

A CRITICAL STUDY ON DIASPORIC LITERATURE OF JEWS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to explore the identity of voice of the Jewish people in India. Jews are an ethno religious group originating from the Israelite or Hebrews of the Ancient Near East. Jewish merchants from Europe traveled to India in the medieval period for purposes of trade. Bombay became the largest Jewish community in India. Bene Israel Jews lived in Bombay, as did Iraqi and Persian Jews. The Bene Israel (son of Isreal) lived primarily in the cities of Bombay, Pune, Karachi and Ahmadabad. They claim to be descended from Jews who escaped persecution in the Galilee in the 2nd century BC. They however maintained the practices of Jewish dietary laws, circumstance and observation of Sabbath as a day of rest. The study is about the Jewish writers who delineated their community and the locale. Thus, there is a rich corpus of Jews fiction lending a very mighty voice to the community of Jews besides Esther David's novel *The Walled City*.

Key words: Identity, replica, no consensus, emancipation

INTRODUCTION

The Walled City, a debut novel by Esther David, is a vibrant and vivid account of the city of Ahmedabad – with its myriad sights and sounds, fragrances and smells, ups and downs coming alive on every page of the novel. And along come the voices and visions of the community of Jews, the size of which in this sprawling country like India is just a negligible dot. The author Esther David belongs to one of the Bene-Israel Jew families that live in India at Ahmedabad. As a child she lived in a house by the zoo founded by her father Rubin David. A gifted sculptor and art connoisseur, she taught at School of Architecture, School of Interior Design and Technology. She has a vast experience of penning a few columns in the noted dailies like The Times of India, The Indian Express and The Indian Post. She had been invited by the UGC to script academic films and had been a chairperson to The Gujarat State Lalit Kala Academy.

HISTORY

Jews are spread around the world today, concentrated mainly in the US and Israel. The history of the race is as engaging as any thriller would be. Jews are people who have maintained a distinct cultural identity originally based on the idea of a covenant, or special relationship, with God. The Jewish people are among the oldest of the many people known to history. According to historians their origins date back at least 3,000 years, and perhaps even further. During this lengthy period Jews have settled in all parts of the world and have had an impact on many civilizations.

Religion, ethnic identity, and language have all played important roles in maintaining Jewish identity. Jewish identity came into question during the 19th and 20th centuries, however. Some Jews today, especially in Israel, reject the Jewish religion but insist that they belong to a distinct ethnic or national community. Other Jews, especially in the West, reject the ethnic component of Jewish identity while claiming they follow a distinct religion. Still others in the West define themselves as cultural Jews, meaning that they lack a religious affiliation and feel part of some other ethnic group, but they believe there is a distinctive Jewish culture in which they participate. And in all parts of the world there are Jews who insist that Jews are both an ethnic and a religious group. Finally, there are those who insist that Jewish religious law defines Jewish identity. In this view, anyone born to a Jewish mother, or anyone who has properly converted to the Jewish faith, is a full-fledged member of the Jewish people and religion. Thus, today there is no consensus on the definition of a Jew. (49)

Diaspora, dislocation, alienation, troubles, strife, hatred and persecution of which Jews are victims were described above projects victories of Jews defeat. The annihilation that they faced still makes the readers eyes brim with tears and awestruck. In literature—for instance, Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, and The Jew of Malta, to name just two of many---the Jews have had their place since time immemorial. But those were the third-party views on Jews. The Jews themselves produced great writers like Benjamin Disraeli, Heinrich Heine and Solomon Rabinovitz (writing in Yiddish), to name just a few of them.

Besides Esther David, Nissim Ezekiel, is perhaps the only Jew writer, rooted in Indian traditions. Both these writers' creative attempts are directed at a search for their true Jew identities, as their works reveal.

Esther David tries to strike a balance between her manifold identities either as a Jew or minority writer or a woman writer. All these tags tend to put her into some or the other kind of margin as perceived by the literary critics. Her works *By the Sabarmati*, *Book of Esther* and *Book of Rachel* are the extensions of her efforts in the novel *The Walled City*, and they interestingly reflect all the tags that may be attached to her writing, but at the same time it defies all such stipulations. She has co-authored *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art and Lifecycle*. She is published in French and her work is included in the library of modern Jewish literature, Syracuse University Press, New York.

As proclaimed in the title itself, *The Walled City*, is set in the urban background of the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat running through the time slot of pre-independence to modern day post-independence India. The narrator-protagonist describes her Bene-Israel roots, history and surroundings in casually devised chapters. Every chapter carries forward not so much of a story by discussing an issue or an acquaintance of the narrator. The success of the novel lies in its scattered incidents without any relevant and sustained thread of the story running through.

Beneath the simple looking surface of the story the author successfully propels many debates and issues. For instance, very ordinary reference to Einstein in the opening page indicates authors groping for her Jewish roots and the later pages also speak of the same feelings. The fond memory of Einstein, a well-known Jew scientist, is beset by her fears about conflicting identities and the pulls of being mingled in the mainstream of the alien land. The worry of retaining one's own identity is evident, at the same time, the attractions of other culture are frowned upon thus in the following narration:

I go around the temple with my friend Subhadra and then, from the mandap, I look her god in the face. The white shell-eye with blood bursting at the corners scorns me. My feet stand frozen, like the dancers on the pillars; the fragrance of sandalwood paste spreads over the alcove and kindles strange desires. I peer into Subhadra's face, asking for a dot of kumkum. She looks at me questioningly and her hand remains suspended in time. The flame flickers in the brass thali and my forehead burns for the coolness of sandalwood paste.

For my mother Naomi, the bindi is an abyss. It is for her the valley of death, where she does not wish to tread. In her dreams, I drag her into the red circle with my defiant eyes. Her mother seems to call her, and Naomi cannot answer. A kumkum circle separates them.

The next generation narrator is trying to strike a balance between conflicting pulls of her own culture and the other one belonging to Hindu way of life, while the fear and anxiety of the previous generation as represented in the character of Naomi, the narrator's mother, is also lent voice to in the second paragraph above. The narrator has her own reservations as expressed in the following metaphor: "I can smell the dying fragrance of the mango blossoms."³ In the same stretch she wants to be cocooned saying "I want to return to my mother's womb."⁴ Her acute fear of alienation makes her relinquish her own people and identity. She says, "I am ridden with guilt for the ways of my ancestors. I wish I had been born to Subhadra's mother. *I would have then been accepted*". (Italics mine)⁵ On the same page she further says:

I look at my image in the mirror. I am but a wisp of that memory and sometimes I question my Jewishness. My complexion is a deep brown like Subhadra's and my long plait is tied with red tassels. I could be her sister.⁶

Apprehensively, the narrator defies the order of the cult and wears a bindi on her forehead. She narrates it thus, "Subhadra makes a perfect dot on my virginal forehead, and some of the kumkum dust falls in a thin line on the bridge of my nose."⁷ The defiance runs deeper when she wishes to play Holi and her Danieldada secretly supports her. Their Jewishness is not only intimidated by the Indian culture, but also by the advent of British in India. For Danieldada is always infatuated by the ways of the British. He dresses in that style and eats with forks and knives, the ways unknown to the Indian society and culture. Of him the author writes: "In the photograph of his younger days, he looks every inch the pucca British officer in a well-tailored suit, sitting regally on an elaborately carved wooden chair."⁸ Even her father has a soft corner for the British ways. He would never miss Danieldada's company of evening drinks. The forbidden film-

watching activity is also indulged with a gusto: “We love the glamour of Hindi cinema—the huge glittering posters of the stars, the handsome heroes brandishing swords, red-lipped heroines in tight bodices and flaring skirts, and the love songs with the bees sitting on flowers.”⁹ At other place the narrator wants to indulge in the Indian costume, Ghaghra. She says, “...I also long for a ghaghra and even think of asking Danieldada to help me get one.”¹⁰

This anxiety ridden minority community of Jews, however, consciously makes efforts to assimilate themselves in the mainstream majority community. For instance the narrator’s Granny insists: “...we should dress in Indian costumes, and that I would look perfect either as a Konkani fisherwoman from the scene of our shipwreck, or a ‘cultured’ Bengali lady.”¹¹ They are aware that Konkani and Bengali are the mainstream and socially acceptable mode of being in the country of the majority. Simultaneously, they also know how well to behave during the communal tensions in the city. They decide to move out of the old city area, where communal riots between Hindus and Muslims become acute.⁽¹²⁾ Ironically, the communal tensions take place only between a majority community of Hindus and minority Muslims. And the author seems to be well aware of the fact yet she dares not mention the reality. It is really bemusing to note that she lacks in author-like integrity and courage necessary and evident in such places. If it is the case with author, so is it with the characters of her novel. The narrator says at one place, “He has decided to sell the house and move to a cosmopolitan housing colony. Possibly with Parsis and Christians as neighbours.”¹³ Their selection of the Parsi and Christian neighbourhood as cosmopolitan one speaks of their apprehension, at the same time, and their halfhearted attempts of assimilation. Many Jews are shown taking shelter in their foster country Israel. For instance, at one place the narrator seems to be lamenting the fact that, “Most of our relatives, including our Bombay cousins, have left for Israel.”⁽¹⁴⁾

The remaining Jews are in a state of dilemma. They are not able take sides clearly. Their dilly-dallying makes them prone to many psychosomatic disorders as is evident in the spinsterhood of various characters in the story including the narrator herself. Their spinsterhood in the story is the result of fear of being derecognised by their own folks, and anxiety of possible on acceptance by the ‘other’ community. The narrator’s mother Naomi is uncannily cocooned and markedly inert. However, the narrator traces back the reasons for her inertia to have been born out of Naomi’s father’s ill treatment of her mother. But she is ill-at-ease when the narrator, her daughter, tries to ape her friend Subhadra who is a Hindu. She does not like her father celebrating Holi, a Hindu festival, and her daughter doing a kumkum dot on her forehead.

The very selection of the title of the novel is fraught with fear and anxiety for this dot like community in a huge country like India. They would not like to come out of the metaphorical walls they

have created around themselves as this city already has. Perhaps they face alienation from the residents already dwelling in the place as Pratibha asks the narrator, “If you are not a Christian, a Parsi or a Muslim, what are you?”¹⁵ The persecution, it seems, still continues for them. At least in India, the community is on the verge of extinction as demographically the community is dwindling every day. Granny desperately says, “We have to make concessions, otherwise our small community will disappear.”¹⁶ The womenfolk of the novel are so obsessed with the fear of the city that “Together they make a wall around me as though they are guarding me against death.”¹⁷

Yet the walls of this city are, perhaps, the replica of the walls of Solomon’s temple at Jerusalem they so dearly adore. Sudhamahi Regunathan describes: “The wall, which is believed to be divine, has been receiving the prayers of devout Jews and others who have been making the pilgrimage for our 2500 years.”¹⁸ The metaphoric walls of the city of Ahmedabad are thus no mean walls for the small population of Jews residing in the city. Within this very walled city of the title, which is vibrant with sights and sounds, breathe the three generations of women in an extended Jewish family. This very city affords them all sorts of calm and comfort besides a synagogue where they go on Friday evenings with Granny.¹⁹ The city pulsates with light and sprite on the pages of the novel otherwise. And therefore, the narrator fiercely says, “We never leave Ahmedabad. We never can.”²⁰ That speaks of the author’s personal involvement with the city, as she has been living in the city for quite a long time.

Besides the experience of dwelling in the city of the author, there are many other traits traceable to her own life and the narrator is a sure alter-ego to her living experiences. For instance, she would describe flora and fauna in one place, which would match with her family background and its interests in Nature, and on the other she would delineate the art and literature which would reflect her own learning in the field. She writes: “Subhadra, her hand frozen in the mudra of applying a tilak, seems to have found a permanent place in the oblique sculptures moving in circles in the ceiling of my mind.”²¹ At other place she says, “It make me think of Botticelli’s paintings of Venus which I saw in one of the art books...”²² Interestingly, the narrator’s father is being referred to as a bird-keeper which has a fine correlate with the author’s father who was once a well-known curator of the Ahmedabad zoo.

The initial impression at the outset, though not a very strikingly feminist, the author tends to become, at times, inclined to explore the genre. She almost blames man’s clay-feet attitude in these words, “Samuel miraculously improves when I visit him with Pratibha and Vatsala. I feel like all men he is fickle, and is now attracted to Vatsala. I wonder my Baghdadi Krishna is also mesmerising some blue eyed gopi, beyond the seven seas.”²³ At times she clearly speaks her mind through such a dialogue, “But it is time we learnt to

stand shoulder to shoulder with men and treat each other as individuals instead of differentiating between men and women.”²⁴ The male characters like the narrator’s own father and her uncle Menachem are weakling as compared to the females like Aunt Jerusha, who decides to serve people as a doctor by remaining unmarried, and the narrator and her cousin Malkha, who dedicate their lives to the old by embracing spinsterhood.

Yet, before jumping to forming any opinion about her stand, a look at MalashriLal’s discourse on feminist writing would not be out of place. Quoting Elaine Showalter she distinguishes between two types of feminist criticism as one that is women as reader; and the other as women as writer. Woman as reader is consumer of the male produced literature whereas, woman as writer is producer of textual meaning, with the history and themes, genres and structures of literature.²⁵ A closer scrutiny of the novel in question will reveal that feminist discussion in India has more sociological references and their bearing on women’s writing is not difficult to see. Thus Malkha and the narrator’s decision of not marrying can be seen as an antithesis of the feminist ideals, because this decision is the outcome of other social compulsions, too. She explains,

Our aim is to keep them alive for when they die, our lives will become pointless...As for me, I do not wish to take a husband, because I am afraid to beget a daughter. According to our laws she would be Jewish and it would be torture for her and for me. (26)

The feminist decision would have been a one of subversion. The novel thus seems to have been written from the woman’s point of view. However, one may not brand it as a feminist novel. Because, among other issues it does not attempt to glorify this one. Of course, one may be tempted to call it a novel on the margin; firstly, because the predominant tone of the novel is that of women oriented and secondly, the very women involved as characters of the story belong to a minority community of Jews, trying to sound their voices to the so called centre.

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