of the transnational ethnoscape, although it was not that simple:

It had not been easy to come back home whenever she wished when she had travelled so far to pursue further studies, to find the right job, or to follow

Ronen's tortuous career path so that her family could stay together. She had created countless spaces to fill in as temporary homes. (Silliman, 2013, p. 179)

Even as she remembered her grandmother's words that "Israel has always been our spiritual home" (Silliman, 2013, p. 199), and in the past whenever the plane used to touch the holy ground, the passengers would all clap, she felt the similar kind of emotion "each time she landed in Calcutta" (Silliman, 2013, p. 200). Therefore, home for transnational migrants such as Rachel is defined more in terms of memories of a cherished time in the past and by their relations. Whatever emotions they may harbour with respect to their physical home are expressed in the periodic mobility to their homeland, which is a key aspect of transnational existence.

The transnational effect is also seen in terms of the cultural impact on familial relationships and institutions such as marriage. When Ronen casually remarks that one in three marriages end in divorce and so it is not a big deal that their marriage of twenty years has also ended, Rachel counters him by saying that they are not Americans. But, Ronen has settled in the foreign culture so perfectly that not only he sees America as his ideal homeland, but is secretly involved in an extra-marital affair with an American woman, who also happens to be Rachel's colleague at work. Even Ronen's parents do not approve of his decision to take a divorce from Rachel. But his transnational existence and the freedom it brings to him has conditioned him to easily break off from a well-settled and happy married life of over twenty

years in just a few days. Alejandro Portes uses the term “transnationalism” to denote the activities in which the individual migrants engage in. He therefore talks not about the interactions between governments or even between big non-governmental organizations and businesses, but focuses on the individuals who forge personal relationships and live in a cross-border setting with frequent linkages between their host country and the place of their origin.

This is what Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith do when they distinguish between “transnationalism from above” & “transnationalism from below”. (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998)

Writing in the similar vein, a celebrated scholar of Jewish diaspora, Deborah Dash Moore comes up with a crucial observation:

Migration placed the individual at the centre of Jewish collective endeavor and transformed community activity. Entrepreneurship generated action; showmanship launched communal projects. Individual Jews supported Israel, joined a synagogue, or participated in Jewish politics, not due to the weight of tradition or any collective compulsion, but because each one saw some personal meaning in the act. (Moore, 1994, p. 266)

This is seen manifested in the world of the novel where Morris contributes to support the girls of Mozelle’s hostel in building up a new life in Israel. He is not bound by any religious or societal compulsion but does so out of his own free will and personal choice.

The transnational ethnoscape of the Jewish community in India is almost nearing its complete dissolution with just a few hundred members remaining, who are soon to migrate to Israel. According to a report published in the *Arutz Sheva*, one-hundred and two members of the Jewish community in India, who claim to belong to one of Israel's lost tribes have freshly migrated to Israel in February, 2017. Most of these belong to the Bnei Menasche Jewish community of the Indian state of Mizoram and their transition from India to Israel has been brought about by the nonprofit organization, Shavei Israel. (Dolsten, 2017). This is the existential dilemma that faces the Jewish family in the narrative of Silliman's novel. With virtually no member of the Jewish community remaining in Calcutta, and the friends who chose to remain, being long-dead, Morris is quite lonely and erratic in his old age and dies a pitiable death longing for the good old days when the community flourished in India. The fact that they deliberately chose India as their home for economical purposes and were hardly perturbed by a nostalgia for their place of origin renders them the status of transnational migrants. The newer generation, that of Rachel, and her kids, are transnationals in a totally different perspective since they view India as their ideal homeland and even till the last pages of the novel, Rachel makes a conscious decision to give up her job in America and settle in India, not Israel. She took this decision too, not on account of any nostalgia for the homeland, or an inability to assimilate in the foreign environment, which she did quite well. The decision comes only after her marriage with Ronen ends in a disaster and the concept of 'home' that she had structured for herself implodes.

Hence, the concept of the transnational ethnoscape applies to the world of the novel in particular and the Jewish community in India in general. It is also significant to note that since most of the members of the different Jewish communities of India have consciously, and without any compulsion, such as anti-Semitic threats or question of livelihood, made a decision and left the country to settle elsewhere, the transnational ethnoscape is near its complete dissolution in India. In conclusion, the remark of American journalist and author Larry Tye is quite relevant with regard to the scenario of the novel: "That metaphor of a people longing to go home is compelling. It is also outdated." (Tye, 2002) At least, in case of the Baghdadi Jewish community of India, specifically its recent generations, the desire for being reunited with Israel is a pretty bygone idea. Morris and more than him, Rachel, feel at home truly in Calcutta and it is the place where one preferably dies and the other ultimately returns, culminating her transnational migrant status in America.

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