

The City in Her Walls of Esther David: Place, Identity and alteration of Indian Jewish Women

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Abstract:

Indian Jewish population happen to be a marginalized one in terms of number. Only a limited and handful number of people are a part of this community and thus require more attention. Their place, identity and customs required to be dealt with in order to spread awareness. The Indian Jewish women have a unique place in the society and have hospitable means which is praised world-wide. The problems of these minorities are harrowing and the riots prior to India Pakistan division has left the community in bruises. The people of this community mainly the women have lost their identity with the changing time and feel displaced. The text is an effort by Esther David to throw light on the marginalized condition of Indian Jewish women and to highlight the importance of food and hospitality in their lives. Food also becomes the metaphor of the staleness and ripeness according their own social position.

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Ahmedabad, a cosmopolitan city within its walls

Esther David is part of the English-language Indian literature. Esther David resides in the state of Gujarat in Ahmedabad where the linguistic plurality illustrates the diversity of its inhabitants. This diversity is not only represented by the languages spoken but by spatial representations such as Hindu temples, mosques, synagogues, churches, etc. The city of Ahmedabad is a cosmopolitan city where along with the Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Parsis (Zoroastrians) try to live in harmony. But Ahmedabad has also witnessed great violence which has been illustrated in the book *The City within its Walls*. Nevertheless, the theme of inter-community violence is mostly developed in the last two books of Esther David.

1. **As the title, The City within its walls,** indicates Ahmedabad is a city fortified, surrounded by walls with twelve doors, located on the banks of the river Sabarmati. This “city within its walls” represents India in all its diversity. But these walls also symbolize the separation between the different communities. These, for example, observe endogamy. Such practices can lead to drama like that of Subhadra, the friend of the narrator in the book. The walls are then the metaphor for forbidden, limits imposed by the different communities. But there are also gaps in these walls represented by the twelve doors where can then slip others possibilities that Esther David tells us.
2. **The riots of 2002, the protection of the walls:** Community riots between Muslims and Hindus in February 2002 evoked in the

City within its walls also emphasize that these walls can be obstacles. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 left traces that fuel communalism even nowadays in India between Muslims and Hindus especially but also sometimes between Hindus and Christians. Hindu fundamentalism fomented unrest as soon as India became independent.

3. **Recalling the life, History and Culture of Indian Jewish Community**

In this landscape of violence, Indian Jewish communities are facing a fundamental identity question. They do not recognize themselves in any of these communities, but Hindus associate them the most often to Muslims. Indeed, like the Muslims, the Bene Israel community i.e. a community of Jews in India, are monotheists and circumcised.

Synagogues are associated with mosques, so much so that it is sometimes the same word in the vernacular which designates them. The bombings in Mumbai (Bombay) and the recent one in Pune have revived tensions between communities. During this violence, the walls that surround the city collapse and become the walls of the lamentations. Esther David explains the terrifying metamorphosis of the city in these terms: curfew, riots, spilled blood. There are only torrents of tears that separate us. Walls of the old city now have a pile of collapsed bricks only. For me, it's the wailing wall from Ahmedabad, witnessing the tears of his people. Except nobody goes there on pilgrimage, no one is praying to invoke supreme help.

The narrator continues the description of this metamorphosis by saying that the curfew winds from one portal to another, like a strangling python slipping between heavy military boots, weapons, water cannons, tear gas. No traffic on the roads and this silence is heavy with threats.

Who is the victim, who is the aggressor? No one knows. Sabarmati becomes the central axis of a curious exodus. Families are looking for a placeto take shelter. The river separates us from the old city, as it used to be cut off from Granny. Questions are constantly jostling in our heads. What is good for us? Where to find some security? Conflict governs us.

It can be seen here that the history of Bene Israel community is a part of the history of India and the narration is like an implementation of abyss. Esther David creates thus a deep link between literature and history, the writing of colonial history and postcolonial through the history of a minority community. The narrator implicitly indicates through Danieldada, the grandfather of the heroine, the colonial presence when she wrote:

“‘Being like the British’ obsesses my grandfather Daniel. He used to work for a British-owned company and affected the mannerisms of his bosses. Yet in a strange way, Indian life and customs too fascinate him”(David 1997:27)

The riots in Ahmedabad clearly demonstrate that there is a balance precarious between these communities. Hindu and Muslim women are the most vulnerable, and the women described in the works of Esther David ask the fundamental question of how to keep the peace? This can be only done by providing a link, a certain unity of speech that can lead them beyond the conflict. So, the sister of the narrator's mother, she declares that she is neither a Jewish nor Muslim; she is simply a human being.

4. **Three generations of women**

In *The City within its walls*, three generations of women intermingle, the grandmother, mother and heroine. The narrator whose name is unknown tells the story of her childhood to adulthood where

she decides not to marry to live independently, probably representing the destiny of India.

Danieldada, the grandfather, Leah, the grandmother, and Gerard, the grand-uncle of heroine, belong to the previous generation. The parents of the heroine, her aunts Hannah, Jerusha, Queenie, her uncles Menachem and Emmanuel represent the new generation. Uncle Menachem is thus influenced by the seeking the truth (Satyagraha) of Gandhi. The heroine's generation includes his cousins Samuel and Malka. This generation of modernity has new choices to make, such as immigration to Israel which offers them; it seems to them, more of education, more freedom.

Naomi, the mother of the heroine, probably represents the transition, the point of articulation between the generations and the others. Indeed, Naomi is the only one working woman who is thus confronted every day by other people who do not belong to her community and who is independent, as the narrator explains:

"My mother Naomi does less housework than Aunt Hannah or Granny. They have never become reconciled to the fact that Naomi works outside the house and earns a salary, while the rest of them have to depend on the men to take care of their expenses. The women of the house think that Mother is far too independent, and they have always been a little jealous of her." (David 1997:7)

4. Bene Israel women and others: the hospitality and taste of India

Despite the major conflicts depicted in *The City within its walls*, is emerging yet a harmony created mainly by women, by

their hospitality. Hospitality in the sense that Derrida explains it:

"Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than "its other", to an other who is beyond any "its other". We have undergone such a test or ordeal a thousand times when, for example (to remain close to Levinas for a little longer), we saw that the border between the ethical and the political is no longer insured." (Derrida 2002b:364)

But both must deal with what they claim to avoid: the intractable even. There is no imposition of the name in *The City within its walls*, it is undoubtedly why the narrator does not have one, and she is rather the infinite echo, constant oscillation between several languages, several ways of life, polyphony where identity reveals.

Women also express their sense of hospitality especially in dishes that they offer to their host. The narrator states that women maintain: "In our house we do not marinate meat in curd. We do not cook the lamb in its mother's milk. In a way we obey the law, or at least try to." (David 1997:13)

But the narrator also a lot of taste for vegetarian Indian cuisine:

"I smell for hours on my fingers the hot Gujarati dal, basmati rice, sour potato curry and the sweet and sour mango pickle." (David 1997:21)

Bene Israel women in India offer hospitality not only to their family, but also to members of other communities, it is then that the delimitation of borders becomes much more subtle. This is how it explains Derrida:

“It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it, as though *the* law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses, on the men or women who give a welcome as well as the men or women who receive it. And vice versa, it is as though the laws (plural) of hospitality, in marking limits, powers, rights, and duties, consisted in challenging and transgressing *the* law of hospitality, the one that would command that the “new arrival” be offered an unconditional welcome.”(Derrida 2000:75-77)

Conversely, everything happens as if the laws of hospitality consisted in marking limits, powers, rights and duties, to challenge and transgress the law of hospitality, that which would command to offer to arrive to an unconditional welcome.

5. These women illustrate very well the maxim of Levinas:

“The essence of language is friendship and hospitality.”But Derrida wonders:

“We have, however, wondered whether absolute, hyperbolic, unconditional hospitality does not consist in suspending language, a particular language, and even the other. Must we not also subject to some kind of restraint the temptation to ask the other who he is, what is his name, where does he come from, etc.? Should we not refrain from asking him these

questions announcing so many conditions, and therefore limitations on hospitality confined to a right and a duty? [...] Unceasingly we will watch this dilemma between a on the other hand, the unconditional hospitality that passes the right, the duty or even the politics and, on the other hand, on the other hand, hospitality circumscribed by law and duty.” (Hockert 2015)

These Bene Israel women are part of a hospitality that is both unconditional but also circumscribed by law and duty. Indeed, this hospitality is unconditional when she addresses her immediate entourage but more circumscribed when it addresses their Hindu neighbours, Muslims, Christians or Parsis. However, this hospitality expresses their concern for the other, a breach, to use the metaphor of the book, in the walls of oneself. It remains the same that women of Indian Jewish communities, and particularly those of the Bene Israel that are of interest here, have played a fundamental role in change and openness to another.

6. Women, tradition and modernity

It is no wonder that George Town University in Washington has been attentive to the work of Esther David for his courses in “gender studies” because his work, and *The City within his walls* in particular, also explores emancipation of women. Feminism in India is a complex subject because the role of woman, contrary to what one might think, has always been important. So, if one refers to the Vedic sacrifice, the sacrificer can not sacrifice without being married and having his wife at his side. We also know the importance of goddess in the Hindu pantheon. The fact remains that women in

India have struggled much as elsewhere to gain independence.

This struggle must also be relocated in the abandonment of village life to an urban life where lifestyles are different and obviously in the history of India, before and after the British colonization and the modernity. The first painting that Esther David gives is rather a community very traditional marked by strict dress codes:

“Black hats, fez caps, turbans, long beards and tight black suits dominate the family photograph. The elders incline their heads and look at us. The girls are in long flowing dresses with large bows in their hair and chains of beads around their necks, and the women in nine-yard saris secured between the legs. They wear nose-rings and heavy anklets, and under the frilled sleeves of their blouses their armlets gleam. I don’t know where we, the younger children, will find a place in the family portrait. The family is like a huge banyan tree and we are the birds.”(David 1997:10)

The narrator rightly wonders how to find her place in this society which is so rigid. She knows that the women of her grandmother’s generation are still very little educated:

“We ask her to write her name and she giggles like a little girl. The written word eludes her. Like most Indian women of her generation she was not sent to school. Aunt Hannah is ashamed that her mother-in-law’s signature is a thumb impression and boasts of her own proficiency in English and French. Yet Granny astonishes us by fluently reciting the Hebrew prayers.

She insists we repeat them after her, and our lips move with hers.”(David 1997:23)

The similar thought has been presented by the writer in another book of her, *Book of Rachel* published in 2006. She says: “Influenced by Indian ritual, Jews also believe that coconut is auspicious for new beginnings.”(David 2006:11) The rituals of Hindu caste have been adopted by the Bene Israel people which depict the fact that there exists a hierarchy in the society and the community of people have worked their way up in the system.

The narrator then emphasizes the importance of education that will allow women to free themselves. In *The Book of Esther*, for example, Jerusha, the heroine, becomes a doctor and takes all the responsibilities upon the death of his father.

This release also begins with another dress code: Hannah and Naomi wear the sari modern version, the point draped over the left shoulder. “They wear gold and glass bangles on the right arm and delicate Rolex watches on their left wrist”(David 1997:23) Likewise Rachel, in *The Book of Rachel*:

“Rachel had gone from the saree of eight meters to that of six then four meters and that’s it that today she was wearing a set with trousers! She felt free, franked and happy.”(David 2006:202)

Esther David is considered an Indian novelist (this is how that she was selected by the Prix Femina in 1998 for *The City within her walls*). Nevertheless, she draws her inspiration from the lives of her compatriots of Bene Israel community and thus reveals an unknown image of India. She introduced the Indian Jewish communities into the literature. Even if before her, the great poet Nissim Ezekiel of the same community had opened the way with his poems.

The themes of Esther David’s books are those of her community, that of Bene Israel whose traditions and transformations she describes in the

modern world. But when Esther David describes these traditions, she remains very critical. This is what her heroine in *The City in her walls* symbolizes by refusing to marry. In *The Book of Esther*, her heroine marries a Hindu for change in tradition. Esther David plays here themes with a certain ambiguity.

6. Plural Identity and Unique Otherness

Esther David seeks to make those women visible who want to reconcile their lifestyle with others around them. The heroine of *The City within her walls* thus develops many plans to be with people of different traditions but paradoxically also with herself. In the following of his work Esther David names two of her books with women's names: *The Book of Rachel* and *The Book of Esther*, the whole plot of history is then genealogical and is part of change and continuity. So in Rachel's Book, it is Rachel's youngest daughter, Zephra, who brings change by coming back from Israel to relocate to Mumbai.

For the heroine of *The City within her walls*, as Montaigne would say in his essay "*each man bears the complete stamp of the human condition*," which borrows from Terence "*Homo sum, humani nihil has me alienumputo*", which means I am man, nothing that is human is foreign to me, which is also a Sanskrit verb "*VasudhaivaKutumbakam*", the whole earth is one family. (Montaigne 1595), (Terence: Wikipedia)

This heroine seeks to re-find the essence of humanity beyond differences in genres and cultures. Only this path allows the understanding of the other. There is no clash between genres, different cultures but a great affinity, a deep understanding of each other because precisely the understanding of life goes beyond these divisions. The intentions must be very clear and not truncated to get anything. Go to the other not as

entertainment in the sense that Pascal uses this word but go precisely as a return to oneself.

Conclusion

Esther David writes to give voice to the minority of Bene Israel Community in India, especially women, to emphasize the specific identity of this community that coexists with other communities and thus claims plural identities, Indian and Jewish, without renouncing their own history of which Esther David traces as memory, genealogy especially in *The Book Esther*. The work of Esther David, among others *The City in its walls*, confers a significant dimension to the question of identity, by clearly showing that Bene Israel's attachment to their community does not mean hostility against other communities that share their political and geographical space. Esther David makes it clear that the community Bene Israel has never been part of communalism but has always dialogue with its neighbours Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians.

Esther David translated, recreated in another language, that of literature, a speech and a narrative that reflect the tension and the encounter of cultures and which allows the thoughts of otherness, plurality as a chance and not as a threat. On the other hand, the threat would be the disappearance of the plurality which would mean the disappearance of the human being.

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