

**MAPPING INDIA'S BENE ISRAEL:
ZIONISM, MIGRATION AND DIASPORIC MEMORY IN
SOPHIE JUDAH'S *DROPPED FROM HEAVEN* AND MEERA
MAHADEVAN'S *SHULAMITH***

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Abstract

Jews perpetually had a convoluted existence as a consequence of their lived reality as a diaspora. Contrary to their condition in much of the countries where they encountered religious persecution and exile, Indian soil with its absence of anti-Semitism facilitated the Jews to occupy a prominent position in this land.

The creation of state of Israel- the land of their prayers and longing triggered a mass exodus of the Indian Jews to the Promised Land. The purpose of this research is to critically analyse this immigration of the Indian Jews, particularly of the Bene Israel Jews, the elements that motivated such an exodus, and their complex diasporic existence, considering Sophie Judah's *Dropped from Heaven* and Meera Mahadevan's *Shulamith*. The research paper is framed on the statement: 'The creation of Israel unsettled the Bene Israel Jewish community in India'. The study arrives at a finding that the religious fondness, better socio economic opportunities, inability in perpetuating their religious practices fostered their exodus and the state of Israel as an entity significantly contributed to the shrinkage of the Jewish population in India.

Keywords : *Bene Israel Jews, Diaspora, Israel, Immigration*

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Introduction

India's benevolent standpoint added one of the first foreign religions to its religious mosaic- Judaism. Jewish history in India is never marked by any distressing events as opposed to their condition in much of the countries. The Jews of India are not an analogous community. They are divided into sub-communities each having its own noteworthiness and historical background. The three main Jewish communities in India are the Cochin Jews, the Baghdadis and the Bene Israel. Though they peacefully integrated into the Indian society, they always craved to return to the land of their prayers.

The need to perpetuate the Jewish identity and to put an end to the Jewish diaspora resulted in the Zionist Movement which eventually led to the creation of Israel. The founding of the Jewish in 1948 drastically transformed the Indian Jewry. The Bene Israel Jews just like other Jewish communities in India, with towering hopes of settling peacefully in the land of their prayers immigrated to Israel. But the formation of state of Israel didn't help the Indian Jews to experience the marvel that they yearned for and dreamt of.

The present study attempts to analyse how the Zionist Movement and creation of Israel unsettled the Bene Israel Jewish community in India, by considering *Dropped from Heaven* by Sophie Judah and *Shulamith* by Meera Mahadevan, as cultural texts. The analysis of these two works brings into light, the hardships faced by the immigrants in the new land and the problems confronted by those who preferred to stayed back in India. Since the Bene Israelis were welcomed by racial prejudices in the Promised Land, the belief that all the Jews would be unified in the Holy Land based on their religious commitment- their identity as a Jew, turned to be a farce. The Bene Israel Jews craved to return to their 'homeland'. But in India too, with their dwindling population, they were almost exiles. The tension resulting from this is sketched by the two Bene Israel writers in their works. Their complex diaspora question is attempted to address in the work. Indian Jewish authors documents the stories that portrays their community and it's shrinkage. In the study, the selected fictional works will be analysed to explore how the writers depicts the effects of immigration in their narratives and will examine the subsequent ambivalent state, identity crisis, cultural exchanges, the sense of longing and memory, alienation, etc. faced by the immigrants.

Material and Methods

Sophie Judah is a Bene Israel Jew who later immigrated to Israel. *Dropped from Heaven* is a collection of stories accentuated by her self reflection on her community. The collection of stories which are set in the fictional town named Jwalanagar depicts her dwindling community and the nineteen interconnected stories present the readers with insightful and gentle episodes. The not much explored community life is presented through the different stories over the course of more than a century.

The formation of Israel and the immigration of the Bene Israelis to the newly found Jewish state inspired by the Zionist ideology has brought in significant changes viz. intermingling of cultures, identity, language, etc. As the Jewish diaspora transcended the borders and scattered to diverse ends, cultural exchanges were an inevitable element. A pluralist society like India where composite cultures coexists, cultural practices of the Bene Israel community got merged and there occurred a fusion of Indic and Judaic. So the society became interlinked and adapted to cross cultures. An impeccable replication of their cultural practices may not be possible in the host countries amidst internal disparities. Cultural hybridisation comes into play here- without being assimilated, the Bene Israelis also adopted the indigenous cultures and integrated happily into the Indian society while retaining their Jewish identity. Coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, the term transculturation is used to signify the merging of cultures without being assimilated. In Cuban Counterpoint he opines that transculturation does not involve an assimilation of one culture, rather it merges different cultures and forms a new one (Ortiz 102-103).

The characters in *Dropped from Heaven* though peacefully situated in the Indian context, have a deep rooted affection towards their community and culture. The instances of transculturation in Judah's novel occurs in a tuneful manner where harmony exists between varying groups.

In the story "My Friend Joseph," Joseph buys a packet of pedas. When Subadhar Kolet gave his consent for the marriage, Joseph took out the packets and distributed it (Judah 11). "Joseph's hand went to his pocket, and he took out a packet of slightly squashed pedas. He placed one in the mouth of our father-in-law-to-be and one in the mouth of our mother-in-law-to-be" (12). This practice of distributing sweets in connection with a wedding celebration which is assumed from the Maharashtrian wedding ceremony, does not assimilate the Jewish practices, rather it entangles and blends multiple elements. Similarly, the incorporation of 'mehndi' 'rakhi' ceremony etc. allows the Bene Israelis not to completely forsake their identity and at the same time this adoption ensures a peaceful social interaction in the host country. Transculturation bedims the fringes of culture.

Being placed in a diasporic space, it is inevitable that the Jews adopt the native languages of India. *Dropped from Heaven* presents adoption of multiple languages not as a mere imitation, but as developed as a result of different cultural contacts. Adoption of Hindi and Marathi languages in their conversation by the Bene Israelis signifies the disintegration of border limitations and contributes to the transcultural world. Thus transcultural communication is a noteworthy aspect in the novel.

Occupying this land for years, Indianness were prominently seen in the Bene Israelis in terms of cultural practices, language, etc. They mediated between the boundaries and embraced multiple linguistic and cultural ties. They developed a transnational space for themselves to perform their communal activities. Jews, who occupied themselves in varied diasporas and experienced many cultures, in the transcultural context, were able to maintain their own cultural practices without facing an assimilation of their cultures. Thus, transculturation is constituted through the involvement from diverse connections and alliance across spaces. Though the Jewish community adopted the cultural practices of the native land along with their customs, they strived hard to sustain their community and tradition. An existence in a multicultural context will also have a profound influence on one's identity.

Diasporic problems which encompasses an oscillation between 'here and there' existence of the immigrants are remarkably ingrained in both the novels- *Dropped from Heaven* and *Shulamith*. In the contact/transmission between the host and the immigrants, there can never be a triumphant fusion/recognition of identity for the diasporants. Constantly there is a sense of absence/deprivation. Therefore, in a multicultural context, hybridity, " a term for a wide range of social and cultural phenomena involving 'mixing'" (Kalra et. 71) and the subsequent ambivalence- 'an in between state' becomes prominent. Homi K Bhabha in his most influential work *The Location of Culture* elaborates: "hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitutes it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives (Bhabha 211).

The diasporic self of the Bene Israel Jews made them exist in an 'in between' space and hybridity thus exists between the boundaries of identity creating a dual mode. Throughout her gentle tale, Sophie Judah portrays a community which have an instable dual identity as a result of their existence in a multicultural context. The lived reality of the Jewish community as a diaspora had already made their identity hybrid. Their existence in India for centuries had almost gained them an Indian identity. The role of religion in the formation of identity was crucial for the Jewish community. The creation of state of Israel, the Holy Land of the Jews fostered a mass

movement of Jews and the Bene Israel community in India were never an exception. A community which longed and prayed for Jerusalem, throughout their existence in India, were not able to place themselves neither in India nor in the Promised Land. The Jewish diaspora in India thus developed an identity which was complex and multi layered. They are a diaspora in India, and in Israel, they were mostly regarded as Indians rather than Jews. They faced with a complex question of where they belong to and where they will be placed.

Stories in *Dropped from Heaven* depicts the conflicts that the characters face with the migration of their friends and relatives. The relocation of the Bene Israelis to Israel after 1948 resulted in the dwindling of the community. Most of the people who made a move and ones who preferred to stay back suffered equally.

The short story "A Girl from My Hometown" deals with the issues of immigration to Israel. It depicts how the Zionist yearning of the Bene Israelis to move to the Holy Land affects the first generation migrants of a household who has become more of an Indian. The marriage proposal between Gershon and Esther breaks when the groom to be announced his plan to migrate to Israel after the marriage. This led to a series of mixed opinions among the family members. Esther's father expressed his strong disapproval to this (Judah 175-176). He spoke about a son's duty to his parents. "What would happen to the old people if all the young men and women left them and went to Israel" (176). "Are you going to lead an exodus? Already one of my sons and two daughters want to leave like you. What would I do without my children?" (177). These words of the old man reveals his angst concerned with the immigration. His children's plans to move to Israel deaden him and he is caught in deep emotions. As he has become more of an Indian, he cannot forgo his Indian identity and embrace the new land.

In the story, it can be inferred that Esther's father felt a belongingness throughout his existence in India and was so very keen on spending his last days in his 'homeland' together with his family. He was anxious about whether he will be forced to leave and uprooted from India. An uneasiness is reflected in his statements. Gershon's father too had anxieties just like Esther's father. "His father had not objected, but his displeasure and sorrow on losing his son was obvious to everybody" (181). The angst of the older generation reflects the impossibility of maintaining their community. Since a small group, they were unable to create their own community where they could retain the old traditions and practices. The older generation were totally ambivalent about integrating with the Israel society. It was something too foreign for them to adapt to. The fusion that they underwent resulted in a sense of duality. They were placed in an in between stage as they existed closer to the host land and cannot move to the so called 'homeland' of theirs. Thus, the immigration

had caused traumatic experiences in both the fathers. It can also be noted that at a later stage Esther's brother and Esther herself too have moved to Israel. Their immigration indicates the shrinkage of the Jewish population. Being very few in number, the existing members could not keep their rich past alive. The prevailing social circumstances might have forced them to undertake such a move and corresponding situations contributed to the depletion of their community.

The final story in the collection titled "The Funeral" is more of a pessimistic account about the possibility of maintaining Jewish communities in India as it sketches how the society prepares for its downfall in the twenty first century. In the story, Eli's is hospitalised and in the deathbed she desperately wanted to be buried as a Jew (226-228). Her words reflect the angst of living in a dwindling community. She desperately wanted her last prayer to be performed by a Jew. She cannot break away from their culture (228). In a multicultural context this was something very difficult. Her beliefs being closely connected with the Jewish customs and her identity being that of an Indian, her very belonging to a community which is vanishing posed a serious threat. Being Indian Jewish and/or Bene Israel, a strong adherence to their religious identity was one medium to equipose their relative marginality. But formation and furthering of identity proved complex for her. Indian identity, community's cultural inheritance and the emotions pursued by the way of religion complicated things. The Bene Israel Jews occupying an ambivalent position and having mixed loyalties enables and at the same time restricts activities. The hybrid identity and the resulting conflict that she underwent created a turbulent state for her. The story and the title "The Funeral" becomes apt in every sense as it effectively portrays how the Jewish community life and persistence in sustaining their rich culture has become impossible in India.

A member from the 'little known community'- Meera Mahadevan centres her novel *Shulamith* around a Bene Israel family which is also the first work by a member of India's Jewish community. The novel captures the internal struggles of the eponymous character Shulamith when her husband Michael immigrates to Israel, leaving his family. The ambivalence, identity crisis, 'finding a home', etc. that the Bene Israelis encounter due to their troubled swaying loyalties to the binaries of India and Israelis intensely enclosed in the novel. Indian identity imbibed by them enforces them to stay in this land and at the same time their Jewish solidarity encourages them to immigrate to Israel. "Michael's departure had emptied the house of its very life" (Mahadevan 9). By portraying the lifeless existence of Michael's family members after his departure, the novel becomes evaluative of the Bene Israel community in the changing scenarios.

More than a personal clash, it was Shulamith's and Michael's affinity to India and Israel respectively that had caused the sense of dilemma in them. She considers India as her only homeland where they can settle down peacefully, and on the other hand, Michael believes that the Bene Israelis must move to their Promised Land. Michael believed that Shulamith would also follow him, but she didn't. But it never led to a clash, instead, both decided to stick on to their decisions (20-21). Here, Shulamith cannot only be viewed as a successor of the 'shipwrecked ancestors', but also as an Indian Jew who overcomes the general assumptions about what home mean. She considers India as her 'home' where her community have been peacefully inhabiting without experiencing any strain of Jewish sufferings. She negotiates old and new recognition of identity. But situating herself with regard to her minority community, being placed in a diasporic space that houses diverse culture, as well as her own identity proved complex for her. Her complicated sense of belonging, affection towards both India and Israel and the subsequent hybrid interplay placed her both at fringes and at the centre. They belong to the diasporic space that they developed between India and Israel. No matter how much religious they are, how much they embrace the 'Easternness', she restrain to surrender the Indianness.

Towards the end of the novel, it can be seen that Michael misses India, and desperately wishes to come back and he also now regrets about his decision. By this time Shulamith's health got worsened and she somehow wanted to die. But Uriel's letter which confirmed Shulamith of Michael's return triggered her wish to live. She became excited and fragile at the same time (197-199).

This coming back of Michael shows that he has come to accept the fact that Shulamith was trying to convince him- India is the only place where Jews can settle peacefully. The displacement and the outsidersness he felt during his stay in Israel made his existence over there more complex. He was unable to directly relate to Israel. This inside-outside dichotomous pull that Michael faced with regard to the Indian and Jewish identity made him chose the alternative to return to India. Centuries old stay of the Bene Israel community in India and the fact that he was not able to be 'placed' in the Promised Land gives us a glimpse of how the Indianisation made his position ambivalent in the new land. The question of identification towards India and Israel is obvious. Michael also faced the fused identity which made his existence even more difficult. The concept of homeland and dual identity from migration formed a complex framework. Thus, as Bhabha indicated, his identity became an impure one, rather than a fixed one. His identity got developed by absorbing elements from dual cultures. This hybridity led to an identity crisis. His crossing of borders was thus a gateway full of ambivalence. But at the same time Michael also points out that many of the community members were easily able to adapt to the new circumstances,

but he couldn't (205). He felt like an outcast there. The otherness he felt could be due to his ethnicity and the retaining of Indian Jewish identity. "I alone felt out of place. I longed for this house which has been my home. I was already regretting my decision. It may be the holy land, still it is not my home. My home is in India, in the Big House with Peepal tree"(205).He was not able to perceive the warmth and the sense of community that he had experienced here in India. His move to the Promised Land can wholly be attributed to the religious adherence and the fact that he cannot forsake his Indianness made him return from 'host' country to 'home'. In a traumatizing dispute between two cultures, he chose to return. He awakened to a fact that it is not only the faith that identifies/places oneself in a home.

Michael never criticizes Israel, but the problem was he always longed for and felt nostalgic about India and faced problems to adapt to the new milieu. "Not being able to return may act as a powerful source of nostalgia" (Kalra et al. 11). Here, nostalgia is triggered by feelings of loneliness in the alien land. Michael was always bewildered between the original 'homeland' and feeling of being at home. Memories about homeland are complex. It blurs as generations advance. Experiences in the host land can never erase the reminiscence of the homeland. The idea of home and a positioning with regard to the Bene Israelis forms the core of Shulamith. Return of Michael and the Shulamith's choice to cling to her decision asserts more of Indianness. Proficiently plotted and daintily written, *Dropped from Heaven* and *Shulamith* explores the Bene Israel community, its concerns and also gives insights into its segments of life. Issues of identity, ambivalence, community, culture and diasporic memories are canvassed with influential and emotional continuity.

Conclusion

The religious fervour inspired by the Zionist ideology was the predominant motive that fostered their passion for the Holy Land and the subsequent immigration. Religion always formed the core of the Jewish life and they who equated their identity with their religion immigrated to Israel to settle in the land of their prayers and longing. Though the immigration was motivated on the grounds of their Jewish identity, they found themselves marginalised. The migration never produced the desired outcome- achieving a perfect and positive acceptance.

As the Bene Israelis were oil pressers, the community members did not enjoy a note worthy position in the social hierarchy. As Israel offered better economic and job opportunities, greater amenities, and higher standard of living, these elements acted as a catalyst for the immigration of the ones who craved for a better tomorrow in the Promised Land. Uriel in *Shulamith* moved to Israel because of the better social life and characters are seen inspired by the job opportunities. The employment opportunities were a factor which triggered the immigration.

Since the creation of the state of Israel coincided with the Indian Independence, much of the Indian Jews migrated to Israel because of their concern about their position in the Independent India. The immigration of one member from a family was usually followed by many. The fascination towards the new land, the need to move with the family, etc., has initiated such a move.

Jews who were extremely pious never made any compromise on any aspects of their traditional Jewish life despite their existence in varied circumstances. With much of their population immigrating to Israel, their community started to dwindle which paved way for an inability to perpetuate their religious traditions. There were no enough members to form a 'minyan'- 'a quorum of ten men over the age of 13 required for traditional Jewish public worship'. So, the inability to sustain their religious traditions in India with their shrinking population remains as a significant reason for the immigration of the Bene Israelis to the Zionist state.

Though a miniscule community, the Bene Israel Jews with their peaceful coexistence in this land for years got evolved even as a part of the Indian society. Once a thriving community, with their immigration to the Promised Land started to dwindle and now turned to be a nostalgic reminder. The state of Israel as an entity significantly contributed to the shrinkage of the Jewish population in India.

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