

Urban Sensibility and Indian Sensibility in the Poetical Works of Nissim Ezekiel

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to project Nissim Ezekiel as one of the most prominent Indian poets writing in English, not only as a conscientious artist but also a fine metrical artist with a high conception of his art using the right word at the right place, with a special focus on the projection of 'Urban Sensibility' and 'Indian Sensibility' in his poetry. As a poet of the city, Ezekiel has proved himself to be a man of Urban Sensibilities being fully alive to the ugliness, dirt, squalor and wickedness of a city like Bombay pointing out the dehumanizing discomforts of urban life, and in his poetic realm, he projects, no doubt, a wide panorama of Indian society with its multiracial, multi-cultural and multi-religious character. It beautifully examines how the world of Ezekiel's poetry is, through art, inflamed by a broad deep Indian sympathy towards the human race in general and for the poor, the depressed, the oppressed and the suffering Indians in particular.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, Prominent, conscientious, metrical, high conception, dehumanizing, discomforts, deep sympathy, urban sensibility, Indian sensibility.

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the most prominent Indian poets writing in English, is both a conscientious artist and a fine metrical artist with a high conception of his art using the right word at the right place. Being a prolific writer, he has published, besides many verses in various literature journals and magazines, six anthologies of poems. 'A Time to Change', 'Sixty Poems', 'The Third', 'The Unfinished Men', 'The Exact name' and 'The Hymns in Darkness' and 'Poster Poems' are the collection of his poems. A study of his poetry reveals a gradual evolution of poetic art and genius. Besides poetry, he tried his hand at plays like *Nalini*, *The Sleep Walkers*, *Song of Deprivation* and a few other literary essays and articles including books on *Art Criticism* and Social criticism. However, Ezekiel is known primarily for his poetic creations.

Such a well-established poet Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay on Dec 14, 1924. A Jew by ancestry, he made India his home. He received his school education at Antonio D'Souza high school and college education from Wilson College, Bombay and Birkbeck College, London. After high studies at London, Ezekiel returned to India and worked for some time as Professor and Head of the Department of English, Mittibhai College of Arts, Bombay. Then he worked as a Reader in American Literature in the University of Bombay till his retirement in 1985. After retirement, he kept himself busy in literary activities through PEN-a form of poets, essayists a number of journals like *The Quest*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *The Indian Poetry Series*, and for sometimes he was holding the post of Director for Theatre Unit in Bombay. Thus Nissim Ezekiel is said to have had varied interests, through which he has inspired many other Indian poets to write in this foreign Language.

Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, A.K.Ramanujan, P. Lal, Kamala Das, D. Parthasarathy, Shiv. K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, K.N. Daruwalle are said to have enriched Indian English poetry, of whom Nissim Ezekiel stands out as the most outstanding poet of the post-Independence India. Ezekiel wrote poetry considering it as 'a disciplined art' falling in line with the remark of K.R.S. Iyengar who said:

"Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot and Auden have taught our poets the importance of taking their art seriously. They have realized that easy writing cannot make good poetry. The profession of poetry is a consecrated endeavor and an exacting discipline." (Iyengar 649)

Ezekiel is a pain taking artist who, like Coleridge, believes in using the right word at the right place. "The best poets wait for words" says Ezekiel and he does wait for the appropriate words while writing most of his poems. He practices economy of words in his poems, but the poems never become obscure. Moreover, Ezekiel does exploit to the full the music that is in words. The images used by him are not for embellishment but for illustration for making the unclear clear. Ezekiel's work can be divided into prose, poetry and verse. The bulk of his verse is free including rhymed verse as well. His corpus also contains poster poems, poems meant for singing. Urban experience constitutes an important segment of Ezekiel's work. So does rural experience. Gieve Patel is right in saying: "Ezekiel was the first poet to allow the significant entry of realistic rural experience into Indian poetry in English." (P 17)

Ezekiel's wide travel and his career as an assistant editor of a National weekly, a deck hand on a cargo ship, an executive of a business firm, a factory manager, a school teacher, a university professor all these have given him an insight into the rawness of reality which eluded almost all poets before him. According to Ezekiel, a poet must expose himself to experience so that it will make him feel and react and he must constantly assess his own value both as a poet and as man. The poet who lives and thinks in isolation is likely to have much sympathy with

those who read his poems. Poetry, in order to be successful, must originate in actual experience. Ezekiel has a clear conception of the poetic process by explaining how a poem is written. He writes:

“Every poet knows what it is to be delighted with the poem he has written – the poet walks on this tight rope fear fully but confidently and gets to the other side by the grace of God i.e. by faith, patience and persistence.” (P 49)

It is universally acknowledged that Nissim Ezekiel is a poet of the city. He is a man of urban sensibilities and as has been pointed out by Rajeev Taranath and Meena Belliappa, “the urban theme forms an important strain in Ezekiel’s poetry”. This theme, in fact, runs through most of his poems. In the words of Linda Hess, “Ezekiel is a poet of the city, Bombay” – the critic further adds, “the poet is fully alive to the ugliness, dirt, squalor, and wickedness of a city like Bombay”. In the poem, “A morning walk”, Ezekiel describes this city as a living hell. He calls it “a barbaric city, sick with slums” and adds:

“Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child – like masses, many-tongued.
Whose wages are in words and crumbs”.

In “In India”, the poet dwells upon the poverty, the squat or, the heat and ugliness of an Indian city like Bombay. He describes it as a city of beggars, hawkers, pavement sleepers, hutment-dwellers, slums etc. he also describes ‘the dead souls’, “burnt-out mothers”, “fright and virgins”, “wasted child and tortured animals” of this city. In “Island”, the poet calls Bombay an island of “Slums and Sky Scrapers” it is the habitat of “dragons claiming to be human” city life, as Ezekiel feels and regrets, is cut off from Nature which is a rich source of life. In the poem, “Urban”, Ezekiel laments that for a man living in Bombay, “the hills are always far away and

“The river which he claims he loves
is dry and all the winds lie dead.”

Commenting on the lines, Inder Nath Kher writes: “the persona in this poem.....is always at a great distance from the hills which symbolize the loftiness of spirit.... His river of life is dry, and the winds lie dead in his path, meaning that he is devoid of the creative breath which has the power of regeneration. The protagonist in the poem “Happening” laments the emotional and spiritual loss suffered in an urban setting:

“We have lost
The language of dreams
We have forgotten
Everything but knowledge.”

In the poem ‘Boss’ he flings a satire at the mechanical life of a big official in an urban setting. In the poem ‘Island’ he describes Bombay as a pleasure island of slums and skyscrapers, yet he declares:

“I cannot leave the island
I was born here and belong.”

While talking about the artificial city life, Ezekiel does not fail to perceive the fact that even such a large city as Bombay has its roots in the pastoral and the primitive. The two contraries for the poet exist side by side and are in fact fused and harmonized by the poet’s genius. The primordial and the urban are integrated. For example, in ‘Love sonnet’ the hill on which the lovers meet is not far away from the city lights. From that hill, the lovers look down “at the distant seas” which they find as “a passionate and perpetual mystery. The sea here is the symbol of the flux between life and death. With such a perception, the lovers descend the hill, and happily mingle with humanity in the urban world. Thus, the two contraries – the urban and the primitive, the worldly and the spiritual – are brought together and harmonized by the alchemy of Ezekiel’s genius.

The Indian element in Ezekiel’s poetry derives its strength from his choice of themes and allusions. Ezekiel is a very Indian poet writing in English. His commitment to India, and to Bombay, which is his chosen home is complete in all respects. Anil Darker says, “His entire poetry is stuffed with Indianisms” (P 35). More characters, objects and situations have an Indian air about them in “The Third” (1958) and in the “Unfinished Man” (1960). “Night of the scorpion” is one of the finest poems of Ezekiel which shows that Ezekiel is a typical Indian poet whose interest in the Indian soil and in ordinary human events of day-to-day Indian life is superb. It is a narrative poem. The mother is stung by a scorpion one rainy night. The mother occupies a prominent place in Indian home. We love and respect her. So, all the members of the family and neighbours are very anxious to bring her quick relief. “They are simple and well-intentioned people who believe in the efficacy of prayer. Prayer can ward off the evil influence.

“The peasants came like swarms of flies, and buzzed the name of God a hundred times, to paralyse the evil one.” (CP 136)

The poet also throws light on Indian superstition. The search for the scorpion but are in vain. They are simple and ignorant people who believe that if the scorpion moves, its poison will also move in the mother's blood:

“With every moment that the scorpion made, his poison moved in mother's blood, may he sit still, they said may the sins of your previous birth is burned away tonight, they said may your suffering decrease? the misfortune of your next birth they said.” (CP 130)

The rationalist and skeptical father tries every cause and blessing, powder, herb and beyond:

“He even poured a little paraffin
Upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.” (CP 130)

Ezekiel ironically juxtaposes the world of magic superstition, irrationality and blind faith, represented by the simple peasants with the world of science, rationalism and skepticism represented by the father. The last three lines from an ironic contrast to the whole:

“My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.”

In the poem, “In India”, he brings out the unique relationship between literature and environment. He makes no secret of the fact that he has to put up with poverty, squalor and other dehumanizing discomforts of urban life. The very opening section of the poem gives a rather grim picture of India, a country populated by beggars, hawkers, pavement sleepers and others in the following lines:

“Always, in the sun's eye
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums
Dead soul of men.....
.....
Burnt out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child,
And tortured animal.” (CP 131)

In his famous poem “Background casually”, he reveals “his total commitment to and attachment with Indians” (King 99). It is evident here:

“The Indian landscape sears my eyes,
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners
They say that I am singular,
Their letters overstate the case,
I have made my commitments now
This is one; to say where I am
As others choose to give them selves
In some remote and backward place is where I am.” (CP 181)

The poem, “The Railway Clerk” does significantly capture the miserable existence of a representative of contemporary lower middle class Indian society as stated here:

“My wife is always asking for more money
Money, money where to get money?
My job is such, no one is giving bribe
While the other clerks are in fortunate position
And no promotion even because I am not graduate
I wish I was a bird.” (CP 184)

The fact that Ezekiel is a very much Indian in sensibility can easily be seen from the way he has described a flood in Bihar. The official indifference and apathy for the victims of flood and the craze for publicity of a relief party of students are highlighted with a touch of satire. In the opening lines, the poet creates an atmosphere of the flood affected areas as:

“For a visitor,
To the flood affected areas,
Of Balasore,
In North Bihar,
It is a job to get at the truth
Meet any official,
He will claim his district
Sub-division or block
It is the ‘worst hit’
And pass on a handout
With a statistics of relief work.” (CP 185)

Ezekiel is found evoking a grim picture of Indian poverty in the lines that follow:

“The villagers ran to them
They slapped their bellies and whined;
“I have not eaten for three days”
“My husband has been washed away”
“My parents have abandoned me”
“My son is dying”
“I cannot find my daughter.” (CP 185-86)

In his poetic world, Ezekiel projects no doubt, a wide panorama of Indian society with its multiracial, multi-cultural and multi-religious character. In the poem, “Background, casually”, the Roman Catholic school has Christian, Muslim, Jewish (like the poet himself) and Hindu boys. The Jewish poet, being of a minority community, suffers harassment and persecution at the hands of the boys belonging to other religions. In ‘very Indian poem in Indian English’, the protagonist is a typical Indian believing in Ancient Indian wisdom, in Mahatma Gandhi’s peace and non-violence, his preference of lass to wine. He also voices his Indian indictment of the craze for fashions and foreign things. In the poem, ‘Goodbye party for Miss Puspha T.S’, Miss. Puspha is ironically described as “departing for foreign to improve her prospects”. In the poem namely ‘Entertainment’, Ezekiel describes a monkey-show, a common sight in erstwhile Indian bazaars. It depicts the poverty of the master of the show as well as that of the spectators for the on lookers, having enjoyed the entertainment, like to slink away quietly instead of parting with a few coins. Ezekiel’s Indian sensibility get reflected also in the way he has taken to Indian spiritualism. In his poem, ‘Happening’, he does neatly express the Indian religious belief that the whole cosmos is enshrined within the individual consciousness. He says:

“I am near everybody
Being near myself alone.”

In ‘speech and silence’ he extols the virtue of silence which in Indian thought is highly valued as a means of communication with one’s inner self as well as with God. He says:

“If speech is truly speech, silence
A whisper of eternity.”

He defines silence as “Speech that needs no words”. Ezekiel captures the typical tone of Indian English in the following lines:

“Every day I am reading Times of India

To improve my English language
How one gunman fellow
Throws stones at Indra Behin.”

The man is also quietly hopeful that everything in India is coming slowly “regeneration, remuneration contraception”. Nissim Ezekiel is essentially Indian in his sensibility for he is a great Indian poet writing in English without losing his national identity. He affirms that he is very much an Indian and his roots lie deep in India. He says:

“I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a national outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India, I am an Indian”.

To conclude, it may be said that the world of Ezekiel’s poetry is through art inflamed by a broad deep Indian sympathy towards the human race in general and for the poor, the depressed, the oppressed and the suffering Indians in particular. Ezekiel’s poetic corpus is definitely the single most dynamic influence on Indian poetry in English making the young contemporaries move further along the course chartered by him, for Ezekiel’s greatest achievement lies in his encouraging the Indian context in poetry to sprout roots into the physical reality of the country. In a nutshell, Ezekiel is as good an instigator as a poet and his contribution towards the shaping of the poet in others is as significant as his contribution to poetry. No doubt, Ezekiel’s poetry is the main link between pre-independence and post-independence Indian poetry in English.

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