

Indian Baghdadi Jews in Literature: A Murder, a Prostitute, and a Drug Dealer

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Article abstract

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Indian Baghdadi Jews in Literature: A Murder, a Prostitute, and a Drug Dealer

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Abstract

The article examines the depiction of female Baghdadi Jewish characters in three works: Gay Courter's English novel *Flowers in the Blood* (2002), Saadat Hasan Manto's Urdu short story *Mozelle* (1951), and Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Bengali story *Makorshar Rosh* (1933). It explores a murder case from Calcutta Jewry through the eyes of Courter's protagonist Dinah Sassoon, a prevalent vice among the poorer Baghdadis through the character of a Jewish prostitute, Mozelle, and the role of Baghdadis in drug-trafficking through the character of Rebecca Light. The 21st century novel offers a nuanced understanding of characters, while the earlier short stories reflect their authors' stereotypical understanding of their contemporary society.

Keywords: Bombay, Baghdadi Jews, Calcutta, colonial India, opium.

Introduction

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Baghdadi² Jews began arriving in the colonial cities of Bombay (now Mumbai) and Calcutta (now Kolkata) from trading centers in the Middle East such as Aleppo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Basra, mainly due to religious persecution (forced conversion to Islam) by the then Ottoman Governor of Iraq Dawud Pasha, and for seeking a new future. Baghdadis, and Jews in a broader sense,³ have always remained a micro-minority in Indian society, despite India possessing one of the oldest Jewish population in the diaspora.⁴ This marginality is reflected in the realm of literature, with the dearth of Jewish characters, leaving a significant gap in the representation of this community in Indian storytelling in regional languages.

The triangular trade between Britain, India and China, was crucial to the balance of trade in the latter half of the 19th century. The opium grown in India was exchanged for tea in China which was shipped to Britain (as Indian payment for British exports and services), enriching Britain and simultaneously impoverishing India and China. Thomas Manuels summed up its effects as "The Chinese got opium, the British got tea, and the Indians got colonialism."⁵ Many Baghdadi families such as the Sassoons of Bombay and Ezras of Calcutta, acted as intermediaries for the British in this trade and made their fortune. This trade has been portrayed in Courter's

Flowers in the Blood. After opium was outlawed in the 1910s, a few Baghdadi Jews engaged in smuggling it alongside other illegal items such as cocaine to China.⁶

Through the three chosen pieces - Gay Courter's English novel *Flowers in the Blood* (2002), Saadat Hasan Manto's Urdu short story *Mozelle* (1951), and Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Bengali story *Makorshar Rosh* (1933), this author aims to portray the depiction of Baghdadi women in Indian literature. The novel is loosely structured on a real incident - the murder of Leah Judah which shuddered the community in 1858.⁷ Despite being fiction, the remaining two depict their authors' understanding of their contemporary society and their lack of knowledge about Jews. Courter's novel provides a glimpse into Jewish life in late 19th century Calcutta, and Cochin. It further reflects upon the interactions between three Indian Jewish communities (Cochini, Bene Israel, and Baghdadi)⁸ and even shows the strained relations between the Bene Israel and the Baghdadis. The Baghdadis aimed to gain European status, and hence tried to distance themselves from their Indianized co-religionists the Bene Israel. Especially in Bombay, the Baghdadis discriminated against the Bene Israel community due to their lack of ritual orthodoxy, and 'ancestral impurity' as noted by Joan Roland.⁹ Manto and Bandyopadhyay's works are set in 1940s Bombay, and 1930s Calcutta respectively.

Flowers in the Blood

Historical Background

Leah Judah's husband Naseem Ezekiel Judah was an opium merchant, who spent most of the time in Hong Kong. They had two children, an infant (five-year old) daughter and a baby boy. She appointed her distant cousin, Nasseem Shalome Gubboy,¹⁰ to run errands for her due to the constraints of the patriarchal society. Nasseem Gubboy alongside his accomplice Ezekiel Rohomim Shurbanee was ultimately accused of murdering her by the servants. Nasseem was a petty trader who resided in Radhabazar at the two-storied Guesthouse (7, Ezra Street) built by the Gubboy's (then owner Elias Shalome Gubboy) for less privileged Jews. Leah's house (5, Pollock Street) was located at a stone's throw distance from it (about 150 yards). Ezekiel Shurbanee was a

lowly, infamous Jew. Shurbanee previously served as a mercenary to the Nawab of Oudh (Awadh) and it was alleged that he temporarily become a Muslim in Lucknow for financial gains. He was of great bodily strength, and accustomed to scenes of violence. Shurbanee resided in a dingy hut on Hurrinbaree Lane.

According to the *durwan* (security guard) Roopchand, Leah and Nasseem started to develop 'great intimacy' with Leah instructing him to allow Nasseem entry into the Judah Mansion at 5, Pollock Street (Figures 1-2) at any time of the day or night.¹¹ Nasseem often stayed till early hours of morning. One of the nurses even stated during the investigation, that she had seen Leah and Nasseem a few times in Leah's bedroom.¹² On Thursday, September 30, 1858, Nasseem arrived at about 10:15 pm, and left at about 2:30 am on Friday, October 1 through the main door. Shurbanee used a ladder to scale the backwalls (whereby some moss from the walls got stuck to his trousers), and left through the same route. The murder was discovered around 3:30 am by the nurses, who were led to the scene by Leah's infant daughter after she found her mother's bloodied body lying on the floor with her feet tied.¹³



Figure 1: The Calcutta Gujarati Education Society at 5, Pollock Street. The erstwhile location of Judah Mansion (later Gubby Estate), where the two murders took place - Leah Judah (1858), and Sumha Gubby (1867). (Courtesy: Present Author)

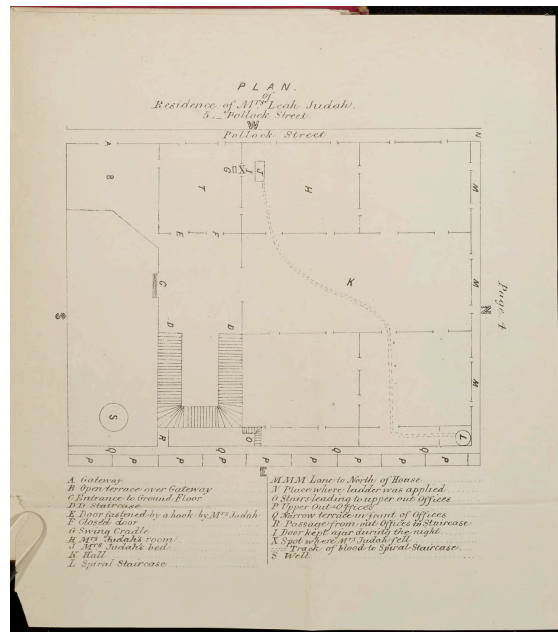


Figure 2: Plan of the Judah Mansion, where Leah Judah was murdered in 1858. 'X' marks the spot where Leah fell after trying her best to fend off her attackers - at the door leading from her room ('H') into the kids' nursery ('T'). 'N' marks the spot where Ezekiel Shurbaneer placed his ladder on the house's boundary wall. The double dotted line from Leah's bed ('J') till the spiral staircase ('L'), marks the route (full of blood spots) taken by Nasseem Shalome Gubby while fleeing the scene. (Courtesy: Lex, *Remarkable Criminal Trials in Bengal*, 124-125)

Leah's father-in-law Ezekiel Judah (after being informed by the *durwan* at around 4 am) rushed to the scene alongside the accused's brother Elias Shalome Gubboy. Elias Gubboy sent three of his *durwans* to apprehend Nasseem, who coolly denied the allegations.¹⁴ He stated that he was at his house (7, Ezra Street) (Figure 3) the whole night and produced three witnesses for the same - Marcus Stein (a carpenter), Markovich, and Nathan Levi. Stein reported that at around 3:15 am Nasseem was washing clothes, and asked him to testify that he was at home that night immediately after hearing a cry of 'Murder' from the streets.¹⁵



Figure 3: The erstwhile Gubboy Guesthouse at 7, Ezra Street, where the less affluent members of the Gubboy family and their relatives resided. At present it is a commercial building housing many shops, and storerooms. The building remains the same, although it has undergone some renovations in the past 150 years. The Calcutta Police raided this place on the early hours of October 1, 1858, and arrested Nasseem Shalome Gubboy from his room on the first floor. Other circumstantial evidence was also found from this house - Nasseem's blood-stained wet clothes, chloroform vial, among others. Despite the evidence, Nasseem denied all allegations, and the media ran cheesy stories about his alleged affair with Leah. The case brought great shame to the Calcutta Police. (Courtesy - Present Author)

About four days before her murder, Leah, who was in good health according to Ezekiel Judah, visited him. Judah was unaware of her 'intimate relation' with Nasseem, who was also related to Ezekiel's wife.¹⁶ London-based newspaper *The Homeward Mail from India, China and the East* reported that Nasseem, who had 'intimate relations' with the deceased, was arrested on suspicion in the early hours of October 1.¹⁷

The ensuing investigation revealed gory details about the gruesome murder. Nasseem initially tied Leah's feet, then used chloroform on her, while Shurbanee repeatedly stabbed her with a dagger leading to gruesome wounds.¹⁸ There were two punctured wounds on the left side (one between 9th-10th ribs, another between 11th-12th ribs), three on the face (exposing the skull on the right cheek, and the right eye being divided), and four on the arms (the muscles and blood vessels of the left arm were divided in three places, and the tendons of the left wrist were cut above the palm). Blood oozed profusely from these wounds.

During the ensuing struggle, Leah succeeded in inflicting scratches on Shurbanee's arms, and below the knees of Nasseem. She caught hold of a rag (portion of Nasseem's shirt) in her hand. Nasseem's pair of blood-stained Indian-rubber shoes were found beneath Leah's bed. A chloroform vial was discovered from Nasseem's room.¹⁹ Due to the lack of advanced forensics, the dried bloodstains on Nasseem's clothes could not be attributed to Leah's murder.

Between 3 to 4 am, Shurbanee was briefly stopped by two police officers at Tiretta Bazar (Figure 4), and Hurrinbaree Lane respectively as he was fleeing the scene with the ladder on his shoulders, and a bundle in his hands. Michael (Leah's neighbor, who resided at 1, Pollock Street) heard a women's (Leah's) cry a few minutes before 3 am. He saw Nasseem (while fleeing the spot) accompanied by a Jew, pass by his house a few minutes past 3 am. Lex speculates that this third Jew was Nathan Levi, as he claimed being awake alongside Nasseem at his house. Furthermore, Levi denied every allegation during the trial which could incriminate Nasseem like him washing clothes, or possessing a dagger.²⁰ Esmond David Ezra (of the Ezra family of Calcutta) later supported Lex's speculation.²¹



Figure 4: The street at Turret Bazaar. On October 1, 1858, a policeman apprehended here an allegedly drunk Ezekiel Shurbanee while he was fleeing the murder scene with a ladder on his shoulder, and a bundle in his hands. He told the police that he was a lost sailor who was searching for his ship. The policeman showed him the way to the docks at Dalhousie, and let him free. Shurbanee was stopped again by another policeman near his house at Hurrinbaree Lane later that day. He repeated the same story, and the policeman let him free again. (Courtesy: Present Author)

After Shurbanee was arrested on October 3, clothes were found in his hut bearing the initials N.S.G. (belonging to Nasseem Shalome Gubby), and one shirt had a missing breast piece matching the rag found in Leah's room. One shirt, and a trouser had green fungi marks corresponding to the missing moss on the walls, likely acquired while climbing it. The dagger was found in the nearby Greek burial ground after the conclusion of the trial, alongside some clothes, and broken parts of the ladder.²² This indicates that Shurbanee got assistance from some Greek person to hide the evidence.

R. Reid and Lex cited the French apothem, "a woman may be satisfied with one husband but never with one lover," calling Leah an accurate illustration of it in the context of this murder.²³ This angle was repeated by Courter, mentioning about Luna's infidelity. Reid (the then Superintendent of Calcutta Police Detective Department) opined that Nasseem killed Leah out of jealousy knowing about Leah's other suitors. However, this angle of another lover is not mentioned in the later sources like that of Esmond Ezra. Ezra asserts that this angle may have originated as Reid and Lex (which he stated to be the same person, with Lex being the pseudonym of R. Reid) based their statements on rumors.²⁴

Shurbanee was not the prime accused as Leah's expensive jewelry, were not stolen. The murder was pre-planned with evidence of planning since September 10, 1858, when Nasseem handed over his sword and dagger (weapon of murder) to his servant Dusroo for cleaning. On September 22, Nasseem got information about chloroform from Leah's Armenian neighbor Arakiel Ababeg (a broker by profession), and purchased the same from a chemist shop 'Smith and Stanistreet' at Dalhousie the following day. Nasseem tested it on Marcus Stein on September 28. Finally on September 30, he sent his servant Dusroo (for handling the money, as Jews are forbidden to touch money during the feast of Tabernacles) with Shurbanee for purchasing a bamboo ladder (used for scaling the walls of Leah's house), rope and matches.²⁵ Nasseem Gubboy (as an accomplice) and Ezekiel Shurbanee (for willful murder) were tried between December 13-18, 1858 at Calcutta Supreme Court (presently Calcutta High Court).²⁶ The accused were tried in the Criminal Sessions before Sir James Colville (Chief Justice), and Sir Arthur Buller (a Puisne Justice). The Advocate-General Ritchie, and Piffard conducted the case for the Crown. Peterson defended Nasseem Gubboy, while Macpherson defended (did not charge any fee) Ezekiel Shurbanee.

The jury gave more weight to Nathan Levi's statement, and pronounced the two accused as 'not proven guilty' based on the circumstantial nature of evidence, lack of witness and the absence of the dagger. The judge gave less weight to the evidence of Indian ('native') servants of the Judah family, as they were 'illiterate,' and unable to comprehend the Judaeo-Arabic language (the language of the Baghdadis) in which Leah and Nasseem conversed.²⁷

Contemporary newspapers such as *The Bengal Hurkuru* ran naff stories about the alleged affair of Leah and Nasseem, which brought disrepute to the community. *The Friend of India* (currently *The Statesman*) reported that it is rare for a Jew to be accused of capital crime, adding that 'native evidence' against the accused particularly broke down.²⁸ The community elders got together at Beth El Synagogue, and decided to support Nasseem Gubboy in this scandal to save face. Leah was blamed for luring Nasseem. They collected money to hire the best lawyers for representing Nasseem at court, and allegedly bribed a few members of the jury resulting in an

acquittal of the accused. This can be perceived as a classic case of victim blaming by a patriarchal conservative society.²⁹ Ezra pointed to the fact that the accused Nasseem and Shurbanee could have resorted to bribery at different levels (members of jury, and Levi) to save themselves.³⁰ Trial through jury was prevalent in India till a 1973 case at Calcutta High Court, whereby two persons accused of murder were acquitted by the jury despite the presence of witnesses. Akin to the case discussed in this paper, there were some cases where the members of the jury were bribed, or influenced to give a decision in favor of a party ignoring all evidences.

Afterwards the freed prisoners Nasseem and Shurbanee fled to Jerusalem. Nasseem Gubboy returned to Calcutta briefly in 1861, and openly bragged that he had murdered Leah Judah, and had hired Ezekiel Shurbanee for wielding the dagger being afraid to undertake it himself. However, he was shunned by his co-religionists and fled to China. Lex mentions a hearsay that Nasseem met with a violent death in the opium dens of Hong Kong.³¹

The Judah family was completely ostracized and isolated by Calcutta Jewry, after the wide publicization of Leah's murder. Upon her death, she was disowned by her husband, Nasseem Ezekiel Judah, as evidenced by her maiden name, Leah F. Abigador Azriel, being used in the burial records of the Kolkata Jewish cemetery.³² Her grave currently lacks any epitaph (Figure 5).³³ The Judah family relocated to Surat to start a new life. Their house (Judah Mansion) at 5, Pollock Street, was purchased by the Gubboys.³⁴



Figure 5: Leah Judah’s oval shaped tomb (numbered ‘EE-188’) at the Narkeldanga Jewish Cemetery Kolkata. The tomb lacks any epitaph. However, the cemetery records mention her by her maiden name as Leah F. Abigador Azriel, and not by her husband’s name indicating that she was indeed disowned by her husband after death. The same also happens in the novel *Flowers in the Blood*, where Luna Sassoon is disowned by her husband and was referred to as ‘Luna Rahamim, daughter of Ephraim Rahamim’ on her epitaph. (Courtesy: Present Author)

Depiction in Fiction

Gay Courter weaves together fact and fiction in her novel *Flowers in the Blood* to narrate the social, economic, religious, and cultural lives of the Calcutta Baghdadi community (along with brief references to Bene Israel, and Cochinis) in the late 19th century through the fictional character of Dinah Sassoon (later Luddy, and Salem).³⁵ Beginning in 1870s Calcutta, the memoir narrated in Dinah’s voice also ventures into other places – Darjeeling, Cochin (now Kochi), Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram), and Hong Kong before returning to 1890s Calcutta. The tale chronicles the varied experiences of Dinah starting from her childhood, till her rise as the head of the Sassoon company.

Dinah’s mother Luna Sassoon (based on Leah Judah) was murdered in cold blood by Nissim Sadka (based on Nasseem Gubboy) and his aide Moosa Chachuk (modeled on Ezekiel Shurbanee). Luna has been depicted as an opium-addict (like the real Leah) who invited other men to share her bed in the absence of her opium-trader husband Benjamin (‘Benu’) Sassoon (based on Naseem Judah), who often stayed away at Hong Kong. The dates and process related to the murder

case represent the real ones, although the year has been changed to 1878. The residence has been changed from 5, Pollock Street to 7, Theatre Road.³⁶

The evidence matches with that of the real incident, including a chloroform vial, a dagger, a torn shirt (rag), a ladder, shoes with bloodstains, and scratches on Sadka's knees and Chachuk's wrists. The defendants, Sadka and Chachuk, questioned the reliability of statements provided by 'native' witnesses from the 'servant-class,' one of whom, the *punkhah-wallah* (a servant who manually operated a ceiling fan) was blind. Despite evidence, and statements of witnesses, Sadka and Chachuk were declared as 'Not guilty!' and freed. Afterwards they fled to Macau, and later Singapore. Sadka briefly returned to Calcutta to brag about the crime, and later again vanished to save himself from indignation. While this decision devastated Dinah, she vowed to seek revenge. Luna was disowned by Benjamin on death, and buried at a part of the cemetery reserved for outcasts, further saddening Dinah, and her maternal grandparents.

The gradual Anglicization of the community is depicted in the story in the clothes and behaviors of Dinah's maternal (Raymond) and paternal (Sassoon) families. While her more affluent paternal relatives wore European suits (men) and dresses (women), her maternal relatives dressed in the Arabic long gowns (*dagla* and *jubba* for men), turbans, and traditional open-fronted dress (*dariya-kassa* for women). The transition from Judaeo-Arabic to Anglican culture was further evident in Dinah learning English before learning Hebrew unlike her grandparents. This was even visible in names, with the Rahamim surname being Anglicized to Raymond. The tale behind the opening of the Jewish Girls School, and Jewish Boys School (now Elias Meyer Free School and Talmud Torah) is narrated through the instance of Dinah's teacher Mrs. Hannover who tried to indoctrinate Christian beliefs in her students. Hannover's character is modeled on the Christian missionaries who attempted to proselytize among Jewish (and other non-Christian) students of missionary schools in colonial Calcutta by teaching them about Jesus and other doctrines of Christianity.³⁷

The book depicts the friction between the Baghdadis and Bene Israel Jews in the treatment of most Baghdadi characters towards Dinah's stepmother Zilpah Kehimkar Tassie Sassoon (a Bene Israel) to the extent of being called 'an imposter' as the Baghdadis doubted her Jewishness. Dinah mentioned Zilpah as 'the most dutiful mother' with regard to observing Jewish rituals and customs, and gradually developed a strong bond with her as evident in Dinah defending her stepmother in front of others. According to Zilpah she was an 'outsider' being a Jew and a Bene Israel, being accepted neither by the Indian nor the Jewish communities. The book also contains non-binary representation in the form of Dinah's first husband Silas Luddy (a Baghdadi Jew from Darjeeling), who came out as gay. Dinah and Silas grieved in the loss of both their mothers at a young age, and bonded over their love for books. Silas was indirectly ostracized by the Baghdadi society for his sexuality, and had to reside in a house (that he named 'Xanadu Lodge') near Tiger Hill, far away from the prying eyes of the Darjeeling city, alongside his lover (whom Silas named Euclid) and servants.

Although the murder of Luna Sassoon is dealt with in the first chapter, it leaves a permanent scar on Dinah which continues to torment her. Dinah lost her faith in British legal system, as depicted in her statement, "There is no justice in the courts."³⁸ Due to the stigmatization associated with being daughter of an 'adulteress' (who was murdered by one of her lovers) it was initially difficult to find prospective partners for Dinah. The only two partners her father Benjamin could find after offering a sizable dowry were from outside Calcutta - Silas Luddy (a Baghdadi from Darjeeling), and Edwin Salem (a Cochini Jew). Later on, seeing the cremation of the Maharaja of Travancore, Dinah is again reminded of the day her father burnt her late mother's possessions in a pyre. Even a transport ship, which Dinah and her second husband Edwin Salem named 'Luna Sassoon' capsized in the middle of Arabian Sea on its maiden voyage, costing them a fortune. Her first child Aaron David Salem was born on the fourteenth anniversary of her mother Luna's gruesome death. Her only daughter was likewise named after her mother, Clara Luna Salem.

Dinah successfully converted from a young girl, to a prudent businesswoman taking the reins of the Sassoon opium business, after her father passed away. Opium is closely intertwined

with Dinah from beginning to end - her mother Luna being an opium addict, her father Benjamin an opium trader, the opium fields of Patna, her husband Edwin who successfully overcame his addiction only to be given opium drops by Dinah on deathbed, influencing the opium auctions at Dalhousie (Calcutta), and finally settling scores at the opium dens of Hong Kong. Hence her remark, “Was there no way I could disassociate myself from opium or was it in my blood?”³⁹ Moreover, poppy is referred to as ‘Flowers in the Blood,’ ‘foreign devils’ flower,’ and its white sap called ‘the milk of paradise.’

Sadka emigrated to Hong Kong after fleeing from Calcutta the second time. Adopting the alias Song Kung Ni,⁴⁰ he ended up becoming a dreaded member of the city’s underworld, profiting through manipulation of the opium prices. Sadka concocted a fake background narrative of him being born in Macau to parents of mixed Indian, Chinese, and Portuguese heritage. Like the real-life Nasseem, he openly bragged about murdering Luna alongside his accomplice Chachuk, and even bribing the Court Justice, “Everyone has a price.”⁴¹ Sadka mentioned that Chachuk was killed in a brawl regarding a woman in Singapore in 1893. Sadka audaciously tried in vain to coax Dinah into forgiving him, by offering generous terms for purchasing the opium chests from her firm. However, the trade deal went south, and a scuffle ensued with Sadka pointing his gun towards Dinah. Dinah’s ‘Gurkha’⁴² bodyguard reacted swiftly to kill Sadka with his *kukri* (Gurkha knife) to protect her. Dinah finally avenged her mother, justifying the success of her name (in Hebrew Dinah literally means ‘vindicated’). Although the book ends in 1898, there is a short epilogue whereby Dinah laments about leaving Calcutta for London in May 31, 1953 due to the gradual exodus of Baghdadis from India.

Ignored Murder

Contemporary and later authors completely overlooked another murder (that of Sumha Gubboy) which occurred in the Calcutta Baghdadi community on November 21, 1867. Sumha Gubboy was twelve years old when she arrived in Calcutta from Jerusalem around 1866, accompanied by her

mother and trusted servant, Abdoollah. After her mother left, she lived in the Gubboy Estate at 5, Pollock Street, even before her marriage to Elias Gubboy. Abdoollah used to look after her needs. However, Abdoollah left after her marriage when the couple argued many times due to him. Contemporary sources depict Sumha as a woman of easy virtue, getting drunk, engaging in an illicit liaison with her brother-in-law Ezra Gubboy, bribing the servants to keep it a secret, and quarreling regularly with her husband bringing tears to his eyes. The servants reported that Sumha, and Elias quarreled that night as well. At 10:15 pm, Sukheena, an old servant of the Gubboy family, came to the kitchen to fetch a knife for Sumha to cut *amraahs* (a type of fruit). At 5:30 am (time of Sumha's death according to medical evidence) on November 22, one servant heard a strange scream, and Elias left the house with a bundle a few moments later. However, the *durwan* mentioned that Elias left at 4:30 am. Sometimes later Sukheena left with two bundles containing fruits, and clothes. Under the leadership of Stuart Hogg, who was then the Commissioner of Calcutta Police, the police arrested Elias Gubboy, Sukheena, and the *khansamah* (male cook and house steward), Ameer, to gather evidence for the investigation. Most of the available evidence was circumstantial. *The Friend of India* reported the event as 'a disgusting picture of oriental life.'⁴³

However, due to lack of concrete evidence the prisoners were released after a few days by the Magistrate.⁴⁴ *The Friend of India* referred to the situation as 'the disgrace of Calcutta Police,' adding that a detective from Scotland Yard could have easily solved the case.⁴⁵ *The Homeward Mail from India, China and the East* likewise condemned the Calcutta Police, and its Commissioner Stuart Hogg for being unable to punish the criminals, and goes to the extent of advising citizens to stop paying taxes at 3 percent for the maintenance of inefficient police force. It refers to Sumha as a victim of Jewish law dooming the adulteress to death, and asks for supervision of the Gubboy family, involved in two murders within a span of 9 years.⁴⁶ The reputation of Calcutta Police was harmed at being unable to bring the perpetrators to justice in both the murder cases within a decade.

Mozelle

Historical Context

The Baghdadi Jewish community in India was primarily composed of the lower and middle class with a small but very affluent elite group. The trusts, and charities set up by the rich ones looked after the poorer ones. Joan Roland mentioned that prostitution was a common vice among the poorer Baghdadis in Bombay and Calcutta, with many young girls taking it up as a part-time profession to accumulate wealth for their dowry before marriage between 1880-1915.⁴⁷ In the 1901 census, seven Baghdadi women listed prostitution as their occupation. Despite not being a regular profession, it was a somewhat acceptable trade for lower class women. In 1916, the British Indian Government discovered that 101 ‘European Jews’ (primarily from Central and Eastern Europe), and eighty-five ‘Asiatic Jews’ were engaged in prostitution across Calcutta, Bombay, and Rangoon. While the European ones were professional and quite open about their vocation, the Asian Jews practiced in secrecy, and were forced into prostitution due to their poverty.⁴⁸ This number might have increased in the 1940s, with the arrival of many impoverished Jewish refugees from Burma, and other East and South-East Asian countries fleeing from the Japanese persecution.

Depiction in Fiction

Saadat Hasan Manto is one of the finest Urdu writers of the 20th century, whose works are known for their portrayal of the raw emotions and violence experienced during the 1947 partition of British India. Manto’s short story *Mozelle* (1951) depicts the character of a Jewish prostitute Mozelle in the tumultuous pre- and post-partition days in Bombay. Mozelle is portrayed as a shameless, cruel, cold-hearted, and physically dominant woman of easy virtue. She constantly teases and insults the protagonist Trilochan Singh (who was madly in love with her) for his religio-cultural (Sikh) identity. When spending time with Trilochan, Mozelle often wandered off on seeing any of her other male friends to spend time with them, making Trilochan jealous and angry. Despite her initial rebuffs, Trilochan gets more attracted to her resulting in Mozelle becoming more assertive, even indirectly forcing him to cut his long hair and shave his beard (sacrilegious for a Sikh person) promising marriage. However, on the proposed wedding day she flees with another

man to Deolali leaving Trilochan devastated. Trilochan never forgets Mozelle, as evident in him continuing to trim his beard. She constantly mocked Trilochan as a ‘first-class idiot’ whose beard could be used for cleaning her ‘navy blue skirt.’⁴⁹

Mozelle’s greatness and love for Trilochan became evident in the climax where she used her promiscuous nature to save Trilochan, and his fiancé Kirpal Kaul from a riot affected area amidst a curfew. Kirpal is depicted as a complete opposite to Mozelle – shy, timid, and of weak stature who rarely speaks. Mozelle only drew her last breath upon hearing that Kirpal Kaur had fled to safety. Her love towards Trilochan was manifested in the fact that she always chose the cheapest and simplest gifts for herself, while Trilochan tried to offer her expensive ones. Trilochan’s love for Mozelle was conspicuous even in the climax, where he took off his turban to cover Mozelle’s nude body, while he initially refused to remove the turban to save his life from a violent Muslim mob amid the charged atmosphere. However, Mozelle returned the turban prior to passing away.⁵⁰

It is likely that Saadat Hasan Manto’s encounters with Baghdadi Jewish prostitutes during his time in Bombay influenced the characterization of Mozelle. It does not emanate out of antisemitism as Mozelle is depicted as a free-spirited, tragic, courageous protagonist who sacrifices herself for the hero. Not wishing to be bound by the norms of the societal, gender and religious relations, Mozelle lived her life to the fullest according to her own rules. Instead of changing herself to be accepted by the male character, she in turn forces Trilochan to change himself for her. There are many such strong-willed, so called ‘scandalous women’ who venture out of the fixed norms in some other stories of Manto as noted by Pragya Jha.⁵¹

Mozelle could easily venture into a riot affected area due to her Jewish identity, openness, and promiscuous nature, while Trilochan was initially afraid and hesitant to go there to save his fiancé due to his Sikh identity making him a target for Muslims. This is an anti-thesis to most stories where the brave hero sacrifices, and rescues the timid protagonist. Here, outspoken Mozelle tactfully used her charm and presence of mind to save hesitant Trilochan, and timid Kirpal on

several occasions towards the climax to the extent of sacrificing her life by tripping of the stairs while trying to distract the violent Muslim mob.

The Venom of the Tarantula

Historical Background

The elite Baghdadi Jews made their fortunes by acting as intermediaries for the British in the opium trade with China in the 19th century. The proceeds from this trade supplied about 16% of the total revenue of the colonial Government of India in the 1880s.⁵² Most among them shifted towards other fields such as industry, tea, and real estate after opium trade was highly regulated and subsequently banned by the government in late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the 1910s, a few Jewish gangs smuggled outlawed opium and other contrabands from Calcutta to China via Rangoon. Mostly some less affluent members of the community engaged in such dangerous activities. The Baghdadi community in Rangoon owes its origin to this nexus. One such gang comprised of Moses Abraham, Morris Joseph, A. Raymond (alias Abraham), and J.A. Cohen (alias Jacob Cohen). All members were arrested by the Excise Department between 1912-1915 for possessing the contraband opium, and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. A. Albert who smuggled cocaine, was sentenced to nine months rigorous imprisonment by the Presidency Magistrate of Bengal in 1916.⁵³

Depiction in Fiction

Byomkesh Bakshi is one of the most famous detectives in Bengali literature, whose characterization was inspired by Sherlock Holmes. In *Makorshar Rosh* (“The Venom of the Tarantula”) from 1933, the author Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay mentioned a character named Rebeca Light, a strange Jewish woman. Since his younger days Nandadulal led an extravagant lifestyle full of pomp, and developing various addictions. The tarantula spider’s venom⁵⁴ gradually made him weak as he aged. His body became paralyzed severely restricting his loco-motor abilities. As a result, his family members became worried, and informed detective Byomkesh

Bakshi about the case through their family doctor. Nandadulal became extremely irritable on being denied the drug, as evident towards the end of the story.

Light ingeniously supplied the poisonous drug to the elderly Nandadulal in lieu of hundred Indian rupees per month (a substantial sum in 1930s). The drug was mixed in a bottle of red ink, which was delivered to Nandadulal through a postal peon. The peon discreetly replaced Nandadulal's ink bottles while supplying him blank letters. Nandadulal composed explicit stories, and sucked the nib of fountain pen to enjoy the drug thus avoiding suspicion. However, this resulted in his tongue becoming red, that provided a crucial clue in solving the case. Nandadulal's son, Arun, mentioned to Ajit, Byomkesh's friend and chronicler (a character roughly equivalent to Dr. Watson), that his father had an affair with Rebeca in his younger days. Towards the end, Byomkesh uses the slang '*Maagi*' (whore) to refer to her. The Jewish woman is denied any agency in the story (she lacks dialogues and any physical presence). She becomes a supporting yet important character without whom the story would be incomplete.⁵⁵

The story unfolds gradually where the protagonist Byomkesh uses his polished intellect to solve the mystery of a strange addiction of the aged Nandadulal. Ajit does most of the investigation, and narrates the findings to Byomkesh. This is one of the rare detective stories where the protagonist solves the case without physically visiting the scene. Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay may have been inspired by the Jewish smugglers to create the character of mysterious Rebeca Light, despite a woman smuggler being unheard of. However, Byomkesh's derogatory remarks towards Light showed his creator's racist attitude.⁵⁶

Discussion

The present author has tried to examine the three pieces within their historical context through this article. The portrayal of Indian Baghdadi Jews in literature has been mostly stereotypical - opium-addict immoral Luna Sassoon, strong-willed Dinah Sasson, uninhibited Mozelle, and drug dealer Rebecca Light. Courter's work is well-researched and offers nuanced depiction of every Jewish character, be it Baghdadi, Bene Israel or Cochini. The portrayal of Baghdadis in pigeonholed roles

by Manto and Bandyopadhyay primarily stems from their lack of understanding about Jews and Judaism, a trend that continues among Indians even today. Unlike the silent Rebecca, Mozelle and Dinah Sassoon are portrayed as strong, dominant characters who act according to their own will.

Dinah's journey throughout the novel portrays how a young woman strives, develops, and establishes a firm foothold within the contemporary, patriarchal Baghdadi society while seeking vengeance against those who wronged her. Whenever confronting adversity, she rises from the ashes like a phoenix – whether after her mother's death, her first failed marriage, the loss of the ship 'Luna Sassoon' (and its cargo), or upon becoming the heir to the Sassoon family business and subsequently saving its legacy by diversifying from opium to other ventures. Mozelle's characterization subverts the traditional hero-heroine narrative, emerging as the stronger figure who will stop at nothing to save the lives of Trilochan and his fiancé, Kirpal. Despite achieving success, Mozelle tragically perishes in the process. Rebecca Light's plain characterization fails to imbue her with any nuance or depth.

The murder case of Leah Judah was unique in many aspects - it was the first case in India where both the victim and the accused belonged to the Jewish community, besides indirect involvement of other micro-minority communities of Calcutta, Armenian and Greek. The accused murderers of both Leah Judah and Sumha Gubboy belonged to the Gubboy family, and the murders occurred in the same mansion. However, there was no direct connection between both events. Although it is interesting to note that the mansion was purchased by the Gubbos after the Judah family left Calcutta. While the first one was a revenge of a vengeful 'lover,' the second one was a result of domestic abuse. Contemporary accounts depicted antisemitic attitudes by referring to the Jews as 'Hebrews.' They asserted that a 'Hebrew' rarely forgets infidelity of wife or mistress, and murders her to extract revenge, as opposed to the civilized English who settled matters judicially.⁵⁷ The conservative, patriarchal Baghdadi society, blamed the victims Leah and Sumha for their fates. Both cases occurred in the formative years of the Calcutta Police, whose reputation was tarnished at being unable to solve them. Leah's case got widespread press coverage, and was immortalized in later works such as those of Lex (*Remarkable Criminal Trials in Bengal*), R. Reid (*Every Man*

His Own Detective!), Esmond David Ezra (*Turning Back the Pages: A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry*), and Courter's novel (*Flowers in the Blood*). Contrastingly, Sumha's case was ignored and forgotten. Even the erstwhile online archive of Calcutta Jewry (named *Recalling Jewish Calcutta*) refers to Leah's case as the only murder in the community. The same is the case for all the scholarly and popular works on Calcutta Jewry. This absence of Sumha's murder from the discourse warrants further research.

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² Although coming from various parts of the Middle East, they were known after the one of the major centres of trade and Judaism in the Middle East. Moreover, they primarily followed the liturgy of Baghdad.

³ At present there are less than 100 Baghdadi Jews in India (less than 20 in Kolkata, and the remainder in Mumbai). The total population of Jews in India according to 2011 census was just 5000 out of a population of 1.2 billion. Besides the Baghdadis, the other two historical Jewish communities of India are the Cochini Jews of Kerela (their number is in single digits at present), and the Bene Israel (most Indianized) Jews of Maharashtra and Gujarat (about 4000 of them live in Mumbai).

⁴ The documentary evidence (10th century copper plate of Chera King Bhaskara Ravi I granting special privileges to the Jews of Cranganore) indicates the presence of Jews in India for about one thousand years, whereas the legends of the Cochini and Bene Israel Jews date back their presence to about two millennia.

⁵ Indian Culture Portal (Ministry of Culture, Government of India), “Opium Trade and the Exploitation of Indian Peasants in Colonial India,” *Digital District Repository Detail*, Published: October 9, 2023, Accessed: January 9, 2025, <https://cmsadmin.amritmahotsav.nic.in/district-repository-detail.htm?25115>

⁶ Dalia Ray, *The Jewish Heritage of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 2001), 47-48

⁷ Tathagata Neogi, “Murder and Mayhem Walk,” *Immersive Trails*, April 3, 2022

⁸ Legend dates back the arrival of Cochini Jews in India to 70 C.E. (destruction of the Second Temple). They have the oldest documentary evidence among the three Jewish communities of India – a 10th century copper plate of Chera King Bhaskara Ravi I. They adopted local Indian language, dress and customs becoming akin to the local Malayali Hindu-Muslim-Christian communities. Among the Indian Jewish communities, they were the only group to face direct antisemitism from the colonial rulers during the brief Portuguese rule over Cranganore (now Kodungallur). Racism, and social discrimination against the downtrodden Jews prevailed within the Cochini community as late as 1970s. The elite members enjoyed influential positions in the states of Cochin, and Travancore to the extent of being exempted from payment of taxes. The elite adopted the European culture, and dress during colonial era.

The Bene Israel of Bombay comprise more than 80% of Indian Jewry at present. They trace their origin to a shipwreck off the Konkan coast in 175 B.C.E., while their earliest mention is in the 1738 C.E. letter of Danish missionary J.A. Sartorius. Being isolated from World Jewry, they adopted Indian culture, dress, customs, and language to the extent of being almost indistinguishable from local Marathi Hindus and Muslims. They were a rural community of agriculturalists, oil-pressers (called *Shanwar Teli* as they refrained from working on Saturdays), and soldiers in pre-colonial times. In colonial era, they transitioned into an urban community of government and private service holders. From minimally observant Jews, they became properly observant under the influence of Christian missionaries.

The Baghdadis are the newest, and most-Anglicized of the Jewish communities of India. They were chiefly traders who settled in the port cities of Bombay, and Calcutta. Initially Arabic (Judaeo-Arabic) by culture, they gradually adopted European ethos and English language (Judaeo-British) between the late 19th to the early 20th century. Throughout their sojourn in India, they strived in vain to achieve European status.

After the twin events of the emergence of the post-colonial states of India (1947), and Israel (1948) amidst large scale violence, the Indian Jewry emigrated abroad. Most of the Cochini, and Bene Israel made *aliyah* to Israel, while the Baghdadis primarily emigrated to the English-speaking countries.

⁹ Joan G. Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 4, 58

¹⁰ The present author has retained the spellings used by contemporary newspapers instead of their modern-day versions. E.g., Nasseem instead of Nissim, Shalome instead of Shalom, Abdoollah instead of Abdullah, among others.

¹¹ Esmond David Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages: A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry* (London: Brookside Press, 1986), 191

¹² Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 212

¹³ “Horrible Murder in Calcutta,” *The Bombay Gazette*, Bombay, October 18, 1858, Pg.: 902, British Library Reference Number: BL0002920/1858/101/045/0004

¹⁴ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 198-200

¹⁵ R. Reid, *Every Man His Own Detective!* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co. Limited, 1887), 98-99

¹⁶ “The Mysterious Murder of a Jewess,” *The Bombay Gazette*, Bombay, October 25, 1858, Pg.: 1015, British Library Reference Number: BL0002920/1858/1025/053/0003

¹⁷ “A Frightful Murder at Calcutta,” *The Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, London, November 13, 1858, Pg.: 1137, British Library Reference Number: BL0001712/1858/1223/016/0007

¹⁸ Reid, *Every Man His Own Detective*, 97

¹⁹ Reid, *Every Man His Own Detective*, 105

²⁰ Lex, *Remarkable Criminal Trials in Bengal: Being Narratives of Facts Taken, With Permission, From the Crown Records of the Late Supreme and Sudder Courts* (Calcutta: City Press, 1876), 122-23, 149-151

²¹ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 208-210

²² Lex, *Remarkable Criminal Trials in Bengal*, 148-150

²³ Reid, *Every Man His Own Detective!* 106-108

²⁴ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 213

²⁵ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 192-194

²⁶ Lex, *Remarkable Criminal Trials in Bengal*, 135-136

²⁷ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 214

²⁸ *The Friend of India*, Kolkata, December 23, 1858, Pg.: 1207, British Library Reference Number: BL0002926/1858/1223/016/0007

²⁹ Neogi, “Murder and Mayhem Walk,”

³⁰ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 211

³¹ Lex, *Remarkable Criminal Trials in Bengal*, 154

³² Burial Records, Narkeldanga Jewish Cemetery, Kolkata, Pg.: 14. It records the date of her death as Tishri 23, 5619 or October 1, 1858.

³³ Self-Exploration, *Jewish Cemetery at Narkeldanga*, March 7, 2022

³⁴ Neogi, “Murder and Mayhem Walk”

³⁵ The surname Sassoon seems to have been inspired by the illustrious Sassoon family of Bombay (the ‘Rothschilds of the East’), which spread its branches across ‘Jewish Asia’ comprising of the colonial port cities from Aden in the West to Shanghai and Hong Kong in the east with Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, and Singapore being its important hubs. The head of the family David Sassoon arrived in Bombay in 1830s fleeing from the increasing religious persecution in the Ottoman Empire.

While the Sassoon family exerted its dominance over the Bombay (and other cities in Western India such as Pune) Baghdadi community, it had no such influence over Calcutta. In Calcutta, the dominant Jewish families were the Ezra, Gubbay, and Elias. However, the dominant Baghdadis of Calcutta frequently intermarried with members of the Sassoon family of Bombay.

³⁶ Interestingly, this house at 7, Theatre Road belonged to Indian revolutionary turned ascetic leader Aurobindo Ghosh, which now houses a museum dedicated to him.

³⁷ Moumita Chaudhuri, “To Jerusalem and to Gaza, a note from Jewish Girls’ School on Park Street,” *The Telegraph*, Published: December 3, 2023, Accessed: January 10, 2025, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/news/to-jerusalem-and-to-gaza-a-note-from-jewish-girls-school-on-park-street/cid/1984163>

³⁸ Gay Courter, *Flowers in the Blood* (New York: Dutton, 1990), 49, 60-61, 589

- ³⁹ Courter, *Flowers in the Blood*, 542-543
- ⁴⁰ The alias (Song Kune Ni) is like an anagram for his real name (Nissim Sadka) in reverse with Song Kung standing for Sadka, and Ni being a shortened version of Nissim.
- ⁴¹ Courter, *Flowers in the Blood*, 589, 703, 721-722.
- ⁴² The Gurkha person was the servant of Dinah's first husband Silas (who named the Gurkha 'Gulliver'). In his will written long before his premature death in an earthquake, Silas gave custody of Gulliver (alongside his properties, and business) to his divorced wife Dinah. Dinah appointed him her bodyguard.
- ⁴³ "The Jewish Murder," *The Friend of India*, Calcutta, November 28, 1867, Pg.:1407, British Library Reference Number: BL0002926/1867/1128/018/0005
- ⁴⁴ "From the Englishman," *The Mofussilite*, Calcutta (Later *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore), December 3, 1867, Pg.: 6, British Library Reference Number: BL0004542/1867/1203/038/0006
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- ⁴⁸ Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India*, 329
- ⁴⁹ Adbi Duniya, "Mozelle- Sadaat Hasan Manto," *YouTube*, published: March 24, 2020, Accessed: April 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92rsNflknj4>
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- ⁵³ Ray, *The Jewish Heritage of Calcutta*, 47-48
- ⁵⁴ There was a tradition of Tarantism (also called Tarantula dance) in late medieval Spain and Southern Italy, where people used to dance hysterically (dance mania) after being bitten by wolf spider, and Mediterranean black widow spider. In some instances, people used to die of fatigue.
- ⁵⁵ Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, *Byomkesh Samagra (Bengali)* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2019), 97-100.
- ⁵⁶ Bandyopadhyay possessed a soft-spot for right-wingers. His other stories also depict racism. In *Satyanweshi* ("The Truth seeker") (1932) the story which marked the introduction of Byomkesh Bakshi in Bengali literature, the author referred to the Chinese as yellow-skinned (*Peetborno*) and slant-eyed (*Tirjakchokkhku*), and the Marwaris as distressed/poor (*Dustho*).
- ⁵⁷ Reid, *Every Man His Own Detective!* 108