

Esther David and Sophie Judah: Voices from Interstitial Perspectives

Ms Doyir Ete
Assistant Professor
Dept of English
Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh
doyirete@gmail.com,

Abstract

Writings from the minority community is one of the important new literatures emerging in the country today. The Bene Israel Jews are one of the minority communities in India that has survived and flourished without any fear of persecution or anti-Semitism. Two of the most prominent female writers of the community Esther David and Sophie Judah narrate the life of this diasporic community. They also interrogate the interstitial space that the community occupies in India. Their stories share many similar experiences, at the same time they raise important questions about the community's position in a multiethnic country like India. The paper seeks to analyze these similarities between the two writers who occupies an important position as an ambassador of the people occupying the position of 'in-between' in India. The feminist concerns that the two writers share will also be analyzed along with the discussion of women's role as a cultural bearer of the community.

Key words: Bene Israel Jew, minority community, diaspora

Writings by Jewish writers have always formed a part of the literary culture of the country from which it has emerged. It cannot be denied that in many cases their writings have been marginalized and sidelined. What is noticeable in writings by Jewish writers is that there is the desire to essentialize the Jewish traits and Jewish identity in the context of the society where they live. The paper seeks to make a comparative analysis of the narrations of Esther David and Sophie Judah who belong to the Bene Israel Jewish community of India. The paper will also foreground the similarities and show how their dispersed interests and works have shared concerns and interrogations about the future of their community in India.

Esther David's oeuvre of literary works is an excellent documentation of the life of the minuscule community of the Bene Israel in India which gives a fair view into the complex lives of the Jewish community and their daily endeavors to survive under the dominant influence of Hinduism and globalization. Esther David's *Book Of Esther*(2002) and *Shalom India Housing Society*(2007) are two of her important works that narrate the lives of the Bene

Israel men and women and their complex lives in India. Though Sophie Judah is now settled in Israel her memories and connection with India her birthplace is still a significant part of her life as is witnessed from the stories in her book *Dropped From Heaven* (2007). The stories of these two writers share multitudes of similarities pertaining to very important issues like, What are the diasporic elements in their writings? What is the position of a woman belonging from a minority community in a large and multiethnic country like India? What is the importance of the role of a woman as a cultural bearer in a diasporic community like theirs? What is the position of women within their own community? These questions that are raised by the two writers foreground the unique and ambivalent position of the Jewish community towards India. What is also very heartening is to see the robust and optimistic experiences of the community in India where they found happiness and acceptance.

Firstly it is pertinent to mention a very important observation, a declaration that is not only stressed by the two writers but also by a host of Jewish personalities including researchers, diplomats, and members of the other Jewish groups like the Baghdadi Jews, and The Konkani Jews. What is very unique about the Jewish experience in India has been the absence of anti-Semitism which was a central experience of Jews specially in Europe. This is confirmed by Esther David when she writes in her historical fiction *Book of Esther* "I had given myself many reasons to run away from India. Gradually, however, I realized that I had lived there as a Jew without fear. When I heard the stories of other immigrants and met the Holocaust survivors, I realized that in India we had never suffered because we were Jews. Perhaps it was the only country in the world where the Jews had never faced persecution" (David, 2002:372). This is why after living out of India for six years Esther decided to move back to India and live here though her children continued to live in Israel. In her book *Dropped From Heaven* Sophie Judah writes "The Jewish community in India has for centuries lived in close proximity to both Hindus and Muslims. There has never been a Jewish ghetto or manifestations of anti-Semitism from the local population. This is a concept foreign to Western Jews, for whom it has been a constant presence" (Judah, 2007:x). Shalva Weil a Jewish Scholar from Tel Aviv writes "Perhaps the most startling revelation for the larger Jewish population outside the country was how peacefully the small Jewish communities had coexisted in India, in contrast to those in Europe, incredibly maintaining their Jewish identity even through centuries of isolation, as was the case with Bene Israel of the Konkan" (Shalva Weil, 2006:9). This is also affirmed by The Israeli Ambassador to India, Mr. Daniel Carmon in his address on 'The International Holocaust Remembrance Day' on January 27th, in New Delhi. Esther David and Sophie Judah celebrate this robust experience of the Indian Jews as they lived their lives simultaneously safeguarding their religion and cultural practice in the midst of their Hindu dominant neighbours. What is also similar between the two writers is their observation of the ways in which the community had adapted to many different Hindu customs and traditions, specially the women of their community while actively partaking in many activities of their community. The minute details of the daily life and the intricate

manoeuvres that the women undertake in adapting to the dominant influence of their Hindu and Muslim neighbours form a crucial part of their stories. In the first story in *Dropped From Heaven*, Sophie narrates the wedding ceremony of two Jewish men, Joseph and Bentzion. She describes the performance of the *mehndi* ceremony, the exchange of *mangalsutra*, the *baraat* ceremony, the *sari* as a bridal dress. These are Hindu practice that has been adapted by the Bene Israeli Jews as a part of the material culture which has become an integral and essential part of their marriage ceremony. In another of her story Sophie Judah narrates the struggle of the community members in performing their religious service in the synagogues because of lack of sufficient Jewish men. For the Jews to perform their religious service according to the Jewish laws a *minyan* i.e ten Jewish men is required. The community constantly laments the difficulty in procuring the required number of men. She writes about one of her character Nathaniel "The synagogue was an important part of his life. He constantly worried about the difficulty in obtaining a *minyan*, the ten men required for a religious service to be complete"(Judah,2007:107). In *Shalom India Housing Society*, Esther narrates a unique aspect of the community. She describes about the community's practice of having the portrait of Prophet Elijah in their homes. She writes "The Indian Bene Israel Jews are remarkable as they not only know what the prophet looks like but have taken the liberty of giving him a face, breaking all rules against idol worship" (David, 2007:1). An important observation that the two writers make is also the way the women of the community had adapted the Hindu tradition of wearing *saris* because one will continuously come across intricate and elaborate descriptions of this traditional attire in the narratives of both the writers. For eg, in the story by the same title as her book *Dropped From Heaven*, Sophie describes in detail what a sari is and how it is a central part of a women's life be it in the public or the private sphere. She writes "Because a sari is just a six-yard piece of material that is unstitched, women of different sizes can wear the same sari"(Judah,2007:154). In the story titled 'Yael', Esther also describes the dress that was worn by the older generation of women of the community as "a nine yard sari and wearing a nose-ring, anklets and bracelets"(David,2007:45). In *Book Of Esther* Joshua says "Look at my wife. She wears a sari and she is no less a Jew than the women at the synagogue, My mother and grandmother wore nine -yard saris, with heavy anklets, toe rings, armlets, waist belts and enormous nose rings but they all observed the Jewish rituals"(David,2002:369). Women have always been involved more in the material culture and more so within the private and domestic sphere. Since ages within a traditional Indian society women were always restrained facing hurdles in self expression and self representation. This problem was compounded in a situation where an entire community itself is marginalized like the Bene Israel Jews in India. Esther and Sophie also questions the double restrain that women from their community faced because of being a member of a minority community that was strictly patriarchal.

The universal theme of marriage and the notion of daughter's as a commodity and status symbol are also explored by the two writers. The Bene Israeli Jews like the traditional Indian

society viewed marriage as an indispensable part of a social life where the ultimate destiny for a girl was to settle down with an eligible man with a good steady income. In the story 'My Friend Joseph' Bentzion muses "...It would not be difficult to find brides from the villages the Bene Israel inhabited along the konkan coast. We had regular work, which promised a pension in old age. This was security. What else could a father want for his daughters?"(Judah, 2007:6). This theme is touched upon by Sophie Judah in many of her different stories in the collection. The major theme of the story 'Dropped From Heaven' is also marriage along with the contentious issue of the position of daughters in a traditional Indian family. Like Mrs Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Solomon in the story is fraught with worry at the future of her three unmarried daughters Shoshanna, Lily and Yochi. The prospect is very bleak especially for Yochi since she is already at the ripe age of thirty. The girls are made to dress up and then paraded around like "animals in a cattle show"(Judah,2007:154). The exodus of the Indian Jews to Israel is also prompted by this precise reason i.e. to find a suitable life partner. If a marriage is solemnized outside of the community, the couple would be excommunicated from the society and their children would not be accepted as Jews. They would be called as 'kala Jews' meaning 'outcasts', 'mixed or mongrel'. This also showed that like the practice of caste system that existed in a Hindu society 'caste' or 'class' based on racial purity and skin colour also existed and practiced by the Bene Israel Jews. In the story 'My Son, Jude Paul' from the collection *Dropped From Heaven*, Jude is abandoned by his Christian mother and Jewish father in a church when he was just a baby. He is found by Father Peter Gonsalves and Father James who bring him up as their own. Jude who is originally named as Judah Saul suffers from identity crisis all his adult life. Father James explains to Father Gonsalves "I know this community well," "they never accept a child whose parents are not both Jews. These children are called Kala Israel, and although they are not prohibited from entering the synagogue, they are never allowed to read from the Torah during services or blow the ram's horn on their holy days. No Jewish parents will give their daughter in marriage to a Kala Israel" (Judah, 2007:53). Kala the word itself is taken from Hindi meaning black. Such ostracism based on religion and colour differentiated and created division among the already miniscule community. Esther David also talks about the Kala and Gora Jews in her book. She writes "The kala and gora Jew stories always circulated as a vicious undercurrent in their lives. Those who appeared to have a darker colour with typical Konkani features were branded black as they were suspected of having mixed blood, and the others considered themselves white or gora because they had married their cousins and looked exactly like each other' (David, 2002:28). Another interesting fact mentioned by her is that the designation of kala Jews was also used to address contentious issues, issues that broke the prescribed Jewish laws. In *Book Of Esther*, Bathsheba in accordance with a promise she had kept offers prayers to Nagdeva. She goes against the customs and laws of her religion by offering prayers to a Hindu god. As a result she is extremely fearful that if her actions are ever found out she will be branded as a kala or

black Jew. Thus what is understood is that this term was used to represent actions and doings that broke the laws of Jewish religion and way of life. It symbolized the marginalized 'other' within the social dynamics of a staunchly ethnic community.

Esther David like many women in the Dandekar family was born and brought up in a traditional Jewish family and had always lived her life with clear definitions of the gendered roles that was expected of her. Her stories are replete with female characters many of whom belong to her ancestral family. Leah, Naomi, Malkha and the writer herself represent different generations with different stories, but what binds them together is a strong close knit family where love and loyalty existed along with strict patriarchy. Esther has questioned the patriarchal authority of men in Orthodox Judaism and she has raised issues of women's role in the family as well as during religious ceremonies. In *Book Of Esther* she narrates the lives of women like Bathsheba, the first women entrepreneur of the Bene Israel Jews, Jerusha the first woman doctor of the family and Naomi her mother who defied conventions to go out of the home and work in an office. Esther's feminist concern is also emphasized in *Book Of Rachel* (2008). The book depicts the journey of Rachel, a widow who reconnects and rediscovers her life post widowhood.

The Bene Israel Jews in India are a community in diaspora and this is affirmed by the fact that the community fulfills many of the diasporic conditions. Diaspora originally referred to the Jewish exodus, when the Jews were forced out of their homeland as a result of religious, cultural and economic persecution. The word Diaspora was derived from the Greek word 'spiero' that means to 'sow'. With the gradual and increased use of the word to describe similar experiences it gradually came to connote encounters of exile, expulsion, migration, displacement, nostalgia and longing for a lost homeland. According to their history, the Bene Israel Jews had migrated to India generations ago. This history is narrated by Esther in *Book Of Esther* and is even discussed by Sophie Judah in *Dropped From Heaven*. The History of the Bene Israel Jews is also discussed in detail by Benjamin J. Israel in his book *The Bene Israel Of India* (1984). According to their history, their ancestors numbering seven women and men had survived a shipwreck in the Konkan coast in Maharashtra. They had lost all their possessions, their *Torah* scrolls and holy books. They retained only the *Shema* prayers and their dietary laws. As the Indian Jews became more and more assimilated they freely adopted different cultural and religious traits of the dominant Hindu culture even adopting Gujarati and Marathi as their mother tongue. What has evolved is a unique Indian-Jewish ethos that forms the fabric of the community as it is found in the narratives of the two writers. But what is also important from a diasporic perspective is the question of ambivalence and hybridity that arises as a result of the encounter between the dominant Hinduism and the minority Jews and the ensuing negotiations that take place. Communities who are in minority practice many survival strategies of acculturation and assimilation as discussed earlier. In this light it will not be wrong to suggest that one of the central concerns of the two writers is the question of belongingness of the Bene Israel Jews in India. This concern is made more

complicated by the dual position of India as the motherland on one hand and their ancestral land of Israel as the fatherland on the other. It is interesting to read the stories of Indian Jews ,how they imagine themselves in India and in Israel. Similarly, in the story titled ‘A Girl From My Hometown’ Sophie Judah interrogates the mixed feelings of the community with regard to emigration to Israel. In the story Esther’s father asks “Do you expect me to give up my job and my home just to go there and starve? Israel is a small place surrounded by millions of Arabs who do not want the Jews there. Do you think that I will risk the safety of my family for a stretch of desert?”(Judah, 2007:177).The predicament of moving to new country though it was the promised land of their forefathers hung in the air. This experience is also shared by Esther David in her narrations. In *Book of Esther*, the narrator’s mother Naomi reacts “Joshua, you must not allow strangers into the house. I wonder if he is from the Jewish agency. I read somewhere that these people are all over the place enticing our people to emigrate to Israel, especially young people”(David,2002:370). Despite their predicaments there was the mass exodus of Indian Jews to Israel specially after Independence and after the establishment of the state of Israel. Sophie Judah as stated had immigrated to Israel in 1972 and settled there. Esther David on the other hand has narrated her experience of aliyah or emigration to Israel and her subsequent return to India in *Book of Esther*. She writes “Israel is now a distant memory .There was a time when it was real. I tried to uproot myself from my surrogate motherland, and replant myself in the home of my ancestors. I tried to settle there. I could not .Yet, Liked it”(David,2002:371).During her stay in Israel, Esther would unconsciously and unknowingly compare India and Israel as she had done in India but the vantage point had shifted now. In India, Israel seemed a distant land, the Promised land ,the land of ‘milk and honey’ beckoning all her lost children. Finally shifting to Israel was a different experience all together. She writes “We were face to face with Jews from all over the world. Black, white, brown, yellow skins intermingled. Sturdy bronzed bodies in shorts rubbed shoulders with people in long, flowing robes. There were also the young soldiers carrying automatic rifles. I was in the land of milk, honey and blood”(David,2002:371).In another instance she ruminates “What a heavy price one had to pay to be a Jew!”(David,2002:372). In many cases for the immigrants trying to rebuild their lives in Israel after leaving their hostland is a traumatic experience. As Esther writes while describing the prophet Eliyahu “His heart went out to them, as the last few Jews in India, they were lost, never quite at home in India, in Israel, or anywhere else”(David, 2007:18).This dichotomous perception of the Jews is an important marker of their diasporic condition. The Bene Israel Jews have been very protective about their religious and cultural practice. Their very identity is inherently connected with their ethnicity and ethnic practice. It is this essentialism and life of segregation that they lived as a community that helped preserves their way of life.

The two writers also invoke the issue of loneliness and nostalgia among those who are left behind in India particularly the elders of the community. In the story ‘Dreams’ in *Dropped From Heaven*, Enoch feels betrayed and abandoned in India when his children migrate to

Israel. This sense of abandonment and loneliness is constantly revisited even in Esther David's stories. *Book Of Rachel* by Esther David is a beautiful culinary journey about a widow who has chosen to remain in India while all of her children have migrated to Israel. Rachel suffers from loneliness and boredom and she is forced to fight her own battles in India. The migration of the younger generation is a reality that is accepted as a hard fact but at the same time they realize that it is a blessing of god for Jews to live and die in the holy land of Israel. Like Bentzion states in *Dropped From Heaven* "The Children are bound to leave one by one. We cannot force them...If it is the will of God, we should accept it gracefully"(Judah,2007:179). In *Book Of Esther* Eli asks "Josua have you thought about her future? Her marriage?(David,2002:369).He was implying that good Jewish bridegroom would be found in the land of their ancestors ,in Israel. Before his death Esther David's father wanted her to immigrate to Israel. She writes "He wanted me to take my aliyah-emigrate to the land of milk and honey. He was certain that I would be happy there and the children would have a bright future, and eventually find Jewish spouses"(David,2002:371).Esther David's writings have always been at the cross-roads between different Indian cultures and communities, and one of her primary aim is to define a subject position with a unique Indian-Jewish ethos and identity. She states "If I wish 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" (David, 2002:377). Sophia Judah puts forth the community's experience from a slightly different perspective from that of an expatriate Indian. She has the double perspective of witnessing the life of the Indian Jews in Israel after their migration. Stories like 'A Girl From My Hometown' and 'Old Man Moses' delicately unfolds the intricacies that the community is forced to engage in as a result of migration to Israel.

As witnesses from the literary investigations of Esther David and Sophie Judah one can say with conviction that their achievements have enriched the landscape of letters in both the nations of Israel and India. The artists have been true in representing the life and experiences of the Bene Israel community in India at the same time their stories depict an emphatic understanding of human relationships and concerns.

Works Cited:

- David, Esther. *Book of Esther*. Penguin Books India, 2002. English.Print.
---.*Book of Rachel*.Penguin. Books India,2006.Print
---. *Shalom India Housing Society*. Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2007.Print.
Israel, Benjamin J.*The Bene Israel Of India*. Orient Longman,Bombay,1984,1989.Print.
Judah, Sophie. *Dropped From Heaven*. Schocken Books,New York,2007.Print.
Weil, Shalva, ed. *India's Jewish Heritage*. Mumbai, Marg Publications, 2006. Print.

Web access:

<http://embassies.gov.il/delhi/NewsAndEvents/Pages/rnational%20day%20of%20Holocaust%20observed%20in%20Delhi.aspx>