

Rethinking Assimilation: Negotiating Marginalisation, Belonging and Cultural Co-Existence in Esther David's Novel *Book of Rachel*

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Abstract

This paper reconsiders cultural assimilation beyond its conventional framing as the flattening of distinctions and identities through passive absorption into existing structures. Focusing on Esther David's novel *Book of Rachel*, it argues that the literary work presents an alternative vision in which the diasporic community actively negotiates marginalisation and erasure in India. It depicts the process of assimilation as a complex encounter that draws the represented Bene Israel Jewish community into the nation without erasing cultural specificity. This study further examines the community's encounter as diasporic minority with the dominant social structures inviting comparison with "habitus" that often perpetuates social inequalities reproduced in everyday, seemingly personal choices rather than overt force. However, it argues that the intermingling of culinary, linguistic and other traditions of the host culture into the foreign is not confined to habitus or social exclusions internalised by the community or individuals. Rather, the novel asserts deeply rooted belonging of the community in the historical and contemporary nation, posited as transcending habitus and marginalisation simultaneously. Further, the analysis foregrounds the novel as a gender sensitive account that asserts belonging anchored to specific land historically as well as from relatively fluid rather than fixed geography. In the process, the novel is read as reconstruction of community identity that privileges the domestic sphere, wielding individual agency and reshaping community destiny, as the woman protagonist attempts to safeguard the Bene Israel heritage. Thus, the novel presents a significant account of history, memory and practice that encompasses cultures in transition and emerging identities within the framework of the nation. This engagement with the novel illuminates cultural models of coexistence from the Indian subcontinental past, positioning the text as offering new insights into cultural integration in the present context of India.

Keywords

Assimilation, belonging, habitus, heritage, cultural co-existence.