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Portrayal of Indian society in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel is considered as the father of post independence Indian English verse. He starts Modernity in Indian English poetry and becomes the trend setter in Poetry. K.N. Daruwalla rightly says; "Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom." Ezekiel has experimented with the use of typical Indian English. He realistically portrays the Indian society through the diverse characters such as spiritual pilgrimage of the travelers' towards sanctified place, Noble attitude and fortitude nature of mother of the narrator, typical Indian ideals and practices of the Professor and superstitious belief of folk in the Indian society in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel such as "Entreprise" "Night of the Scorpion" "The professor" and "The Visitor". He emphasizes on simplicity of thought, feeling, image and language in modern poetry. He won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 and Padmashree award in 1988.

Keywords: Indian sensibility, idiom, spiritual pilgrimage, fortitude, ideals and superstitious

Nissim Ezekiel is a distinguished twentieth century Indian writer of English poetry. “He says that the poem “Enterprise” is as systematic and well organized narration of a journey. His colloquial style of the poem reminds us the poems of Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on the Snowy Evening” and T.s Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi”. In his poem “Enterprise” the narrator is observer of life and records his observation. He depicts the journey of pilgrimage of the human soul to reach its divine destination. Every human life is a spiritual pilgrimage. The poem is dealt with the bold and dangerous undertaking a group of people who go on a pilgrimage to a holy place. The man with the best stylistic prose withdraws from the enterprise. He describes about the philosophy of life through the best prose writer that Man not only needs literary skill but also proper attitude and fortitude in facing the problems of life.

“A shadow falls on us –and grows”

The narrator describes the shadow mentioned here is not external, physical shadow but internal, mental gloom. He depicts the varied experiences of the traveler’s in his poem “Enterprise”. The enterprise started as a pilgrimage. The travelers begin the pilgrimage journey with an exalted state of mind in that mood the burdens of life is light. In the second stage of the enterprise the travelers begin to experience difficulties. The sun beat down upon them. Differences of opinion arouse about how to cross the desert patch. A friend whose stylish prose was the best of batch withdrew himself from the enterprise. A shadow of mental gloom fell on

the travelers and it grew in violence. The mental gloom is a contrast to the exaltation of minds with which the enterprise begins as a pilgrimage. He says,

When finally we reached the
We hardly knew why we were there
The trip had darkened every face
Our deeds were neither great nor rare
“Home is where we have to gather grace”

In his poem he describes the graphic account of the problems and perils that a group of people faced while they went on an enterprising pilgrimage to a place. Firstly the travelers had an exalted state of mind but as the journey progressed with progressive problems in the form of scorching sun ,dispiriting desert, differences of opinion, desertion of friends, disunity in the groups, Danger of the pilgrimage when they finally reached the destination. There is no cheerfulness in any face because the gloomy face is the index of the gloomy mind .the deeds of the travelers is neither great nor rare. Finally he gains the wisdom from this arduous but an ordinary enterprise that home is a place where we have to gather grace. He describes the Indian ethos that a man can gather grace through right living in his own home. We should face the difficulties in the home and shows spiritual qualities so that we can gather the grace of God.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the Name of God a hundred times to
Paralyze the Evil one.

In his poem "Night of the Scorpion" The narrator who is the son narrates the incident of his mother being stung by a stray scorpion on a rainy night. The sympathetic and helpful peasants who were the neighbors came like swarms of flies and buzzed the name of God a hundred times and uttered incantations which express their wishful thinking and religious belief to mitigate the pain of his mother.

May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight. They said
May your suffering decrease?
The misfortunes of your next birth, they

He genuinely describes the characters of Indians especially our culture as well as their religious belief through neighboring Peasants that the sympathy of fellow human beings to a suffering human being is our Indian culture but sufferer has to suffer by him. No one can share another's suffering. The husband was a sceptic and a rationalist .he used medicines and desperate remedies to reduce the poison. The holy man used rites and incantation to remove the poison and pain. But the narrator believes that pain disappeared only after twenty hours. Like Wordsworth who finds uncommon beauty in common things Ezekiel also visualizes the human greatness in the loving and suffering mother. He believes that superstitious acts, rational administering of medicines and holy incantations cannot remove sufferings

My mother only said
Thank God the Scorpion picked on me
And spared my children

One has to endure suffering with fortitude and proper attitude of the mind. He exalts the character of mother that she only said that she thanked God because the scorpion had chosen to sting her and spared her children. The mother had physical suffering but mental relief.

In his poem “The professor” Nissim Ezekiel depicts the typical Indian ideals and practices through the character of the Professor who had a conversation with old student. The professor like many Indian mindsets is only bothered about position, status and wealth.

By Gods grace .all my children
Are well settled in life
One is Sales Manager
One is Bank Manager
Both have cars

Here the Professor boasts about his well settled children, his health and also various changes brought on society in the name of progress. In India, the amount of respect attributed to a person in society is equivalent to the number of cars he owns.

He observes the Indian society that Indians have a habit of naming their children with rhyming names to their daughters. The Professor refers his and daughters in a gender stereotypical manner.

Sarala and Tarala are married

Their husbands are nice boys

While referring to his daughters he only states that they are married and refer to their husbands as nice. While referring to his sons he never mentions their spouses but instead only talks about material possessions like money and wealth. This brings out the gender stereotypical mindset generally prevailing in India. Where sons are provided better educational opportunities and are encouraged to plush jobs the education of daughters is given less importance with over emphasis on their marriages.

He also said that Indians were taking pride in having many issues. The previous generations had large families and now the changing trend of smaller families. He accepts the change that time brings He Enquires about the student.

,

How many issues you have? Three?

That is good these are the days of family planning

I am not against We have to change with times.

We the Indians feel proud to speak in English and to use of idiomatic expressions and Indians are so obsessed with use of the present continuous tense instead of simple present tense. Ezekiel has experimented with the use of typical Indian English in his poem in place of the simple present Indian speech.

In his poem “The Visitor” Ezekiel tries to understand the truth of the wide spread popular belief or superstitious existed in the Indian society that the cawing of the crow would be followed by a visitor. He believes that miracles happen only in the mind not outside events like an angel in disguise came that day following the cawing of the crow.

James H. Cousins says that Indian poetry in English is: “Indian in thought, Indian in emotion, Indian in imagery and English only in word.” In the words of Nissim Ezekiel, “My poems in Indian English are rightly described as very Indian poems. So they should not be considered as “mere lampoons”. The characters and the situations projected are intended to be genuinely Indian, and the humor is in the English language as it is widely spoken by Indians, to whom it is not funny at all.” We conclude that Ezekiel praises the diverse characters of Indians such as pilgrimage of the travelers’ towards sanctified place, greatness of loveable and sacrificing nature of the mother, typical Indian ideals and practices of the Professor and superstitious belief of folk in the Indian society through the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel.

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