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## **Migration and the Problems of Cultural Assimilation in Esther David's *Book of Esther***

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### **Abstract:**

Migration is the physical displacement of people or group of people from their original homeland. They create a home outside their country. The migrants experience a sense of displacement or dislocation. They are uprooted from their native culture. Their sensibilities and reactions are governed by their inherent culture. Assimilation is an offspring of the process of migration. In the present novel Esther David, a well-known Indian Jewish author, tries to explain the effects of migration and resulting assimilation on the family of Dandekar. It is worth noting that Indian Jews are mixed with the local population still they manage to sustain their cultural identity. She successfully brings out the fear and anxiety of Jewish people in India. They are worried about their existence in an alien land so many of them hose to migrate to Israel in order to find satiated life. The present paper is an honest attempt to focus on the theme of migration and problems of cultural assimilation in *Book of Esther*.

**Keywords:** Migration, cultural assimilation, homeland, Jewish, inherent.

Migration is the physical displacement of people or group of people from their original homeland. They create a home outside their country. They share their cultural, social and ethnic characteristics of their native land. Migrants suffer due to their separation from their motherland, family, friends, and relatives. They resent for leaving behind everything that is familiar to them. William Safran speaks about migrant people as, “they continue to relate personally or

vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (23). The migrants experience a sense of displacement or dislocation. They are uprooted from their native culture. Their sensibilities and reactions are governed by their inherent culture. In the process of migration there arises the conflict between the new and the old. Migrants expect acceptance in the new environment, and at the same time they still cling to the old world. They face varied situations, problems of rejection and acceptance. If accepted, the problem would be of an adjustment, coping with the anxiety, monotony, disappointment, isolation and finally they face failure and rejection. Their sense of displacement not only refers to the physical movement of an individual or group of individuals but it also shows how they carry with them their collective memory, the aggregate of a whole nation to which he/ she belongs. The cross-cultural encounters affect the lives of immigrants. Their feelings of displacement and non-belonging make them live in the reminiscence, a collective memory of their origin.

Assimilation is an offspring of the process of migration. When a person immigrates to the other country in his pursuit of education, economic prospects, job opportunities or for some other reasons he alienated from the rest of the people. To overcome this sense of loneliness he tries to establish some relations with the natives by following some cultural norms of the host country. His arrival at the alien land brings some cultural shocks. The atmosphere of the host land may differ from his native land so he has to follow the dressing style of the host land to suit the atmosphere. He has to cultivate his food habits accordingly as the food changes as per the geographical background. Apart from these basic needs he also has some socio-cultural aspirations. He tries to adopt some cultural traits of the host country to get acceptance by them. This process is recognized as assimilation. The Jews were immigrated to India somewhat 2000 years ago. Then they feel the need to migrate to Israel after the partition of India and the establishment of the independent Israel. The historical references reveal that the mass-migration of Jews took place in late 1950s. Since then Jews are immigrating to Israel. In her interview with the researcher the author speaks about cultural assimilation, “Actually, it become better, when the Diplomatic relations between India and Israel improved. Indian Jews are still emigrating to Israel and although, they have assimilated in India. They often say, India is their Motherland and Israel is their Homeland.”

Esther David narrates the history of her community in this novel. It is observed that like most other ethnic writers she also wants to re-narrate the history of her community, so her works are important from the historical point of view. In the novel *Book of Esther* she records the arrival of her ancestors at Indian coastal area and their adaptation of Indian culture is their survival strategy. They have mingled with the local people adopting their language, food and dressing style. In the first chapter of the novel the author informs us that the Bene Israel Jews were carrying Konkani identity. The men wear dhotis, angarkha and turban while women wears nine-yard sarees tied in a kela, big nose-rings, toe rings and anklets. They decorated their houses for festival with asopalav leaves, mango leaves and marigold flowers. Sometimes they stung bead festoons with intricate designs on the front door, following the Indian tradition. Their cuisine also shows flavor of Indianness as they stack their storeroom with toddy, chik or dry wheat cakes, semolina laddus, coconut chikki etc. They also follow the dietary laws laid by their religion means they only eat kosher meat. The novelist shows that the Bene Israel are influenced by Maharashtrian ways of religion. They address their God as 'Aho Deva' or 'Eshwar'. They Sing *bhajans* which are translations of Marathi *kirtans* into Jewish songs. Esther David describes the process of assimilation of earlier generations in these words, "Although we do not know the meaning of the Hebrew words, we recite them regularly. These words keep us together and protect us from other influences. Yet some rituals from other religions have seeped into ours" (29). The Jews have adopt the lifestyle of the region where they lived so when the action of the story moves to Ahmedabad their dressing style changed accordingly. Men of that generation started wearing dresses like Muslims and Parsis, a loose flared pants, long sleeved shirt and long flowing coat; women prefers to wear parsi-style Gujarati saree. Later on they started wearing sarees like modern Indian women.

At the beginning the Bene Israel Jews speak Konkani then they started to speak in Marathi and consider it as their mother tongue in exile. The author describes the transformation of their language as, "(a)s they had lived close to the farming communities of the Konkan like the Kolis and the Agaris, their Marathi had words typical of these communities. To this day the Marathi spoken by some Bene Israel Jews has a touch of the Konkan. As the younger generation began going to English-medium missionary schools, the Dandekars started speaking in English"

(87). Later on some of their members learnt Hebrew also. When they move to Ahmedabad they started speaking Hindi and Gujarati.

The story begins in the colonial era. Bathsheba is waiting for her husband to return. He left home without informing and nobody knows about his whereabouts. This instinct of migration is inherited from his ancestors. The arrival of the Bene Israel in the Konkan is an ancient case of migration. Bathsheba's great grandfather had told her, "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." (29) This perturbing incident of survival is deeply rooted in the following generations. They are aware that India is just a surrogate mother for them. Their real home is Israel. Following the tradition of Jewish people they adopt the lifestyle of the land where they shipwrecked, silently mingling with the local population. They also develop a story of their arrival at the Konkan coast that is similar to those of the origin of the Chitpavan Brahmins.

Shebabeth, the representative of elder generation, has kindled the hope of migration to Israel in Esther. She often regrets that she was unable to give a meaningful life to her daughter, Jerusha. She can neither find a proper match for her nor can manage to send her to Israel. For Shebabeth Israel is a land of opportunities. Everything grand and comforting is associated with Israel. On her deathbed she often pleads Esther to go to Israel and give meaning to her life. She believes that being a Jew one has to go Israel. Since ancient times Jews have faith in the concept of returning home. Feeling of rootedness, security, bonding, belonging, and happiness is related to Israel. She is utterly depressed and feels like an outcast everywhere. Her yearning for Ahaseures, Haman's attempt to rape her, a broken engagement with Benjamin, and unsuccessful marriage with Shree leaves a scar on her psyche. She feels lonely and alienated from her parents, family, friends and a society. One cannot sustain without an emotional support of family and friends. So she wants run away from her life in India. She said, "Shebabeth planted the seed of Israel in my mind. Israel was my oasis. It was the place where I could escape to when I was in distress." (366)

Eli Jacobson, the merchant of carpets from Israel, was the survivor of the holocaust but he has lost his family. His concerns for the Jewish community are obvious. The brutal memories of the holocaust make him restless. He was curious to know about Joshua's future plans whether he is "going to stay in India or leave for a Promised Land" (369). When he was certain that Joshua is not willing to migrate to Israel he tries to convince Joshua and Naomi to brood over Esther's future. He observes Esther's preferences of Indian dress and jewellery in his short visit. He goes on convincing her parents to send Esther to Israel. If she lives in India she might adopt Indian lifestyle and perhaps choose a life partner from other community as in the case of European and American Jews. This is seen as a threat to the existence of extinguishing minority like Bene Israel Jews of India. Eli intensifies the issue of migration by focusing the prospects of content and meaningful life in Israel.

Shlomo, an Israeli historian, visited Joshua to see his achievements as a Jewish person. Joshua is not religious by nature rather he believes in Darwinism. Shlomo reintroduces Jewish rituals in their house which were observed very strictly and enthusiastically in past. Dandekar's remain alienated from the community for long time. They are reformists and their alteration of traditions and rituals disappointed other members of the Bene Israel. Shlomo insists them to do Shabath prayers with him. He helps Esther to set the table for Shabath and recite the prayers. Joshua joined cheerfully. He remembers his childhood days and the words had suddenly come back to him. Shlomo opines "One never forgets what one learns as a child" (363). Culture and traditions come to us from elders. It is not inherited by birth but one has to learn about one's culture. He explains the meaning and background of the Bene Israel. After his departure Esther feels like drown towards Israel. She extremely feels the need to fly to Israel. Something unknown is pushing her to the Promised Land perhaps it is a cultural pull. She admits, "I was suddenly interested in the meaning of the word Israel and everything Jewish, but did not have anything to turn to- no books, no knowledge." (364). Her cultural displacement has torn her identity of being a Jew. Until now religion is a mere word for her which "we fill in in the forms where we were expected to do so."(364). She is unaware of the strength and power of the religion. Her newly found religious identity makes her active in the synagogue activities. She has started going to the synagogue for weddings, festivals and to attend the malida for the prophet Eliyahu Hannabi. Her attempts to reconciliation with her community bring her closer to the

religion- Judaism. Her fascination for Judaism and Joshua's constant pleadings lead her to make her *Aliyah*. Joshua is hopeful that his daughter will lead a happy and secure life and his grandchildren will find perfect Jewish partners in the Promised Land. On the day of her departure Esther's mind is full of memories: sweet and bitter. For her migration is a way to remove these memories. She wants to bury her traumatic past. To get rid of these painful memories she has decided to immigrate to Israel. She ponders over her escape as,

“My departure for Israel was like a pilgrimage. It would wipe out my past. Give me a new life, help me forget India, Ahaseures, Haman, Baroda, Ahmedabad and wagging tongues, suspicious relatives, acquaintances, society. They never seemed to forget it. I was running away from India.”(371).

On her arrival at Israel she is suddenly face-to-face with the Jews from all over the world. Their stories make her disheartened. Their terrible past has left them restless for a life. There are many people who are survivors of the holocaust. Their past haunts them as well as it haunts other Jews also. The brutality of the event made a deep psychological impact on the minds of the survivors. Esther realizes that in India she has not suffered from any persecution. She becomes aware that Israel is “the land of milk, honey, and blood” (371). It is not easy to live in Israel without learning Hebrew. One cannot find a job unless he/she has the acquired the Hebrew language. The language problem restricts job opportunities. She cannot decide how to survive in a foreign land. Life becomes dreadful. She tries to earn living by selling embroidery but it didn't work out. She is aimlessly wondering in the land of her dreams. Her life in Israel is disappointing. She is afraid of the bloodshed and constant fear of life. She is perplexed about her immigration to Israel. Soon she realizes the futility of her life in Israel and thinks that-

If I wished to live like a Jew, I could live anywhere. I did not have to live in Israel to feel more Jewish than I felt in India. For me Israel was a discoloured mosaic floor, stained by images of violence, fire, blood, ambulances. Israel unnerved me. I was terrified of terrorist attacks, the right to kill for survival, and the constant tension. I did not have the courage to make a home in Israel, all alone. I needed some sort of support. A person. A family. A community. (377).

Finally, she understands the importance of family and friends. She returns India closing all the doors behind. She feels relieved in the company of her father. Her life is set in a tune till she finds her Golem. She has created her Golem to lead a good Jewish life being a good Jewish wife. Her marriage with Golem forces her to immigrate to Paris. Her children had decided to live in Israel on Kibbutz and she is free to move to Paris. She is worried for them and feels distressed. She is caught in the web of emotions. She decides to immigrate to Paris with her husband. He is the survivor of the Holocaust. His bitter memories make him renounce his Jewishness. On the contrary, Esther is trying to preserve her Jewishness. He annoys Esther by questioning the rituals. He did not believe in religion and Esther becomes more and more religious after her arrival at Paris. This rift between them gradually widens. She becomes homesick and longs for her children. He fails to provide her the warmth of the relationship. Her life is in trouble. She is lonely in an alien land with a detached husband. She becomes sick and could not control her emotions. Her children also returned to her disillusioned by their life in Israel. Her son decides to live in an ancestral house in India and her daughter lives in Paris with her fiancé.

Disenchanted by her lonely life in Paris she suffers from psychological disturbances. She longs for her homeland and becomes nostalgic with the memories of India. She visits psychologists for counselling. She is homesick and wants to return home that is India. Her concepts of home are related to India. she cannot imagine home outside India. She remembers India and thinks that she could tell anybody about her problems if she were in India. Her married life is in danger. Golem wants to lead separate life in France. Esther is shocked for a moment and then decides to leave for India. She says, “It is time to return to Ahmedabad. India. Home” (394).

In the present novel Esther David talks about migration of Jewish people. She hints that for Bene Israel Jews India is their home. Though they try to establish themselves in other countries their home remains in India only. Her characters are in search of home. They immigrate to Israel and Paris but at the end they return to India, where their home is. Esther David shows the futility of the dreams and hopes of the elder generation people who think Israel is their ancestral home. She pursues the myth of ‘ancient home’ and delineates the fact that if a Jew wants to live like a Jew he can live anywhere he need not to go to Israel to feel more Jewish.



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