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Cultural Dynamics and Identity Formation in the Postcolonial Context: A Study of Esther David's *The Walled City*

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Abstract:

A diverse cultural background invariably creates opportunities for new possibilities and fosters creativity. Cultural assimilation plays a crucial role in shaping innovation and generating positive outcomes. Similarly, the cross-cultural integration and pluralistic nature of Indian society are vividly depicted in Esther David's debut novel, *The Walled City*. The novel explores the multifaceted cultural landscape of Ahmedabad, where the author, while immersed in its diverse environment, seeks to reconnect with her ancestral roots. The narrative emphasises on the rich Gujarati cultural heritage. This paper focuses on the themes of "homeland," identity, and individuality within the multicultural framework of Ahmedabad. It aims to examine the experiences of the Bene Israel family residing in the Walled City of Ahmedabad, exploring their search for cultural roots after three decades of residence in the city. In addition, the paper addresses the status of Jews as a minority community and their position within the vibrant and

historically significant urban fabric of Ahmedabad. The novel offers a critique of the marginalisation of minority groups and their interactions within the broader multicultural society. This research paper examines the identity crises and nostalgic challenges encountered by the Bene Israel family as they navigate their lives in the city.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Identity Crisis, Cross-cultural assimilation, homeland, individuality, multiculturalism, Bene Israel, Jews, Minority.

Introduction

Diasporic literature is a vast and multifaceted field, encompassing works created by authors who live outside their countries of origin yet maintain a deep connection to their cultural roots. This literary genre serves as a comprehensive framework for authors whose works, although created in diasporic contexts, remain intricately connected to the cultural, historical, and traditional landscapes of their native land. Central to diasporic literature are recurring themes of displacement, loss, and alienation, which often arise from the personal and collective experiences of migration and exile.

The early generation of diasporic Indian writers, including figures such as Raja Rao, G. V. Desani, Santha Rama Rau, Dhalchandra Rajan, Nirad Chaudhuri, and Ved Mehta, predominantly focused on a reflective examination of India. These writers rarely focused their narratives on their experiences as expatriates, instead drawing their creative inspiration from the Indian subcontinent. For them, a sense of Indianness was most keenly felt in their physical and emotional separation from India. This distance—both literal and figurative—allowed for a more nuanced and detached understanding of their native culture, enhancing the depth of their works.

Over time, the generation of Indian writers born from the era of indentured labour has given way to a newer wave of authors who engage more directly with the globalized, market-driven world. These contemporary writers often reflect on their experiences abroad, exploring feelings of estrangement from India. Rather than romanticizing the past, their works express a sense of melancholy or loss, navigating the complexities of belonging in a rapidly changing world.

Likewise, the Jewish diaspora has garnered growing attention, both internationally and within India itself. Jews in India have historically been regarded as a diasporic community, navigating distinct experiences of isolation and identity crises within the nation's pluralistic social fabric. The history of Judaism is deeply intertwined with the experiences of the Jewish Diaspora, beginning with the first major migration from Egypt to Israel, an event that reinforced the belief in a future return to the Promised Land for those who upheld God's commandments. The destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians and the subsequent exile to Babylon further shaped Jewish identity, fostering a dependence on written texts, particularly the Torah, which was not fully compiled until 586 BCE. Despite their dispersion across various nations and cultures, Jews have managed to preserve their religious and cultural identity, with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 providing a momentous return to their ancestral homeland.

While discussions of the Jewish Diaspora typically focus on the Ashkenazi Jews of Europe and the Sephardic Jews of the Middle East, the Jewish community in India has often been overlooked, partly due to its relatively small size. Nonetheless, the shared foundations of Judaism with other Abrahamic religions have allowed Jewish beliefs to influence both Islam and Christianity. The interactions between Jewish communities and the broader society in India, at times harmonious and at other times marked by tension, stand in stark contrast to the Jewish experience in other parts of the world. The Jewish presence in India is uniquely characterized by a deep-seated history of tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence

with the Hindu majority. This paper seeks to explore this exceptional relationship, examining the diverse Jewish communities in India, their historical origins, cultural practices, processes of adaptation, and their eventual migration to Israel after 1950.

The Jewish communities in India can be broadly categorized into several distinct groups, each with its own unique origins. The Cochin Jews trace their lineage back to Jerusalem, asserting that their ancestors fled the Roman invasion and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Conversely, the Bene Israel community attributes its origins to a legend of a shipwreck off the coast of Maharashtra, which is said to have brought their forebears to the subcontinent. The term 'Baghdadi Jews' refers to Jews who migrated from Arabic- and Persian-speaking regions, although their roots may not necessarily lie in Baghdad itself.

A significant aspect of the Jewish Diaspora in India is its history of peaceful coexistence, marked by minimal evidence of anti-Semitism throughout the country's history. Jews in India have formed a unique bond with the Hindu majority, adopting aspects of Indian culture while preserving their distinct religious and cultural identity. This integration has been facilitated by Hinduism's diverse traditions, which range from monotheism to polytheism, allowing Jews to blend into Indian society without losing their heritage. Through the adoption of external customs—such as clothing, language, food, and certain practices—Jews integrated into Indian society as "Jewish Indians." However, they remained outside the caste system, carving out their niche in the social hierarchy through their professions.

The peaceful coexistence of Jews in India can largely be attributed to the cultural flexibility of Indian society. India has historically embraced immigrant communities, allowing them to maintain their unique identities. Many such communities have legends that recount their arrival, often depicting them as welcomed by local rulers who permitted them to preserve their distinctive customs. This cultural acceptance enabled Jews to retain their separate identity

while integrating into the larger social fabric of India, fostering a harmonious existence that has lasted for centuries.

Esther David is a prolific writer, sculptor and a well-known columnist based in the bustling city of Ahmedabad. She is a writer conscious of her Jewish identity with the very presence of Women's voice. She is a highly acclaimed recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, renowned for weaving themes of cultural assimilation into the fabric of her literary works.

Esther David's *The Walled City* (1997) offers a nuanced examination of the complex interrelations between identity and belonging within the framework of a postcolonial context. Set within the historical boundaries of Ahmedabad's Walled City, the narrative centres on a Jewish community displaced from its ancestral homeland of Israel, seeking refuge in India. Through its exploration of themes such as memory, displacement, cultural hybridity, and identity, the novel intricately portrays the lived experiences of individuals navigating diverse cultural landscapes.". This paper argues that *The Walled City* is an exemplary case study for understanding the dynamics of identity formation in the postcolonial context. By drawing on the critical theories of Homi K. Bhabha and Avtar Brah, the paper explores how David's text illustrates the ongoing, multifaceted process of identity construction that characterizes diasporic existence. Central to this investigation are Bhabha's notions of hybridity and the 'third space,' as well as Brah's conception of diaspora as a site of both physical displacement and psychic reconfiguration.

Postcolonial Theory: Hybridity, the Third Space, and Diasporic Consciousness

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* has been instrumental in reshaping postcolonial discourse, particularly in relation to the complexities of cultural identity. Bhabha challenges static notions of identity and culture, proposing instead that identity is a dynamic and evolving construct. His concept of *hybridity* captures this process of cultural negotiation, where

identities are not fixed but constantly in flux, shaped by the interactions between different cultural forces. Hybridity, for Bhabha, is the result of colonial encounters, where cultures meet and merge, producing a third, hybridized space that transcends traditional boundaries of origin. This hybrid space, which Bhabha terms the *third space*, becomes a site of potential transformation and new cultural meanings, offering a way to understand identity as a constantly shifting and negotiated process.

Similarly, Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the lived experience of diaspora. Brah conceptualizes diaspora not merely as physical migration but as a psychological and emotional condition that involves complex negotiations between belonging, displacement, memory, and cultural affiliation. Brah argues that the diasporic experience involves an ongoing negotiation across various temporalities, cultures, and geographies. She suggests that the identity of the diasporic subject is in a state of constant flux, continually influenced by the forces of memory, historical context, and the evolving process of cultural adaptation. Brah emphasizes that diaspora is not a singular or static identity but a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that challenges traditional notions of home and belonging.

Both Bhabha and Brah provide critical tools for analysing the identity dynamics in *The Walled City*. David's text illustrates the intersections of cultural memory, displacement, and hybrid identity, echoing Bhabha's theory of the *third space* and Brah's notion of the diasporic subject as caught between multiple temporalities and cultural worlds.

The Walled City: Cultural Negotiation and Identity Formation

Esther David's *The Walled City* offers a profound exploration of identity in the context of displacement, belonging, and memory, particularly through the lives of a small Jewish community residing in Ahmedabad, India. This community, dislocated from its ancestral

homeland struggles to navigate multiple cultural terrains, balancing the desire to preserve its heritage with the complexities of adapting to a new cultural environment. The novel portrays the evolving consciousness of identity, focusing on how individual and collective identities are shaped and redefined within the diasporic experience.

Through the lens of cultural memory, hybridity, and emotional displacement, David constructs a narrative in which identity is not a fixed or static concept but rather a fluid and dynamic process, constantly renegotiated across time and space. The characters in *The Walled City* represent the fragmented and multifaceted nature of diasporic identity, demonstrating a profound psychological and emotional understanding of their position within both their community and the broader social fabric of India. This paper explores how *The Walled City* presents the consciousness of identity as shaped by the tensions between tradition and modernity, the personal and collective, the homeland and the host country. The writers carve out a space for themselves to reconnect with their ancestral roots, with recurring discussions surrounding the concepts of home, nation, and identity. These images raise a paradoxical concept for creative writers, which is articulated through the voice of Siona Benjamin at the South Asian Conference.: In my recent series of paintings entitled —Finding Home, I raised questions about what and where is —home, while evoking issues such as identity, immigration, motherhood, and the role of art in social change. I am still trying to reconcile the conflicts I experienced in my own experience as a Jew who attended Catholic and Zoroastrian schools while growing up in (predominantly Hindu and Muslim) India. My ancestors came to India from the Middle East and perhaps also Spain centuries ago. My family has gradually dispersed (again), mostly to Israel and America, but my parents remained in India. The feeling I have of never being able to set deep roots no matter where I am is unnerving, but on the other hand, there is something seductive about the spiritual borderland in which I seem to find myself. My paintings also explore female energy and power, as I am inspired by tantric art (of ancient

India). The work is informed as well by Indian miniature paintings, Byzantine icons and Jewish religious art from my childhood. In this multicultural society, I would like the viewers transcend this apparent exoticness and absorb the core message—tolerance of diversity. (Benjamin, 172-73)

Esther David tries to create a sense of diasporic consciousness in her writings. In Esther David's *The Walled City*, themes of loneliness and isolation are frequently depicted, a sentiment that, as Shushila Nasta suggests, underscores the emotional depth of the narrative. As she says, “is built on the discontinuous fragments of memory and reconceived in the imagination (11). The awareness of diaspora is evident in the novels of Esther David.

At the heart of *The Walled City* lies the concept that identity, within the diasporic experience, is inherently fluid—perpetually shifting and requiring constant renegotiation in response to the challenges of displacement. This evolving process of self-formation is mirrored in the emotional and psychological journeys of the characters, who navigate life within the Walled City—a place that embodies both a refuge and a form of confinement. The Jewish community, displaced from their ancestral homeland, holds fast to the memories of their past while adapting to their new reality in India. However, this attachment to their homeland is perpetually at odds with the need to integrate into a new society, creating a continuous process of identity reinvention. Esther David's narrative particularly highlights how personal identity is shaped by the intersection of memory, trauma, and adaptation. For the characters in the novel, the past is a constant presence, not a distant memory but a lived experience that shapes their daily interactions and their emotional landscapes. The consciousness of identity among the characters is closely tied to the community's collective memory of their homeland, but it is also marked by the fragmentation and dislocation of their diasporic existence. The characters' negotiation of identity, both on a personal level and within the collective framework of their

community, unfolds as a continuous effort to reconcile the tension between the enduring pull of the past and the pressing realities of the present."

In *The Walled City*, Esther David presents a rich narrative that explores the lives of Jewish characters living in Ahmedabad, a city that serves as a cultural crossroads where multiple communities—Muslim, Hindu, and Jain—coexist. In the novel, the Jewish community serves as a representative microcosm of the diasporic condition, depicting the challenges faced by individuals seeking to uphold their cultural and religious identity while adapting to the diverse socio-cultural fabric of India. Rachel, the central character, embodies the inherent tension of living between two worlds—her weakened ties to her ancestral heritage and her partial inclusion in the host society leave her in a state of liminal belonging, shaped by displacement and the absence of a concrete homeland.

Rachel's journey of self-discovery is shaped by the emotional and cultural dislocation she experiences, reflecting the *unhomely* condition described by Bhabha. For Bhabha, the *unhomely* experience occurs when the familiar becomes estranged, when individuals are forced to navigate new and unfamiliar cultural terrains that challenge their sense of belonging. This sense of estrangement is evident in Rachel's relationship with her heritage and the surrounding culture. Her interactions with the city of Ahmedabad and the Walled City serve as metaphors for the diasporic experience—spaces where cultural identities are both preserved and transformed. The themes of cultural assimilation and loneliness are observed through Rachel's perspective in the novel. As the author states, "She muses over the invisible "wall of dead animals and birds" that separates Subhadra and her (David 21). She constantly feels guilty of the question of not being accepted in the vegetarian community of inhabitants of Ahmedabad. As she rightly says, "I wish I had born to Subhadra's mother, I would have then been accepted" (21).

One of the key themes in *The Walled City* is the negotiation between heritage and modernity. The characters navigate the complex interplay between maintaining their Jewish religious and cultural traditions and adjusting to the diverse, secular environment of Indian society. The conflict between the past and the present resonates with Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, which suggests that identity is formed through the ongoing interaction between historical memory and contemporary realities. Rachel's journey is marked by her constant negotiation between two distinct cultural spaces, as she attempts to understand the notions of home and belonging within a context that is both familiar and alienating. Rather than being entirely dismissed, this experience of alienation becomes integral to a hybrid identity—one that continuously evolves by engaging with and adapting to the cultural dynamics of her surroundings. This can be seen here in the words of Parmeshwaran:

“Every immigrant transplants part of his native land to the new country, and the transplant may be said to have taken root once the immigrant figuratively sees his native river in the river that runs in his adopted place; not Ganga as the Assiniboine or the Assiniboine as the Ganga, both of which imply a simple transference or substitution, but Ganga in the Assiniboine, which implies a flowing into a merger that enriches the river. The confluence of any two rivers is sacred for the Hindu ethos, perhaps because it is symbolic of this enrichment. In the literary context of the immigrant experience this image has an added dimension. At the confluence, the rivers are distinct, and one can see the seam of the two separate streams as they join” (79-80).

The Walled City itself becomes a metaphor for the liminal space in which the Jewish community exists. It is both a place of refuge and confinement, a site that preserves cultural memory but also limits the potential for full integration into the larger social fabric of Ahmedabad. The walls that enclose the city symbolize the boundaries between different cultural identities, yet they also become a site of cultural fusion and negotiation. In this sense,

the Walled City embodies the idea of the *third space*—a space where hybrid identities emerge and where the process of cultural reconfiguration takes place.

Rachel's experiences highlight the complexity of diasporic identity as articulated by Brah. The emotional and psychological dimensions of her displacement are central to her sense of self. Her longing for her lost homeland is juxtaposed with her deep attachment to India, where she has found a new, albeit uneasy, sense of belonging. Brah's concept of diaspora as a negotiation between multiple temporalities is evident in Rachel's experience. Her sense of identity is not anchored in a single geographical location or cultural context but is instead shaped by her memories of homeland, her present life in India, and the shifting dynamics of her Jewish community. In the novel, the protagonist Rachel attempts to reconcile her diverse cultural background by preserving her ancestral heritage while simultaneously striving to assimilate into the predominantly Gujarati-speaking community that surrounds her. In the process, she becomes a victim of an identity crisis, as the author highlights here, "she attempts to "preserve her Jewish roots, without understanding them" (ix). Rachel struggles to practice her Jewish identity while living in the city. At times, she is unable to provide answers when her friend Subhadra inquires about the synagogue and the prayers in Judaism. She finds herself feeling a connection to Hindu deities like Krishna and even compares them to Moses. As Esther writes, " She unveils her queries regarding kashruth (Jewish dietary laws) before Aunty Shoshonah, especially about the prohibition of eating unko sher fish (David 130). On another occasion, while enthusiastically speaking about Hindu gods to her cousin Samuel, she makes a deft comparison between the stories of Krishna and Moses and even finds the temple more attractive than the synagogue (28).

Critical Reception of Bhabha and Brah in Relation to *The Walled City*

The idea of identity as a fluid and hybrid construct is central to Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, especially his concepts of *hybridity* and the *third space*. Bhabha argues that identity is never fixed, especially in the context of colonialism and migration, but is constantly in flux. The *third space*, according to Bhabha, is a site of negotiation where multiple cultural influences intersect and create new forms of identity that do not belong entirely to any one culture but are the product of cultural exchange.

In *The Walled City*, this concept of the *third space* is reflected in the characters' daily lives. Rachel, the protagonist, represents the complexity of hybrid identity. She is caught between her Jewish heritage, her longing for home and her life in Ahmedabad. She feels a sense of alienation in both her community and the larger Indian society. Her identity is shaped by multiple cultural influences, each of which exerts its own pull on her consciousness. Rachel's internal struggle is emblematic of the *third space*—a space where she must continuously negotiate her sense of self as she interacts with different cultural, religious, and social forces. This constant negotiation manifests in her emotional and psychological complexity, as she works through the conflicting aspects of her identity. This reminds of Rachel's loss of identity in this diverse cultural background of Ahmedabad. As Edward Said Observes, “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home”.(173)

The lines talk about the struggle the diasporic individual imagines while living in a different city. The sense of loneliness, alienation, identity are reflected in the novel. The community itself also embodies hybridity. While attempting to preserve its Jewish traditions, the community is inevitably influenced by the broader cultural and social dynamics of Ahmedabad. This hybridity is not merely a superficial blending of cultures but a deeper process of transformation, where both the Jewish heritage and the surrounding Indian culture shape and

reshape each other. The Walled City becomes a symbolic site of cultural interaction and exchange, where the boundaries between the past and the present, the homeland and the host country, are fluid and constantly redefined. We can easily identify the concept of “cross breed gap” of Homi Bhabha in the novel, *The Walled City*. Here, the diasporic individual’s life is assimilated with the people of different cultures, languages and regions.

The theoretical contributions of Homi Bhabha and Avtar Brah have had a profound influence on the critical reception of works dealing with the complexities of diaspora and identity. Scholars have applied Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the third space to a diverse range of postcolonial literature, highlighting how these frameworks offer profound insights into the fluid, evolving nature of cultural identity. In the context of *The Walled City*, Bhabha’s idea of the third space serves as a compelling analytical tool for examining the hybrid identities of the Jewish community in Ahmedabad. The community's experience within the Walled City exemplifies Bhabha's claim that identity is not fixed but is continually in the process of becoming, shaped by cultural encounters and the negotiation of various cultural influences.

Brah’s work on diaspora, with its emphasis on the psychological and emotional aspects of displacement, also enriches our understanding of the characters in *The Walled City*. Brah’s focus on the multidimensionality of diasporic experience helps illuminate the internal conflicts and emotional complexities that Rachel and other characters face as they navigate their cultural identities. The notion of diaspora as a space of both loss and transformation is central to the novel’s exploration of memory and belonging.

The consciousness of identity in *The Walled City* is not only a cultural or social construct but also deeply psychological and emotional. The characters in the novel experience the psychological toll of displacement, as they are forced to live in a space that is both a refuge and

a prison. Their consciousness of cultural identity is perpetually shaped by the emotional resonances of loss, longing, and the enduring trauma of exile.

Rachel's sense of identity is profoundly shaped by her emotional displacement. She constantly yearns for homeland, but she also feels a deep connection to India. This dual sense of belonging creates an emotional dissonance that shapes her self-awareness. She is torn between nostalgia for a lost homeland and a complex, often painful attachment to her new life. Her emotional struggle reflects the tension between the past and the present, the homeland and the host country, a conflict that is central to the diasporic condition. She feels the identity crises in Daniel Dad's house. Her frustration is articulated in these lines, "I feel as if I am in a glass case" (David 81). Rachel oscillates between the Jewish and Non-Jewish identity crises throughout the novel. This represents the syncretism in propounding third space identity by intertwining the hybrid identity in oneself. Towards the end of the novel, she explains why she chooses to remain unmarried. She fears that she will 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. She would have unruly hair which I would have to pull back in a tight braid, in order to make her look unattractive. I would try to manipulate and control every thought and action and her grandmother's urgent voice would beg her to go to the Promised Land. Then my unborn daughter would somehow learn to worry about me and my old age and would perhaps end up living with me, as I live with Father and Mother. It is a vishchakra, a never-ending, poisonous cycle because she, as a daughter, would want to know all that I know, forcing me to start this story all over again. (197)

Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora as a space that involves "multilayered" and "polyphonic" experiences of identity provides a useful framework for understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of identity in the novel. Brah argues that diaspora is not just a matter of physical relocation but also involves a psychological and emotional journey, where the

diasporic subject is always navigating between different histories, memories, and cultural affiliations. In Rachel's case, this emotional journey is marked by her constant negotiation between the memory of homeland and the realities of her life in India. This dual consciousness—living in two places at once—creates a profound sense of displacement, but it also contributes to the formation of her complex, hybrid identity.

While *The Walled City* focuses on individual identity, it also emphasizes the role of the collective, particularly the Jewish community, in shaping the consciousness of identity. The community's collective memory of Israel and its shared rituals and practices create a sense of continuity, but the community is also marked by its marginalization within the larger social and political landscape of Ahmedabad. The Walled City serves as a metaphor for this marginalization: a place where the community is both protected and isolated.

The collective identity of the Jewish community in *The Walled City* is tied to both preservation and adaptation. On one hand, the community clings to its traditions and religious practices, hoping to preserve a sense of cultural and spiritual identity. On the other hand, the external pressures of Indian society, with its diverse cultural and religious influences, force the community to adapt and change. This dynamic is reflective of the broader diasporic experience, where identity is both a product of collective memory and an individual's personal experiences, all of which are constantly in flux.

Conclusion

Esther David's *The Walled City* offers a compelling narrative that captures the complexities of identity formation in a postcolonial context. Through its exploration of displacement, hybridity, and cultural negotiation, *The Walled City* resonates with the theoretical frameworks of Homi Bhabha and Avtar Brah. Bhabha's concept of the third space and Brah's understanding of diaspora as a fluid, multi-temporal phenomenon offers critical lenses for analysing the

characters' experiences. In the novel, the negotiation of identity is neither linear nor fixed but rather an ongoing dialogue between past and present, the familiar and the foreign. *The Walled City* serves as a poignant reminder of how cultural identities are continually reshaped in the face of displacement, hybridity, and the complexities of the postcolonial world. The novel emphasizes the fluidity of diasporic identity, which is never static but constantly re-negotiated in response to personal, cultural, and emotional forces. Through its engagement with hybridity, the third space, and emotional displacement, *The Walled City* reveals the intricate processes through which identity is formed, deformed, and reformed within the diasporic and postcolonial context.

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