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Esther David’s Fiction: A Saga of Indian Jewish Culture

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Abstract:

Minority voices are attracting attention of theorists and academicians since colonial period. In India various communities attain the status of minority and many of the members of that community portray their communities in literature. Thus, they are trying to demonstrate their existence and struggle of survival through their fiction. Esther David, a bilingual author, belongs to the Bene Israel Jewish community of Ahmedabad, a city of walls. She has depicted Jewish culture and tradition thoroughly in her literary works. Born and brought up in a multicultural society, she is aware of the cultural differences. She observes society minutely and presents the same in detailed manner in her fiction. Her literary corpus mirrors the lives of Jewish characters living in India and Israel. She is the first Jewish writer in Indian English Literature who devotedly portrays her Bene Israel Community in her works, as Rohinton Mistry represents Parsi Community, residing in India and particularly in Bombay, in his works. She has dealt with the themes like assimilation, alienation, cultural clash, inter-religious marriages, the threat of conversion etc. in her literary output. Present paper attempts to bring out her concern for Bene Israel Jewish community in India by examining her novels.

Keywords: Minority Literature, Diaspora, Bene Israel Jew, culture, religion, inter-religious marriage, sense of loss, assimilation.

Jewish literature constitutes a major portion of world literature. This literature reflects sense of loss, struggle of survival, existential dilemma, cultural shocks, issues of identity, search for home, holocaust syndrome and many more related themes. Their literature is driven by their collective memory. They sought after the self-assigned mission of constructing a Jewish identity in the context of their foster society. Many times, their literature is considered as marginal or minority writings. Homi Bhabha calls such type of writings as, “The social articulation of
difference, from the minority perspective” (2). They reinterpret and reconstruct history from their point of view. So, minority articulation is necessary to the full-fledged understanding of national progress. India has sheltered many religious immigrant communities over a period of time and Jews is one of them. Though, India has six official minority communities: Muslim, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jain and Parsi: three Indian states that are Maharashtra, West Bengal and Gujrat have granted minority status to their Jewish communities. Bene Israel is one of the three major Jewish communities of India. Esther David belongs to this community. She tries to portray her community and preserve her culture throughout her literary output. Her contribution to the development of Indian English writing is noteworthy. She has also received prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel Book of Rachel in 2010. The present paper is an attempt to analyze Esther David’s fiction to bring out her concern for Bene Israel Jews of India.

Minority writers carry twofold responsibility: they represent as well as recreate their communities in their writing. They represent the culture in which they are born and brought up at the same time they also try to erase the set images or cultural stereotypes created by the mainstream writers. In this way, they create their own versions seen through their own eyes. While writing about their mini-microscopic communities they focus on preserving their cultural values, norms, rituals and cuisines for future generation. They not only sustain their traditions, rites related to festivals, birth, marriage and death through their narratives but also revive some disappearing traditions by emphasizing them in their narratives. They try to relocate their community within the multicultural society and give meaning to their existence. Their literature is significant as it gives different perception to look at the history of the nation. Similarly, Esther David embarks on her literary journey to understand and find her roots. She is digging out the history of her community by interviewing its members, following religious practices, exploring Jewish cuisine and researching old photographs of her family. She puts her family history parallel to that of the community. All her efforts to sustain her community emerged out as striking literary chronicles about Bene Israel Jews in India. Real life Jewish characters and their day-to-day life are at the core of her writing.

Esther David tries to fit her community in the national rubric of India. She traces the history of Bene Israel Jews since their arrival in India somewhat 2000 years ago when some fleeing Jews accidently arrives at Konkan coast in a shipwreck. In her novels The Walled City, Book of Esther,
Book of Rachel and Shalom India Housing Society she discussed this incident in detail. In Book of Esther, she writes about the myth of their arrival in India as:

We were running away from the Greek ruler Antioch who wanted to destroy us. We fled in a ship with our families and belongings. For months we were at sea. One stormy night, we were sure we would drown and the fish would eat us up. Suddenly the ship rocked dangerously and crashed on the islands of Chanderi and Underi. Some of us swam to the shore, some died, but we lost our ark and the books. (*Book of Esther* 29)

They have also developed a story of survival which is similar to that of the Chitpavan Brahmins of Konkan. This shows their urge of survival through the process of assimilation. According to this myth Parshuram finds fourteen corpses on the coast of Navgaon and he brought them back to life by reciting some mantras. These seven couples are believed to be the ancestors of Bene Israel Jews which means sons of God. Since then, they are living in India adopting local language, names and mingling with the natives. David writes about this survival strategy in *The Walled City* as:

It hangs somewhere in the inner world of my memory, with the tales of my ancestors shipwrecked on the Konkan coast, reciting the Hebrew prayers silently and becoming one with the people there, wearing Indian clothes, speaking the local language and taking a new name, the name of the surrogate village that had adopted them. (22)

They become Dandekar, Divekar, Bammolkar and many more similar names were adopted by them. They adopt Indian attire and way of life. She gives a detailed description of the family of the narrator in *The Walled City*. The men wear turbans, fez cap or hat with black suits. Women of the elder generation wear nine-yard sarees, heavy anklets, armlets and bangles. The narrator’s mother and aunt wear sarees, cotton and silk, in modern style with *pallav* arranged on the left shoulder. Their hair tied in big *chinagogs* or plaits. Attire of a bride is a fusion of Indian and European culture as she wears veil over saree, a bouquet, green bangles and gloves. This shows influence of two cultures giving birth to hybrid culture. They refer to their God as ‘deva’ and called...
synagogue ‘deval’. They even adopt Hindu bhajans replacing the name of Hindu God with Moses. David has explored all these cultural changes occurred in her community in detailed manner.

Anthropological studies have shown that the Bene Israel Jews have lived a comparatively isolated life from other Jews in the world. They were ignorant about the existence of other Jews in the world till the time of the arrival of rabbies who teach them religion. When the print media and BBC news reached to them about the dissemination of the events like holocaust and anti-Semitism that is prevalent in European countries then only this community becomes aware of their association with the larger community in the world. This knowledge and the establishment of Israel as an independent nation cause mass-migration of Jews in India. Many Jews have immigrated to Israel in search of bright future. David depicts this mass-migratory movement and its consequences in her narratives at a length. She also highlights the issue that Indian Jews had never experienced any religious persecution in India. They lead quiet peaceful life here. She writes, “Unlike the Jews in Europe, we in India had never know the meaning of the Holocaust. We had heard about it, seen documentaries and films, but it was something distant” (Book of Esther, 383). After their acquaintance with other Jews, they started adopting Biblical surnames: most probably they adopt their grandparents’ name as their family name. Hence, Dandekar is replaced by David. In this way they try to erase their diasporic identity and create new identity.

‘Ghettoization’ is another theme or concern revealed by the author while narrating the history of her miniscule community. After the partition of Indian subcontinent Indian Jews prefer to live with their similar kind of people. When we read David’s fiction, we witness the changes that occur over a period of time in our nation and how people respond to these changes. She describes the division of society on the basis of their food habits. In her books like The Walled City, Shalom India Housing Society and Bombay Brides we have seen that this rapidly vanishing community lives in a ghettoized apartment to be safe as well as to maintain their ‘otherness’ from other religious minorities. They fear that they could be mistaken for being Muslim and perished in fit of anger. So, they decide to live together and protect their children. There is another possible reason for such type of ghettoization; by living with the community members, they are trying to reduce the chances of inter-religious marriages and threat of conversion. During a course of time Bene Israel Jews have stopped the tradition of cousin marriage as marriages in close relation will increase genetic problems in upcoming generations. David elaborates this problem in her fiction.
Elder generation is favoring cousin marriage to let her girl child remain within the family because as per Jewish rule if a mother is Jew, then the child will be Jew inevitably. Thus, to increase the community they should promote the tradition of cousin marriage.

Food becomes metaphor in the discourse of Diasporic Literature. Esther David uses Jewish cuisine as a cultural artifact to represent cultural uniqueness. Her novel *Book of Rachel* is remarkable as each chapter of this novel begins with a recipe. These recipes have some significance in upcoming chapter either it evokes traditional value or some memories of the narrator. The eponymous heroine of the novel is fighting against all odds to save the prayer house, the synagogue, last monument of her faith in the village. David deliberately explored traditional Bene Israel Jewish recipes in her fictional world to retain her cultural practices. Food is associated with a group of people. In her literary works she links food to the collective memory of Bene Israel Jews. She gives vivid description of food that is served on that occasion of performing ‘Shabbath’, ‘Passover’ or ‘Pessach’. The plate is arranged to remind the torture, suffering, hardships experienced by the entire community. ‘Matzo bread’ is symbolic of poverty she writes in Book of Rachel, “Matzo bread is the symbol of poverty, as the Jews ate it when they were slaves in the land of Egypt. It is also symbolic of the unleavened bread they carried with them when they fled from Egypt. It inspires Jews to work for freedom, justice and peace” (44), ‘limbu cha ras’ represents “tears shade by their ancestors as a slave” (BOR 46) bitter herbs are symbolic of “the bitterness and hardships suffered by the Jews when they were slaves in Egypt” (BOR 46). In this way food has become metaphor at the hands of Esther David to portray the history of her community.

As per the above discussion we can say that Esther David’s fiction is a mosaic of Indian Jewish culture particularly Bene Israel Jewish culture. She has successfully delineated the history of entire community from their arrival to the present era in her works. She has discussed several issues related to her community like migration, sense of loss, uprootedness, issues related to marriage, conservation of traditional recipes, assimilation and so on throughout her narratives. We cannot read her literature without considering her concern to the community as said by Shulman and Weil, “Esther David’s writing must be viewed against the backdrop of her community, its customs and traditions, the status of women within the community and their unique position in Indian social structure” (235). Thus, through Esther David’s fiction we can peep into the world of
Esther David’s Fiction: A Saga of Indian Jewish Culture

Bene Israel Jews of India. Her fiction helps to document the culture and history of Indian Jewish communities in general and Bene Israel in particular. Her contribution in sustaining the rituals, traditions, cuisine as well as traumas experienced by the Bene Israel people is remarkable. Her literary oeuvre unfolds the saga of Indian Jewish people and allows people from all over the world to have a glance over it.

Works Cited:


