

Reconciling Cultural Contours in Esther David's *The Walled City*

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Abstract

The meaningful interaction of diverse cultures in the social edifice opens up creative and productive possibilities, and in this regard, the story of Jewish integration into the variegated tapestry of Indian society is an exceptional one, quite different from the accord of Jews in any other part of the world. Esther David's novel *The Walled City*, by eloquently tracing out the growth of the narrator, a Bene Israeli girl, lays out the vignettes of cross-cultural perforations from the vantage point of Indian Jews. The reconciliation of conflicting identity positions emanating from the narrator's minority status and the subsequent exploration of selfhood form the main thrust of the novel. Questions of cultural appropriation and the infiltration of mainstream culture jeopardise the worldview of the adolescent narrator. The paper examines how such cultural incongruities are negotiated by the members of minority communities and how these disparities influence their identity formation.

Keywords: Culture; Ethnicity; Hybridity; Identity; Minority.

In Postcolonial discourse, culture is not deemed as a homogenous, fixed entity; it is ever-dynamic and consists of opposing elements. In a multicultural society, the contentious and often conflictual relationship between the cultures of the majority and minority becomes discernible at times. Since the borders between cultures are permeable, perforations often take place. The minority has a tendency to absorb the cultural signs and practices of the majority and vice versa. The colliding cultures meet at a liminal point, which spawns new, hybrid identities. The eminent postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha describes this interstitial point as the "Third space of enunciation" (37). According to Bhabha, every cultural statement and system is built inside this ambiguous space of enunciation (37). "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes

the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (37).

Cultural collision is an innate attribute of the "diaspora space," because it is a site "where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed" (Brah 2005). It is difficult for a diasporic population to strike a balance between the contesting cultural spaces of homeland and hostland. Vacillating between the twin forces of cultural absorption and exudence, they have to negotiate the differing cultural identities accrued from their existence as a minority community. In this regard, the Jewish diaspora, which forms an extremely microscopic minority in India, offers a remarkable account of cultural translation. Being a tiny, endogamic ethnic community that attaches too much importance to lineage and genealogy, they grapple with the desire to strictly maintain cultural boundaries. However, maintaining their identity and culture without external interferences is fraught with problems as often the majority culture percolates into this tightly-knit community, producing hybrid identities.

The cultural expressions that emerge from the community of Indian Jews provide an in-depth insight into the cultural dilemmas and perplexities they confront on a regular basis. The literary oeuvre of Esther David, a prolific Indian Jewish writer, opens a window into the lived experience of Indian Jews set amid the multicultural ethos of the subcontinent. A representative of the Bene Israel community, David won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2010 for her novel, *Book of Rachel*. Her debut novel, *The Walled City*, published in 1997, offers an exhaustive overview of the Bene Israel community of Ahmedabad by capturing the story of three generations of women in an extended Jewish family. Like a bildungsroman novel, it traverses through the different stages of growth and maturity in the life of the narrator. It relates the journey of her self-discovery, her struggles to come to terms with her Jewishness in an alien environment, and finally, her reconciliation on attaining maturity. The paper seeks to examine the influence of cross-cultural interactions and exchanges in the life of minority, diasporic communities as evinced from David's *The Walled City*.

Understanding the pre-eminence of one's ethnic identity progresses through various stages which commences by grasping a basic awareness regarding his/her identity to achieving a state of positive self-esteem and affirmation. Such an inclination to explore and identify with the social groups to which one belongs is clearly perceivable in the adolescent stage. "In their teenage years, people experience corporeal, mental, and social vi-

cissitudes more overtly than earlier and later in life and are therefore more at the risk of identity confusion" (Coulmas 93). In *The Walled City*, the unnamed narrator, who is a thirteen-year-old girl when the novel opens, undergoes an identity conflict as she struggles to comprehend the meaning of her Jewish identity in the backdrop of the mainstream cultural milieu. More than her community's cocooned, closeted existence, she is drawn to the exuberant mainstream culture. Through the course of the novel, she expatiates on the curious, intangible terrains where differing cultures converge. Her efforts to negotiate the crisis of identity stemming from her Jewish upbringing are further complicated by the eruption of communal riots in the city. The novel, which begins by delineating the splendid, prismatic walled city of Ahmedabad of the 1940s, offers heartwarming glimpses of cultural fusion as well as heartrending portraits of communal violence. Arguably, the author seems to dismiss essentialist cultural identities and favours hybrid, multivalent, liminal subject positions.

Most diasporic communities find ways to preserve the ties with the anterior homeland that renders them their distinctive cultural identity and take measures to avoid full-scale assimilation to the pressures of the mainstream cultural forces. Here, the Jews, for the most part, are tenacious in maintaining the purity of their monotheistic religion and rigidly following their traditions. However, the child narrator is confused by the artificial borderlines that separate people. She remains oblivious to the invisible, so-called intransgressible, inexplicable borderlines that exist between religions and cultures. As a result, she often earns the displeasure of her irascible mother, Naomi, who is intolerant of crossing the rims of religion. Naomi considers her daughter's acts of going to the Hindu temple with her friend Subhadra and wearing of bindi as outrageous. Nevertheless, the narrator continues to engage in similar behaviour, much to her mother's chagrin.

As already mentioned, diasporic subjects experience an ambiguity while making choices because of the thrust of acculturative powers. In this context, acculturation means "the exchange of cultural features that results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact" (Kottak 206). An outline of John W. Berry's theory as explicated in *Cross-Cultural Psychology: Research and Applications* is useful here to understand how people in diasporic subject positions tackle acculturation. Berry identifies four strategies with regard to an individual's acculturation to an alien culture: assimilation, separation, marginalisation, and integration. He considers integration as the best acculturative strategy. Here, individuals maintain a balance between their native cul-

ture and the host culture; they adopt new cultural traits and, at the same time, retain their original cultural codes. Assimilation happens when they reject their cultural identity and embrace the host culture. "When individuals place a value on holding to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, then the separation alternative is defined" (Berry 354). Marginalisation occurs when people reject both their own culture and the host culture.

In *The Walled City*, as the narrator embarks the adolescent phase, she is taken over by the 'assimilative' tendency, in Berry's terms. There is no denying that her carefree childhood days spent in the sprawling Dilhi Darwaza house with her paternal grandmother, whom she affectionately calls Granny, are jovial and effervescent. In fact, the scintillating beams of the Shabbat candles lighted by Granny, the Hebrew incantations, and the touching of the *mezuzah* (i.e. a parchment containing Hebrew verses affixed to the doorpost of a Jewish house) all of these marks her childhood days. Nonetheless, she exhibits a craving for the alien cult, a longing to be a part of the majority culture. For instance, she likes the food prepared at Subhadra's house more than that at her own house. She wonders why her community is different, why she cannot commingle freely with others and adopt their culture. She muses over the invisible "wall of dead animals and birds" that separates Subhadra and her (David 21). On account of her non-vegetarian dietary habits, she feels guilty for the ways of her ancestors. She remarks, "I wish I had born to Subhadra's mother, I would have then been accepted" (21). Here, the narrator's assimilative stance is evident as she is prone to espouse the ways of the host culture.

The narrator's identity crisis ensues from her attempts to bridge the disparate cultures. As the author observes in the foreword, she attempts to "preserve her Jewish roots, without understanding them" (ix). Though Granny edifies her on the Jewish customs and way of life, their history and cultural distinctiveness, the cross-cultural dilemmas she confronts make her childhood discomfited. Her identity behaviour makes it evident that she does not like the unique, peculiar ways which set them apart from their neighbours. She fails to make sense of the elaborate Hebrew ritualistic prayers recited at the synagogue and feels out of place. In lieu of the Hebrew spells which she recites in a perfunctory manner, she prefers Subhadra's prayers rendered in the vernacular language. She is embarrassed whenever Subhadra asks her doubts regarding Judaism. Again, in her adolescent immaturity, she is confounded by the dogmatic taboos set up by the orthodox practitioners of religion even regarding the dietary patterns. She unveils her queries regarding *kashruth* (Jewish dietary laws)

before Aunty Shoshonah, especially about the prohibition of eating unkosher fish (David 130). On another occasion, while enthusiastically speaking about Hindu gods to her cousin Samuel, she makes a deft comparison between the stories of Krishna and Moses and even finds the temple more attractive than the synagogue (28). Out of her childhood naivety, she tells her mother, "I like the sound of the bells. Why don't we have some drums and gongs at the synagogue?" (122). When Danieldada gifts anklets to the narrator, Naomi upbraids him and explains to her daughter "the correct dress and behaviour codes for Jewish girls" (28). Here, anklets symbolise the non-Jewish culture around her and the narrator wonders what is it that makes "anklets and Jewishness" incongruous (28). Thus, the ambivalence regarding the appropriation of cultural traits is very much part of her psychosocial maturation.

While assimilation characterises the narrator's responses to her immediate surroundings, the separation strategy (as explained by Berry) is more conspicuous in her mother Naomi. It seems that Naomi's hate for her father, whom she holds responsible for her mother's death, has impacted her outlook on life. Danieldada's extra-marital affair with a non-Jewish woman makes her hate the outside culture as such. That is why she becomes offended whenever she sees the crumbling of old values. She makes sure that her daughter wears the proper attire meant for Jewish girls. In her puritanical upbringing, she denies her daughter the simple pleasures she longs for, such as anklets, ghagra, and the like. Because of her conservative outlook, she is flabbergasted upon viewing nail polish on her daughter's fingers (David 84). Obsession with the notion of cultural purity, coupled with the fear of cultural assimilation, makes her parochial at times. That is why she implores Danieldada not to "corrupt" her daughter by doing un-Jewish things (35).

For a diasporic community, the family, apart from being a socialising agent, plays a pivotal role in imparting religious and cultural erudition to the young members. The shifting of the house accentuates the narrator's isolation as she now misses the emotional support and comfort she hitherto enjoyed in the joint family setup. As she moves to her maternal grandfather Danieldada's house, she gets more exposure to the outside culture and there occurs a slackening of the connection with the rigid traditions. She becomes the confidant of Danieldada who also has a hyphenated identity like her; he emerges as a "complex metaphor representing the ambiguities and the quotidian strength of the Indian Jewish community" (Venkateshwarlu 17). He absorbed the British ways when he worked for a British-owned company; he is also fascinated by the Hindu ways despite

his Jewish upbringing. He gives his servant Mohun a separate room for conducting pooja and allows him to adorn the walls with pictures of Hindu deities. Interestingly, Mohun worships his master on par with other gods. Even in his old age, Danieldada's mind yearns to cross the rims of religions and cultures, as illustrated by his interest in celebrating Holi.

As pointed out earlier, the narrator's identity dilemmas get heightened in Danieldada's house. The thwarting of her simple wishes and romantic sensations on account of her being a Bene Israel girl stifle her. Her frustration is implied in these words: "I feel as if I am in a glass case" (David 81). The unfortunate death of her intimate friend Subhadra further unsettles her complacency. When Granny's *Shema* (a Jewish prayer) does not work, Mani gives her a book of prayers to Hanuman to ward off her nightmares. Unknown to her mother, she makes a clay model of Hanuman to get peace of mind. When she cogitates on the deaths of Subhadra and her maternal grandmother Leah, her understanding of life widens exponentially. Tormented by the weight of parental expectations regarding the acting out of her ethnic identity, she tries to create meaning in the third space which is a syncretic realm boosted by the traits of the Jewish and the non-Jewish cultures.

The aforementioned scenario shows that the overarching pressure exerted by the older generation as a safeguard against "alien influences" crushes the desires of the younger generation (David 155). The wall mentioned in the title of the novel becomes a metaphor for all such restrictions. "Walls between religions and communities and walls between generations" pervade the consciousness of adults (Wald 86). These "gates of iron" suffocate the young who grope to make sense of their identity (David 79). When the undue pressure throttles her freedom, the narrator rebelliously questions their conservative outlook and infringes the circumscriptions. On her Sunday escapades to Pratibha's house, she practises dance secretly: "We dance together and she stands with her right leg crossed over her left, just like the Krishna in the poster in her kitchen and pretends to play with the flute while I, Radha the milkmaid, implore him not to bewitch me with his music" (88). Moreover, she draws pictures of Krishna in addition to helping Pratibha in arranging the earthen lamps on the occasion of Diwali. Yet another of her transgressive acts is her interest in learning Sanskrit epics when she goes to college, which also becomes a problem for Naomi.

Here, it can be seen that the elders are not able to quell the doubts of the younger generation. The narrator does not get a satisfying answer to her queries regarding the form of their god. Through the narrator, David, in

fact, perceptively brings to light the agonies of a diminishing community. In spite of being in India for generations, many communities are ignorant of the existence of Jews. Pratibha's question aggravates the narrator's crisis of identity: "If you are not a Christian, a Parsi or a Muslim, what are you?" (David 132). Moreover, as more and more people conduct *aliyah*, the immigration to Israel, the younger generation faces the problem of finding suitable marital alliances from within the dwindling community. Granny persuades her grandchildren to migrate to Israel in order to retain their ethnic purity. But the narrator's father Joshua unwaveringly affirms, "We'll live and die here. In India" (143).

Unlike Naomi, Joshua exemplifies a clear case of integrative strategy, in Berry's terms. The way he enacts his identity illustrates that he has perfectly balanced his Indianness and Jewishness, adopting elements from both cultures. He runs a workshop where he makes furniture with the assistance of Hasmukh Mistry. He even makes furniture for the local temple. On the occasion of buying a new car, Mistry performs a small *pooja* to ward off the evil eye. Though Naomi dislikes such actions, Joshua does not find any fault in doing such things. On another occasion, he also compares his daughter to the goddess Laxmi. Though his mother compels him, he is not willing to move to Israel as he is clung to the firm roots and anchors in the land. His love for the land of his birth, in addition to his social ties and commitments, causes him to stay put in the familiar terrain and decide against migration.

The psychological development of the narrator is also shaped by the communal tensions brewing up in Ahmedabad. In fact, the dilapidation of the old city wall is symbolic of the present condition of the city. The fallen wall in the backdrop of the pandemonium prompts the narrator to compare it to the wailing wall of Israel. It seems that the wall "watches over the tears of its people" (David 82). The river Sabarmati has become "red with the blood of her people" (116). Such incidents inevitably wound the psyche of the minority community. The pigeons and horses of the narrator's paternal house are killed. Joshua loses his close confidants, Sulemanbhai and Hasmukh Mistry, in the riots. Mani, alias Mumtaz, is also terribly affected by communal violence. As curfew, mayhem, and bloodshed become a part of their life, more and more Jewish families migrate to Israel. The narrator's family moves to a new house in Navrangpura for safety, where they give accommodation to Mistry's family in the outhouse— a humanitarian act transcending cross-cultural barriers.

Emmanuel's story presents an interesting account of cross-cultural dilem-

mas. His life was an experiment with religious and cultural identities. In the letters written to Uncle Menachem, he expressed his conflict of being a Jew in a strange land. He changed religions sporadically and longed to find the meaning of life before falling prey to the communal riots. In the narrator's opinion, he is "a lost soul, trying to search for his Jewish identity through all the religions that surround him" (David 189). The deaths of Danieldada, Granny, Samuel, and Emmanuel capacitate the narrator to ponder over the vagaries of life. Aunt Jerusha, who became the breadwinner of the family, remained a spinster. Her parents did not look for an apt alliance for her as they wanted her to look after them in their old age. Her eccentric behaviour and paranoid dread ensue from her isolation and thwarting of desires.

From the earlier rebellious stage, a shift can be seen in the narrator's psyche as she slowly begins to attain a state of equilibrium between her ethnic roots and her Indian identity. In other words, it is a shift from her earlier assimilationist position to an integrative worldview. Her questioning habit pares down as she starts accepting things as they come. For instance, in her college, though she reads Sanskrit epics, she ensures that she is not overtly enamoured by the sensual world it portrays. She expresses her state of mind thus: "I keep away from Kama and his arrows, lest he come between my parents and me" (David 171). Upon the compulsion of her mother, she opts for Psychology instead of Sanskrit as it "resolves the tension in the house" (171). A reversal of earlier traits is perceptible in her decision-making process as she now values her mother's sentiments. She no longer gets agitated at the "half-hearted attempts" made by her parents to get her married (156). She tries to keep them happy as she knows that "when they die, [her] life will become pointless" (196).

The feelings of cultural disorientation that characterised the narrator in the earlier phase is now overridden by a resilient embracing of both the facets of her being which amounts to a reinvention of her identity. Over time, she learns to navigate the dualistic identities more efficiently than in her younger years. Following their aunt's footsteps, the narrator and her cousin Malkha leave their romantic vacillations and colourful dreams aside and concentrate on their career. They decide to remain spinsters so as to take care of their ageing parents: "We never leave Ahmedabad. We never can" (David 197). While Malkha runs an English school, the narrator teaches at a local college. Through the third space they have created, they attempt to construct moments of gratification. Taking their parents to synagogues and going to the cinema no longer become incompatible acts. Furthermore, witnessing the heart-rending vignettes of communal riots,

the narrator reaches the apotheosis of her earnest quest for understanding god. She says, "my search for gods is over" (197). Towards the end of the novel, she explains why she chooses to remain unmarried. She fears that she will beget a daughter:

According to our laws she would be Jewish and it would be torture for her and for me. I would try to keep her away from every possible outside influence and she would have to fight me. She would have unruly hair which I would have to pull back in a tight braid, in order to make her look unattractive. I would try to manipulate and control every thought and action and her grandmother's urgent voice would beg her to go to the Promised Land. Then my unborn daughter would somehow learn to worry about me and my old age and would perhaps end up living with me, as I live with Father and Mother. It is a vishchakra, a never-ending, poisonous cycle because she, as a daughter, would want to know all that I know, forcing me to start this story all over again. (197-98)

The novel thus illustrates how cross-cultural conflicts and minority status affect the development of one's selfhood. It also shows how cultural clashes impinge on the construction of one's identity. The concepts of home and roots play a substantial role in the novel. The dialogic relationship with other cultures broadens one's perspective and helps to identify one's own culture in a better light. The liminal, third space, the meeting point of diverse cultures, enthrals the narrator from her childhood. By being questioning, submissive, observant and rebellious at times, she tries to dovetail the jigsaw of cultural ambiguity. The final reconciliation and negotiation of conflictual subject positions equip the narrator to delve deeply into the innards of cross-cultural interaction and make her insights philosophical.

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