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REFLECTING SELF AND EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS IN SUJIT SARAF'S *HARI LAL & SONS*

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ABSTRACT

India has been a rich source of culture, heritage, religion, myths, legends, literature and of course rich history. The advance researches are made in various areas of different culture, languages, castes, religion etc. But taking its unity in diversity, the assertion is made upon the literary roots which go back to the rich tribal or 'Adivasi' literature of India. In the ancient times, an era which was bereft of tangible literature was primarily oral literature which would till its history in various forms like songs, stories, narratives, episodic verses. It rendered its assertion and identity. Hence, it is noteworthy to point out that the several communities dealing with this literature may be socially and economically deprived of all rights and assertion. The paper explores the diasporic dimensions in the novel entitles, Hari Lal & Sons by Sujit Saraf. The contrast between the barrenness of home and the richness of Bengal is very evocative and not only refers to both the fertile land and ample rains but also to the economic opportunity. In Sarogis's book, the character recalls a Marwari proverb about Calcutta, 'Rice like silver, pulses like gold, could heaven be better?' The famine as the push factor for migration was accompanied by the pull factor, the success of earlier Marwaris who came east, among them the Birlas. The novel spans about 72 years and in this period it witnesses the changes that are occurring in British India. Harilal & Sons sticks to a personalized account of the protagonist's life, the diasporic 'scattering' is transformed into 'gathering' by Homi Bhabha. "Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettoes or cafes of city centers …. Also the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant …" (Bhabha 198-199).

KEYWORDS: *Diapora, Identity, Cultural Loss, Revealing Self*

INTRODUCTION

Harilal & Sons by Sujit Saraf, is an exceptional tale of the epic journey of Marwaris have made since they began migrating. Harilal, a twelve-yearoldboy, leaves Shekhavati Rajasthan after the great famine in 1899, *chhappaniya,* 1956 in the Vikram Samvat as per Hindu calendar. Harilal leaves for Calcutta, as they refer to it, as an assistant to a family who hail from the same village and who have made their fortune in Kalkatta. The novel follows Harilal's life as he learns the trade as an apprentice, first in Burra Bazar in Kalkatta, then in the town of Bogra in today's Bangladesh, and finally, at the end of his life, Harilal finds himself back in his village Rampura, Rajasthan in independent India. Over a period of half a century, Harilal fathers nine children with two wives and his business, the eponymous Harilal & Sons, is successful enough for him to leave something for each of his sons to manage and build a *haveli* back in Rampura. It is the sense of diaspora and immigrating spirits that get confronted with the real self even

after being migrant to other places. As Bhikhu Parekh also puts, *The diasporic Indian is like the Banayan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dries up. Far from being homeless, he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world.* (106)

The purpose for Harilal's migration to Kalkatta is built around the chhappaniya, which resulted in a big wave of migration of the Marwaris to Calcutta. Alka Sarogi in her novel *Kalikatha: Via Bypass*, while referring to the famine of 'fifty-six' writes '…Burrabazar area of Calcutta is full of migrants of all ages…' Saraf establishes a connecting source the famine to the migration east for providing compelling factors through the comparison of '*…cruel Shekhavati, this land of scrub and sand and khejra leaves…We hear daily of this Bengal, a thousand miles to the east; we are told it is lush, rich and overrun with mango orchards;…Who in Shekhavati ever saw a Mango?'* The difference between the barrenness of home and the richness of Bengal is very provocative which tantamount both the fertile land and ample rains bringing economic opportunity. The novel covers about 72 years and in this period it witnesses the changes that are occurring in British India. *The novel pictures* a personalized account of the protagonist's life, but we can figure out the larger Marwari experience in the multiple migratory journeys undertaken to far-flung corners of the colonial empire in pursuit of their livelihoods. If we can imagine the 19th-century journeys of this trading community to Northeast India, Nepal, Burma, and other places, the Marwari experience would make for compelling reading on all aspects of the host society.

Diaspora and Immigration

The political and social experience can be traced when Harilal is directed by his mentor to go to Bogra, in what was then East Bengal to earn his livelihood as the businessman. It is at first frightened by the local society and over time learns to understand his new world. He is not unnerved when slurs are used against him or embarrassed about bargaining or generally keeping his head down in more volatile surroundings. This type of experience is part of the collective consciousness of the Marwari experience and offers a fascinating ringside view of important events. It is astonishing in how it opens the intimate Marwari world, such as their association with speculation and trading in the future. In his first few days in Kolkatta, Harilal discovers the betting around rain in Burrabazar and we are introduced to terms like *khayivals*, *lagayivals* and also introduced to the British commercial world which employed the Marwaris as *banyans* and as *gomastas*, the middlemen who underpinned it. It is the sense of nostalgia when at the end of the novel, the author writes about his grandfather Hiralal Saraf, whose life years mirror those of Harilal (the real self). Saraf writes that he had to imagine, reconstruct and situate the story of his grandfather and family.

Hari soon found that a boy of twelve could do little but sit around the office and wait to be sent out on errands, a glass of rose sherbet for Khemchandji, a message to the durbaan at the door, a trip to collect rent from the flour mill. When he was dispatched to collect on debts, the amounts were small—125 was a pittance, he soon learned and the payments involved no delays because that would require some haggling over the interest rate with the debtor. However much his ten rupees had seemed at first, he was the lowest paid clerk in the office. The eight annas he had saved every month vanished as soon as winter required him to buy a muffler and a new pair of Nagra sandals. He kept scrupulous accounts, yet his earnings seemed to slip away and there was no prospect of accumulation.

Walking through the narrow, circuitous lanes of Bara Bazar, he shrank from the dirt and the rude crowds, the boys bathing at roadside pumps, the women cooking in a sea of slush, their pots and pans collecting splashes of water from

tonga wheels. Then there was the problem of the fish market, which became impossible to avoid on his way to Cotton Street. There he saw goat carcasses, snails and fish that were still living, flailing when held by the tail, dripping blood on counters. When passing these, he longed for the open spaces of Rampura where a boy could wander in the fields and chew on bajra, or jump into the pond near the dam for an afternoon bath, without having to deal with Bengalis, crowds, English hmm d,hg8lfsahibs or tongawalas.

He had hoped this was to be a temporary situation that would enable him to start his own shop, as Seth Daulatram had done in Cotton Street, but where would he get the money for a shop, given that he had been unable to save even a few annas in nine months? Trade is in our blood, his father had told him, but that blood had to be sweetened with capital. No one would trust his money with a boy of twelve who knew nothing but arithmetic and Modhiya. Perhaps he could become a dalaal—a jute or opium under-broker; he could learn how to tell good jute from bad and arrange deals for Khemchandji. A good dalaal at a European firm could earn three hundred rupees in a month, but such firms employed experienced men who had already been brokers in Indian firms for years. The capital of a dalaal was his reputation and his word, and no one would trust the word of a boy. Besides, a dalaal had to know how to speak Bengali with Bengalis, a little Hindi, and perhaps some English when

In June, eleven months after he had arrived in Calcutta, he asked the cashier in Lalgodam to show him his account. A red binder was produced and opened to a page that contained too few entries: his accumulated savings were three rupees and six annas.

Later that day, he walked down Cotton Street to collect on a bill. There was a letter from his father in his kurta pocket. Having received no news of home for seven months, and having sent none, lest his father—laid low by the Chhappaniya—be burdened with his misfortunes in Calcutta, he was afraid to read the letter. When did Raamji ever send good news from Shekhavati? June was the month of blistering heat in the tibbas, of preparation for bajra planting, of scanning the sky for wisps of cloud. Perhaps the Chhappaniya would return this year, as the Saiya famine had followed the Bhaiya. He sat on a bench and bought a glass of tea, knowing he should not drink anything when on an errand. With the tea calming his nerves, he opened the note.

'… Rukmini is now sixteen, and her father-in-law has already asked thrice, "When will you send her to us?" I cannot delay her departure any longer, even if I am unable to buy the gifts that must go with her. Your mother has put together everything she could find in the house—after setting aside the gifts that must be given to Jasoda and Muniya when it is their time—but I do not know what I will give to her husband when he comes to take her away. Panditji has determined Aashaadh Sudi dashmi—the day Raamji had chosen for your wedding last year—as auspicious for Rukmini's departure. If you are able to, send a gold ring from Kalkatta. I have made inquiries, and gold has declined to twenty-four rupees in Kalkatta—some even quote twenty-three rupees, fifteen annas, and a paisa for a tola, a rate I have not seen in fifteen years. Do not spend too much: a one-tola ring will be sufficient. You will find many men in Lalgodam leaving for Shekhavati in a week or two before the chaumasa begins. Send the earrings with them …'

Hari could read no more. He understood what the letter left unsaid—his sister Draupadi had not survived the fever that had attacked her a few days before his wedding. His father would not make the mistake of communicating such inauspicious news in a letter. Instead, he had named everyone but Draupadi, letting Hari divine the rest.

He wished he had never come to Disavar, and never believed those stories they had told him about Seth Daulatram. But for the Chhappaniya, he would be sitting in the shop with his father, weighing mounds of bajra and moth, gwar, cucumber, and melons, bantering with customers, speaking of trips to temples in Sikar and Jhunjhunu. Why did anyone in Rampura have to step out of Shekhavati at all? 'There is much to buy and sell,' Hemrajji had said, 'and a hundred ways for a good bania to make money. Once a boy has learned the ways of Disavar, he starts out on his own.' Yes, but not a boy sent out before his time!

He could simply pack his trunk and return to Rampura. He would have to borrow money for the gold ring—Khemchandji would perhaps extend a loan. He would have to ask for more than twenty-four rupees: his father had not accounted for the cost of workmanship—two-and-a-half annas in a rupee. Excited, he stood up, then sat down immediately when reminded of the train fare. What would his father say about the waste? Ten rupees to go from Delhi to Calcutta, another ten to return, with nothing to show for the expense but a gold ring and a debt of thirty-five rupees! In any case, he could not return empty-handed. When someone—even a boy—returned from Disavar, he was expected to arrive with gifts for everyone, with stories of Kalkatta, English sahibs, trains, tongas and bales of jute. What stories would he tell?

Forlorn, he walked down Cotton Street, entered number 67 and took the staircase directly to the second floor, avoiding the crowded courtyard where a meeting appeared to be in session. As he had done hundreds of times, he slipped off his chappals, placed his bills respectfully before the munim at the cash box, and sat down cross-legged in a corner of the mattress to await his turn, knowing he would not be noticed until closing time three hours later, yet had to remain seated to be noticed at all. Had he arrived at closing time, they would have asked him to come the next day. Everyone wanted to avoid the ill omen of a creditor early in the afternoon when three hours of business remained, yet no one wanted to see him at the end of the day. I am the agent of ill-luck, he told himself as he drifted into a waking slumber that he had mastered over a year of waiting in Gaddis. An hour later, his indiscretion with the tea returned to haunt him. He could not seek permission to go to the latrines. The munim would surely taunt, 'Have you come to collect money or piss in my building? Do they not have latrines in Lalgodam?' So he ignored the urge until he could bear it no longer. Gently, hoping the munim would not notice, he slid off the mattress, slipped on his chappals and walked out into the balcony. There seemed to be no latrine on the floor. He went upstairs; that floor, too, seemed to have nothing but offices. He climbed to the roof, thinking they might have built a latrine there. A thick pillar stood in the middle, supporting nothing, apparently part of an abandoned plan to add another floor to the building. Dark clouds hung overhead; a drizzle appeared imminent. Someone had thrown maize and bajra grains all over the roof. Hundreds of pigeons flapped about, feeding busily, trying to climb each other to get closer to the grain. Beyond the birds, a channel of concrete had been laid in the floor to collect rainwater and direct it into a pipe that descended to the courtyard below. A boy slightly older than Hari was squatting on the channel, his dhoti pulled above his knees, urinating.

So they never built a proper latrine in this building, thought Hari.

He walked to the other end of the channel and squatted, taking care not to expose himself to the other boy, and began to urinate. The boy sprang to his feet, ran to Hari, pulled him up by the shoulders and dragged him behind the pillar. A storm of pigeons blinded them. Hari was terrified. Was this not a urinal?

Had he not seen the boy squatting there? Before he could utter a word, however, the boy clapped a hand over his mouth and pointed to the stairwell. Two men in turbans came up to the rooftop in great agitation. After looking anxiously

at the sky, they bent over the concrete channel to study the stream of urine as it flowed and emptied into the drain. When the first drops spilled out of the pipe at the bottom, a cry went up in the courtyard below.

'Khaya! Khaya!'

The men on the rooftop frowned, scoured the sky again, held out their hands to catch imaginary raindrops and looked down at the channel in consternation, where the flow had now reduced to a trickle. They argued for a few minutes, then went downstairs. The boy released Hari and chuckled. 'How much did you wager?'

Hari did not understand. 'What is khaya?'

'Three for me,' said the boy. 'At seven to two.'

'What do you deal in?' asked Hari.

'What do you deal in?' the boy responded.

'I am a clerk with Daulatram Gulabchand in Amherst Row.'

'You look too young to be a clerk,' the boy said, though he himself was not much older.

'I started a year ago.'

'What are you doing on the rooftop? There are no Gaddis here.'

'I drank too much tea …' Hari said weakly.

The boy laughed. 'What is your name?'

'Harilal Tibrewal, son of Shri Duli Chand Tibrewal of Rampura in Shekhavati.'

The boy appeared surprised. 'Are you the son-in-law of Narayan Dasji Nangaliya of Chirawa?'

Hari nodded. The boy turned to face him, folded his hands and bowed. 'I would have touched your feet if you were older, but this will have to do.' 'Who are you?' Hari asked.

'Janardhan Kedia, son of Shri Sawarmal Kedia of Chirawa. I consider Narayan Dasji's daughters my sisters, so his son-in-law is my jija. Consider me your saalaa, jijaji.'

Hari was relieved: a boy from his wife's side of the family certainly had lower status—there was no reason to be intimidated by him. 'You have not told me what you deal in,' he said boldly.

Janardhan pointed to the sky. 'Rain.'

'That is not yours to sell.'

'Everything made by Raamji can be bought and sold if a bania knows how to price it,' Pointing to the concrete channel, Janardhan continued, 'This drains into a metal pipe, which flows straight down into rain-gauges on the ground floor.'

'I saw no gauges when I came up.'

'They are hidden in a double-ceiling to the left of the courtyard. Look down there, but keep your head out of sight.' Hari peered over the steel rail into the courtyard. It was bustling with men, all shouting at the same time, right hands held up in the air, fingers dancing to flash secret signals to hidden partners.

'Those are all khayivals,' Janardhan said. 'They had bet that it wouldn't rain today, and have lost a lot of money because the odds of rain were only two to seven.'

'But it did not rain.'

Janardhan shrugged and looked at the channel, where the trickle of urine had disappeared. 'It did, at least three millimeters according to the Calcutta-mori rain-gauge that sits under this pipe. It would have been more had you been quicker to piss, or if I had remembered to drink tea this morning.'

'Is there a latrine here?' Hari asked, suddenly reminded of the pain in his bladder.

Janardhan laughed. 'Your piss is worthless now. Why give it away for nothing? Betting resumes tomorrow morning.'

All in all, Harilal & Sons is a book that doesn't just take you back in time, it allows you to relish the present and think in the future. We could make the same mistakes that our ancestors once made, or we could learn from them and rise above. The choice is ours.

"There are no Marwaris as such in Rajasthan; they only become Marwaris when they leave." Thus writes Anne Hardgrove in her 2004 study, Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta, c. 1897-1997, the most detailed account of a people who have been integral to the birth, development, growth and continued life of the city of dubious joy, yet who still remain strangely elusive when it comes to historical or sociological analysis and understanding. When talking of Calcutta's cosmopolitanism, the Marwaris seldom get a look in, with Armenians, Baghdadi Jews, Anglo-Indians, Parsis, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the like hogging the limelight. Which is strange if one considers that Calcuttans live in buildings constructed with Marwari cement and steel, go to schools run by Marwari trusts, worship in temples built by Marwaris, still ride in Ambassador taxis made by a Marwari firm, watch movies produced by Marwaris, get treated (those who can afford it) in private hospitals run by Marwaris and gawp at the marvels of the cosmos in a planetarium built by Marwaris. Why the book-loving Bengali wouldn't even be able to read her Feluda or Byomkesh (or Lila Majumder or what have you) if it were not for the illumination provided by the electricity produced by a Marwari-owned firm… the list of Marwari contributions to the day-to-day life of Kolkata and Bengal is potentially endless.

Despite all this, the attitude of the Kolkata Bengali towards the Marwari remains friendly but slightly suspicious at best, and directly derogatory and abusive at worst. A typical case in point being the great nationalist scientist, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray's sneering remark that the Marwaris were "mere parasites" who do "not add a single farthing to the country's wealth, but have become the chosen instruments for the draining away of the country's wealth — the life-blood of the peasants —to foreign lands" (in his autobiographical Life and Experiences of a Bengali Chemist, published in the early 1930s).

Sujit Saraf's Harilal & Sons can be seen as an attempt to demystify the Marwari, to humanise him for those who subscribe to the old stereotypes about this "business caste" from the arid wastes of Rajasthan, who travelled across a

subcontinent to make their home, and their fortunes, in what was for long India's greatest trading centre. Inspired by his grandfather, Hiralal Saraf's life (1880–1960), "a man whose travels epitomized the peregrinations of his community" (p 515), Sujit Saraf has spun a tale that goes beyond the merely personal. It maps the story of one man's journey against the turbulent events of India's journey — from colony to Independence via the horrors of Partition. In so doing, Saraf has given his readers not just a detailed, poignant, heartfelt portrait of a man (the eponymous Harilal Tibrewal), but also a bania's eye view of the historical people, places, and events that have gone into the creation of modern India.

Saraf starts his story in dusty, arid Rampura reeling under yet another droughty summer, the Chhappaniya famine of 1899 ravaging the countryside and leaving 12-year-old Harilal determined to do better for himself. Soon after, young Hari finds himself married to 11-year-old Parmeshwari and traveling with the worldly Hemraj Biyani in an overcrowded third-class carriage to Kalkatta, "breathless with excitement, conscious of being connected to Calcutta, Bombay, England, and the whole world through Daulatram Gulabchand. What a glorious firm and what good fortune to be working for it!"

Kalkatta proves to be everything and more Hari's overheated brain had imagined it would be — the sights, sounds, smells, the many kinds of people, professions (legitimate and illegitimate), the wealth and the poverty, and, above all, the sheer rain-blessed fecundity of the "Second City of Empire" seduce and overwhelm the young Marwari, who gradually makes it his own.

Saraf's strength lies in creating quirky,believable characters who infuse Hari's life-story with dashes of eccentric humor (not all of it deliberate) — there are the teachers, Master Bholaram in Rampura and Surendra Bagchi in Bogra, not to speak of the many women who shape Harilal — and it is a testament to his architectonic skills that Saraf never lets his minor characters overwhelm the broad contours of his central biography-driven narrative.

Yet, despite all Saraf's efforts, Harilal Tibrewal remains stuck in the stereotypical mold of the money-grubbing, egotistical, control-freak Marwari, even as he rues the ways in which people fail to acknowledge his heroic struggle to rise above his humble origins to create a trading empire. At one point in the story, Harilal sits discussing Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice with his bookish son, Tribhuvan. Harilal first defends Shylock's demand of a pound of Antonio's flesh since it "was a pukka loan, formalized on a piece of paper" and on being told of Shylock's status as an outsider, a Yehudi, says, "A Yehudi in Venice is much like a Marwari in Bengal. No one wants him there, but everyone needs his capital."

It is this sense of being bothwanted and unwanted, lauded and despised, loved and hated, at the same time that lends a strange poignancy to Harilal's story in particular and Saraf's novel in general. Harilal & Sons are not just about a particular clan or community, but also about the many crossings and migrations, displacements and settlements, the to-ings and fro-ings of Indians within India that have gone into the making of this multifarious land. Saraf's may not quite be the Great Marwari Novel we have all been waiting for, but it certainly tells an engaging story of a people who have done much to make India what it is today, for better and for worse.

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