

Video Clip: Ruby Daniel

Preserving Malayalam Jewish Poetry

Ruby Daniel was famous for her exceptional oratory skills from a very young age. She was born in 1912 in Cochin, India, home to an ancient Jewish community. In 1951, she immigrated to Israel and lived on Kibbutz Neot Mordekhai in the Upper Galilee where she collected and translated Malayalam poems and wrote her autobiography.

Suggested Implementations

Hashkafa/Philosophy

1. Prejudice and diversity

Language Arts

1. Autobiographies

Background

Ruby was the first Cochini Jewish woman to author a book. She wrote her autobiography *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*, in collaboration with anthropologist Barbara C. Johnson, in order to illustrate the rich Jewish culture of Jew Town in Cochin. The book is narrated specifically from the perspective of a woman who came of age within this religiously tolerant society with a rich Jewish culture and history. Ruby was determined to preserve that heritage. The book specifically talks about the southwest coastal province of Kerala, nicknamed “God’s Country.” Like the Upper Galilee, the home she adopted once she came to Israel, Kerala was a luscious land full of green.

Growing up, Ruby’s family lived with her mother Leah’s parents, Eliyahu and Rivka (Docho) Japeth. This had a profound impact on her identity. Ruby’s grandmother adored stories and Malayalam Jewish songs, which she transmitted to Ruby. In elementary school, Ruby studied at the local all-girls government school in the morning and then in the afternoon she attended the community’s Jewish school, called the *heder*, where she learned Hebrew, *tefillah*, and Torah. Her mother, Leah, saw that Ruby was an exceptional student, so she went to great lengths to ensure that she would attend a prestigious high school, St. Theresa’s convent school, even pawning her gold chain to pay the tuition. Ruby was the first Cochini Jewish woman to finish high school and even learned at St. Theresa’s affiliated college for a year. She left, however, to help support her family during an economic time of hardship following the death of both her father and grandfather.

Even in that, she was exceptional. Upon leaving the college, Ruby worked as a government clerk and was the first Jewish woman to serve in the Indian Navy.

Beyond her academic and career endeavors, Ruby tells of family interactions on the veranda of their house and Jewish holidays celebrated in Jew Town. Ruby’s family belonged to the Paradesi community, led by the so-called “white” Jews. The family belonged to a section of that community who for many years were denied equal rights in the synagogue because of a controversy over their ancestry. In her

book, Ruby wrote about discrimination she had experienced in Cochin, from some of the Jews who were richer than others and who looked down on Jews with darker skin. Indeed, Ruby was partially guided in writing the book to “set the record straight” about this controversy. But, for Ruby, discrimination didn’t end when she moved to Israel in 1951.

She and her sister lived on the Ashkenazi, secular Kibbutz Neot Mordekhai, where they were the only Jews from India and there was no synagogue. The book analyzes social prejudice in this context of a majority Ashkenazi secular kibbutz in Israel. Ruby managed to remain religious and distinctly Indian in her diet and cultural identity, despite the challenges posed by her surrounding culture.

Ruby Daniel ultimately never married. From 1982 to 1999, Daniel devoted herself to translating 120 Jewish women’s songs from Malayalam into English, inspiring an international project to translate even more of these songs and publish interpretations for each.

But it was not until she published her book in 1995 that Daniel’s story was acknowledged and appreciated by people outside her community. Upon her book’s publication, Neot Mordekhai honored her with a personal reception, and she was also a panelist at “The Jews of India” exhibit in the Israel Museum, serving as a featured guest for its grand opening. She wrote in her book the following profound quote: “It is important for people today to know what happened before they were born, to know about the lives of ordinary women ... wildflowers who bloom in the forest. Nobody sees them and they fade.”

Questions for Discussion

1. Ruby maintained a fairly private life on her kibbutz yet she found it necessary to write about herself. Why was it important? What’s the significance of her life to us today?
2. Part of the reason that Ruby wrote her book was to discuss social discrimination and put it on the table. Watch ASF Institute of Jewish Experience Reclaiming Identity – either video clips on YouTube or listen to the podcasts. Why is it important to talk about the prejudice and acknowledge the pain it causes? Why is it important to know your heritage?

Suggested Readings

About Malayalam songs - <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/sound-issue/words-melodies-hands-and-feet-musical-sounds-of-a-kerala-jewish-womens-dance/>

Johnson, Barbara C., and Ruby Daniel. *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*. Philadelphia: 1995.

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/daniel-ruby>

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