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## Postcolonial Ethos in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

### Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is considered to be the founder of the modernist trend of Indian English poetry. Like an avid and ardent Postcolonial poet, he has profound penchant and proclivity towards his native country, its traditions, conventions, those theories, texts, political leanings and modes of activism that resists the structural inequalities and endorses social justice. Colonialism means the marginalisation or extinction of culture, and in the mainstay of post-colonialism several cultures are compatible with new world culture, which is called hybridity. His poetry unravels many traits of post-colonialism as haunting past, cultural hybridity, nativism, sense of alienation search for roots and identity.

The paper, however, explores various cardinal characteristics of postcolonial theories, cultural activities and practices that his poetry discern vehemently and vigorously.

**Keywords: Colonialism, Post-colonialism, myth, identity, cultural hybridity, globalisation.**

The term Post colonialism pinpoints the historical, social, cultural, political and literary overtones of the colonial encounter between East and West. It heralded a new era of introspection and retrospection in the modern literary world. It augmented a comprehensive and socio-cultural and psychological study of the subjects pertaining to both the colonised and the coloniser. Colonial rule affected the social, economic, political and intellectual life of the colonised acrimoniously. The colonial oppression sowed the seeds of inferiority and subjection in the minds of colonised people with respect to their culture, colour and the nation. Frantz Fanon, Martinique born psychiatrist who played pivotal role in Algeria's freedom struggle applied psycho-analytical method to showcase the panorama of racial discrimination. His ideas germinated different forms of postcolonial resistance. Bijay Kumar Das elaborates post-colonialism in his book *Critical Essays on Post-colonial Literature* remarkably:

Semantically, Post-colonialism means something that has concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power. But in actual practice, it has to be understood only in reference to colonialism. Like colonialism, post-colonialism a state of consciousness, a crucial stage in the continuum of our cultural process and self-awareness. Colonialism involves two types of imperialism- political and cultural. Therefore, myth and history, language and landscape, self and the other are all very important ingredients of post-colonialism (7).

Edward W. Said foregrounds the various impacts of colonization on the eastern (colonised) countries in his ground -breaking treatise *Orientalism* (1978). He lays emphasis more on colonisers than the colonised to show the complexities stemmed from the ghost of colonialism. He is highly influenced and enamoured of French Post-structuralist thinkers

Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and Italian political thinker Gramsci. He vents out his anger against west for not giving importance to the thinking of the people of East, their culture and conventions. He denigrates the objectification of the orient. He is pained at the partisan attitude of west against west for not transfiguring it. He succinctly avers in his book *orientalism*:

Under the general heading of the knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for development, revolution, cultural personality, national religious character (15).

After Fanon and Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha is conspicuous for his adding new altitudes to the postcolonial approach by virtue of bringing the elements 'ambivalence' and 'mimicry' to it. He opines that cultural hybridity is the panacea to consolidate the position of the colonised people. According to Bhabha, with the improvement of the socio-political conditions, the adaptability to the new cultural values and traditions can be exacerbated. Bhabha in his famous treatise *Location of culture* (1994) avers;

The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed table of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation (2).

Another prodigious proponent of postcolonial theory Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak enunciated Subaltern theory which highlights the mechanism of exploitation and subjection of women. The women are the most wretched sufferers of the phenomenon of postcolonialism. They are doubly suppressed by the colonialist rule and the patriarchal hegemony prevalent in our society. Her theory and French novelist Simon de Beavour's novel *The Second Sex* gave new direction and impetus to feminist movement. The aim of the movement was to break the jinx that men are superior to women and they every right of expropriation. Sirin Kudchedkar is quite quotable here:

It aims at making women the subject of her own story and not the object of the main desire and male satisfaction or a whipping block for male frustration. Women come to realize the inauthenticity of the lives lead and struggle to discover for themselves their own impulses, reactions, desires and needs (34).

With the advent of Nissim Ezekiel on the horizon of Indian English poetry, Postcolonial poetry sets in. His first volume of poetry *A Time to change* (1952) opened new vistas in annals of Indian English poetry. He brought a spirit of realism into then romantic and imaginative poetry. His poems give a graphic account of mundane Indian life. In his poetry, he tries to show his country's history, myth, rituals, religion, familial relations, socio-political scenario and contemporary problems in an ebullient way. Bruce King rightly observes:

With him postcolonial poetry started which reflects the lives and identities that that an increasing number of educated Indians knew or would seek. Being a Jew and raised as a as a secular rationalist by his scientist father made him an outsider to Hindu- Muslim culture; it is his outsidership, his marginality, which makes him a representative voice of the urbanised, western- educated Indian (92).

As a conscious craftsman, he employs his tools cautiously. His poetry exhibits his sharp wit, keen observation of life, intellect, direction and forming an Indian English medium. Like postcolonial poets of other like Australia, Africa, Caribbean's, he endeavours to establish his own identity and nation's identity that were decimated during the colonial oppression. Elleke Bohemer is worth quoting here:

Indian African and Caribbean nationalist writers focused on reconstructing from the position of their historical, racial or metaphysical difference a cultural identity which has been damaged by the colonial experience. The need was for roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors, national fore-mothers and fathers: in short, for restorative history (185-86).

Like most of his contemporaries, he also braves the predicament of marginality. Being a descendent of Bene-Israel Jewish clan and Non-Hindu, he lacks Indian roots. In his famous autobiographical poem "Background, Casually", he has enumerated various experiences of his own life, which made him feel his marginal position in the society. The poem offers graphic account of his childhood, adolescence and school days, his brief stay abroad, eventual return to India, matrimony and his stint in different jobs. The first stanza describes the frail and emaciated health of the poet in his childhood and his incapability to learn more common games of children. The following stanza reflects his predicament of studying in a highly hostile ambiance lucidly:

I went to Roman Catholic school  
 A mugging Jew among the wolves.  
 They told me I had killed the Christ,  
 That year I won the scripture prize.  
 A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.  
 I grew in terror of the strong  
 But undernourished Hindu lads,  
 Their preposition always wrong,  
 Repelled me by passivity.  
 One noisy day I used a knife (*Collected Poems* 179).

The poem illustrates his existential gloom that looms large throughout his entire life. He faced racial discrimination at school. Later, he triumphs over his Jewish heredity and transcendently reconcile with Indian milieu. Mark the following lines of the poem:

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 stay where I am,

As others choose to give themselves

In some remote and backward place.

My backward place is where I am (*Collected Poems* 181).

In the poems “In Emptiness”, “Communication”, “Minority Poems”, “Philosophy”, “Night of the Scorpion”, “In India”, “Perspective”, and “Song of Desolation”, we witness sense of alienation and tumult tormenting his mind inalterably. In “Minority Poem”, he spells out his ire fanaticism and segregation he faces in the city like Bombay. Mark the following lines of the poem “Minority Poem”:

And you, uneasy

orphan of their racial

memories, merely

Polish up your alien

techniques of observation

while the city burns ((*Collected Poems* 237).

The poem “Song of Desolation” is a very scintillating poem, reflects his feeling of isolation and alienation and dissociating himself from his own existence. His fathomless existential anguish, angst and agony gushes out forth:

Write, I have nothing to say.

Confess it to the cold domestic room,

Worked the long day,

Noticed nothing bloom.

Come, religion, comfort me.

You lifeless moralists prescribe your laws,

And make me see

My secret flaws ((*Collected Poems* 103).

“The Unfinished Man” (1960) is a luminous treatise consisting of ten fine pieces of verse, it unravels his marginal dilemma with his surrounding and self. The volume springs back and forth from generalisation to personal, from dissent to consent unabashedly. We find irony, antithesis, wit, serenity, depth, melancholy and eloquence. The poem is introspective and his elegant craftsmanship. The poems “A Morning walk”, “Urban”, “Enterprise”, “Commitment”, “Event”, and “Jamini Roy” are vindication of his sense of alienation and his inability to communicate with the people. The poem “Urban” is a vivid spectacle of the anguish he feels in the city and his harmony with his environment. Mark the following lines from the poem:

At dawn he never sees the skies

Which, silently, are born again.  
Not feels the shadows of the night  
Recline their fingers on his eyes.  
He welcomes neither sun nor rain.  
His landscape has no depth or height.  
The city like passion burns.  
He dreams of morning walks, alone,  
And floating on wave of sand.  
But still his mind its traffic turns  
Away from beach and tree and stone  
To kindred clamour close at hand (*Collected Poems* 117).

Like other postcolonial poets, he vivaciously highlights the various problems that our country is engrossed in presently: poverty, plight of the poor, spiritual hollowness, political upheavals, and scarcity of basic amenities draws his attention, and he creates poetry out of trivialities with a tinge of imagination. In the poems “The Railway Clerk”, “Ganga”, “Yashwant Jagdap”, he laments the hard life led by most of Indian poor people. “The Railway Clerk” reveals the pathetic plight of the cash starved people. The poem symbolises the wretchedness and helplessness of the poor in India. He toils hard to increase his income but doesn’t get overtime or cash in lieu of that. His wife is frugal soul and always crave for more money and pelf:

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

Nissim Ezekiel vehemently depicts the poverty, the squalor, the agony and irony of Indian life. His vivid and ironical vignettes leave moral and intellectual imprints on the minds of the readers. In “Ganga”, he portrays the pathetic condition of a maidservant and ill-treatment meted out to her sympathetically. “Yashwant Jagdap” is also very charming piece of verse presenting the horrible experience of a poor man who is severely affected by flood. How a hapless father puts child over his shoulders in order to save him from the rising tide of water is a real spectacle of the misery of poor people. India is free from the shackles of Colonial rule but we are not free from poverty and violence. He reminds us of the vituperative colonial past where people were suffering from poverty and hunger. “The Truth about Floods” gives pictorial account of the helplessness of the poor people when natural calamity strikes them. Mark the following lines:

A relief party came at last.

Five students

with a transistor,

a tin of biscuits,

a camera.

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 son is dying.’

‘I cannot find my daughter’ (*Collected Poems* 187).

Ezekiel is pained at seeing the nation’s economy in moribund and keenly rationalises the factors responsible for it. His blood simmers and heart sinks to see the indifference and callous attitude of rich towards poor in this postcolonial era. He cites the various examples of malpractice and corruption prevalent in our society. During the time of natural calamities striking our country like floods, cyclone, plague, thousands of people are rendered homeless, foodless, jobless and plunge in anxieties and ailments. Government officials embezzle government funds in the name of providing relief to the victims. The following lines from the poem “The Truth about Floods” is the blazing example of corrupt officials’ apathy:

At Badapal

I have heard the children

wail with hunger

An atmosphere of despair

pervaded the vllage.

I asked the man to help me

organise relief,

but they turned their backs at me

till I told them I wasn’t a government official

The District authorities

at Balasore

admitted they had failed,

but they claimed they could not have done better (*Collected Poems* 188).

In the poem “Guru”, and “Healers”, he gives real account of the hollowness of fake godmen who hoodwink the superstitious less educated people of our country. He ridicules the spiritual healers who apply the same method for all kind of miseries and sufferings. The following lines from the poem “Healers” are worth quoting here:

God’s love remains your heritage.

You need not change

your way of life

Know your *mantra*, meditate,

release your *kundilini*,

get your *shakti* awakening

and float with the spirit

to your destination (*Collected Poems* 232).

In the poem “Undertrial Prisoners”, the poet satirises hollowness of our democratic and legal system where people suffer disproportionately to the intensity of their crime. Some people languish in jail when they haven’t committed any crime. Ezekiel is averse to the delayed process of justice and advocates fool-proof, transparent, fair and fast trial. In “Hangover”, the poet ridicules the double dealers. They say what they don’t mean, they mean what they don’t say. Their preaching doesn’t correspond to their practice. He depicts a scene in a five star hotel where people talk of Carl Marx and his economic theories but they gorge upon expensive delicacies and express superficial sympathy towards poor. See the following lines of the poem “Hangover”:

The foreigners and the foreign –returned

The expensive menu and the shadow of Marx.

The Biryani Hyderabadi and the sighs for Bangla Desh.

The see-through dress and the show-nothing sari.

The fog in the head and the sense of success (*Collected Poems* 232).

In the poem “Professor”, Ezekiel has described the pitiable condition of the elderly people. They feel isolated after the retirement, for there is none to give them company and listen to. His all children are well settled in life and hardly find time to take care of him. The poem beautifully depicts the trauma of old people. “Patriot” is also very beautiful poem which reflects the tumult and confusion of the mind. In a modern India having Pakistan, China as

neighbour, the patriot's only concern is to drink milk and talk of altruism. "Irani Restaurant Instructions" and "The Egoist Prayers" reflect the similar chaos and confusion of the mind. Mark the following lines of the poem "Egoist's Prayers":

The price of wisdom  
 is too high,  
 but folly is expensive too,  
 Strike a bargain with me, Lord.  
 I'm not a man of ample means (*Collected Poems* 213).

Nissim Ezekiel is an indefatigable post-colonial poet par excellence. His poetry vehemently throws light on the impact of industrialisation and globalisation on the country's economic growth. In this world of globalisation, poverty and chaos is everywhere specially in the once colonised countries, beggars thronging the public and religious places, corruption prevalent in all public domains, and screams of malnourished children find felicitous expression in his verses. In "A Morning Walk", he showcases the grim and gloomy condition of the society and reminding of the colonial oppression. Mark the lines:

Barbaric city sick with slums,  
 Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
 Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,  
 Processions led by frantic drums,  
 A million purgatorial lanea,  
 And child-like masses, many tongued,  
 Whose wages are in words and crumbs (*Collected Poems* 119).

Ezekiel is highly concerned with physical, geographical, social, political, cultural and intellectual panoramas Indian life. He is extremely attached to his country, and uses Indian idiom profusely. The poems "A Morning Walk", "Night of the Scorpion", "In India", "A Small Summit", "from Very Indian Poems in Indian English", "Guru", and "Tribute to the Upanishads" are rich tapestry of Indian life, and extensively expressive of Indian sensibility. City of Bombay has found prominent place in his poetry. Ezekiel's belief in depicting the Indian reality is the hallmark of his postcolonial leanings in a streamlined manner. The following lines from his poem "In India" is the testimony of it:

Always, in the sun's eye,  
 Here among the beggars,  
 Hawkers, pavement sleepers,  
 Hutment dwellers, slums,

Dead souls of men and gods,  
Burnt-out mothers, frightened  
Virgins, wasted child  
And tortured animal,  
All in noisy silence  
Suffering the place and time,  
I ride my elephant of thought,  
A Cezanne slung around my neck (*Collected Poems* 131).

Like R. K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and Jayanta Mahapatra, he also endeavours to mythicize Mahatama Gandhi. He is a staunch supporter of Mahatama Gandhiji and his doctrines, and consequently writes about him nonchalantly. He is indescribably influence with his concept of “Ram Rajya”. He glorifies Gandhiji, his freedom struggle, sacrifice, undying spirit, and epic resolve to free India from slavery to decolonise Indian psyche. The following lines from “Very Indian Poems in Indian English”:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.  
Why world is fighting fighting,  
Why all people of world  
Are not following Mahatama Gandhi,  
I am simply not understanding.  
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.  
I should say even 200% correct.  
But modern generation is neglecting-  
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing (*Collected Poems* 237).

In conclusion, we may affirm that Nissim Ezekiel, The T. S. Eliot of India, is deemed as the doyen of the modernist trend of Indian English poetry. His craftsmanship, novel style of writing, variegated themes, flawless command over English language add charm to modern English poetry. He is a prodigious post-colonial poet, has great love and affinity for his nation he resides in. He pens his poetry immersed in Indian ethos and contemporary reality. He has successfully overcome the Anglo-American and romantic tradition of the preceding poets. He is successful in creating a new Indian English Idiom and has no influence of the coloniser. His poetry uprightly upholds the compromise between old and new. Various postcolonial strands like search for identity and roots, sense of isolation, migrancy, cultural ambivalence, nativism, irony, and the relation between the centre and the periphery underlie his poetry. We must sign off with words of S. K. Desai:

The post-Independence Indian Writers in English who have their particular commitment to India, present interesting variations of the predicament they are in (a) Some, like Ezekiel, cultivate a cool and detached view of things, accepting the predicament of living in an environment in which they feel alien (35).

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