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A Narrative Analysis of Book of Rachel by Esther David as a Narrative of Cultural Integration



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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to look into the narrative of the novel 'Book of Rachel' by Esther David and bring out the narrative methods that make it a narrative of cultural integration. The story of the novel is located in the Bene Israel community in India and carries the story of the protagonist Rachel Dandekar, an old Bene Israeli woman, who refuses to return to the holy land of Israel in

response to the Aliya, the holy call to the Jews to return to Israel. The analysis examines the working of intertextuality and focalization that creates the narrative hermeneutics rendering it a work of cultural integration.

KEYWORDS

Indian Jewish Literature, Narrative Analysis, Cultural Integration, Esther David

RESEARCH PAPER

The Bene Israel community of Jews in India arrived on the west coast of India, in Danda near Alibaug around 175 BCE where they were shipwrecked as they were on their journey sailing away from persecution. It is said that seven men and seven women survived the shipwreck and buried the others on the banks of Danda. Their graves remain a shrine and monument for the memory of the Bene Israel. They were shown hospitality by the natives of the land, settled on the west coast of India and came to be known as the *Shanwar Telis* because they took up the occupation of oilpressing but refrained from work on the Jewish Sabbath. The Bene Israel were one of the few tribes of Israel that arrived in India at different times in history and settled in different regions as they fled from persecution.

With the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948 (Declaration of Establishment of the State of Israel, mfa.gov.il) the Jews who had migrated to different parts of the world due to religious persecution were given a call to return to their homeland Israel. Many Jews obeyed the call and made their way back to Israel.

The author of 'Book of Rachel', Esther David is an Indian Jewish author, an artist and sculptor. She is a winner of the Sahitya Academy Award 2010. She has received Hadassah Brandeis Institute Research Award, USA for documenting the Bene Israelite Jews of Gujarat and the study of Indo-Jewish cuisine. The French translation of 'Book of Rachel' received the Prix Eugenie Brazier.

The protagonist of the novel *Book of Rachel* is a representation of a Bene Israeli woman who refused to obey the call to return to Israel as she believed that India was the holy land for her. As most of the Jews left India, the synagogues could not maintain the minimum number of members required for conducting a service. Therefore, the old synagogue that was dear to Rachel was left in disuse. She would, however, clean it and see to its maintenance religiously. A character named Mordecai was the trustee of the synagogue and being a cunning man he planned to sell the land of the synagogue to a commercial farmer named Chinoy so that he could utilize the money for his own migration to Israel. Rachel was a devout Jew and decided to protect the synagogue as a relic that was the memory of her people, her ancestors who had taken refuge on the land. She rallies the help and support of the Jews all over the world to protect the synagogue. The plot moves on as a young lawyer Henry helps her discover that the land had actually been gifted to her ancestors by the then maharaja of the area. However, the fraudulent deal by Mordecai was almost complete. The plot employs the use of supernatural intervention in the way of Prophet Elijah appearing to Chinoy and directing him to return the land of the synagogue to Rachel.

The underlying schema of the archetype of the myths and legends embedded in the narrative and the narratives associated with various objects and monuments is deciphered and compared with the plot of the story. The narrative of the customs and the symbolic devices used are analyzed for the kind of focalization employed.

The author has addressed the state of human relationships resulting from the various phenomena such as the creation of the diaspora, immigration, forced immigration, creation of refugee camps, religious conversions and excommunication. The protagonist goes beyond these forces that threaten to lead to mental and emotional conditions of fragmentation and alienation and her efforts are successful in overcoming hatred and prejudices at the personal level, at the level of the family, the communities and across nations.

The narrative layer of the novel is structured in the format of a recipe book. The story is divided into chapters, each beginning with a different recipe and an illustration depicting the episode of the story and the meal described. The recipe is not written professionally. It has a homely feel to it as if the woman is conversing with a narratee belonging to a different culture. The episodes of the story follow the recipe with notes and comments on the recipe,

its ingredients, its variations according to culture, its significance and the customs associated with it. Each episode of the story connects with the recipe described before it. The story then unfolds itself recipe-by-recipe to tell how a mix of Esther's culinary skills, hospitality, love for her homeland and belief in the Prophet Elijah help her to win her case against the sale of the land of the old synagogue.

Every recipe and the episode that follows is significantly linked providing the recipe or the meal with greater value in the lives of the characters involved. As stated in the article 'South Asian Literatures: Beyond Borders, Across Boundaries' by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal that:

"A distinct South Asian literary identity, drawn from interconnecting languages, culture, food, music and oral heritage is emerging in modern fiction, and in social media. It cuts across the boundaries of religion and ideology, and stretches the limits of static political maps."

The novel *Book of Rachel's* narrative attempts, through the use of actants like recipes and stories and songs, binds across community loyalties. The analysis of the narrative presents the actants used to bring about cultural integration between the Maharashtrian Indians and the Bene Israeli Jews in India.

Narrative is found in the way the meals are prepared and as she describes the alternatives used in the Maharashtrian and Jewish cuisine recipes, there is flux of attachment to both the cultures as she adjusts ingredients to the dietary laws of the Jews and associates value to the Maharashtrian meals as they worked changes in her life. It also adds comments regarding the significance of that particular recipe in the culture of the community.

'Choose a big pomfret, according to the dietary law, a fish with scales, never without scales. Also, avoid a bruised fish..' (David, p.1)

This statement refers to the dietary law of the Jews that allows only fish with scales to be eaten. The comments about the Jewish dietary law that prohibits lamb to be cooked in milk and therefore coconut milk is used as a substitute in Jewish cuisine takes on an additional level of value when the comments also include the connecting cultural link, the coconut: 'Influenced by Indian ritual, Jews also believe that coconut is auspicious for new beginnings.'

The comments that go along with the recipes are the protagonist's discourse with her cultural history that creates a reference narrative in which the episode that follows would induct an interpretation. The recipe on fried fish comments on the fish being a protector acts as a foreboding of the woman Rachel, 'the protector' not of the domestic household only but the house of worship of the community, the synagogue. The comments and the illustration refers to the 'hamsas' a good luck sign in Jewish homes. This cultural symbol is also called the hand of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed. This cultural sign is poignant in reference as it is common to two major communities Jews and Muslims.

The recipes are extradiegetic. They fall outside the first narrative but pose to be the underlying narrative that binds the episodes together. The comments regarding the Jews, their dietary habits are also extradiegetic. However, the comments regarding the meals can be called 'linkers' or 'registers' as they become a part of the diegesis, a part of the theme of the story.

Thus, narrative is created by way she constructs meanings. The use of languages becomes significant for cultural associations. The names of the recipes are not all Jewish or written in their English versions. There are recipes that are given their Marathi names as in

Saat Padar, Sown Kadhi, Peethal these are basically Maharashtrian recipes. But the very Jewish traditional ceremonial meals made for the Pessach, though given the traditional Jewish names, have the chapter titled in Marathi as '*Anashi Dhakacha San*'. These titles also help elaborate the way in which the Bene Israel nativized themselves in India.

'She needed to be in the land she had known, a land where her other half, Aaron, was buried, the familiar land which belonged to their forefathers. Whenever her sons and daughters spoke about her immigration to Israel, she shivered and imagined they would imprison her forever in an unknown land and tie her tongue with the language of their prayers.' (David, p. 3)

'As a rule she spoke in Marathi, the language she had known since her birth' (David, p. 4).

Her sons and daughters had immigrated to Israel and her grandchildren spoke Hebrew. She was appreciative that they spoke the language of the Holy Book of the Jews, The Torah, but was pleased that her children spoke to her in Marathi and her grandchildren could manage a few broken Marathi words.

The narrative describes Rachel as a person who though belonging to the Jew community the Bene Israel Teli, would dress, behave and speak in a way that it was easier for the people of the village to accept her as one of them.

'..they often introduced her to their relatives as a Konkanasth Brahmin. Rachel took pride in her new-found identity, which made her a part of their lives, not a stranger who belonged to a minority community' (David, p.5).

The meaning that a narrative induces is because the reader/narratee engages in dialogue reinterpreting experiences in relation to other cultural narratives so that there is a constant refiguring of cultural identity (Ricoeur 1983/1984) Thus the levels of discourse in the given narrative is between Rachel and the Jewish community, Rachel and the narrative of her ancestors, Rachel and her surrounding culture. During this process of she refigures her own cultural identity.

The myths, legends, festivals, meals, dietary laws, costumes build up a sense of cultural identity. The narrative also bears on intertextuality as it entwines myths and legends that make up the spirit of the two cultures and entwine them into the design of the narrative of cultural integration.

The stories and legend that the narrative uses include the story of the Prophet Moses, Prophet Elijah, Queen Esther, that are common to the major semitic religions, the story of the Passover, the Exodus of the Jews and entwines it with the story of Lord Krishna. Rachel is presented as singing a *bhajan* to Lord Krishna and she remembers how the story of the Prophet Moses was also similar to that of Krishna. Both were targeted to be killed at birth, yet they both escape and both escape with the help of a river. The connecting cultural links continue in the narrative as when a popular song about the child Krishna is modified to a *bhajan* to the child Moses floating in a basket on the river Nile. (Pg 13) This brings about the similarities in the stories of prophet Moses of the Jews and Lord Krishna the god of the Hindus. At the time of Prophet Moses birth, The Hebrews were slaves of the Egyptian superpower. Feeling insecure about the growing population of the Jews, the then Pharaoh, Egyptian ruler, commanded all male babies to be killed at birth. However, the prophet Moses when born was hidden in a basket and floated on the river Nile to safety. Similarly, Lord Krishna's maternal uncle, the King Kans, being warned in a prophecy, did not want the child of Devaki to be born as he would kill Kans. Seven children born to Devaki were killed at

birth,. However, baby Lord Krishna was carried across the river Yamuna by the working out of a miracle and was saved. The similarities in the stories were such that the hymns composed for one of them could be sung for the other. Thus, this reference brings about a unifying concept.

The narrative includes the celebration of the Jewish festivals of Purim and the Pesach. Both the texts of the festivals revert to the attempts of the ancient rulers, King Artaxerxes and the Egyptian Pharaoh trying to annihilate the Jews in their kingdoms similar to the Holocaust. The festivals celebrate the rescue of the Jews as a community. In the case of the Pesach or the Passover, it is a reminder that the children of the Jews were protected from the angel of Death as it passed over them killing only the children of the ‘other’, the Egyptians. As Rachel prepares the festive symbols of Pesach she narrates the meaning of every act of preparing the meal and what each item was in remembrance of. Thus, performing an adherence to the memory of the salvation of the Jews however, at the same time locating her own concern that she does not want to be the ‘other’ in the land she considers her own. The Pesach initiated an exodus of the Jews to safety whereas she interprets her own concerns to the Prophet that she did not want the exodus from India. She did not want the memory of the Jews to be erased from the land of India that had sheltered them. The *bhajan* sung for baby Lord Krishna reminds her of Prophet Moses, and the Pesach reminds her of her own attachment to India. Thus, performing a new story, her attempts becoming a new cultural narrative. The narrative of the novel thus transforms the narrative of segregation underlying the myths, legends, rituals into narratives of integration in the global multicultural scenario. It dips into the cultural backdrop of the writer and rewrites the stories of individuals who through their characters bring about integration among diversity.

Ceremonial meals are described in detail in the narrative according to the three Jewish ceremonial days the Pessach, Purim and Tish B’Av. These three festivals are significant to the community of the Jews as they represent the Jews survival through communal hatred. The section titled ‘Puranpoli’ has the comments that relate the meal with the Jewish festival of Purim and the Indian festival of Holi. Both the festivals fall on the same lunar festival. The mention of Purim and Queen Esther connect to another major event of Jewish history where the community of Jews was targeted. Queen Esther had no voice. She gathered the Jews together and asked them to observe three days of fasting and prayer for her as she attempted to broach the subject to the king endangering her own life. The day when the Jews were saved is celebrated as Purim.

This is an example of self-interpretation where the common text of a *bhajan* brings a story out of its cultural framework because of the narrator seeing the parallel between the two. Every experience of the individual would lead to an interpretation that would entangle or disentangle one from their own earlier cultural frameworks. For the Jews that migrated to Israel, they interpreted the *Aliyah* according to their association with the cultural narrative that made up their identity for themselves. For Rachel Dandekar, who stayed back in India in spite of her being old and her sons and daughters deciding to migrate to Israel with their families, her interpretation of ‘home’land and ‘holy’land belonged to her experience and her interpretation. She had an alternative point of view and it challenged the interpretations offered by her Jewish community.

The Cemetery where Rachel’s ancestors, who were shipwrecked on the Indian shore and took refuge in India, were buried in the seven wells of Kehim beach, the rocks Chanderi-Underi where the shipwreck occurred and *Eliyahu Hannabi cha Tapa* , the Rock of the Prophet are memorials to the Jews’ relationship with India as their ‘motherland’ that gave them refuge. The old synagogue that Rachel struggles to save in a token of monuments that are actants that remind the population of the heritage of the different communities that co-exist and cooperate in multicultural settings.

Thus intertextuality, discourse and focalization engaging the narrative design guides in explicit or implicit ways to draw on archetypal symbols or patterns and evolve their own dynamic movement within the multicultural rubric. In the article titled ‘Understanding Narrative Hermeneutics’ published in ‘Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies’, Jens Brockmeier and Hanna Meretoja point out hermeneutically oriented narrative studies conceptualizes narrative in terms of a subject who strives to give meaning to his or her experiences, while at the same time radically decentering—that is, socializing and historicizing—this subject. It centers on our capacities of interpretative understanding, interacting, and meaning construction. We always encounter the present moment within the horizon of experience shaped by our past experiences and by the cultural traditions and forms of life in which we have become who we are. This historical matrix is always in flux all our interpretations are reinterpretations, interpretations of previous interpretations to which they add, from a different point of view in time (and often also in space), new versions, as minimally distinct from each other they might be. The narrative gives the protagonist new interpretations creating new possibilities of action; they also are actions themselves, interventions that change the very world in which we live. Rachel has her own mind regarding obedience to the institutional Jewish community. For her, her religious commitment was personal and individualistic. She did not look towards the whole international community of Jews but at the Bene Israel community in India as her community. The narrative has a world creating effect as it contributes to both the understanding of our historical world and our ways of being in this world. Thus, developing the old synagogue and the character Rachel as synonymous to it, the narrative develops into a narrative of integration.

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