

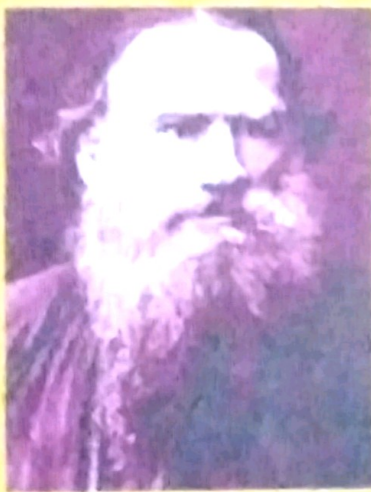
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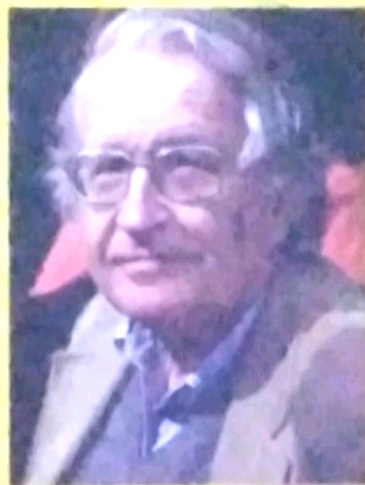
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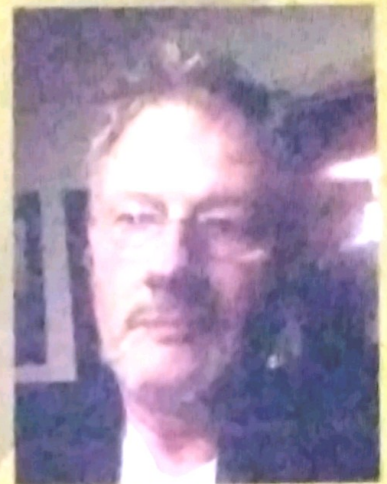
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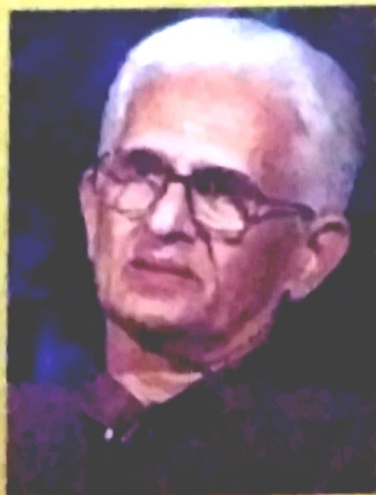
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The Portrayal of Ethnic Angst in a Vanishing Community: A Critical Reading of Esther David's *Book of Rachel*

Neelima S. Saral



Abstract

The Jews are one of the ethnic minority communities in India with a varied and vibrant cultural tradition. However in the present global scenario, these ethnic minorities tend to sink below the surface of the society because of the ongoing homogenization process. The anxieties of the ethnic minorities like the Jews are well portrayed in the novels of the India-born Jewish writer Esther David and especially in her Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Book of Esther*. It unveils the story of an old Jewish woman, and her struggles to preserve an abandoned synagogue, which is the manifestation of the neglected Jewish community itself. The narrative acquires universal appeal as David weaves into it a heart-warming tale of love, longing, heritage and racial memory.

Keywords: ethnic anxiety, Jewish diaspora, homogenization, preservation, synagogue.

Ethnic anxiety of the minority communities is a sensitive issue in the postcolonial era. Since postcolonialism promotes the homogenization of cultures, the minority groups with varied and vibrant cultural traditions tend to sink below the surface of the mainstream society. As they are the bearers of their ethnicity, the ethnic groups are prone to preserve it in its pristine purity, but they often fail. Besides this, they always prefer to live within the cocoon of their communities and are reluctant to mingle with the mainstream society. Because of this insularity and introversion, which they inherit from their ancestors, they are more or less completely isolated from the rest of the society. Belonging neither to their ethnic culture nor to the dominant culture, the members of the ethnic group are in search of newer lands, where his/her being, is accepted by the society.

The ethnic anxieties of the diasporic groups like the Jews are vividly rendered in the novels of Esther David who is a Jewish- Indian woman writer, artist and art critic. She was born into a Bene- Israeli Jewish family in Ahmedabad. All her novels unveil the story of a diminishing miniscule Jewish minority, its sterility, isolation and the cross-cultural struggles of the heroes to preserve their Jewish roots. Her main concern as a Jewish writer is the preservation of Jewish heritage, culture, rituals, artifacts, oral tradition, cuisine etc. In her novels, Ms David offers a study of the fast changing life-styles of a micro-miniscule Jewish community and tries to find out solutions to their problems. Her most influential novels are *The Walled City*, *Book of Esther*, *Book of Rachel*, *Sari Sutra*, *Shalom India Housing Society*, and *Man with Enormous Wings*. Her novels target a world, which is still ignorant about the existence of Indian Jews and their cross-cultural conflicts of being Jewish. They point out one thing in common – the ethnic anxiety of the Jewish community in India, and their efforts to preserve ethnicity.

David's celebrated novel, *Book of Rachel* is more ambitious than all her other novels, as it portrays the community from within and examines its tensions and struggles and its economic and cultural landscape as well. In this novel, she weaves a heart-warming tale of a woman, who struggles hard to preserve her ethnic culture as she belongs to a vanishing community. The protagonist of the novel is Rachel, who has been living alone in her house by the sea in the Konkan Coast of Ahmedabad. Her husband is no more, and her children have migrated to Israel. She is alienated and isolated from all her kith and kin.

The novel opens with a cyclone in the Arabian Sea, which is the indicator of the tension that the protagonist has to face in the future. Watching the waves rise as high as the coconut trees, Rachel is reminded of the dark night when the Jews had been shipwrecked in India, in fact, in the very same sea. Rachel is worried not only about herself and the house, but about the Jewish synagogue also, as it is the very root of her identity and tradition. However, a few metres away from Rachel's house, it stands alone, distant and abandoned by the community, which tries to ape the dominant culture of the society in which they live in. However, Rachel believed that one day it would again emerge as a place of communal gathering. The abandoned synagogue itself manifests the slowly changing Jewish community and its loss of interest in ethnic culture. It is actually not a prayer house alone, but a monument and a relic of a rich past too.

Rachel is presented here as a protector of the synagogue 'from some evil people' (69). She often felt that she was in the protective presence of her ancestors. Unlike other Jews, who always pine for the 'Promised Land', Rachel prefers to live in her own land of birth. She had grown accustomed to Danda, its sounds and silence. Her longing for home and

homeland is evident when she says, "I grew up with them; bury them with me." (7). When Mordecai, one of the synagogue committee members came to her with a plan of selling the land of synagogue to a businessman, Mr. Chinoy, we for the first time, see the 'activist streak' (72) in her. She fights for the sake of the belief of her community and the preservation of its purity. By doing this, Rachel is actually trying to live a life of her own and to find out her identity and sense of social belongingness in an alien society. She becomes resistant because the proposal to acquire the synagogue not only threatens to take away the emblem of faith, but also marks the return of a rich past.

Thus, Rachel has a mission in her life - 'looking after the synagogue' (104). She sets the example to all those, who merely accept their fate when they are subjugated by some superior forces or dominant cultures. With the help of her son Jacob's lawyer- friend, Judah, Rachel hitches her wagon to stars. It is the starting of a great thing for her and the entire Jewish community. Her attachment to the synagogue, which is the token of her ancestry, is further evident as she says that she always keeps the keys of it tied to her sari. She says, "I even sleep with them." (61). They are inseparable. Except for a few Jews like Rachel, the rest of the community does not know anything about 'synagogue, traditions, ritual, sentiment and attachment' (69).

Zephra, Rachel's daughter is a typical postcolonial product because she does not know the real values of her Jewishness as she lives in a society with varied kinds of people and innumerable number of cultures. The members of the younger generation like Judah and Zephra are a wrecked lot who are all the time alienated in both societies of India and Israel. "They have to lead a life between two countries, the motherland and the fatherland. One existed in head and other in heart" (193). They fly 'owards the 'Promised Land', but they are 'unknowingly rooted to the land of their birth' (196).

Caught between the two worlds and belief patterns, they are unable to possess either of them. The younger generation gradually develops the crisis of identity, feeling of homelessness, lack of social belongingness, meaninglessness of their heritage, tradition etc. While Rachel devotes her entire life for the protection and preservation of the synagogue and its Jewish values, Zephra asks her mother:

Zephra: "But, Mama I suppose the committee can take a decision to sell a synagogue or keep it. Why are you so upset?"

Rachel: Upset is not the right word. I am suffering because they have the audacity to make business out of religion." (70)

This shows that the members of the older generation of the ethnic minorities are alienated souls, wandering in search of roots and identity, even at the cost of their life and the members of the younger generation are shattered thoroughly as they do not even have the solace of identity or social belongingness. Belonging to neither world, they never try to preserve their culture or religion. They do not have the time or patience to know what is happening to their synagogue or age-old ethnic culture. "The community is fast disappearing. Everybody has left for Israel... where is the minyan of ten men to hold the Sabbath services? So we decided to lease out the land around the synagogue for a couple of years..." (88), says Mordecai. It reveals the attitude of the Jewish community members to wash their hands off from their responsibility to preserve their culture. Jewishness has become a burden for most of them except a few like Rachel.

Not only Rachel, but also the hard-hearted Judah, though at first not interested in the Jewish culture, later fights hard for the protection of the synagogue and its beliefs. Zephra also attests to this, when she says, "under all that hard-core lawyer façade, there is a typical Bene-Israeli male hiding somewhere inside you" (127). This is also the same for Rachel's three children—Jacob, Aviv and Zephra. Despite their migration to the Promised Land, they also try hard to protect their ethnicity from slaughter by evil people like Mordecai. Deep inside them, they nourish, 'the land of their lost childhood' (196).

The sincere effort of Rachel to preserve the synagogue is a sort of inspiration for all ethnic groups, especially the Jews. It is like a peephole of the universe through which the ignorant or disinterested community members can see their Fatherland (Israel), Motherland (India) and the smallness and largeness of life. Thus, the motif of the protection of the synagogue runs throughout the novel. By protecting the synagogue and preserving the Jewish ethnic culture, Rachel acquires the aura that is essential for a postcolonial opponent. Literally, she gives life to make meaning to her religion and culture.

Another important aspect of the novel is the preparation of the traditional Jewish food. The name of each chapter in the novel has a Jewish recipe name. Rachel's frequent preparation of ancient Jewish food is a sort of digging out her own ethnic culture. It also provides her with a link to her children as she is reminded of them and she looks forward to their return home. What this implies is the inevitable reunion of the older and younger generations, who are separated from their native lands and have migrated to different parts of the world. All the recipes in the novel are special to the Bene-Israeli Jews in India. Esther David here explains the significance of particular dishes on particular situations and its ingredients and meanings also.

In the first chapter there is a recipe for frying the fish. The Jews consider fish as the symbol of protection. Likewise, coconut is the king of Jewish cuisine. According to the dietary law of the Jews, lamb should not be cooked in its mother's milk. Therefore, instead of dairy products, coconut milk works as a perfect substitute for milk in Bene-Israel cuisine. Halech/ Haroset also known as Indian sheera is symbolic of the mortar used by the Jews when they built the pyramids for the pharaohs. Bitter herbs like parsley and salad leaves are symbolic of the bitterness and hardships suffered by Jews when they were slaves in Egypt. The egg is a symbol of life, womb, fertility and the creation of life. Puranpoli, a Jewish recipe made on the memory of Purim, celebrates the liberation of Persian Jews and the festival of Queen Esther. They bring love and happiness. The germination of Val beans is a good omen for them as it means their tribe may increase. Thus, even a small ingredient of food that Rachel cooks is deeply associated with the ethnic Jewish culture.

By preparing delicious Jewish recipes, Rachel can ensnare even a typical businessperson like Mr. Chinoy, who was there to buy the synagogue and the land around it, and his wife, Mrs. Kavita Chinoy also. Rachel made Kavita's favourite Jewish dish 'bombils' and gave her a live cookery demonstration on bombil preparation. It worked at last, in favour of the Jewish synagogue, as Chinoy decided to give up his plan of acquiring it and he even helped them to convert it into a Jewish museum. Rachel's food also helped Zephra and Judah to fall in love with each other. Later, they will get married and surely 'the tribe may increase' (124).

All actions of Rachel are special. Whatever she does, it is for the preservation of her Jewish heritage and ethnicity in an alien ethos. *Book of Rachel* highlights the peculiarities and delicacies that are related to the Jewish ethnicity. The interpretative reading of this novel enables us to appreciate the values of even a minority community and its belief patterns. Even an apparently abandoned synagogue has lots of significance in the life of its community members. All of them want... "the synagogue to come alive with people and have celebration like the good-old days" (35).

The matters such as ethnicity and religion are there in the minds of most of its members. That is why Judah, Zephra, Jacob, Aviv and many of the Jews in India and abroad started to work with Rachel for the protection of the synagogue. Such people have to be inspired by someone like Rachel. Every one, irrespective of all barriers, cherishes the memories of their own home, culture, community and homeland. Only a few people like Mordecai are the pests infesting their ethnic culture. When they are marked out as odd ones, the rest of the community can survive with all its good-old traditions, rituals, heritage etc. through the future generations. Rachel, the unlikely opponent, shows this fact, through her unrelenting

battle to those who are trying to sell the synagogue and ultimately their ethnicity. The novel, at this point, becomes a gripping story as well as the chronicle of a unique community in the present post-colonial scenario.

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