



THE ANXIETY OF FINDING 'HOME'

DIVYA HARI RAO

Asst. Professor,
Jain College – Centre for Graduate Studies,
Vasavi Temple Road,
V VPuram,
Bengaluru
divyarao.dhr@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

"The ache for home lives in all of us; the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned", said Maya Angelou. For the Bene Israel Community in India, the idea of "Home" is a distant dream as it is not only hard to define but also to locate. If 'The Walled City' tries to locate the Jewishness of an individual in a foreign land, David's other novel 'Shalom India Housing Society' captures the dilemma of the Bene Israel Community as a joint entity post the communal riots in 2002. After the mass exodus of the Bene Israel Jews in the 1950s from India to Israel, the 2002 Gujarat riots forced the remaining Jews to move into a tight-knit housing society for protection. This paper aims to explore the idea of "Culture" among the Bene Israel Jews with the infusion of modernity into traditional practises. In order to elucidate the meaning of "Identity" in David's novels, I wish to bring in Bhabha's idea of "Liminal" negotiation of cultural identity. The paper will culminate into the idea of 'the anxiety of finding home' and how various factors affect it.

Keywords: Home, Jews, Diaspora, Bene Israel, India

Introduction

Along the western coast of India, a community called the Bene Israel has been living for centuries¹. According to their folklores, it is believed that seven couples survived a shipwreck off Konkan coast and since then they have integrated into different Indian cultures. They eat the local food, dress like local but they cling onto their religion and live in a tight-knit community. If we look at the enormous body of work called the 'Indian writing in English', Nissim Ezekiel is a prominent name under the poetry section. Ezekiel is not only known as an Indian Writer but as an Indian Jewish writer, who also belonged to the Bene Israel community. Under the same category, Esther David is another well-known, contemporary novelist whose works represent the everyday Jewish life in India.

David's first novel *The Walled City* portrays the struggles of living in the margins of the religious hierarchy in the City of Ahmedabad populated mostly by Hindus and Muslims. Narrated from the perspective of a young Jewish girl, the conflicts of understanding one's religion in juxtaposition with the indigenous culture with the intervention of modernity and urbanization forms the substructure of the novel. Her other novel, *Shalom India Housing Society*, set in the same city post Gujarat riots of 2002 dissects every individual's Jewish life and their need to be accepted by the community.

'Home' in the Settings of the novel

As mentioned before, both the novels, *The Walled City* and *Shalom India Housing Society* are set in Ahmedabad as the author belongs to this city. *The Walled City* tells the story of a young girl who lives in an extended family in Ahmedabad. The family members are closely knit and



every decision is taken after the elders in the family meet and discuss. The extended family not only represents the traditional style of Indian patriarchal system but also the family together creates a sense of 'Home' for every individual in the story. Living in an extended family brings in that sense of belongingness and at the same preserve the Jewishness of every member. The novel takes a course of action when the extended family disintegrates into nuclear families, thereby representing the disintegration of the Bene Israel Jews due to urbanization and migration.

In *Shalom India Housing Society*, the apartment of the same name, reserved only for the Jews depicts their sense of belongingness and the need for 'Home'. The time period of the novel is 21st century and the families are already nuclear and as a result the members of each flat try to help each other and consider themselves as a single family.

The synagogue plays an important role in both the novels as this is the only place that brings the Jews in the city together and binds them together as a single entity. In fact, David says in *The Walled City*, "It had been easier to feel more Jewish near the synagogue."² The synagogue was not just the place of worship, it reminded the Jews of their roots and that their forefathers belonged to the Promised Land called Israel, thus being their vision of 'Homeland' in a foreign country.

In her foreword to *The Walled City*³, Esther David states:

When I wrote *The Walled City*, I was a wandering Jew. I was in search of a homeland. But, as soon as *The Walled City* was published, I found my home in my novel. Home is still not a country, city, place, but it is somewhere inside my novel *The Walled City*. I have to just open the book and I am at home. The Jew within became a temporary stationary ark – but the novel wandered or rather journeyed from India to the world.

The foreword states that the author had already been in search of home and has also explained her definition of the 'Home'. The US based Bene Israeli painter, Siona Benjamin considers "the anxiety of finding home, both spiritually and physically, the perpetual occupation of her life and career."⁴ Similarly, Esther David also tries to find home in the city of Ahmedabad. She compares the walls that guard the city of Ahmedabad to that of the Western Wall (also known as the Wailing Wall) of Jerusalem, as "it watches over the tears of its people."⁵

As the walls of Ahmedabad dwindle and disintegrate into fragments, the extended family collapses and many of them migrate to their Promised Land of Israel to be at 'Home'. *Shalom India Housing Society* shows few characters yearning to go Israel which they call their 'Home' while some other characters call Ahmedabad their home.

Home and Identity

Homi Bhabha, in his *The Location of Culture*⁶ states that Frederic Jameson invokes something known as 'Situational Consciousness' where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectively itself. This situational consciousness is what we find in Esther David's novels



where in narrating her experiences, especially in *The Walled City* ends up representing the Bene Israel Jews collectively.

David also looks at the advent of modernity which seems to bring a similarity in the culture of the Jews and the non-Jews. So, the question arises if modernity has made it easy for the diaspora communities to integrate into the society easier or has it erased the cultural differences to create the liminal space.

Bhabha further explains that the 'third space' of the modern nation-people created as a result of 'hybridity'⁷

Is never simply horizontal. Their metaphor movement requires a kind of "doubleness" in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formation and social processes without a centred casual logic. And such cultural movements disperse the homogeneous, visual time of the horizontal society.

The protagonist of *The Walled City* tries to create the liminal space by rebelling against certain practises which she considers oppressive. Esther David also brings in characters that have married outside their religion and these characters (Juliet/Julekha in *The Walled City* and Miriam/Mariam in *Shalom India Housing Society*) try to follow certain Jewish practises inspite of having converted to other religions. Throughout the novels, David tries to understand the customary practises of a Jewish household and balances it with the culture that the outside world (in this case, the city of Ahmedabad) has to offer. An anecdote from *The Walled City* explains the "doubleness" in identity of the character when she secretly dances dressed as Radha with her friend dressed as Krishna. She even starts singings songs on Lord Krishna under her breath when there is a Hebrew Congregation. Esther David's writings not only represent the Jewish Community in India but also bring in the essence of a particular kind of Indianness to it. As a reader, if we negate the Jewish elements in the text, every other middle class Indian would connect to the book as it describes the everyday life situations.

Conclusion: Who then are the Diasporas?

In his book *Beginning Post colonialism*, John McLeod defines diaspora in Robin Cohen's words 'diasporas are communities of people living together in one country who 'acknowledge that "the old country" – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotion'⁸. Further he discusses how the diaspora community need not have experienced migration in order to have an emotional connection with the 'old country'. However, in case of the Jewish diaspora in India who have become a part of the Indian ethos and have adapted themselves accordingly, can they still be called 'Diaspora'? Walter Fischel calls the Bene Israel Jews as the "Native Jew Caste" of India⁹. Due to their occupation of running the Oil Press, the Bene Israel Jews were known as Oil pressers and as a result became a 'caste' in India¹⁰. Apart from this, the Bene Israel Jews have acquired their family names from the places they have lived in. For instance, Esther David's complete name is Esther David Dandekar and the word 'Dandekar' comes from the Konkan village of Danda¹¹. Hence, if the Bene Israelis from India migrate to Israel, are they the Diasporas of India or Israel? In spite of Israel government claiming that Israel is the true home



for any jew¹² around the world, the culture and history is negated. 'Bhabha has been accused of neglecting the cultural and historical specifics in his work by abstracting a general theory from particular experiences'¹³. To conclude in Kurieshi's words 'the grounded certainties of roots are replaced with the transnational contingencies of routes'¹⁴ and thus, a home becomes a concept of imagination rather than a real location in space.

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