

The Concept of Tradition and Culture of Indian Jewsin

Esther David's *Bombay Brides*

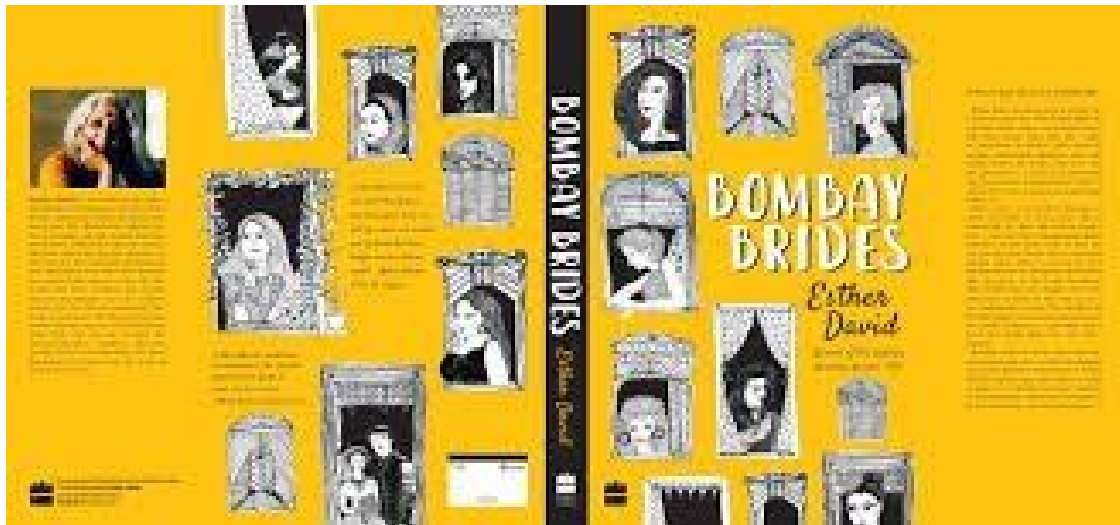
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Abstract

*Culture plays an important role in the existence of the existing of every individual. When the people who live outside of their home country, they experience cultural conflicts. In the case of migrants, who cross the geographic and cultural borders, their culture changes in relation to their home and host country. The memory of their part culture complicates the existence and they face the issues of cultural plurality and identity. There they face alienation, loneliness and emotional distress etc. As a result of their obsession towards traditions, which were followed in their homeland. This study explores the issues of cultural plurality, when the migrants are trying to cling on their tradition. Esther David, an Indian writer, weaves her stories around Bene Israel, Jewish community of India. Being a Bene Israel, she tries to explore the tradition and culture of Indian Jews, especially Bene Jews in Bombay. She created a fictional backdrop, Shalom India Housing Society, Ahmedabad in her novels. The focus is on her second and latest novel, *Bombay Brides*. In her fictional society, where the Block A inhabitants are completely Jews and Block B is inhabited by a mixture of other communities. *Bombay Brides* is in the form of stories told by each character, living in Block A. Each story is a lamination on the problems of diminishing community of Jews in India. It is an analysis of their culture and tradition; they are still trying to follow in a vast multicultural country like India*

Keywords: *Tradition, Culture, Cultural Plurality, Migration*



Indian Jews are considered as three types; among them Bene Israels is one of the largest and oldest communities. Cochin Jews and Baghdadi Jews are the other two groups of community. In Hebrew, Bene Israel means sons of Israel. Their history before 18th century was unknown and controversial. According to community's own oral tradition, they are the descendants of seven couples from a country to the north; the sole survivors of a shipwreck off the Konkan coast. According to biblical history, they were the descent from the lost ten tribes of Israel, who were exiled from their capital, Samariya by the Assyrian king. These survivors got shelter permanently by the people of Konkan. They were known as 'Shaniwar Thelis' as they adopted the occupation of oil pressing and Marathi became their official language. They are the most hinduized of Indian Jews. However they celebrated the major festivals of Jews. The centrality of Prophet Elijah in their tradition shows that, their ancestors were lived in the holy land, Israel. Their religious observance was based on biblical Judaism.

The religious revival of Bene Jews took place only after the arrival of David Rahabi, may be a Cochin Jew. With his arrival, Bene Israelis were come into contact with other Jews. In 18th century, some of them moved to Bombay, where the British rulers ensured the religious freedom. In Bombay, they had a prosperous life. After that they immigrated to different countries, after the independence of India. Bene Israelis were immigrated to Israel, but their existence in Israel society was not easy. They faced discrimination and other orthodox Jews didn't consider them as Jews and they faced difficulties in marrying from Jewish community. Later they were returned to India. They have combined their ancient tradition and custom with Indian culture and created a rich culture of their own.

Sinorakolatkar, President, Shaare Rason Synagogue, said: "We may be few in number, but we do exist. Preserving our culture means looking after our synagogues. We also need to conduct activities to indulge the city in our community affairs". They

are torn between their homeland and their adopted homeland and probably they are the most indianized of all exiled Jews. They consider Israel is in their heart and India is in their blood. The community of Bene Israel had racial distinctions within their own community 'Gora', the white and 'Kala', the black. Majority of them are Goras and both their parents are Jews and considered as pure Jews, where as Father of Kalasis from Israeli origin and mother is a non Jew. Goras didn't accept Kalas. These distinctions faded only after the British control.

Esther David, born and brought up in Ahmadabad and a member of Jewish community. She created a fictional community, Shalom India Housing Society, which forms the base of her latest novel, *Brides of India*. Block A of this fictional complex was inhabited by Jews, while people of other community was accommodated in Block B. Apartment 107 in block A is owned by Juliet, a Jewish girl and Romiel, a Hindu boy, who got married and relocated to Israel. Each inhabitant of this apartment has a story to tell. 'Marriage' is a common thread running through many of the stories. *Bombay Brides* is the story of their roots, rituals, heritage and rites of one of the last surviving members of a diminishing minority community settled in the Konkan. Esther David, over a phone interview says:

In 1850s, a lot of young Jewish men Moved from Alibaug to Ahmadabad, as a part of the British services. And when it was the time for them to get married, they started looking for brides in Bombay. Soon Jewish women from Bombay were moving to Ahmedabad. Today, many Jewish women in Ahmedabad are from Bombay.

Title of all the chapters is the name of female characters. Tradition and culture of Bene Israel are exposed through the perspectives of these women characters. Because, according to David, in India, women were the preservers of Bene Israel culture. They are eager to follow the tradition, rituals and festivals and try to hold their family together.

Chapter 7 'Salome' opens with the following lines:

It was a Wednesday, the first day of Passover. Ezra woke up at 4 am to pray to the sun for Birkat Hamcha, when the sun is in the same position that it had been on the day of Genesis. Saul Ezekiel, the cantor of the synagogue, was to reach the society at 5 am (B B 55-56).

This chapter clearly gives a picture of some rituals like, 'Passover' they followed. It shows the importance and methods of Passover. It is a major Jewish holiday and one of the most widely celebrated Jewish holidays. The following lines show that they have their own unique beliefs: "It was believed that on this particular day, the sun would be at the same pointing the centre of the horizon as when God created light. It was mentioned in the Jewish Bible, Genesis" (B B 56). They followed other

major festivals like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Simchat Torah etc. For all these festivals, they reach at Synagogue before dawn.

Prophet Elijah is perhaps the most beloved prophet in the Bible. According to tradition, Elijah frequently comes down to earth to help Jews in distress or reveal secrets of the Torah to our great scholars. He is present at a Jewish baby boy's circumcision and he visits us every year at the Passover Seder. In every story, the presence of Prophet Elijah is seen. The Prophet Elijah who is a major face in their relief threads the narratives together. Prophet Elijah gracing their lives with his plans for his people, appearing at critical or amusing moments and wreaking havoc with his mischief, but ensuring that ultimately peace prevails.

The book gives a great doze of information about the religion and way of life the community follows without making it preachy in any way. *Bombay Brides* talks about the lives of the women of the community- their lives before and after their marriage. Finding love, facing betrayal, loss of a loved one or a new beginning make up the core of the book. This book celebrates the sacred tradition of marriage, however, also manages to bring out the cross-cultural conflicts to the forefront. Each new chapter begins with a new illustration, which allows the readers to catch a glimpse into the life of the character. Jewish community is very strict in this particular matter as they've to always marry in the same community. Juliet and Rahul eloped & got married. Eventually her parents agreed & accepted their marriage only after he changed his religion. "I suggest that you convince Rahul to convert to Judaism. That will be the easiest" (B B 14).

Esther takes her readers on a roller-coaster experience into the ups and downs in the everyday life of Indian Jews. This book gives an unprecedented insight into their culture, festivities and rites, acquainting the readers with picturesque details of the preparations for synagogue or recurring motif of the prophet Elijah in his chariot. A beautiful insight into the lives of a slowly receding minority.

References

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