

# “An umbrella made of precious gems”: An Examination of Memory and Diasporic Identities in Kerala Jewish Songs and Literature

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## Abstract

The Jews living in the state of Kerala enact their diasporic identities through a unique narrative network including songs, stories, and memoirs. Drawing on memory studies and affect theory, this article aims to examine selected Jewish folk songs as an example of entanglement of memory and culture, nostalgia and narrative. We study *Oh, Lovely Parrot* (2004), which is a compilation of 43 typical Kerala “parrot songs” – devotional hymns and songs for special occasions – translated from Malayalam into English by Scaria Zacharia and Barbara C. Johnson. Performances of these songs constitute cultural as well as affective phenomena that bring together Jewish identities, especially female rituals, in a collective effort to preserve their ethnic memory and its associated social identity. The music unique to this community illustrates the ancestry and tradition of the Kerala Jews which held them together even after ‘*aliyah*’ (a Hebrew word referring to the migration to the nation state of Israel post-1948). Using selected songs from the book, the article aims to examine the community's cultural identity markers related to experiential and discursive diasporic memory. It also draws on the memoir *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers* (2001) by Ruby Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson to analyse the affective quality of songs which unites the community in collective imagination and in complex *nostalgia narratives*.

**Keywords:** Kerala-Jews, Israel, Affect, Identity, Migration, Memory

The history of the Jews in India stretches back to two millennia and represents one of the smallest religious groups in the subcontinent. The Indian Jewish experience was not marked by xenophobia or political oppression but was instead characterised by complex combinations of assimilation, alienation, nostalgia, and patriotism. There are three main Indian-Jewish communities practising key elements of Judaism. They are the Bene Israeli, the Kerala Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews from Iraq (Singh, 2014, p. 30). The Bene Israeli group (‘Sons of Israel’) is settled around the Bombay region and in Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Karachi. The Baghdadi Jews are mostly found in the Kolkata region in the state of West Bengal in India (Katz, 2011, p. 3-4). The Kerala Jews are based in the state of Kerala in South India. Their historical narrative affirms that they

came to Cranganore (south-west coast of India) after the destruction of the second temple of Israel in Jerusalem in 70 CE (Fernandes, 2008, p. 15; Singh, 2014, p. 69). In the 15th Century, the Jews of Cranganore left for Cochin where they lived, supported and protected by the royalty and the locals, subsequently spreading across towns like Parur, Chendamangalam, and Mattancherry. The origins of the Jewish community in and around Cochin's port city lie in the ancient maritime trading links between the Malabar Coast and West Asia.

With the massive flooding in Cranganore and also with the Portuguese invasion in 1565, the Jews took settlement in Kochi (then called Kochazhi) as it was another route conducive to their mobility and trade. The final group of Jews came to Kerala in the 16th Century with the onset of the inquisition in Europe, with many Jews starting to arrive from Spain and elsewhere to settle over here. The community flourished under the patronage of Cochin kings who valued their diplomatic and commercial skills in dealing with the Europeans. The formation of the State of Israel on 14 May, 1948 introduced the idea of *aliyah* among the Cochin Jews. The word *aliyah* literally means 'ascent' and it refers to the committed migration to the Jewish Homeland. The Jews in Kerala were not persecuted and lived a very settled life with the state's support. Therefore their migration was not an escape from difficulties but based out of an entanglement of utopian nostalgia and aspiration, informed by historical-materialist as well as messianic markers. Thus by 1949, a year after Israel was formed, the first batch of people left for Israel under the leadership of Kadavil Meyer from Chendamangalam village (Oommen, 2008, p. 29).

*Oh Lovely Parrot* (2004) is a compilation of 43 Malayalam folk songs of the Jewish community in Kerala that comprises "parrot songs", devotional hymns, and Zionist songs that aim to prepare Kerala Jews for the migration to Israel. They were translated into English by Scaria Zacharia and Barbara C. Johnson and published by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The songs were passed from one generation to the next, mostly orally, as institutional archives were "regarded as a somewhat undesirable presence in performance" (Schultz, 2016, p. 75). The women of the community were generally the preservers and conveyers of the cultural memory. They preserved the songs in small notebooks that were later copied down by others and performed on various religious occasions. In the introduction to the book *Oh Lovely Parrot* (2004), Barbara Johnson states that the "Songs and notebooks travelled from community to community, when brides moved into the homes and congregations of their husbands" (Zacharia & Johnson, 2004, p. 10). The songs as an affective and memory vehicle brought them together as a community and contained a combination of Jewish and Kerala culture through complex discursive and material markers. In the article "The Parur Songs: Reflections on the Role of Women," Albrecht Frenz writes about these performances:

When singing the songs, women created an atmosphere of hope. The performance of the songs constituted a decisive element in the history of the Jewish community in Kerala. Word, expressions and the way how the songs were performed show that they contain typical Kerala features in terms of landscape, behaviour and the liveliness of performance (Frenz, 2006, p. 514).

The female voices metonymically and musically transport the past into the present, allowing them to shape uncertain futures with performativity and affective agency. In this way, the performing women re-created and conveyed meaning and value in the Kerala Jewish cultural fabric through these individual and group activities involving emotional memory and cultural historical materiality. Some of the songs in the collection are named "parrot songs" signifying the

lovely colourful birds as often inscribed in the ketubah or Jewish wedding contract document. Every song is a narrative of embedded experiential memories that the community carried wherever they migrated, containing material as well as messianic markers aimed at creating and consolidating a uniquely aspirational as well as a nostalgically political and religious identity. Through the songs they looked forward as a community to their promised land of Israel, corroborating the complex forward-looking utopian quality of collective memory. Whenever the songs were performed, the remembering subject “actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 16), corroborating how such collective activities in the private as well as public spaces re-present and preserve an economy of cultural memory and identity markers which “offers a productive frame for explaining the social and cultural meaning and value of the act of remembering literature at the individual level” (Skopljanac, 2012, p. 210).

The song ‘Our Ancient Hope’ also referred to as “Kakicha’s Song” written much before the formation of Israel, portrays the hope of “returning to the land where Messiah King will rule” (Johnson & Zacharia, 2004, p. 89). The first line of the hymn, “Dwelling in both sides of the world is the national spirit of the Jews” (Johnson & Zacharia, 2004, p. 89) underlines the community’s political and existential hybridity. They talk about a spirit of hope for going back to their ‘home’ Israel, which is affectively portrayed in their folklore and life. Israel thus becomes a veritable chronotope in collective imagination here, a complex spatiotemporal category containing an idyllic perfect past as well as an aspired future which is material as well as messianic in quality (Best, 1996). Home as an ontological and experiential category is problematized in this scenario in the entanglement of what is perceived as ‘returning home’ to the messianic Jewish Homeland and leaving the *real* home in Kerala where they and their ancestors were born. The liminality between home as physical place and home as an affective spatiotemporal construct underscores the play of information and imagination characterising collective as well as private processes of remembering and re-construction. The refrain in the song “The hope we have had since ancient times has not faded from our hearts” (Johnson & Zacharia, 2004, p. 89) underlines the geopolitical and affective complex here, with the relationship between the notion of a ‘homeland’ and of ‘diaspora’ emerging as fluid as well as fixated.

The songs also imparted an affective quality about the utopian homeland to the Kerala Jews once they migrated to Israel after 1948. However, the idyllic quality of Israel in their collective imagination was undercut by the material and cultural difficulties in the diasporic land. Ruby Daniel, one of the earliest immigrants, notes in her life writings *Ruby of Cochin* on observing the new environment thus:

The whole place was mud with only thorn bushes growing, and full of jackals, as was written in the Bible: that the Land of Israel will be given to jackals and owls until the Jews came back again. There were scarcely any green... The Cochini people would talk among themselves, saying, “This is not a place for us. We can’t mix with others, because others don’t want to mix with us. The culture is completely different. (Daniel & Johnson, 2002, p. 102, 106)

The topography and the cultural ecosystem in Israel were experientially and discursively alienating to the Jews from Kerala. The new settlers were taken to Kibbutzim, a collective community in Israel based on agriculture. But the kibbutzim for them was raw, unused, and harsh, located in isolated places mostly close to the borders of the country, where they were left to fend for themselves with Jews from other parts of the world. It was here in these kibbutzim, that the Kerala Jews collectively re-created and connected even more to the pre-diasporic land,

Kerala. This was facilitated mainly through the performance of these songs, consumption of Keralite food, and commemoration of Jewish cultural events as a community, problematizing the combination of cultural and religious identities in narratives of nostalgia. Describing the affective quality of Kerala Jewish wedding tunes in Israel, Ruby notes:

When the bridegroom is from Cochin, it is understood that he conducts the ceremony. When he is an outsider, he will be taught how to read it with the correct tune, and usually he is willing. A young boy will read the ketubah in a Cochini tune. Our tunes are very sacred to us, and we will never give them up, I hope! (Daniel & Johnson, 2002, p. 191)

Gregory J Seigworth and Melissa Gregg in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) describe affect as “an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2011, p. 1). For the Kerala Jews in Israel, Cochin emerged from a physical place to literally a permanent presence with affective and material entanglements. Barbara Johnson in the introduction to *Ruby of Cochin* examines the cultural setting of Ruby’s house which is reminiscent of a typical Keralite household: “The air is rich with the mingled smells of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg. We talk as we work. Ruby’s stories never cease” (Daniel & Johnson, 2002, p. xvi), corroborating the cognitive connection between smell and memory in psychology as well as in literary studies (Herz & Schooler, 2002, p. 21). The taste here creates a liminal memory space and a conveyor belt between the present in Israel and the past in Kerala, where affect comes into play, moving between real and imaginary homelands, establishing complex *nostalgia narratives* which are experienced by the same set of subjects while being directed at different geopolitical places.

Martha Figlerowicz observes that affect theory is “grounded in movements or flashes of mental or somatic activity rather than causal narratives of their origins and end points” (Figlerowicz, 2012, p. 4). The song “Golden Palanquin” in the collection stands out in the performance with its deep affective quality. It is in the bridegroom’s voice asking for advice and is typical of the Kaduvumbhagam-Kochi Jewish community style. The lines “Here we are, all of us—Living here in happiness” (Johnson & Zacharia, 2004, p. 25) depict the quality of life in Kerala which the community experienced and this became more affectively and ironically nostalgic when performed in the notional Jewish homeland of Israel and re-creating Cochin in collective imagination. Barbara Johnson in the afterword to the book *Karkulali- Yefefiah- Gorgeous!* (2005) mentions this nature of interaction through the preservation of song books by the Jewish women thus:

Most of the song books... (are) kept in the possession of families who treasure them as precious heirlooms. Simcha Yosef, a member of the women’s group, explains that her mother always took care of her notebook “because it wasn’t hers. It belonged to the past generations. She guarded it like her eyes... When I hold it, I feel as if I am a part of my ancestors.” (Zacharia & Gamliel, 2005, p. 210)

P.M. Jussay notes the lack of reliable records of the history of the Kerala Jews, especially in the context of their arrival and departure from India for Israel after 1948, while also highlighting how their songs dating back to their origin in the Indian homeland speak about their “tradition and legends on which they depend” (Jussay, 1990, p. 66). The “Parrot Song” or Palotu Palam Taruven, like every other Jewish song, mixes memories and rhythms to generate a nostalgia narrative about precarity and preservation. Here the protagonist of the song, a parrot impersonating a Jew living a comfortable life, needs a safe haven on being hunted. The wounded bird flies “Nearby the seashore of Palur-” (Johnson & Zacharia, 2004, p. 21) which is believed to be

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the place Palur where there was an ancient Jewish settlement in Kerala. Later the bird settles down at a “high place it could find” (Johnson & Zacharia, 2004, p. 21) that denotes Kochi, where the settlement migrated later following flood and invasions. This description underscores the complex combination of geopolitical reality and affectivity in collective memory and its representations and highlights how Kerala was the “splendid green mansion” and “an umbrella made of precious gems” (Johnson & Zacharia, 2004, p. 22) for the Jews who lived there until they migrated to Israel in 1948.

The deep entanglement of memory and culture, nostalgia, and narrative in Keralite Jews finds resonance in a similar examination by Harold Bloom’s “Jewish Culture and Jewish Memory” where he argues thus:

To fly from or be estranged from memories, images, desires that are prohibited, and to be forced into flight by an inner drive, is to presuppose a universe in which all memories, images and desires are overwhelmingly meaningful unless and until the estrangement is enacted. What kind of a world is that, in which there is sense in everything? For there to be sense in everything, everything already must be in the past (Bloom, 1983, p. 15)

Markers of memory through songs operate in these Kerala Jewish folk songs, which problematize the binaries between home and the diaspora, as depicted in *Ruby of Cochin*. As this article has attempted to accentuate, the curious case of the Kerala Jews highlights how the geopolitical and macro-markers of religious location and identity may be underlined as well as undercut by micro-politics of culture, local rituals, and language, whereby Kerala and Israel alternately appear as home and exile in their collective imagination. Through an examination of selected Keralite-Jewish songs, we hope to have established how the lenses of affect theory and memory studies offer original perspectives into how identities are produced, performed, and preserved through collective and affective activities in the complex chronotopes and nostalgia narratives we inhabit and internalise today.

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