

**THREADS OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY: SARI, MATERIALITY, AND
MINORITY CONSCIOUSNESS IN SOPHIA JUDAH'S "DROPPED FROM
HEAVEN"**

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Jews constitute a miniscule community who grapple with the fear of cultural erasure and the challenges of social accommodation within the dominant social order. They are constantly engaged in deep, strenuous struggles to assert their identity by preserving the distinctive cultural heritage of their rapidly declining community. Through the framework of material culture studies, this paper attempts to analyse how a seemingly simple garment, the sari, functions as a significant material object that articulates the communal anxieties, minority consciousness and the quest for rootedness of the Indian Jewish community as portrayed in Sophia Judah's short story "Dropped from Heaven" (2007). The story is an exploration of the marital negotiations and cultural anxieties of a Bene Israel Jewish family. Adopting the lens of material culture, the paper foregrounds the negotiations of socio-cultural conflicts confronted by the community by scrutinizing how the drastic demographic decline affects matrimonial alliances and the struggles of the community to preserve their culture and identity while contending with marginalisation.

Key words: Indian Jews, Marginalization, Material Culture, Sari, Identity

Minority communities are often engaged in perpetual struggles to assert their identity and existence within cultural spaces dominated by the majority. They are the victims of conflicting fears, contending with anxieties of assimilation, belonging and adaptation in a social order that is largely shaped by the norms of the mainstream. The fear of social ostracization often prompts them to internalize and imitate the values of the dominant social

order. At the same time, they consistently strive to protect their cultural identity and ethnicity. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry as "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which appropriates the Other as it visualizes power" (86) validates the struggles of minorities to seek social acceptance through cultural assimilation. Their life is marked by the persistent and conflicting negotiation between the desire for inclusion in the mainstream society and the necessity to preserve their unique cultural identity. "Mainstream culture is held within a large amount of people residing in a society, the culture that seems the most common to those who live in a specific area" (Zhao 75). In this cultural context, the domestic objects and spaces of minority communities play a pivotal role in illuminating their socio-cultural negotiations. Everyday material objects such as food, clothes, books, utensils and furniture act as repositories of history, culture, emotions and memory. The cultural artefacts associated with or used by minority communities such as the Indian Jews, who constantly endure the fear of extinction and social isolation, are symbolic embodiments of their cultural identity and social visibility. This paper attempts to analyse how everyday cultural objects and domestic spaces unravel the vulnerable lived experiences of the minority Jewish community in India as portrayed in the short story "Dropped from Heaven" (2007), taken from the debut collection of the same title by the Bene Israel Jewish writer Sophie Judah. Judah explores the fears and cultural marginalization endured by the diminishing Jewish community in India and illustrates the gravity of the situation through quotidian objects and household spaces.

The history of Jewish communities in the Indian subcontinent has had a long lineage spanning thousands of years. Multiple subgroups exist within the broader Jewish community, of which the most predominant are the Bene Israel Jews, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews. The group portrayed in the story under analysis is the Bene Israel Jews which is one of the oldest religious communities in contemporary India. Similar to other Jewish communities in India, the Bene Israel Jews also confront an alarmingly significant population decline, driven by migration and other socio-political aspects.

"Microscopic" has been the term most frequently used to describe the Jewish communities in India, for at their peak in the early 1950s, the total Jewish population never exceeded thirty thousand in a country which at the time had over three hundred million people. Now, there are barely five thousand Jews left out. (Roland 118)

Their centuries-long coexistence with the broader Indian social and cultural milieu reflects prolonged struggles for cultural integration and social inclusion. "In the overall economic structure of India today, the Indian Jewish communities as an ethnic minority are almost totally marginal" (Abraham 182). The current socio-cultural status of Indian Jews is largely articulated by negotiations centred on cultural preservation, social visibility and experiences of marginalization. "In India, Jews could be described as both an 'interior other', the 'other'

which was part and parcel of Indian society, and an 'exterior' or 'remote other', which belonged to a different environment" (Egorova 1). In India, this demographically small ethnic community is often perceived either as a foreign entity or rendered socially invisible.

"Dropped from Heaven", set in the fictional town of Jwalanagar, explores the existential anxieties and socio-cultural insecurities of the diminishing Jewish community in India and underscores the community's predicament through their material culture. "The term 'material culture' emphasises how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity" (I. Woodward 3). Any physical object that an individual or a community uses, stores, creates, or possesses, and which acts as a marker of identity, can be considered part of their material culture. It comprises everyday objects such as food items, clothing, jewellery, furniture, photographs and books. In addition to their practical functional uses, these objects are valued for their role as the embodiments of the history, memory, culture, identity and religious beliefs of individuals and communities. "By studying culture as something created and lived through objects, we can better understand both social structures and larger systemic dimensions such as inequality and social difference, and also human action, emotion and meaning" (I. Woodward 4). The study of objects enables a deeper understanding of social inequalities, power dynamics, gender equations and emotional experiences. Objects are the material manifestations of the underlying hegemonic structures within society.

The formation of Israel in 1948 and the consequent waves of Zionism, coupled with migration to other countries, have drastically reduced the Jewish population in India. (Dalal 173) This scenario has intensified the anxiety of Jewish parents with unmarried children, because finding a suitable match for their son or daughter from within the community becomes extremely difficult. The issue is not merely personal or familial; it has profound social and cultural implications, particularly with regard to the cultural continuity of the Indian Jewish community. "Dropped from Heaven" is set against this socio-cultural backdrop. When two unmarried Jewish men from Bombay come to Jwalanagar in search of prospective brides, the Jewish families in the town organize a community picnic to aid them. The picnic spot turns out to be a significant space of marital negotiation for the Jewish parents of the town. Having explicitly conscious of the demographic decline of the Jewish community in India, the parents perceive the picnic as an eagerly anticipated opportunity to find a suitable marital alliance for their daughters. The apprehensions and anxieties of the Jewish parents foreground their underlying fear of communal decline and reflects the community's efforts to preserve their cultural heritage.

In this story, Judah provides significant insights into the cultural marginalization of the Indian Jewish community through the cultural depiction of their objects, especially clothing.

“As material culture, clothing is not seen as simply reflecting given aspects of the self but, through its particular material propensities, is co-constitutive of facets such as identity, sexuality and social role” (S. Woodward 21). Clothing is not only an index of personal identity but also a representation of socio-economic position, cultural belonging and class mobility. The style, fabric and quality of clothing evince the negotiations and challenges involved in the process of cultural assimilation of Indian Jews to the dominant social order. “The Bene-Israel seems to have been part and parcel of the local Indian environment and were influenced by many processes characteristic of Indian society” (Egorova 101) The extent to which the community is ingrained in the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society is clearly discernible in their clothing. The adoption of the sari as the everyday attire of many Indian Jewish women represents more than an adaptation to the climatic and social landscape of India; rather it can be contextualized as an attempt to gain social acceptance and assert cultural belonging.

Sari, an everyday object, is “a garment consisting of a length of cloth, draped around the body, traditionally worn by women from South Asia. The sari is a rectangular length of fabric 4.5–6 or 9 yards” (Ranavaade 17). In this narrative, sari transcends its practical purpose of being a mere clothing; it becomes a powerful material culture infused with profound significations.

Mrs. Solomon stood over a pile of saris that lay spread out on her bed. She had to choose three for her three daughters to wear for the picnic that everyone from the Jewish community of Jwalanagar would be going to on that day. The choice of clothes was usually left to the girls, but this time there was more at stake. (Judah 153)

Here Judah is not only describing a simple domestic act of selecting the best clothes by a mother for her daughters, but also portraying a culturally significant moment that exhibits the ethnic anxieties and dilemmas of a declining minority community. She throws light on the cultural resonance of the picnic when she describes that usually Mrs. Solomon lets the girls choose their attire, “but this time there was more at stake” (Judah 153). The significance accorded to sari, in the story, reflects the politics encoded in the institution of marriage within the Bene Israel Jewish community wherein marriage is regarded as a pivotal medium for cultural preservation rather than a personal affair. The community’s underlying anxieties regarding marriage, cultural continuity, and the protection of the Bene Israel Jewish identity are reflected in the painstaking effort with which saris are selected by Mrs. Solomon to impress the Jewish bachelors anticipated at the picnic.

The emotional distress of Mrs. Solomon in choosing befitting saris and befitting grooms for her daughters underscores the scarcity of eligible Jewish grooms and brides in the Indian society: “there were a dozen girls of marriageable age in Jwalanagar, and Mrs. Solomon hoped that at least one of her daughters would be chosen” (Judah 153). On one hand,

her anxiety is the result of the uncertainty in finding an eligible Jewish groom for her daughters due to the drastic demographic decline of the community. On the other hand, she is equally worried about protecting and carrying forward the unique identity of her community through the institution of marriage. This apprehensions regarding the future of their children regarding marriage is endured by the entire Jewish community in India. Judah exposes the fragile demographic condition of the community and their resistance to inter-caste or inter-faith marriage.

The normative order among Jews prescribes marriage and building of a family governed by the Judaic principles and as such places a high value on marrying Jews as opposed to Gentiles. The adherence to the normative structure by marrying members of one's own community thus reinforced community solidarity and was a boundary marker (Abraham 189)

Inter-faith or inter-community marriage is considered to be a potential menace to the cultural continuity of the Bene Israel Jews because such marriages can undermine the established *Halakhic* laws of Judaism and can ultimately result in the complete erasure of this ethnoreligious community. Given the situation of the ongoing population decline of the community, the disapproval for exogamous marriage transcends the apprehensions about community reputation and family honour; rather, it is more significantly connected to the fear of community extinction. Marriage is thus instrumental in sustaining the cultural identity and in preserving the unique ethnicity of the community. For Indian Jews, marriage is no longer regarded as a private affair but it is considered to be a significant collective mechanism for safeguarding the community from cultural erasure. Hence Mrs. Solomon's struggles of choosing the best sari and in turn a suitable partner for her daughters is not merely personal; rather, it is an indication of the cultural insecurities and subtle fears of the rapidly dwindling minority Jewish community.

Mrs. Solomon chooses sari, rather than any other outfit, for the picnic, an event which is significant in determining the future of her daughters as well as the cultural continuity of her community. "A garment which is intrinsically linked to Indian womanhood is the sari" (Ranavaade 108). Sari is a visible indicator of Indian or South Asian identity. It is not a simple, causal outfit, but a significant instance of material culture imbued with profound meanings. Along with asserting feminine identity, the sari acts as a potential marker of cultural conservatism, respectability, economic status, social acceptance and communal belonging. Moreover, it functions as an important cultural site to negotiate debates over tradition and modernity within a society. "The sari has been worn by Indian women for more than 5,000 years and is such an integral part that very often one does not feel the need to question the whys and wherefores of this cultural practice" (Ranavaade 6). For centuries, the sari has served as a significant cultural signifier through which Indian womanhood is

conceived, represented, and enacted. Sari, due to its long-standing presence in the everyday socio-cultural life of Indians, is a fundamentally inevitable component of Indian cultural heritage.

“Saris were also integral to orientalist perceptions of the customs and manners of people under imperial rule and served to highlight dress as a marker of regional and occupational identities highlighting differences based on religion and caste” (Kawlra 214). Sari has proved instrumental in shaping and signifying the national identity of India. In colonial and post-colonial India, sari emerged as a valuable repository for the orientalist scholars to study and document the shared characteristics and distinguishing features among the varied geographical and cultural landscape of the pluralistic Indian society. Indian women, coming from different geographical, religious and cultural groups, often drape sari in different styles. The distinct draping convention and the region-specific motifs in saris represent the cultural heterogeneity of India. Despite these disparities, sari is universally perceived as the quintessential sartorial wear of Indian women.

Mrs. Solomon’s insistence on sari reflects the hybrid identity of the Indian Jewish community. Mrs. Solomon chooses sari which is a quintessentially Indian garment, as the best attire to impress prospective grooms for her daughters. Having lived in India for centuries, the Jewish community has assimilated into the dominant cultural environment of the country. In the process of securing social accommodation, they have adopted various aspects of Indian lifestyle including the clothing practices of mainstream Indians. So, Mrs. Solomon’s choice of sari for the most culturally relevant occasion aimed at securing the future of her daughters as well as her community, reflects their cultural assimilation, struggles for social accommodation and the deep-rooted fear of communal erasure. Sari, hence become a significant indicator of cultural hybridity, reflecting the contradictory efforts of the markedly declining Indian Jewish community to preserve their cultural identity, while simultaneously helping them adapt to the mainstream Indian cultural landscape.

Apart from unveiling the social anxieties and cultural apprehensions of the Jewish community, the narrative has profound gendered and patriarchal implications. Judah, through the conflicts surrounding the choice of saris, subtly exposes the underlying gender dynamics prevailing in Indian households, especially among Jewish families. The careful selection of saris by Mrs. Solomon is apparently an innocent act by an anxious mother desperately seeking eligible Jewish bachelors for her three unmarried daughters. But it also illustrates how clothing reinforces gender roles and social expectations. While heated arguments were unfolding among the mother and the daughters regarding the sari selection and the expected match-making, Mr. Solomon remains detached, immersing himself in a book. This instance clearly illustrates how the burden of communal preservation is solely entrusted upon the women, while men are comparatively free from such social expectations. The anxiety

surrounding the marriage of the daughters is more pronounced among mothers than fathers. The mothers “made sure their daughters were always in sight so that the boys and their parents could watch them and make their choice” (Judah 159). Through the materiality of sari, Judah exposes the objectification of female body. Girls are expected to dress up to win the attention of prospective suitors. To impress the two Jewish bachelors, the anxious mothers invested considerable time and effort in enhancing the attractiveness of their daughters, thereby heightening their desirability and marriageability. However, no such pressures, preparations or expectations are imposed on the men. Further, insistence that her “daughters must look fresh and attractive at all times” (Judah 153) embodies the objectification of female body. This illustrates how matrimonial negotiations frame women as objects of aesthetic and visual appraisal rather than as autonomous individuals. Moreover, the agency of choice in marriage is completely vested on men. Girls are denied the right to choose their own outfits, and even more significantly, they occupy a passive role in matters concerning marital choice. This narrative, through the act of sari selection, evidently demonstrates the unequal gender expectations and deep-rooted patriarchal structures embedded within the Indian Jewish community.

“Mrs. Solomon gave much thought to what would be regarded as an appropriate sari” (Judah 153). Mrs. Solomon’s careful negotiations involved in the choice of fabric of the sari has even more resonating significations than the connotations embedded in the sari itself. Mrs. Solomon thoughtfully endeavours to maintain a proper balance between social respectability and financial prudence. She rejects silk clothes on the ground that they might convey the wrong impression of extravagance and hence undermine proper respectability. Similarly, she rejects the cotton saris too “not because they were made of the cheapest material but because they would get crushed and crumpled. Her daughters must look fresh and attractive at all times” (Judah 153). She fears that wearing cotton saris, that might get crumpled easily, may undermine her daughters’ aesthetic appeal and consequently diminishing their prospects of being chosen as brides. It reflects a heightened awareness of the minority status and cultural insecurity of the Indian Jewish community. They strive to mitigate their unstable existence by strategically pronouncing a well-groomed and aesthetically refined appearance through clothing. The meticulous deliberations regarding the choice of the fabric foregrounds the deeply embedded anxieties and precarities of the Bene Israel Jews who are on the verge of extinction.

Further, the saris piling upon bed, in “Dropped from Heaven”, is seemingly an intimate domestic scene; but it has powerful cultural implications. The piled-up saris underscore the community’s collective anxieties and expectations that invade the household environment. It can be indicative of the emotional weight laid upon the remaining few community members to ardently preserve their culture and ethnicity. The domestic setting of

a bed covered with saris, thus, become a significant site of cultural negotiation. Thus, Judah, with the depiction of sari, an everyday domestic object, unravels the socially vulnerable position of Bene Israel Jews who are constantly confronting the questions of cultural survival, ethnic identity, and community continuity in the Hindu dominated cultural landscape of India.

“Dropped from Heaven” provides an insightful deliberation on how a seemingly innocent domestic object like the sari can signify the socio-cultural issues such as the cultural erasure, gender dynamics, communal anxieties and hybrid identity of the Bene Israel Jews. Through the domestic act of Mrs. Solomon’s selection of saris, Judah exposes the social insecurities and the struggles of the community to preserve their Jewish identity in the broader Indian social milieu. The substantial significance accorded by Mrs. Solomon to the seemingly trivial act of choosing saris visibly foregrounds the difficulty in finding a suitable marriage alliance within the drastically declining community and in turn reflects the deep apprehensions and fears of cultural erosion. The narrative underscores how the personal dilemmas and collective history of the minority Jewish community are intertwined. The sari, depicted as a powerful cultural object embedded with intense underlying significations, becomes a powerful site for socio-cultural negotiations on how a microscopic ethno-religious community confronts the conflicts of inclusion and exclusion in the pluralistic Indian society.

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