



Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope (HBI Series on Jewish Women)

Jael Silliman

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Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames offers a personal and social history of the author's foremothers -- Baghdadi Jews who lived most of their lives in the Jewish community in Calcutta. Jael Silliman begins with a portrait of Farha, her maternal great-greandmother, who dwelled almost entirely within the Baghdadi Jewish community no matter where she and her husband traveled on business (Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore). Next is her maternal grandmother, Miriam (Mary), who was much more Anglicized than Farha and deeply influenced by British colonial practices. The third portrait, of Silliman's mother, Flower, reveals a woman in a double transition: her own and India's. Flower grew up in colonial India, witnessed India's struggle for independence, and lived her middle years in an independent India. The final sketch is of Silliman herself. Born in Calcutta in 1955 in the waning Jewish community, Silliman grew up in a cosmopolitan and Indian world, rather than a Baghdadi Jewish one. Silliman's own travels have taken her to the US, where, as a teacher and scholar, her primary identification is with the "South Asian intellectual and professional diaspora." These rich family portraits convey a sense of the singular roles women played in building and sustaining a complex diaspora in what Silliman calls "Jewish Asia" over the past 150 years. Her sketches of the everyday lives of her foremothers -- from the food they ate and the clothes they wore to the social and political relationships they forged -- bring to life a community and a culture, even as they disclose the unexpected and subtle complexities of the colonial encounter as experienced by Jewish women.

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