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Exploration of Identity of the Bene Israel Jews in India: A Reading of Esther David's *The Walled City*

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Abstract:

Esther David, an Indian Jewish writer, wrote her first novel in 1997, *The Walled City*. Her works revolve around the lives of Bene Israel Jews. In India, they constitute a minuscule population which is insufficient even to gain recognition as a minority community. However, Indian-Jewish experience stands as a mixed narrative of resilience and transformation weaving together threads of assimilation, Philo-Semitism, and alienation as concurrent happenings, with nostalgia and patriotism running alongside. Indo-Judaic Studies and fictional works like this help in the understanding of the relationship between Jewish and Indian communities. The present paper delves into the identity development of the characters as represented in *The Walled City* through the analytical framework of Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process Theory. The theory emphasises key processes such as assimilation, accommodation, and evaluation, which are pivotal in understanding the diasporic community's navigational strategies. Through

a detailed exploration of key characters and themes, this paper highlights the resilience and adaptability of aloof Bene Israel Jews in maintaining their cultural heritage.

Keywords: Bene Israel Jews, Integration, Identity Development, Philo-Semitism, Jewish Diaspora.

Esther David is an Indian writer of Jewish origin, inhabiting Ahmedabad, Gujarat that is also home to around 170 fellow Bene Israel Jews. Esther David was conferred with the Sahitya Akademy Award in 2010, which established her recognition as an acclaimed litterateur, followed by the National Jewish Book Award from the Jewish Council, USA that made it impeccable, further reputed by Hadassah Brandeis research award from USA for documenting Indian Jews, which by any governmental or nongovernmental record is a minuscule community in India. Her works revolve around the Jewish experiences in India.

Ventilation of Esther David's probable experiences of the double marginalization in society as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority community can be overseen and felt in her fictional works containing diasporic issues such as rootlessness, disestablishmentarianism, homesickness, estrangement and integration, acculturation and much more. Struggle in maintenance of Jewish culture in India is visible in the forefront of her writings, amplified by the loss of holy Jewish books in the Arabian Sea and community's reliance on memory. She has pursued significant research into her traditions while penning her works in the pursuit of Judaism. Some of her works such as *The Walled City* (1997), *The Book of Esther* (2002), *Book of Rachel* (2007), *Shalom India Housing Society* (2007), *Bombay Brides* (2018), are necessarily semi-autobiographical.

Among the three communities of Jews in India, The Bene Israel Jews are the maximum despite their negligible number, while Baghdadi Jews and Cochin Jews have still receded presence. They constitute tiniest minority of the country. Etymologically, the word minority

has a statistical connotation, literally ‘smaller in number’. However, the term ‘minority group’ has been universally used to describe a subordinate group based on their distinct characteristics. The U.N. Subcommittee on Prevention of Discrimination & Protection of Minorities (1985) describes it as:

A group of citizens of a State, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that State, endowed with ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with one another, motivated, if only implicitly, by a collective will to survive and whose aim it is to achieve equality with the majority in fact and in law. (64)

When we delve into the understanding of any ethnic minority community, the most important aspect is to study their identity construction. The present paper uses textual analysis as a research method for studying the ethnic identity of Bene Israel Jews and their representation in Esther David’s *The Walled City*. This research attempts to investigate the community of Bene Israel Jews in India and their process of formation of identity using Identity Process Theory (IPT). As a theoretical piece of research, it will be interpretive, exploratory and qualitative. The paper is likely to help in the understanding of the notion of ‘identity’ and ‘ethnicity’ in the context of Bene Israel Jews and it also examines associated social and psychological factors. The primary focus is to know how Jews, as an ethnic minority community, define their Jewishness and nationality in relation with other major communities in India.

Esther David’s novel, *The Walled City* vividly portrays the experience of growing up as a Jew in India. The title of the novel symbolises the walls and boundaries of the Jewish community, their families and that of being a woman. The novel exists within the interconnected layers of society, community, family, and womanhood. It gives a feeling of

home and belonging to the community in India; Esther David also acknowledges the fact that she finds her home in her novel. While penning the novel down, she was a wandering Jew, but after its publication, this became her home.

As the community constantly witnesses the immigration of its members to the Promised Land-Israel, the work becomes centric to the themes about isolation and cross-cultural conflict. The narrator herself is not well versed with her Jewish roots, and half the time does not understand the true meanings of their rituals, but still makes a strong and constant effort to preserve her Jewish roots. Moreover, it also depicts the state of Ahmedabad, Mahatma Gandhi's once peaceful city is reduced to the state of violence. (Jaspal and Breakwell 4). The novel probes the aspects of roots and home for the small Jewish community, as, in a divided city, they do not know where to place themselves.

The novel also gives an insight into the Bene Israel community's practices and unique religious customs. On Yom Kippur, also called the festival of Closing of the Doors, they attend the synagogue before dawn to minimise contact with others that may be symbolic of the avoidance, thus overshadowing the sense of belongingness, a significantly added attribute in the furtherance of Breakwell's Identity Process Theory by Vignoles. Their traditions also include distinctive rituals such as infant hair-shaving, visiting pilgrimage sites and specific festival celebrations. A notable characteristic of their worship is their profound reverence for Eliyahu Hannabi/Elijah. Unlike most Jewish communities, which believe Elijah ascended to heaven near modern-day Haifa in Israel, Bene Israel firmly believe that this ascent occurred in Khandala, a village in the Konkan region. They visit this site which is respected by Bene Israel and the local Hindus and see the footprints of Elijah's horses. Pilgrims offer prayers, make wishes or express gratitude for fulfilled vows at this sacred location. Guttman observes:

The Walled City is also shadowed by partition; Mani, the servant who is the narrator's main caregiver, is one of its refugees. There are also several incidents of communal violence during the narrative, which may well include partition—other than the date of the narrator's birth, 1940, the narrative is conspicuously vague about the order and timing of other events. (135)

Besides depicting the lives of the community members in Ahmedabad, the novel also portrays contemporary social aspects, such as the impact of partition on people. The issue of marriage is portrayed in the novel as well. Marriage within the community remains an expectation. Life of the community is associated with alienation, which overall affects the identity development of each member.

As one delves deep into the formation and development of identity theory, the symbolic interaction figures as the foundation over which it got developed, however social scientists and scholars of other disciplines interested in its construction may like to study it from varied angles, having their logical descriptions. Henri Tajfel's 'Social Identity Theory' covers socio-psychological analysis of intergroup relations in which the identities remain dependent on social roles, seeking acceptance of the other members in group (*Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* 9). John Turner extends it with the conviction that social identity encompasses the personal one (qtd. in Schwartz 208). Disparate aspects of one's identity are studied by the advocates of identity theory. Research on ethnic identity formation primarily focuses on how people belonging to a specific ethnic minority group navigate their identity with fellow members of the same group while living with dissimilar communities.

Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process Theory is an active archetypical explanation that explains the methodology that helps in framing, developing and altering the identity that one

holds. The theory deals with the impact of any kind of threat on one's identity and, how it affects the individual's personality and behaviour, and the kind of coping strategies one uses.

Breakwell explains how IPT integrates social and psychological processes shapes and identity. IPT proposes that self-identity framework should be viewed through the lens of its content and emotional/value aspects (Jaspal and Breakwell 4). This structure of the self-identity is governed by two fundamental processes known as assimilation-accommodation and evaluation. Assimilation-accommodation involves integrating fresh information into one's identity framework, making necessary adjustments to incorporate it. Breakwell identified four core principles of identity which are, self-efficacy, self-esteem, continuity and distinctiveness.

The unnamed narrator of *The Walled City* grows up with a strong sense of being the 'other' in a predominantly Hindu culture. She is part of a joint family set up, who gradually understands her roots and family traditions through her family's history. Once her friend Subhadra takes her to a temple, when she asks to apply Bindi on her forehead – a dot of Kumkum, she gave her an objectionable look and remains still. Even for her mother, the narrator says:

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. I do not know that she swims in blood. Her mother seems to call to her, and Naomi cannot answer. A kumkum circle separates them. (*Walled City* 2)

The narrator cannot understand why her mother is unwilling to follow Hindu practices. Whenever she puts a question on any of the Hindu rituals, she is told that it goes against their religion. Even her Gujarati friend Subhadra is aware of their 'otherness' and believes it is a religious taboo for them to apply Kumkum. Such encounters with society, which always made the narrator feel differently about her Jewish ethnicity, can be defined through the typology of

the ‘other’ offered by the historian and sociologist Todorov. According to Egorova, Todorov’s division of ‘other’ falls into three categories: the ‘other’ that exists within oneself, the ‘other’ that functions internally within society and the ‘other’ that lies outside of society. The external ‘other’, which Todorov also labels as distant, signifies another society that could be either nearby or far away, depending on the context: individuals linked with each other culturally, morally, historically, or strangers whose language and traditions are entirely unfamiliar in the words of Yulia Egorova:

In India, Jews could be described as both an ‘interior other’, the ‘other’ which was part and parcel of Indian society, and an ‘exterior’ or ‘remote other’, which belonged to a different environment. Jews could be even described as ‘doubly remote’, as they were often known to Indians via a ‘secondary source’ (e.g., the Bible brought by Christian missionaries, European fiction, etc.) and not as a result of a direct contact. (*Jews and India* 12)

In *The Walled City* there are certain practices, which the narrator carefully observes. When she goes to Subhadra’s house to eat the delicious Gujarati food she very much enjoys, her mother prohibits her from sitting in the kitchen. Mani, narrator’s house-help, also warns her to maintain a respectable distance from Subhadra’s family as they are different from them, irrespective of the fact that she cannot comprehend how exactly this perceived difference accrues. When Subhadra comes to their house, she refuses even a sip of water. This refusal is not born out of rudeness but a quiet adherence to the unspoken rules of their society - rules that dictate boundaries, caste, and tradition. The narrator curses these traditions, feeling the weight of their injustice. In moments of solitude, her thoughts wander to an imagined life where such boundaries are inexistent. She wishes she had been born in Subhadra’s house, where acceptance seems to follow as naturally as the food placed before guests. Perhaps there, she would be free from the chains of her ancestor’s traditions, free to build relationships untainted by societal

prejudice. She begins questioning what it would take to dismantle these invisible walls - to create a space where kindness and humanity supersede tradition. 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" (*Walled City* 22).

At a wedding, when the ceremonies are accomplished, and the bride enters her husband's house, five virgins welcome her, the narrator being one of them gets objectified by an old aunt: "We are the virgins—Pratibha, Vatsala, Mandakini, Ketaki and I. An old aunt objects, 'But that one is not one of us.' I feel cold and alone, but then someone answers reassuringly, 'No, she is just like us.' It makes me want to disown my name, a name which exposes me." (*Walled City* 135)

Such movements in her life feel a direct attack on her self-esteem and her identity feels threatened. Breakwell identified four primary identity motives that guide the universal identity processes and represent desired outcomes. These motives include continuity, meaning preserving a stable sense of self across different times and situations; distinctiveness i.e. maintaining a sense of uniqueness from others; self-efficacy, which means having confidence and control over one's life; self-esteem, the feeling of being valuable and worthy.

As a member of a minority community in the city, we see how narrator seeks to maintain a consistent sense of self and grapples with maintaining individuality and cultural identity in a predominantly different social setting. The narrator's ability to feel in control is often challenged by societal restrictions, family dynamics and cultural expectations. Even the little life experiences and decisions are controlled by her mother, Naomi. For things like wearing a Gujarati dress in a fancy dress competition, leaving her hair loose or wearing the anklets given by her Danieldada, she is unable to choose anything up to her desires. Her mother does not even extend her liberty to be inquisitive, even to ask questions about their religion.

Half the time, the narrator is not comfortable with the rituals without having a complete understanding of them. She says: “I look at my image in the mirror. I am but a wisp of that memory and sometimes I question my Jewishness” (*Walled City* 22).

Experiences of marginalization, prejudice and rejection influenced the narrator’s sense of worth and strained her individuality. Her mother tells her that ‘Jewish girls should wear no ornaments, except perhaps a chain, a brooch, a watch or bangles’. David writes: “For generations it had been one of the unspoken rules of the elders that Jewish women should be self-effacing; as long as they did not attract attention, the community was not in any danger” (*Walled City* 60).

The narrator feels disconnected from the cultural heritage and traditions expected to be upheld, threatening the continuity principle of identity. Prejudice against the Jewish community erodes the narrator’s sense of belonging and self-esteem. Traditional roles assigned by family and community, conflict with personal desires, and threaten the psychological coherence. The women are expected to bear as many children as possible. There is a fear and anxiety in the Bene Israel community to see their tribe being wiped off, the reasons being the willingness of the new generation to get married outside of the community and the constant immigration of many members to Israel.

One of the intrapsychic coping strategies adopted by the narrator is redefining her identity by questioning traditions and finding new ways to relate to her cultural and personal identity, for example, seeing personal struggles as paths to self-discovery rather than failure. Even though suppressed by her mother, she does not stop asking questions from Daniieldada, her cousin Samuel and other family members. Another form of protecting her self-esteem and self-efficacy sometimes involved denial and withdrawal. It takes the form of interpersonal coping. At times, the narrator may suppress emotions or avoid confronting uncomfortable

factors about familial or societal dynamics. Her happiness and dreams are sacrificed in the name of religious and cultural obligations, leaving her with little hope for her fulfilment. She takes a major decision in life when she becomes financially independent and holds the capability of taking care of her parents. She decides never to get married, let alone have kids. She says:

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. I would try to keep her away from every possible outside influence and she would have to fight me. I would try to manipulate and control her every thought and action and her grandmother's urgent voice would beg her to go to the Promised Land. (*Walled City* 203)

She cannot bear the thought of bringing another daughter in a world of oppression. This decision reticently confirms to the continuity factor of IPT as the traditional practices and unpronounced desires of hapless elderly to retain their daughters within the family so as to find a caregiver in them during their fragile and aging process, instead of giving them away through marital relationship and seeing them migrating in some case not only from their families but from the nation so as such to settle in the Promised Land. Her gender identity itself gets further influenced by this decision which denotes her self-efficacy as now she feels capable of taking an independent decision but simultaneously distances her from the very fact of distinctiveness, desiring that it may no longer prevail in her Jewish world.

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