

Contentment in Cultural Assimilation: A Study of Esther David's *The Walled City*

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Abstract

Cultural Assimilation is sometimes referred to as melting pot. It is a process of consistent integration whereby members of an ethnocultural group (such as immigrants, or minority groups) are "absorbed" into an established, generally mainstream community. This process presumes a loss and gain for many characteristics of the absorbed group, This paper Titled "*Contentment in Cultural Assimilation: A Study of Esther David's The Walled City*" focuses on the Contentment through conscious and unconscious Assimilation by the absorbed community namely Bene Israel, largest Jewish community in India as portrayed by the author in her book the Walled City, which seems to be Semi-Autobiographical. This paper attempts to bring out the multiple cultural significations in the text with Integrity and compassion runs between the host and mainstream communities in India for about two centuries.

Keywords: History, Cultural Assimilation, Ethnicity, Acculturation, Multiculturalism, Contentment.

Introduction

"A harvest of peace is produced from a seed of contentment." Inner satisfaction with society would be the definition of Contentment. Contentment and happiness are highly valued today, and that is the purpose of life, Contentment blooms in a healthy environment where there is absences of tussles and quarrels but the presence of acceptance, compassion and Integrity. In this paper, the researcher focuses on Contentment through the lens of Culture and their Assimilation. Culture is the lifeblood of a vibrant society. Still, the very concept of Culture is an assumption because of its modes of variation, on the other hand, culture provides essential social and economic benefits. With improved learning and health, increased tolerance, and opportunities to come together with others, Culture enhances our quality of life and increases overall well-being for both individuals and communities.

Cultural Assimilation is the process of acquiring the Culture of the mainstream community by the host community, which results in social inclusion. When the host community receives the qualities of dominating cultures, they are culturally assimilated. Here acquiring Culture explicitly mean adopting languages, customs, costumes and cuisines.

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According to Wikipedia, History of Jews in India reaches back to ancient times, possibly around 50 A.D. Judaism has become an integral part of Indian history, cultures, and society. Indian Jews are a religious minority of India. Still, unlike in many other parts of the world, they have lived in India without any instance of antisemitism from the local majority populace. The better-established ancient communities have assimilated a large number of local traditions through cultural diffusion. The Jewish community has often been applauded for integrating entirely with the local population. Jewish acculturation to India has many components. Most people in the community have adopted Indian mainstream cultures without ever ceasing to be Jews by religion.

Esther David, born to a Bene Israel family in Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat, wrote several novels about the Jews of India that are partly fictional and partly autobiographical. She writes in English and her novels are based on the Jewish experience in India. She weaves her stories around the Bene Israel Jewish community of India. Esther David received the national Sahitya Akademi Award for English Literature in 2010 from the Government of India. David's debut novel *The Walled City* is all about Jewish life in the old city of Ahmedabad at the time of independence. The wall in the title metaphorically means invisible walls that separated India's religions, languages, and castes. These walls also allowed India's Jews to maintain their identity in spite of Assimilation.

Judaism in India has its significance in Indian English writing and Indian Fiction. In the late 20th century, 150 years after Jews had appeared in Western and Russian novels, they also became visible in Indian English-language literature. These books were more widely read, in and outside India. The authors are Anita Desai, Amitav Gosh, V.S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and Vikram Seth. Many of these authors have spent part of their lives outside India, mainly in America or Britain some live permanently there, and one, Naipaul, has never lived in India. Thus they have a foot in both worlds, the West and India, yet they are quintessentially Indian. They focus on Indian problems and want to speak to the Indian public. These authors have published five books with major Jewish characters and themes. Also, there are at least five more books by these and other authors containing relevant references to Jews or Judaism.

Discussions and Interpretation

David brings out her experiences as Jews in India through an unnamed narrator, who is also a protagonist, the novel *The Walled City* set the 1940s in Pre Independent India in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. It is estimated that India's Jewish population peaked at around 20,000 in the mid-1940s and began to rapidly decline due to their emigration to Israel after its creation in 1948. Since the formation of modern state Israel in 1948, the majority of Indian Jews have "made Aliyah" or emigrated to that country. This paper focuses on the Jews who decided to stay back after the formation of new land and who proclaimed themselves as Indians.

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*I look at my image in the mirror. I am but a wisp of
that memory, and sometimes I question my
Jewishness. My complexion is a deep brown like
Subhadra's and my long plait is tied with red
tassels. I could be her sister. (22)*

The unnamed narrator frequently associate herself with her Hindu neighbour Subhadra and convinces that she might be one of them.

Uncle Menachem cannot imagine lunch or dinner without gulab jamuns or pedas (13)

Accepting different cuisine is part of cultural Assimilation, acquiring other Culture does not describe a singular, fixed entity rather it is a way of thinking, that can be very productive in understanding behaviour or it also doesn't mean neglecting one and accepting another. Culture necessarily changes, and is changed by, a variety of interactions, with individuals, media, and technology.

*So we sit in the mosaic-tiled drawing room and
eat from brass thalis. I smell for hours on in fingers
the hot Gujarati dal, basmati rice, sour potato curry
and sweet and sour mandi pickle. (21)*

This research is a multi-dimensional study on Indian Jews' Culture and their Assimilation. the better-established ancient communities have assimilated a large number of local traditions through cultural diffusion. The Jewish population in India is hard to estimate since each Jewish community is distinct from different origins. The accurate historical and the enriched cultural background of the research population shall be brought to the knowledge of the general public as well as community members.

*Granny wears the nine-yard sari in the Maharashtrian style
and covers her head. She speaks to us in Marathi.
We answer her in Gujarati.
she always scolds Hannah and Naomi for not teaching us enough Marathi.
It is our mother tongue, she says. (23)*

Naomi is the mother of the narrator who is trying balance between her own Culture and the mainstream Culture and their way of life. Without hesitation, Granny, who is considered to be the

oldest member of the family knowing Hebrew is their mother tongue, scolds Naomi not teaching kids Marathi. Cultural Assimilation acquires unconsciously in most of the households, this happens when they accept their society and cultures practiced around them.

*When I tell him that we will always have Ganesh.
Samuel says seriously that all religious texts are different
but he doesn't know how and I surprise him by telling
him of the similarities between the stories of Krishna and Moses. (29)*

Conclusion

Narrator not only adopts but also accepts mainstream Culture and starts her life with acceptance yet preserved her Jewish Culture. The minority culture does change dramatically and loses cultural separateness, but the majority culture also changes during this process. The initial argument is not Cultural Assimilation but the peace and Contentment around them in their foreign land. Contentment matters, Culture is not constant, it changes when civilization changes, but harmony remains the same.

Judaism has been a subject of various literature in India but this research approaches in new dimension portrayal of Indian Jews and their culture in unique perceptive. This research focuses on the cultural and psychological aspects of Indian Jews from Indian Jewish writer's preceptive, Judaism is one of the ancient religions in India. Jews came to India and remained there since times immemorial. Although a sizeable number at its peak, the Jewish population in India has diminished drastically, leaving behind a minuscule minority who are trying to keep their traditions alive. It is often overlooked and may be deemed unimportant. This research helps people who are ignorant of one of the ancient foreign dying communities in India and helps to give them the recognition that has been ignored all these years. This research shall open up various opportunities for the community amongst in various fields and thus the minority community who happen to part of Indian Culture, society and history gets its long due recognition in literary fields.

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