

The Cross-cultural Confluence, Patriarchal Conflicts and Identity Crisis: Themes in Esther David's novels.

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Abstract -

Bene Israelis were deeply rooted in tradition and followed all the customs and rituals without fail. They make it a point to connect with their Jewish identity and to never cut the umbilical cord they had with their holy motherland. Novel after novel Esther David presents the characters who believe that they would one day go to their holy homeland of Jerusalem. They took every effort to preserve their holy books, language, rituals and cultural practices rigidly. But they were not immune to the local culture and traditions of India and hence we find a confluence of two culture and a unique and rich heritage of thousands of years.

Keywords – culture, identity, language, rituals, history, legacy

Jane Austin called her novels as 'bits of ivory'. Like finely, minutely carved ivory pieces, her novels revealed a small world with limited world view in minutest details. Like Austen, Esther David carves a small, beautiful, culturally very different world of minorities in India, Bene Israelites. Bene Israelites are the people who were migrated to India during Great Exodus 2000 years ago on ships, out of which only one ship with a few hundred survivors could land the on country named India, rest of thousands of Jews were engulfed into the sea. Esther David belongs to this small community that thrived and survived through hundreds of centuries and preserved their bloodline, culture and heritage intact on the coastal line of Arabian sea and mostly resided in and near Alibaug, near Mumbai. Esther David shares the legacy of this close-knit community's culture, beliefs, rituals and practices, shared heritage and collective memories with the readers through her novels like 'The Book of Rachael', 'The Book of Esther', 'Bombay Brides' and 'The Walled Cities'. Esther David's novels are widely recognized as cultural documents that capture the essence of the Bene Israeli Jewish experience in India. Her work provides a narrative analysis of the Bene Israeli community, shedding light on their unique customs, traditions, and historical struggles (1) Esther David presents the Marathi-Jewish ethos of Maharashtrian Jews and Gujrati Jews as well. Her characters freely and frequently change places like migrating birds but their value and belief system is deeply rooted in their respective Marathi or Gujrati locations. Bene Israeli community is a unique community in India. But unfortunately, it's vanishing very fast, the reason being most of the Bene Israelis are moving to Israel for the love of their homeland and also for getting better job prospects. So, Esther David is doing a noble work of recording the historical narratives of Bene Israeli community. Work of fiction is considered as historical record like diaries, memoirs and autobiography. 'The Book of Esther' has autobiographical elements. The author says that it is her quest to search for the roots and also her urge to share the legacy of rich cultural heritage which is on the verge of extinct. Esther David narrates in the Author's Note how she turned up to writing personal narratives as novel –

“Book of Esther’ is a work of fiction inspired by a real event, the arrival of my ancestors on the Konkan coast. I am named after Queen Esther from the Megillat and Book of Esther in the Bible. As the only child of working parents, I was left with my grandmother in the ancestral house where she stayed with her oldest son and his family. Here in the Delhi Darwaza house, where relatives visited us during vacations and sometimes stayed on for long periods, I heard all the family stories. That was before their exodus to Israel or England or America or Canada. Yet, the house remained the focal point which received all those stories, through letters, telephonic talks or as the nostalgic recollections of those who were left behind. With my own deep desire to run away from the family, it so happened that I stayed the longest in Ahmedabad. The elders passed away and the others started losing contact. Till I found myself alone, with just my own children and a large collection of photographs and stories I wanted to tell them. This became the fertile ground for Book of Esther.” (2)

‘Book of Esther is dedicated to her grandchildren as a history of ancestors. So, all the novels by Esther David are personal tales, memoirs and family history turned into fictional narrative.

The story spans two-hundred years of history. The text is in itself a four-part chronicle of family history from the late 18th century to present times. Its structure follows the order of descent from Bathsheba, through her great grandson David, to Joshua, the narrator's father, to Esther herself. There is an attempt to model the telling after The Book of Esther of the Old Testament, but the parallels, except for the use of some names, are tangential. What the author does succeed in emulating is the spare, almost prophetic style of the Bible. This gives a special poetic intensity and tautness to some sections of the book. (3)

The novels by Esther David have so strong autobiographical undercurrents that it would have been better to write an autobiography that instead of presenting in the fictional format. But then autobiography would have lacked the ethos Esther had created and the psychological ebbs and flow of emotions her vibrant characters went through would have been missing entirely. Fictional format allowed Esther David to present history with a tinge of imagination, allowed her to interweave personal stories of different people into a character and gave her an opportunity to present the characters spanning of hundred of years. “The analysis examines the working of intertextuality and focalization that creates the narrative hermeneutics, rendering it a work of cultural integration.”(4)

Bene Israelis were deeply rooted in tradition and followed all the customs and rituals without fail. They make it a point to connect with their Jewish identity and to never cut the umbilical cord they had with their holy motherland. Novel after novel Esther David presents the characters who believe that they would one day go to their holy homeland of Jerusalem. They took every effort to preserve their holy books, language, rituals and cultural practices rigidly. But they were not immune to the local culture and traditions of India and hence we find a confluence of two culture and a unique and rich heritage of thousands of years. Bene Israelis have a unique combination of Jewish and Marathi language which they used for communication. They had magazines in Bene Israeli Marathi language which was widely popular. They had their unique cuisine based on the seasonal harvests and what they brought from Israel. Esther David presents these cultural nuances and identity in a very aesthetic way. Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal states that: “A distinct South Asian literary identity, drawn from interconnecting languages, culture, food, music and oral heritage is emerging in modern fiction, and in social media. It cuts across the boundaries of religion and ideology, and stretches the limits of static political maps.” (5) Esther David’s novels are a specimen of this statement. Esther David weaves rituals, songs, seasons, harvest products, culinary, apparel to celebrate the mixed identity of Israeli Indians located in Maharashtra and proud to be known as Bene Israeli.

The Book of Esther's narrative and structured is imbued with culture and tradition. The story is divided into chapters, each beginning with a different recipe and an illustration depicting the episode of the story and the meal described. The recipe is not written professionally. It has a homely feel to it as if the woman is conversing with a narratee belonging to a different culture. The episodes of the story follow the recipe with notes and comments on the recipe, its ingredients, its variations according to culture, its significance and the customs associated with it. Each episode of the story connects with the recipe described before it. The story then unfolds itself recipe-by-recipe to tell how a mix of Esther's culinary skills, hospitality, love for her homeland and belief in the Prophet Elijah help her to win her case against the sale of the land of the old synagogue. (6)

The cross-cultural confluence, patriarchal conflicts, identity crisis are the major themes in Esther David's novels. In an interview with the Times of India she shares – 'It is very conflicting as there is a cross-cultural conflict that we experience. I think we Indian Jews live a very secretive life. Most Jewish celebrations happen after 7 PM. On the streets we all look like Indians, but the moment we enter a synagogue we wear the kippah (the Jewish skull cap) and we pray, there are celebrations, etc. Even in our homes, most festivals are celebrated after sunset, and so it's like a transformation that takes place in the evenings. These two conflicting emotions-- of being a Jew and an Indian- I find it very difficult. In my books I write about Jewish themes to understand myself, where I come from, where I belong, and yet at heart I'm an Indian.' (7)

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