

Nissim Ezekiel's Depiction of Man and Human Relationship

Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Asst. Professor

Department of English

E.M.G. Yadava College for Women

MADURAI – 625 014

Tamil Nadu, India

rramyachelliah@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines in depth Nissim Ezekiel's social idealism by representing man – woman relationship, thereby making it clear that poetry lives with a unique aliveness which does present the human experiences relationships filled with struggles and miseries and through his poetry, Ezekiel draws the cognizance about living creatures and shows how he symbolizes the polluted society by its condition. He is known as philosophical, religious and Nature's poet whose commitment is nothing but the experience of human life in the society.

Keywords: Nissim Ezekiel, social condition, human values, nature, emotional themes, suffering of human, superstitious belief.

Truly speaking, the prime concern of Nissim Ezekiel is man and his life in the universe. In his poetic realm, he seems to be engaged in an attempt to find out whether life, when stripped bare of its illusions and ideals is worth living and if so, the requisites for man to face it, and to make it meaningful. He obviously directs his focus on men who are unsuccessful in their lives and whose lives are governed by uncertainty, frustration and misery. He suggests that man be armed with courage and love to remedy these evils in life. Mankind, as it is commonly held, is one, though divided by geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic barriers. Basically, it is the same heart that feels and the same head that thinks. Fundamental emotions like love, hate, jealousy etc., are the same and fundamental intellectual factors knowledge, intelligence, etc. are the same too, which work in much the same way. A study of any writer either separated by time or space is bound to bring to light one important and interesting truth – that the raw material is the same – which is, human nature.

Since time immemorial, man has had a pivotal place in literature, thereby providing the never-changing, ever-interesting staple of the writer's pen. Man deserves such importance because he is endowed with a remarkable nobility which enables him to fight against the prodigious forces he is pitted against. He is capable of heroism in the face of the ultimate mysteries fighting valiantly and emerging triumphant in the challenging struggle with the forces that are beyond his control. This makes him superior to any other creature. Now more than ever, the concept of man has acquired new

significance and great importance because the twentieth century is the epitome of the highest progress of man in all fields. Yet man has to work within certain limitations. This awareness of his limitations, his undying faith in the yet unknown and his heroic effort to fight and his admirable resolve to surrender to that which he cannot conquer have inspired many a writer to write on man.

One such a writer is Nissim Ezekiel whose special focus is on his never flagging interest in man. As he is fascinated by man, he does consistently draw from the common repertoire of human experience. Human beings form the fulcrum of the major bulk of his poetry. His poetry lives with a unique aliveness, because it presents living people who work, walk about converse and tell their stories with the freedom of common speech, depicting human situations that are stark real.

No doubt, it may be said that Nissim Ezekiel's first love is man. The struggles and miseries of man in his cosmos have never failed to interest him. Man caught up in the corrupted city life is the prime subject of his creative works. H.M. Williams writes:

“Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet's puzzled emotional reaction to the modern Indian dilemma which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village” (P 116).

This is well exemplified in *Night of the Scorpion* where the peasant superstitions about the scorpion bite are seen in juxtaposition to the modern skepticism of the father and the poetic image of religious ritual, and in the poem “In India” (Later – Day Psalms 50). With its tormented awareness of Bombay:

Here among the beggars
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums
Dead souls of men and gods.

Ezekiel's poetry is nothing but the criticism of life in the best sense of the phrase. He is at his best when he attempts hard to answer questions and reconcile differences. That is the reason why he deals with situations where man is sulking or dreaming or is puzzled in the world. Ezekiel himself says that the major themes of his poetry are “love, personal integration, the Indian contemporary scene, modern urban life, spiritual values” (P 56). Laying focus on humanity, Ezekiel is found to be familiar with humanity in its urban milieu. He is “a poet of the city” (Hess, 3). To Ezekiel, the imagery of nature symbolises the pure and tranquil state of being as opposed to the earthly humdrum. The images of hills, river, wind, skies, sun and rain, as seen in “urban”, for instance, attain a definite significance in their contrast with the images of the city. The two worlds of fanciful dreams and stark realities are set in opposition to each other. The images derived from the world of nature are the archetypal life symbols. K.D. Verma observes:

“They project a pastoral vision of a fully refulgent and harmonious life, a pattern in which man enters into sacred communion with his cosmos, including objects of nature as a

metaphoric condition of his integrated humanity and of his desire to foster a community of beings” (JSAL 231)

Ezekiel’s awareness of nature is not only limited to earth, air, water, fire, etc. but also includes birds and beasts. He mentions “worm” in *A Time to Change*, crows, cats and squirrel in *Sixty Poems*, Sparrows in *The Third*, elephants, cats and birds in *The Unfinished Man*, scorpion and paradise fly-catcher in *The Exact Name* and monkeys in *Hymns in Darkness*. In “Totem” published in *JSAL*, he gives a bountiful catalogue of birds, goats, cats, phoenix, crocodile, lam and ant. “In the country cottage” published in the same journal, a mention of lizards is made. This wide variety of images is symbolic of primitive simplicity. The poet considers these birds and animals to be more humane, and warm than the polluted city dweller. While man assumes many masks and conceals his identity so much that it is ultimately lost, birds and beasts are always unmarred by the ugly hand of affectation and corruption.

Though Ezekiel is far from being a religious poet, he wishes to resort to private meditation. Yet his humanism drives him to reject “all that is grand and mystical in the Indian religious tradition” (Jussawalla 67) and desire “a human balance”. As he is the poet of man, he has an undying interest in man. Human beings engaged in talking, going about their work, making love, committing mistakes, worried over problems, puzzled over mysteries – all that is human, hold an interest for him. He loves out and out the voices of the people for he is “a poet of human situations, human concerns and human voices” (Seetha 183).

Nissim Ezekiel’s philosophical commitment is to the experience of life and his people live amidst us. They belong to a modernized urban world. Theirs is the problem of search for truth and love in this world of deception and corruption. Subjected to the paralyzing influence of the western culture for several centuries since the British rule in India, they are still unable to come to terms with it. They can neither accept it fully nor throw it. The Indian mind with its singular capacity for inclusiveness enabled us to accommodate a variety of races, religions, languages and their costumes, food habits and social customs. But these foreign features coexisted with the Indian elements and in spite of all these the Indian retained his identity. C.D. Narasimhaiah writes:

“The western – educated gentleman who donned his three – piece suit crowned it with a lace turban all right. His house is furnished with Persian carpet, mahogany chairs, seven branched Candelabra, Japanese crockery and Belgian cutlery along with wattle mats, earthen lamps, the green *thoranam* across the door over the threshold and the *rangavalli* in front of the house, as the European rose coexisted with the Mysore jasmine and English cricket with the age-old *chinnidandu*” (P 2).

This is true with the elder generation of Indians. But in the present day, the younger try to ignore the call of their own tradition and culture, lured away by the dazzle and glitter of the siren that is the western culture. They lose their fights against the claims of culture because the very atmosphere of today is enveloped in a shroud of artificiality and hypocrisy. They practice all kinds of

absurdities in the name of modernism. They are free in their ways with everything – costume, character, outlook towards life, etc. It is this picture of the corrupted modern world that Ezekiel captures in his poems. But beneath this assumed exterior lurks a mind which is purely Indian or purely human in its wider connotations. There is a violent storm raging in the minds of every city-bred man caught between the two worlds. While the women, like reeds, try to resist it, the men succumb to it. There are exceptions on either side. Ezekiel is chiefly preoccupied with these “inner conflicts of the human mind, and that particular malaise of modern urban man caught up in the ugliness, Shallowness and meaningless routine of city life denuded of spiritual values” (Schomer 353).

Ezekiel’s very first volume of verses titled *A Time to Change* (1952) is introspective in tone. It expresses Ezekiel’s frustration and his search for identity. He realizes that salvation is not to be found outside life but in it. Fulfillment in life is to come through two sources: marital bliss and human relationships. In the title poem of the volume, he writes:

“To own a singing voice and talking voice,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two,
Accommodated to their needs and changing moods,
And patiently to build a life with these” (JSAL 12).

This “personal ideal” (Karnani 16) is contrasted with the social ideal where the poet has to know the various lives and dreams of man. In the second collections namely *Sixty Poems* (1953), Ezekiel’s widening range of interests manifests itself in his greater preoccupation with sex. In the third volume of poems collected under the title *The Third* (1959), Ezekiel exhibits broad sympathies and a deep understanding of the human situations. In his fourth volume *The Unfinished Man* (1960) he explores the relationship between man and woman. He is depressed by the hollowness and deception that characterize this relationship. The fifth volume *The Exact Name* (1965) and most of the other poems published in journals after this collection, “reveal the human interest that his poetry always had” (Karnani 77). The personal ideal of Ezekiel’s prompts him to materialize his social ideal.

To conclude, it may be said that Nissim Ezekiel as a man has been tried most by the tragedies in his life, that too, as a Bene Israelite living in India, that too, in a polluted city like Bombay, has known and tested the hardships of life in the truest sense and has realised the need for personal human relationships if one does not wish to despond over the distressing and depressing trials of life. What he seems to agree upon is that life with all its painful experiences is worth living. Ezekiel, like a true Indian, would say that redemption for man is to be won not by renouncing life, but by living it.

Works Cited

1. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-1980*
ed. Keki. N. Daruwalla. Ghaziabad:

- Vikas Publishing House, (1980) Print.
2. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Later – Day Psalms*
Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982. Print.
 3. Hess, Linda, qtd by Inder Nath Kher in
Journal of South Asian Literature.
11, 3-4 Spring – Summer 1976. P.3. Print.
 4. Jussawalla, Adil. “The New Poetry”
The Journal of Commonwealth Literature
5 July 1969. P. 67. Print.
 5. Karnani, Chetan. *Nissim Ezekiel*.
New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann Publishers,
1974. P. 77 Print.
 6. Narasimhaiah, C.D. “Can Indian Writing in English
Replace English Literature in our Colleges?”
The Literary Criterion, XIV 4 1979, P.2.
 7. Schomar, Kevine. Book Review of Chetan.
Karnani’s *Nissim Ezekiel JSAL* P.35.
 8. Seetha, S.V. “From Alienation to Community:
An Analysis of the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel,
A.K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy”
Unpublished thesis submitted to the
University of Madras, 1982. P.183.
 9. Williams, H.M. “Poetry: The Modernist Reaction:
A Note on Drama” *Indo-Anglian Literature*
1800 – 1970 : A Survey.
New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976. Print.
-