

CULTURAL TRAUMA AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY OF THE BENE ISRAEL JEWS IN SELECTED WORKS OF ESTHER DAVID

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Abstract

The Bene Israel Jews is one of the three major Jewish communities in India. Bene Israel literally means 'Children of Israel'. Narration of Jewish life in India has been vividly documented in the writings of the Jewish writer Esther David .She belongs to the Bene Israel community of India, and her work blend biography, history and culture and are equally rich in imaginary details. The experience of the Bene Israel Jews in India can be best understood in terms of their behaviour and attitudes towards their situation as immigrants. The complex relationship between the Bene Israel Jews with India and Israel constitute the crux of Esther's narration. The Paper aims at foregrounding the deep affiliation that the Bene Israel Jews had with Jews of Europe heightened by the sense of persecution that was exemplified in Europe by the phenomena of Holocaust. Though the Bene Israel Jews had lived in India for centuries without experiencing persecution or anti-Semitism, nevertheless they experienced different forms of trauma and segregation because of their 'difference' and as a minority community in the dominant Hindu-Muslim milieu of India. Taking recourse through trauma studies the paper will highlight the deep Cultural History and Cultural Identity that the Bene Israel share with the Jews of Europe. The objective of the paper is also to show the Holocaust as a central concern in the narratives of Esther David and in the Indian –Jewish literary tradition and how a sense of affiliation is created by this event with different forms of trauma that the community experienced in India and Israel.

The Bene Israel is one of the minority communities in India . Shalva Weil in her edited book *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual , Art and Life Cycle* (2002) writes ' ...factual material is liberally provided along with the theory that the Bene Israel were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast in the year 175BCE. Another theory was later propounded by advocate Shellim Samuel, namely that the Bene Israel arrived in India in the 8th century BCE...' (Weil,2002:9). The Bene Israel Jews and the other Jewish communities like the

Baghdadi Jews and Konkani Jews remained relatively confined to India and was unfamiliar to the outside world until the second World War and Independence in 1947. In 1948 the state of Israel came into being and many Indian Jews migrated to Israel. Esther David herself was witness to this Exodus as she states in the beginning of her novel *Shalom India Housing Society* (2007) ‘...I had seen Jews living together in the same building. This was before the mass Exodus of Indian Jews to Israel in the late fifties’. Anderson’s statement that a nation ‘...is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploration that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’ (Anderson, 2006:7) to some extent explain the mass exodus of the Bene Israel Jews to Israel.

In India the Jewish experience has been to a great extent positive. ‘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, 2002:9). But this sequestered existence of the Bene Israel Jews was shattered by the new developments that took place in Europe particularly in Germany. The traumatic experience of Holocaust and anti-Semitism in Europe traumatised the Indian Jews who had themselves never experienced anti-Semitism in India. Esther David states in *Book Of Esther* (2002) ‘The Bene Israel Jews of India had suddenly become aware that they were connected to a larger Jewish community in Europe. More so, since they had been reading and listening to world news on the BBC about the gas chambers, concentration camps and the extermination of the six million Jews by Hitler’ (David, 2002:198). The catastrophic effect on the moral, physical as well as psychological well being of the survivors of the Holocaust is beyond words. But for the Bene Israel Jews though the event itself was physically very remote they were not untouched by its traumatic effect. The trauma of the Holocaust was greatly augmented by the recognition that the persecution of a particular group of humanity because of their religion and ethnicity was shockingly their very own kind! Thus a sense of affiliation and identity is constructed through this recognition that takes the form of collective trauma. Chambers dictionary states that trauma etymologically derives from the Greek word ‘wound’. Among the many definitions of trauma found in the dictionary two are significant; ‘a physical injury of wound’ and ‘an emotional shock that may have long-term effects on behaviour or personality’. The definitions though inadequate for full comprehension of the word nevertheless stresses on two aspects, the physical and emotional suffering of an individual by an external force. Jeffrey C. Alexander states that ‘Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways’ (Alexander, 2004:I). Niel J. Smelser defines cultural trauma as ‘an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or

overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole'(Smelser,2004:38).

Many questions arise in this kind of shared collective trauma of the Bene Israel though they had been separated physically and geographically from the European Jews for centuries. What is the nature of this profound connection that made them unambiguously and undoubtedly a sharer of this trauma? Is it only because of a shared belief and cultural practice or is there a hidden relationship that only the people of 'a lost tribe' comprehend? Or is it simply an attempt at rediscovery and reconnection to an ancient past to forge new identities? These questions pose cultural identity and cultural affiliation as a profound connection that drives the Jews not only in India but all over the world with an underlying sense of unity. Jeffrey C. Alexander states

'For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crisis must become cultural crises...Trauma is not the result of the group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go'(Alexander,2004:10).

In "Cultural identity and Diaspora" Stuart Hall delves deep into two kinds of cultural identity. The first he states is '...our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history'(Hall,2013:111). Such a conception he believes is very important for the construction of 'one true self'. According to their story of origin in India the Bene Israel were shipwrecked at the Konkan coast where they lost all their *Torah Scrolls* and holy books and retained only the *Shema Israel* a prayer they remembered and chanted through memory and also retained the Jewish dietary laws. Weil writes that 'when discovered by a Jewish outsider, David Rahabi, possibly in the 18th century, the Bene Israel were observers of the Jewish Sabbath, dietary laws, the rite of circumcision, and many of the Jewish festivals.'(Weil,2002:13). These rituals that were unique to the practice of Jewry connected the Bene Israel Jews to the Jewry that existed in Europe and a sense of cultural connection and affiliation is tacitly established. Thus when discovered they used these similarities to be recognised as one of the lost tribes, the literal meaning of Bene Israel itself being 'children of Israel'. Stuart Hall stresses on the importance of imagination especially in forging this sense of cultural identity with a lost past or a lost history. He writes 'We should not for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of rediscovered, essential identity entails'(Hall,2013:111). Thus for forging a sense of kinship and building affiliations with different groups of Jews such images of connections are very important as Stuart Hall further writes 'Critically, such images offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas'(Hall,2013:112). But what he discusses at length is a second type of cultural

identity that he calls ‘cultural identity as a matter of becoming’. He states ‘This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather –since history has intervened –‘what we have become’ (Hall, 2013:112). He further writes ‘Cultural identity in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ (Hall, 2013:112). What Hall is implying in his powerful assertion is that apart from a connection to an already existing cultural history, identity is a continuous flux of being influenced by many different agencies particularly by the phenomena of transnationalism, globalisation and migration. For the recognition of traumas also depended on how certain events impact common life. It is from this second position that the Bene Israel Jews can properly comprehend the traumatic experience of the Holocaust and different traumas caused by anti-Semitism. The ways in which Jews all over the world were stereotyped as different-religiously, ethnically and racially and subjected to all kinds of persecutions from the time of biblical exodus, to modern day ghettoization and stereotypical representations in canonical texts like *The Jew of Malta*, *Merchant of Venice* and *Oliver Twist*. Thus with the appropriation of this insight Bene Israel looked at their own position in India with a sense of huge relief and happiness. As a minority community they lived in complete freedom to practise their own religion as well as live without any fear of persecution. In *Book Of Esther* (2002) Esther David writes ‘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). But Esther is also concerned with the social vulnerability of the community especially during social unrest and riots. During such events the Bene Israel question their position within the milieu of dominant Hinduism. Jeffrey C. Alexander states ‘Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity’ (Alexander, 2004:10). As stated the Bene Israel were not exposed to the kind of traumas that the European Jews had to suffer, their traumas were of a different nature because of the contextual and experiential differences. The Holocaust was paradigmatic in a sense that it exposed in terms of newer understandings of human beings ability to perpetrate violence and the endurance of the other half. The ‘extermination of six million Jews by Hitler’ (David, 2002:198) changed the Bene Israel’s own perception of their position in India. For the first time they become aware of the existence of anti-Semitism though they had never experienced it in India. Not only in India but even in other parts of the world the European phenomena of Holocaust continued to be a central concern in narratives of Jews. Emily Miller Budick in “The Holocaust in the Jewish American literary imagination” writes ‘For the way that the Holocaust gets taken up in Jewish American writing is part and parcel of the project of creating a Jewish *American* tradition distinct from any other national Jewish (or for

that matter ,ethnic American)tradition’(Budick,2003:217).Like the Indian –Jews the Jews in America ‘occupy an oblique and distant relation to the events of the catastrophe’(Budick,2003:217).She further writes that since extermination of the Jews was Hitler’s objective in committing the act of genocide remembering the Holocaust entails the preservation of Jewish life, Culture and Identity. She puts forth a very strong assertion when she questions ‘...how can Jewish writers construct identity without recourse to the Holocaust?’(Budick,2003:218).Though she addresses the issue of reluctance on the part of many American-Jewish writers to confront their relationship to the Holocaust because ‘they were not eyewitness in any sense of the term’(Budick,2003:217) the reluctance does not deny the centrality of the Holocaust in the literary imagination of the tradition of Jewish writing in America.In India too the Holocaust has been a distant event yet Esther David like many Bene Israel connect with the event in a deep and personal level. They do not hesitate to engage with the Holocaust and confront their own experiences of trauma in the society where they live. In *Shalom India Housing Society* (2007) Esther David describes the celebration of *Yom Shoah* or Holocaust Day. These are ways in which a society and its members find ways to come to terms with traumas and express emotions of loss and mourning. They perform these acts of catharsis through commemoration, memorial constructions, public gathering and mass prayers etc. Ruby one of the character organises the Holocaust day and calls it a festival of celebrations. Hadasah the character portrayed on the writer herself observes that ‘...others including Ruby were dressed as though they had come for a party’(David,2007:229).Seeing them laughing ,eating and chattering around the buffet she gets enraged not only at the trivialisation of the memory of Holocaust but feels incensed at the historical distortions of the significance of the day by certain members of the community who lacked genuine knowledge of the significance of the traumatic event. She declares ‘Holocaust Day was not a festival; it was the Memorial Day for six million Jews who had died in Nazi Germany’(David,2007:229).Later when confronted by angry Ruby, Hadasah shows her the picture of her husband who was a survivor of the concentration camp as she says ‘...my late husband was a survivor of the concentration camp and I know what it means’(David,2007:229). As a minority community and as Jews they also had traumatic experiences that took different forms ,sometimes psychological, physical and even political especially during times of riots and social unrest. Jeffrey C. Alexander states ‘...trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society’(Alexander,2004:2). Such traumas for instance heightened the sense of the minority position of the Bene Israel Jews in India .Esther David writes that after the news of Holocaust reached them the Bene Israel ‘were horrified and afraid and wanted to underplay their Jewishness or leave for Yerushlayem –Jerusalem-the promised land of their prophets’(David,2002:198).Thus it is clear that the trauma of the Holocaust made the Bene Israel fearful of their very existence in India. Another event that was traumatic was during 1947.Esther writes ‘The Bene Israel did not know where they stood and what should be their reaction when Hindu and Muslim riots erupted with the partition of India’(David,2002:199).Caught in between the warring zone

provoked the mass exodus of the Jews to Israel and other European and Western countries. Esther writes 'When they fled their homeland and landed in India after the shipwreck, the Bene Israel had followed the dictum: mix with the people where you have found a new home. Keep your religion a secret. Let nobody know who you are' (David, 2002:199). Shalom India Housing Society is the name of a housing society that the community is compelled to build after the Godhra Violence of 2002. Esther David who was born in Ahmedabad narrates the traumatic experience that was unleashed because of the riots. She writes

'For years, they had lived in these bustling streets with Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christian families. Then the riots had struck like the plague. The screams, the weapons, the blood and the dead bodies had revived memories of violent persecution which they thought, they had buried with their ancestors in the wells of Alibaug' (David, 2007:8).

The trauma of the Godhra riots that had become a part of the mainstream political and journalistic discourse is conspicuously silent on how the riots had affected and traumatised the miniscule community of the Jews in India. For the first time the Jews became vulnerable because of their 'difference'. They were caught between the two bi-polar entities of Nation and Identity. In a Nation-State the existence of the 'difference' or the 'other' is precarious for there are efforts by the dominant culture to homogenise it with the mainstream. The community also realised that their similarity with other minority communities also made them potential victims in the bloody riots. Esther writes 'During the riots, some of them saw an angry mob armed with spears and swords stripping a young boy to see if he was circumscribed. He was burnt alive. The Jews had been terrified, as they were also circumscribed' (David, 2007:9). This realization enforced within the community the need to establish a separate identity from other minority communities. The recognition that their shared practice of circumcision and other similarities threatened them into marginalisation and victimisation compelled them to 'move from the predominantly muslim moholla to safer part of the city' (David, 2007:9). When Ezra the proprietor of the building received tenants he stressed 'Just Jews...so that people know we have separate identity from other minority communities' (David, 2007:9). 'Individual security is anchored in structures of emotional and cultural expectations that provide a sense of security and capability. These expectations and capabilities, in turn, are rooted in the sturdiness of the collectivities of which individuals are a part' (Alexander, 2003:10). Shalom India Housing society assumes a significant symbolism in the lives of all the inmates. It is their safe haven, where they lived among people of their kind, everyone knew each other and were connected through prayers, rituals and ceremonies. Yet different forms of separations were experienced as a result of this, especially when members find it difficult to accept the life of self-segregation that the society had compelled them to live in. Esther writes 'The ghettoization of the city had begun' (David, 2007:9).

Esther David also makes repeated mention of immigration of the community particularly to Israel in her novels. Israel the only Jewish Nation represented the 'Promised land' of their ancestors, a sanctum where many Bene Israel migrated with a sense of jubilant homecoming. But as Esther David narrates the experience of the Bene Israel post-immigration is full of

contradictions. They became ‘double-immigrants’- an Indian-Jew in Israel. They were not officially accepted as Jews ,unless they converted to orthodox Judaism and learnt to read, write and speak Hebrew .The concentration of the Bene Israel Jews in certain parts of the state, also meant a kind of segregation of the immigrants into restricted pockets in the country. ‘The Bene Israel tend to reside in what are called “developmental towns” in Israel, with large concentrations in such cities as Dimona and Beersheba in south,Lod and Ramle in the central part,and Kiryat Ata and Kiryat Shmona in the north’(Weil,2002:16). Also among the different Jewish –Indian groups that immigrated to Israel the Bene Israel had to face racism because of their skin colour.The purity of the Bene Israel was put under question . Schifra Strizower in her article “The ‘Bene Israel’ in Israel” mentions a report in the *New York Times* that appeared on 22nd November 1951 .The report ran the following statements ‘In Bombay we were told that there is no colour bar in Israel, but in a shop in Beer Sheba we were told that we should eat only black bread as we were black and the white bread was only for white Jews’(Strizower,123).These traumatic events lead to the formation of ‘Let us return to India’ movement which became ‘...the symbol of their transitory state in Israel...’(Strizower,136). Esther writes in *Book Of Esther* ‘I could no longer see myself living in Israel. If I wished 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).

Esther David’s narrative delves into the collective memory of her community and is as much a product of lived experience as it is a creation of imaginary relationships forged on a shared history and culture. Stuart Hall in fact stresses on the role of imagination and myth as very essential in forging new ties with the cultural past that the multivalent position of the diaspora allows. Esther David’s literary work narrates the collective trauma that the Bene Israel shared with the European Jews and how this collective psychological trauma is translated into mental trauma that manifests itself in the way the community reacts and behaves during times of social unrest and violence. Esther states in her foreword to the novel *The Walled City* (2009) ‘...I mingle fact and fiction as I create my own imaginary world’(David,2009:xi).The Identity that is constructed of the Bene Israel as result of these ‘interstitial experiences’ in turn makes them signifiers of one of the many Jewish Identities that makes up the Jewish diaspora.

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