



Exploring The Concept Of Isolation In Esther David's 'The Walled City'

Dr. Gollapalli Shalom, Assistant Professor, AU College of Engineering for Women, Visakhapatnam

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the concepts of isolation and alienation in the voice of an unnamed narrator in the novel The Walled City.

Key words: isolation, community, culture, cultural minority, tradition

INTRODUCTION

India is a multi-cultural nation. The Atlas of Ethnographic Society reports more than two thousand distant cultures in India based on factors like geographic location, languages, festivals, food habits, art, religion and caste. Many tribal communities have their own distinct culture, tradition and religious practices which are different from the mainstream cultural practices. Among the major religions, cultural traditions differ based on caste, region and language spoken.

One such cultural minority is the Bene-Israel Jews in India. Esther David is an Indian author of Jewish descent. She hails from Gujarat and was born into the Bene-Israel Jewish community. This community was believed to have arrived in India after a shipwreck around 2100 years ago, to escape persecution from Antiochus Epiphanes. Since then they have slowly become an integral part of the Indian culture. They are nicknamed "Shaniwar Teli" i.e. the Saturday oil pressers, since many of the Jewish people work in oil pressing so that they can follow Sabbath and other traditions. They have integrated into the Indian society while maintaining their traditional and religious practices, thus maintaining a unique identity and becoming one of the many cultural minorities in India. Esther David, a Bene-Israeli writer, tried to preserve and portray their unique culture through her works. She has won the Sahitya Academy award in 2010 for her work 'Book of Rachel'.

People belonging to cultural minority have expressed their own identity crisis, alienation and suffering due to marginalization, as minorities often hold an unspoken subordinate position in the society. People immigrate for various reasons. Some immigrate to seek a better life, some to seek better jobs and better opportunities. However, some people flee their homeland due to war, discrimination and out of the need to survive. People who immigrate with nothing in their hands are the ones who undergo the most cruel discrimination, isolation and marginalisation. The natives are worried for their own safety and tend to view the immigrants with suspicion, as if they are thieves. In case of a mass immigration, problems like shortage of food, water and employment are inevitable, thus starting a competition for basic needs. This competition puts immense pressure on both parties - the natives and the immigrants. This conflict for resources could be resolved with time. However, it is the internal conflict like alienation and isolation that remain for generations.

THE ISOLATION FROM OTHERS

In her novel 'The Walled City' Esther David narrates the life of a young girl who is in the stage of self-discovery and developing her social identity. She remains unnamed throughout the story. She is subjected to caste discrimination as a child from the native Indian Hindus who have deep rooted caste and religious beliefs. The narrator mentions an incident at her friend Subhadra's house.

“her mother will not allow a meat-eater like me inside the kitchen where a lamp burns in front of the family deity. So we sit in the mosaic-tiled drawing room and eat from brass thalis” (21)

The discrimination is so deep-rooted that even the maid of the narrator's household, Mani, dislikes their friendship, openly expresses her dislike and even goes to the extent of forcing the narrator to stay away from her friend, Subhadra.

“I try hard to keep away from Subhadra, but she is my best friend. We grew up together. But the meat of dead animals sticks to my teeth and the camphor in her breath rejects me. Between us there is a wall of dead animals and birds. On hot summer afternoons she comes to my house and then runs back to her own to drink water. Her nose twitches at our kitchen smells.” (21)

This discrimination is based on the food they eat, the food they do not eat, the language they speak and do not speak, dressing style etc., which are the indicators of Identity. These aspects have heavily weighed on the unnamed protagonist's psyche. She says “I am ridden with guilt for the ways of my ancestors” (21).

The neighbours at Dilhi darwaza are frequently at aggressive odds with the narrator's family. Each time a stray dog or a crow scatters the garbage, the non-meat eating families tend to quarrel with them. This social exclusion and aggression forces the narrator's family to relocate. Menachem, the narrator's uncle relocates a family to a community of non-vegetarians. But the narrator's identity has been deeply damaged. She feels "like a cannibal" (121) each time the topic arises.

The narrator's brood is treated with the same disdain, contempt and segregation as the untouchable caste in the Indian caste system. A pujari from the Brahmin caste (upper caste) visits their house. However, he is suspicious of the narrator's family and their food. The narrator's father gives an elaborate explanation about the Jewish dietary laws to the pujari but he still remains suspicious. His humiliating treatment of them, being a guest in their own home reminds them yet again that they are not accepted and so is their way of life, which is not accepted and that they are aliens in the land even though they have been residing in India since 721 BC. The first synagogue was built in 1796 A.D in Bombay. It is practically possible to build a place of worship only if a considerable population has resided for a considerable period of time and was able to secure land for temple building. Later when the state of Israel has formed in the year 1948, around 70,000 Indian Jews have returned. But a small portion of 5000 Jews stayed back in India, calling India their home.

Even though the immigrant Jews have been calling India their home for over 2100 years, they have been alienated and isolated time and again just like the unnamed narrator. When the narrator attends the wedding of her friend Pratibha's cousin, she was chosen to be among the five virgins who are to welcome the bride. The narrator participate enthusiastically until one old lady proclaims that the Jewish narrator is "not one of us" (131) and just like that, without any consideration to the young girl's feelings, she is removed from the bride- welcoming group. The narrator's very presence taints the religious rituals. This discrimination and social exclusion disappoints the narrator very deeply. She says

“I feel cold and alone.... It makes me disown my name, a name which exposes me. I am what they are not” (131).

This social exclusion and isolation drives her to want to renounce her identity. “I wish I had been born to Subhadra's mother, I would have then been accepted” (21). She yearns to be accepted. However,

the question here is not about the identity the narrator ardently wishes to embrace but about the identity that is willing to let the narrator embrace it, without any rejection.

THE SELF- INFLICTED ISOLATION

The strict religious rules of Jewish community further alienate them. The narrator's maternal grandmother, Leah's life is a stark example. She undergoes a religious shock after her marriage. Leah is raised in a very strict conservative Jewish home. Every ceremony, ritual and prayer is performed with ardent sincerity and piety. Leah's father is a very religious man who has never missed even a day of the Sabbath in his entire life.

“at home, there was a strong awareness of being Jewish, which set them apart from their neighbours” (63)

Leah, from a conservative upbringing was married to her cousin, Daniel. She later finds that her husband is not a practicing Jew. This turns her conservative world upside down and makes her married life miserable. Leah and her husband do not celebrate any festivals except the Yom Kippur. They do not bother to follow the Jewish dietary laws. Her husband's lack of participation in the religious and ceremonial aspects alienates Leah.

Leah receives further shock when she discovered her husband's infidelity. To turn her husband's stray heart towards her and the children, Leah naively turns to prayers. She visits the 'Chalet Pir ki Dargah' and offers ardent prayers. When the straying husband doesn't return home, she understands that this turn of praying didn't show result. Leah's maid advises her to go to meet Banyan Baba, a famous god-man who is rumoured to solve all problems. Leah has mixed feelings about visiting this baba. Leah, hailing from strongly monotheistic background feels she is betraying her religion.

“she was crossing the thin line that had always separated her from things that were not Jewish. She knew she was pushing back the perimeter of her world to include another dimension about which she knew nothing” (64)

Only when Daniel abandons Leah for another woman, having no other choice, she chooses to meet Banyan Baba to seek solution for her problems. However she receive lustful looks and sensual touches and this not only scares her but also reminds her of the reality of her immigrant, alienated and sub-human status. Leah seeks guidance and comfort in troubled times from a culture and religion that is not ready to give the immigrant what she seeks.

Leah is a sensitive and innocent soul. She perceives the said god-man's advances as invasion of purity. She feels defiled. She begs Daniel to return home but he refuses. The helpless, sensitive, innocent, pious and pure Leah commits suicide.

The author continuous to talk about the religious dilemma and religious identity in the older generation. Granny, the narrator's paternal grandmother becomes the go-to person for religious practices. She was raised in a very conservative home and away from the world.

“her Jewishness had been nurtured in the closed courtyard and she had been guarded against alien influences” (155).

Granny was the magnetic maternal figure keeping the family and traditions together. Everyone depends on her to solve their problems. She is the centre of Delhi Darwaza house. However, things have changed after granny's daughter Jerusha returns to India from London. Aunt Jerusha chooses to remain a spinster. Granny becomes very protective of her aged unmarried daughter and moves to Ambawadi to live with her, away from Delhi Darwaza house the family home. Granny begins to feel lonely and nostalgic. She remembers her life in a house full of people. When relatives from Israel visit granny, she is hopeful for the 'land of milk and honey'. She keeps an old faded photograph of her brothers, sisters and their families with her. While some have passed away, some have immigrated to Israel. Granny feels all the

more isolated and alienated after her relationship with aunt Jerusha becomes tense. Unable to bare the pangs of loneliness, she turns to alcohol. It is shocking to believe that such a religious and pious women turns to alcohol. The main reason behind things falling into the state is Granny's self- estrangement.

Through the narrator's grandmothers - maternal and paternal, the other portrays the self-imposed alienation and isolation. They are generation of people who do not want to leave India and yearn for Israel both at the same time. They are an unfortunate generation who has metaphorically lived on the no-man's land belonging to neither and both nations simultaneously.

The younger generation faces alienation and isolation in their own measure. Samuel, the narrator's cousin is attracted to one of his sister's friend, Mandakini. His parents opposed to any sort of inter-faith romantic interactions. After Mandakini becomes a 'Sadhvi', Samuel is confused and restless. He suffers from nightmares. Whenever Samuel approaches his parents to discuss doubts about religion he is dismissed saying he is too young for such serious discussions. He goes away to Bombay for further studies to forget Mandakini but becomes more isolated. Hostel life doesn't suit him since he lived in a big family all his life. He becomes lonely and detached and gradually degenerates into consuming narcotics and eventually commits suicide. Granny however concludes that the root cause of Samuel demise is too much education.

"It is all because of too much education and the freedom of mingling with other communities. Had that been controlled, you would not have lost him. The parents are responsible, not allowing cousins to marry. All these modern views are not good for us" (179)

Granny fails to understand the root cause of the problem, which is alienation and isolation- the inability to belong. The young narrator experience similar alienation and isolation. She is burden with confusion about her identity. She seeks answers to this endless quest. She is torn between the duality of identity. She is a Jew by religion and Indian by nationality. She practices Judaism and Jewish traditional requirements at home but is expected to follow Indian cultural requirements in the society.

For example a very simple gesture of greeting - the Indian 'Namaste' a greeting performed with folded hands is a natural gesture for any Indian, regardless of religion. But the same gesture cannot be practice by Jews since they religion strictly forbids worshiping or bowing to anything or anyone other than their Divine. It is this small differences that lead to big conflicts while bigger differences in terms of religious procedures and cultural practices lead to a cultural diversity. It is these small differences that actually hit hard. When the unnamed narrator who chooses to remain unnamed and therefore unidentified says "I question my Jewishness" (22), it stirs sympathy in the reader. She further says:

"my complexion is a deep brown like Subhadra's and my long plait is tied with red tassels. I could be her sister" (22)

This solidifies her yearning for answers to conclude her confused identity. The narrator continuous in her quest to understand why she is different. She debates

"but then there is a difference between us-she need never ask questions anyway, as everything is clear to her: her religion, her history, her caste and the code of behaviour she is expected to follow" (133-134)

As a young girl, the narrator is obsessed with 'bindi', nail polish, 'ghagra' and silver anklets. Naomi, the narrator's mother is shocked at her daughter's dress she punishes the narrator and goes on to explain the correct Jewish dress code for young girls. The narrator had to follow these rules half-heartedly. The young narrator is burden with the fact that she had to conform to the rules of the home and give up her girlish wishes even as a little girl.

The narrator's attraction for aspects of Indian culture is common among the Bene-Israel youth. They are attracted to Indian languages and cultures. They seem to take their friends' career choices as examples despite the disapproval of Jewish elders. The narrator herself chooses to study Sanskrit in her college. Even her teachers are amazed to listen to her beautifully recited 'slokas'. Later, influenced by her

professors, she becomes a vegetarian and drapes white sarees in Gujarati style. Her mother Naomi, becomes petrified fearing that her only daughter is converting and finally to ease the tension in the family, the narrator takes up psychology. However the Indian philosophy she learnt has made lasting impact on the narrator. She concludes that this identity crisis, culture crisis, isolation and all that confusion into one phenomena: the 'Maya'.

“Everything is maya, and it has spun a web around us. What appears around us is not that which exists. Behind the curtain of the synagogue, in the Hebrew inscriptions on the grave, in the light of the candle, is that which we try to grasp but cannot, because that which we are looking for does not have the eyes of Shakti, mesmerising us with belief.

Everything is maya, the illusion of so many births, so many shipwrecks, so many voyages, so many massacres. Yet one can take a dip in the Dead Sea and emerge in the Ganga having lived through a whole landscape of experiences” (192 193)

Through a wall city, Esther David has opened a whole new world of psyche of an immigrant population who yearns to belong but still holds on to their roots. It is a strange world a native who is born and lived in the same land as his ancestors could never fathom on their own.

Bibliography

David, Esther. *The Walled City: A Novel*. Syracuse UP, 2002.

Google Search.

www.google.com/search?q=The+Atlas+of+Ethnographic+Society+is+reports+more+than+two+tousand+distant+cultures+in+India&oq=The+Atlas+of+Ethnographic+Society+is+reports+more+than+two+thousand+distant+cultures+in+India+&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOdIBC TE3MzRqMGoxNagCDLACAfEFT2yKdbyOt74&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

Wikipedia contributors. “Bene Israel.” *Wikipedia*, 2 May 2025,

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bene_Israel#:~:text=In%20response%2C%20the%20Bene%20Israel,1948%20as%20a%20Jewish%20homeland.