

## **And Thereby Hangs a Tale: A Reading of Community and Identity Formation through Alka Saraogi's *Kalikatha* – via *Bypass***

**Saikat Sarkar**

In the field of Indian Writing in English the trajectories of migration are usually charted as events happening across and beyond the borders of nations. Notwithstanding the international character of migration studies it is also important to look within the borders to trace the myriad acts of migration that shape and reshape the history of a nation like India and its people. In the study of the formation of the national character of India the significance of the indigenous narratives are undeniable as one may, by slightly tweaking Sheldon Pollock's observation, contend that "the literatures of [India] constitute one of the great achievements of human creativity" (2). It is similarly important to bring into the ambit of discussion the literature written in vernacular Indian languages to make it possible for communities within a multi-ethnic country like India to interact with each other and, thereby, achieve a comprehensive understanding of the locations of culture. Additionally, we should bring the emphasis on translation which plays a key role in cultural interactions across and within borders.

To academicians and researchers of Indian writing in English the word diaspora perhaps comes automatically/fluidly these days as an easily applicable word with which the fiction of some of the well known writers of Indian origin can be explained. One look at the internet will provide a staggering number of entries on writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. One can opine that the relevance of diaspora studies and the easy availability of material have resulted in the area being over-worked by researchers. This over-worked nature of diaspora studies has compelled William Safran, one of the early theorizers of diaspora studies, to comment on 'the uses and misuses

of the concept.’ In an essay named “Deconstructing and comparing diasporas” he opines that

Diaspora is a concept that is being used so widely that it has become an academic growth industry – not only in political science, but also in anthropology, sociology, psychology, religious studies, history, and even literature. (9)

In the same essay Safran further contends that

the indiscriminate extension of the label to almost any group of expatriates, or even to individual migrants, has denuded the concept of much of its historical meaning and led to a conflation of the term, which has made it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish diasporas from other kinds of minority communities and to reduce the concept to a useless metaphor. (9-10)

I have no issues in endorsing Safran’s observation on diaspora as an academic growth industry and it is also understandable, based on the countless research papers churned on diasporic Indian English writers, that the concept is turning towards being a ‘useless metaphor’. But it is also possible to counter his assumptions against individual migration being considered as diasporic in nature. Our world today is marked by multiple acts of migration of every possible kind and in this light it is necessary to reconsider the term diaspora away from its historical origins. For history is constituted more by dynamism and less by fixity.

Since its use by Khachig Tölölyan in the first issue of the noted journal *Diaspora* in 1991 the term diaspora has moved beyond the meaning of community dispersal to acquire multiple significations. Tölölyan himself had noted in a conference in 1998 that in the journal the contributors have used the word in 38 different categories. Due to this wide arc of signification there have been debates regarding the specificity of the definition. In his attempt to define diaspora identity Safran has opined that

diasporas comprise special kinds of immigrants because they have retained a memory of, a cultural connection with, and a general orientation toward their homelands; they have institutions reflecting something of a homeland culture and/or religion; they relate in some (symbolic or practical) way to their homeland; they harbour doubts about their full acceptance by the

hostland; they are committed to their survival as a distinct community; and many of them have retained a myth of return. (10)

Safran is a seminal name in diaspora studies and it is only natural to quote him extensively. His definition has stood its ground over the years as the homeland hostland contrary pull is an unmistakable part of diaspora identity. Another significant word which Safran has used is religion. For community identity is not only constituted by cultural aspects but also by the religious dimension. However, it is possible to think beyond national borders as the demarcating line to define homeland from hostland. For in a country like India migration can take place within the national border and the migrant can feel a diasporic longing for the place of his/her origin. It is necessary to think of the heterogeneous nature of diasporic identity. In an essay entitled “The Materiality of Diaspora” in a later issue of *Diaspora* in 2000 Pnina Werbner has underscored the “*social heterogeneity* of diasporas” (emphasis original). She writes

that as social formations [diasporas] are internally divided. Not just a *fusion* of discourses but a *multiplicity* of discourses, some intersecting, some mutually clashing and contradictory, is widely recognized to underpin the representation of diaspora and its organizational structures. (5; emphasis original)

Along with Werbner, critics like Floya Anthias, Avtar Brah, James Clifford and Khachig Tölölyan have widely written and commented on the rupture and division that exist within diaspora identity.

In the field of diaspora studies it is common practice to take into account the divides such as race, class and gender. Maybe the time has also come to cast our attention at other issues as well. One such issue is language. While talking about Indian diasporic writing the writers who write in English are almost exclusively talked about. But we cannot ignore the multiple narratives written in vernacular languages such as Hindi and Gurmukhi. One may look at a more homely example. In his “Introduction” to the volume *Contemporary Indian Diaspora* Angshuman Kar has noted the case of the Bengali poet Alok Ranjan Dasgupta. He has been living and writing in Germany for years. Yet in discussions of diasporic Indian poetry he is hardly talked about. Similarly, in discourses of diaspora studies almost no light is shed on Garo diaspora in Assam or Khasi diaspora in Kolkata. In a personal essay “Diasporic Meditations” Mohan Ramanan has recounted his experiences of living in Kolkata and

Bangalore as a Tamil Brahmin. In his beautiful prose he underscores the cultural alienation he felt in Kolkata and the linguistic alienation he felt when he moved to Bangalore. He recalls his “almost ghetto like” existence and writes “We are all, I am convinced, Diasporic in one way or the other. It has to do with the shrinking of the world and the effects of globalization. No one really lives at home, everyone is abroad, even if abroad is the next town or city” (37). Ramanan talks about Pilani (in Rajasthan) and Hyderabad as places where he has not felt alienation. If we discount Pilani as a university town and think of Hyderabad as a city and, thereby, more amenable to anonymity, we still do not have a satisfactory answer. Kolkata and Bangalore both are cities and yet he felt alienated in them. Questions such as these are relevant even if the answers are not easily available. Kar writes

Can internal migration be diasporic? Is there a homeland within a homeland? Will the use of the term ‘diaspora’ for the internal migrants turn it into a useless metaphor? Is a Northeast Indian in Delhi simply a member of a minority group or a diasporan? Could the killings of the Northeast Indians in the capital of our country be considered hate crimes? It is difficult to give ‘yes/no’ type of answers to these questions. The questions themselves are much more important than the answers. (5-6)

It is necessary for academicians and researchers now to look into diaspora studies to unearth hitherto unexplored territories and, thereby, keep it from being useless metaphors. In this light it is also necessary to map the dispersals, both communal and individual, that happen within a multi ethnic country like India. One community that has long been on the move from its place of origin is the Marwari community in India. The migration of the Marwari community to different parts of India and beyond has been a significant historical process. Especially in the Eastern parts of India the presence and the influence of the Marwaris can be traced back to the times of the battle of Plassey. But their community formation and identity construction have not been sufficiently mapped in the field of literary studies. It is possibly due to language of their literary expression. The Marwari writers write mainly in Hindi and like many other non-English languages, literature written even in the national language of India remains not adequately read and researched on. In this paper I will focus on a novel which was originally written in Hindi and then translated into English by the novelist herself. The novel is *Kalikatha – Via Bypass* by AlkaSaraogi, a well known Marwari writer of fiction. It was originally published in Hindi in 1998 for which Saraogi won the

SrikantVerma and the SahityaAkademi awards and later she herself translated it into English in 2005. Avadesh Kumar Singh reads the novel as “a biography of a city, community, country and its little individuals passing through centuries” (166).

Born in a Marwari family of Kolkata in 1960 Saraogi, despite beginning to write in the early 90s, has earned significant prestige as a writer of Hindi fiction, both short and long. She is a widely translated writer. Apart from its English translation *Kalikatha* has French, Italian and Urdu translations. Perhaps more significantly her second novel *SheshKadambari*(2001) was translated into Bengali by Meenakshi Mukherjee and was published by the prestigious Ananda Publishers. This is more significant because Ananda Publishers is the house of mainstream Bengali publication. The publication of the translation of Saraogi’s novel by Ananda bespeaks of its acceptability to the Bengali bhadraloks, a group which has historically never allowed minority communities like the Marwaris to culturally intersect with it. This makes us hopeful of a possibility of such interactions in the future and one must notice the role played by translation in facilitating such interactions.

*Kalikatha* is about a successful businessman Kishore Babu and four preceding generations of his family. The narrative begins with a mature Kishore Babu getting out of a bypass surgery. However, he gets a lump at the back of his head due to some surgical mishap. This lump curiously brings in a change in Kishore Babu. From his customary ways of a busy businessman he turns into a wanderer and keeps roaming around Kolkata (Calcutta in 1997 when the story began). His wandering ways not only make him see things anew such as helping him realize that he has never cared to know where his employees eat but also facilitates another type of travel. This is a journey made across time and space. Born and married before the Independence Kishore Babu has seen a lot in his life and his mental travel maps the historical changes he has gone through. But this is not his story alone. For in this psychological journey he takes us along on a ride to witness the history of his ancestors who had long migrated to Calcutta from their native place Biwani in Rajasthan. But *Kalikatha* is not only about an individual’s life or the history of a community, it is also as Singh says ‘a biography of the city’ (166).

The novel traces the human stories of hopes and pains behind the emigration of Marwari community from the deserts in Rajasthan in North-western part of India to Calcutta in the East, under the British colonial rule. Against such a wide canvas, with

broad brush strokes, the story touches the changes in the society and the struggle against British colonial rule, through lives of individuals. In an interview with Avadesh Kumar Singh Saraogi has said:

When I was writing *Kali-katha*, I had Kishore Babu's life in front of me with all his personal tragedies, but all this had happened in a city and amidst the historical circumstances of the struggle for Independence. Then this city was not really his city, for his forefathers had migrated to this city and he ate, dressed and spoke a language very different from the local Bengalis. There was pain in his heart, for he found his community very inferior and unprogressive by comparison. (Singh 167)

The novel is strewn with references when the young Kishore felt acutely the difference between the Bengali community around him and his own. One incident comes early in the novel when Kishore's best friend Shantanu casts aspersions at the self-centered and spineless nature of the Marwaris. The narrator writes; "Shantanu claims that Marwaris cannot participate in the struggle for freedom. He thinks that they are so spineless and cowardly that they cannot go to jail or withstand torture in police custody. They are not capable of thinking beyond their own life and property" (21).

Shantanu being a friend is only teasing Kishore. But teasing and bantering have deep-seated emotions beneath. In "Diasporic Meditations" Ramanan recalls; "The Bengali boys would bully us and tease our girls, make fun of our Idli and Sambar... if our girls were teased by Bengalis of other Paras or localities there would be hell to pay but teasing is teasing and we did feel alienated" (37). Yet, Calcutta is home for Kishore as his great great grandfather migrated to Calcutta way back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He told his son Ramvilas, Kishore's great grandfather, "Beta, if you ever leave this soil, let it be for Calcutta only. There is no other place like Calcutta on this earth and there is no river like the Ganga" (39). For generations his family has stayed in Calcutta but the disconnect, however subtle, is palpable. The disconnect becomes all the more apparent regarding the community's general attitude towards participation in the freedom struggle. When Kishore's close friend Amolak (another Marwari) and his father begin collecting donations for the downtrodden Kishore's maternal uncle becomes caustic in disapproval;

"Just look at these people – bringing shame to our community of traders

by begging. Collecting donations! My foot! That's how they propose to serve the country? Such people are a blot on the fair name of the Marwaris. Gone totally astray! That's what they are. Doing *prabhatpheri* in the morning, singing national songs! *Khadipheri* for selling hand spun cloth on roads!" Kishore feels like doing something drastic to stop Mamaji. He feels like saying, "You should know better! Rather than blighting the reputation of the Marwaris, they are the ones washing the stigma off them". (158; emphasis original)

Through the eyes of Kishore Babu Saraogi goes on underscoring the internal machinations that operate within the Marwari community. *Kalikatha* is replete with instances of the superstitious nature of the Marwaris. This is most apparent through Saroj, Kishore Babu's wife who leaves no astrologer and Bastu specialists untried to heal what she thinks to be Kishore's malady. These references are coded comments by the novelist who uses these to mark the difference between the two communities living side by side. It is not that the Bengalis are not superstitious but in the eyes of the protagonist these are more a Marwari thing as he finds these superstitious beliefs to be of collective nature. The narrator writes; "We Marwaris are a strange lot, Kishore thinks, Shantanu is right when he says that we live in perpetual apprehension of impending doom" (134). One can read Kishore's introspections as reflective of the pressure felt by a minority community which lives constantly under the surveillance of a major culture.

The co-existence of the two ethnicities also usher in gaps and fissures between the two. Kishore is keenly aware of such divide. In a visit to Jiyaganj in Murshidabad in his youth Kishore felt amazed at the easy flow of life that exists between the two ethnicities. He muses;

Two cultures, one developed in the desert sands of Rajputana and the other in the greenery of Bengal. This land has accommodated people from the distant desert, a people who have their roots going back thousands of years, never severing ties with their roots. Like an ever watchful invisible eye, their society is severe with those who violate its codes of conduct. They thus abide by them and yet let themselves also be imbued with the culture of their adopted land. The two cultures here do not run parallel to each other, as in Calcutta but overlap for the most part. (176)

His amazement notwithstanding this observation speaks pertinently of the diasporic longing felt by the Marwaris in Bengal. Key aspects of a diasporic community such as cultural ghettoization and connection with the root are evident in this. This also talks about the heterogeneity of diasporic existence as different spaces provide different degrees of assimilation or the lack of it.

A prime aspect of *Kalikatha's* portrayal of the Marwari community is its treatment of women. Curiously, AlkaSaraogi, in spite of being a woman, does not foreground the condition of the Marwari women in her novel. I say curiously because the uneven treatment meted out to Marwari women is very apparent. One complicated example is the community's approach to the custom of *sati* (earlier spelled suttee). In her essay "Sati Worship and Marwari Public Identity in India" Anne Hardgrove writes; "Even though no Marwari I met advocates *sati* in the modern age, many if not most of them want to preserve their traditions of *satipuja*. An analysis of the Marwari's belief and practices of *satipuja* provides a means to consider how *sati* can be a significant ingredient in the way a community both practices kinship and defines its public boundaries" (724). Though the custom of widow burning and the worship of *sati* aren't same yet centuries of associated memories of tortuous practice make such affinity open to questions. The traumatic memories are not buried deep in the past. They can come back as was proved by

The most infamous case ... in 1987, when an eighteen-year-old Rajput widow named RoopKanwar burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre in the village of Deorala, Rajasthan. To those villagers honoring her death, RoopKanwar was known as a *sati*, a woman transformed into a goddess by having committed a Hindu ritual of widow immolation. Twelve days after the immolation took place, Deorala villagers persisted in glorifying RoopKanwar's *sati* by conducting the ceremony of the *chunarimahotsav* (*mahotsav* is literally a 'great festival') in which women offer their *chunari* (wedding veils) on the site of the *sati* in order to obtain the blessings of the *sati* goddess. (Hardgrove, "Sati Worship" 727; emphasis original)

The Roop Kanwar case is not representative situation of all the Marwaris but the strict gender binary and patriarchal superiority are common aspects of Marwari community.



Saraogi is a keen custodian of the Marwari women's stories and is a faithful recorder of the trials and tribulations they go through. In her first volume of short stories *Kahanike Talash Mein* ("In Search of a story") one comes across stories such as "LalMittiKaSardak" ("The Red Dirt Road") and "EkVratKa Katha" ("The Tale of a Fast") wherein, through the lived experiences of two Marwari women, Vandana and Amita respectively, Saraogi exposes the strong patriarchal bias which exists within Marwari community. But *Kalikatha* is different as she has chosen to focalize the novel not on a character like ShantaBhabhi, Kishore's widowed sister-in-law, but on Kishore, a man. She defends her choice in the following words;

I was quite surprised the first time I was slotted in this category. I was not aware of such classifications in literature. My instinctive reaction was to reject the label; but I was compelled to think seriously about it when a critic like RajendraYadav commented on the absence of a feminine sensibility in *Kali Katha Via Bypass*, "Even a man could have written it" Yadav said. Well, if I had singled out the story of ShantaBhabhi, one of the many strands that comprise *Kalikatha*, because she is a widow, the narrative of her deprivation would have satisfied those who expect every woman writer to record the sad chronicle of the victimhood of women; but that is not the story I chose to write. (Joseph 158)

Yet the novel bears ample testimony to the Marwari women's uneven conditions. From Shantanu's biting comment ["You have to see that ShantaBhabhi is married again. This is the twentieth century, my dear Kishore. 1940! ...What do you want for your Bhabhi? You want her to burn slowly like a sati for the rest of her life?" (17)] to Kishore Babu's realization ["Why is it that Marwari men roam free like unshackled bulls, but the women must live under all sorts of restrictions? (91)] the novel adequately chronicles the gender disparity existing within the community. Saraogi is alive to the layered attitude men have for women. Kishore is aware of the plight of women yet in his house he maintains a strict gender divide. His youngest daughter asks, "why does Papa have such rigid notions about what girls should or should not do?" (74) This intelligent girl's academic pursuit was cut short as "Kishore Babu had snuffed out her ambition on time" so that he would not face problem "finding an equally educated boy for her" (213).

*Kalikatha* is an important novel and it should be read as an ethnographic document

and its attempt to “confront the bias in the way that the Bengali bhadralok have implicitly set the norms for other communities, like the Calcutta Marwaris, whose lives were shaped by ideologies actually quite different from their socially-distant Bengali neighbours” (Hardgrove, “Hindi Literature”, 804). One area, however, I have not been able to put emphasis on in this article is the role played by translation in cultural interaction. Cristiana Giordano has noted how in the millennial Italy “cultural mediation and translation were concerns...in ethnopsychiatry” (588). Ethnopsychiatry is an approach aimed to understand the ethnic and cultural dimensions of mental illnesses. It refers to the trauma of dislocation. The migration of the Marwari community to the eastern part of India has happened over centuries and hence the trauma may not be acutely felt by the migrants anymore. Still, the ethno-cultural divide persists and novels like *Kalikatha* are instrumental in bringing to light the pain of cultural displacement. Diasporic literature should be located beyond the study of a handful of writers writing in English. It is necessary to bring into academic discourse the literature written in vernacular languages and translation must play a key role in widening the ambit of diaspora studies.

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