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The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel: A Study in the Direction of Self

Abstract: Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) stands as the pole star in the firmament of the history of Indian English Poetry. His contributions to Post- Independence Indian English Poetry is noteworthy. Being a Jew, the problem of identity crisis was always with him but he assimilated well with Indian tradition and experimented greatly with poetry; better to say the poetry of India and its people. He belongs to the group of poets who attempted to create a modern English poetry in India and with his extraordinary poetic works became the leader amongst them. He did not only set standards and create places of publication, meanwhile, also gave a new direction; a smooth and clear path to modern Indian English Poetry with his incomparable craftsmanship and sensible concerns. The present paper focuses on Ezekiel's concerns towards his search for self. Ezekiel made poetry central to his life, a life where there was quest for 'selfhood'; quest for a peaceful way of living in the modern world with satisfaction since he wanted to identify himself with modern India knowing the fact that

westernized past was behind him. This paper depicts Ezekiel's concept of 'self' as discovered in his poetry.

Keywords: Poetry, Indian, Selfhood, Quest, Identity.

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was a man of varied interests, a prolific writer, poet, playwright, editor, philosopher, literary and art critic and most important of all, an outstanding teacher. His contributions to Indian English Poetry is seminal. Bruce King says: "others wrote poems he wrote poetry". He was serious enough regarding his vocation as a poet. As in the poem "Poetry", Ezekiel has very beautifully elaborated the meaning of the two words: "poem" and "poetry". He says:

A poem is an episode, completed
In an hour or two, but poetry
Is something more. It is the why
The how, the what, the flow
From which a poem comes. (CP 13)

He was born in December 1924 in Bombay of Jewish parents and just because being a member of Jewish family, the problem of identity crisis always surrounded him and he had a sense of alienation within. On his return to India he edited 'Quest', 'Poetry India and Imprint'. He has been honorary secretary of the Indian PEN and was a visiting professor of leading universities of India and abroad. His significance also lies as a prolific writer and journalist who contributed articles to a number of journals magazines and periodicals.

The collection of Ezekiel's Poetry include – A Time to Change (1952), Sixty Poems (1953), The Third (1959), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in Darkness (1976), and Latter Day Psalms (1982). His poems have appeared in Encounter,

Indian Literature, The Illustrated Weekly of India, London Magazine, The Spectator and in a number of anthologies. For Ezekiel, poetry was a means by which he tackled his own existence in the world, he searched for 'self' and it was 'selfhood' which proved to be the basic concern of his poetry. Doubtlessly Ezekiel was a sensitive poet with modern thoughts. And it is his sensitiveness that 'self' had always been a point of concern for him. In the poem "subconscious" (CP 271), Ezekiel says about his divided self:

Consciously, I ask my subconscious
To supply me with a poem
It sends up this harsh message;
You have not turned to me to long,
I shall not speak now. (1-5)

Ezekiel underwent other kind of sense of alienation that came from the widening gap between the vast Hindu masses in the rural areas and the articulate urban middle class minority. Ezekiel's Indian poems are remarkable as they focus on Indian modes of social-behavior which assort with those of the English reflecting there by a typical post-colonial, cross-cultural situation. He has used his poems as experiments.

Indianness is the secret of Ezekiel's greatness as a poet. He identified himself with India. Ezekiel was undoubtedly in crisis so far as India and the environment of India was concerned. The detailed study of the sociological background of Jews in colonial and post-colonial India can provide a proper perspective on Ezekiel's poetry as far as his search for 'self' is concerned. He belonged to the Bene Israel sect of Jews. The origin of this community dates back to 1600 to 2000 years ago, when they first landed in southern Maharashtra. They took to agriculture and oil pressing for livelihood. They lost touch completely with people of their own faith elsewhere in the world. For most Bene Israel in India it was Marathi that came

to be their mother tongue. For Ezekiel too, Marathi was his first language along with English. But he never thought of going ahead with Marathi. When the Bene Israel emigrated to cities like Bombay in the second half of the nineteenth century, they slowly moved away from their traditional occupations. In the nineteenth century caste-consciousness gradually came to be replaced by class-consciousness in the city, and many of them obtained 'white collar jobs'. Ezekiel's parents became teachers and later on Ezekiel also gave up the more lucrative jobs in advertising and journalism and opted for lectureship in a college.

Gradually with social mobility came a sense of cultural superiority. Their new status prompted them to identify with upper-caste Hindus. When they first arrived to India, their close association with the Hindus and assimilation of Hindu cultural practices could have easily led to the belief that Saturdays were unlucky days. But they did not allow this to influence them and continued to regard Saturday as the most holy and auspicious of all days of the week. Most of the Jews especially older members of the community who had grown up in a colonial world still had colonial mentalities. They wore dresses which did not identify with "Indian India" and still lived in predominantly Jewish worlds. They did not mix with others and seemed narrow-minded and outdated. Jewish community till the mid 20th century strictly maintained their Jewish identity and drew impermeable borders between themselves and other communities. They lived in close proximity to other Jewish family, went to Jewish schools attended Jewish social functions and inter-marriage seemed to be a taboo for them. They distanced themselves from India and Indian culture.

Ezekiel attempted to create the impression of having undergone a willed-submersion in the native tradition of India but always used a rider: "I have never been a refugee except of the spirit" (CP 209). He suffered from a sense of alienation that came into existence from the widening space between the vast Hindu masses in the rural areas and the articulate urban middle class minority. For Ezekiel, who is a born urbanite, this sense is actually "an

intellectual experience, relating to an objective perception of life, of the masses in the rural hinterland and the life in the city” (Rao 98). In *Background Casually*, which is a part of his collection *Hymns in Darkness*; he says: “I have made my commitments now./This is one: to stay where I am” (CP 181).

These lines show that staying in India is a matter of choice and honor for Ezekiel. He has gained enough maturity now and understood the value of living in one’s own place. Abroad does not fascinate him anymore since he felt a sense of rejection while staying at a ‘basement room’ in London. Now it is his wise decision to stay in Bombay. He has been now well acquainted with the ordinariness of life. He further reveals: “As others choose to give themselves/In some remote and backward place./My backward place is where I am” (CP 181). Ezekiel has accepted the actualities of his life and this acceptance brought to him a greater sense of attention towards Indian subject matter. He is no longer having the quest for integration. Perhaps this is the time when he started focusing on the social context of Indian life and the outcome was some of his beautiful poetry reflecting the ordinariness of Indian life; Indian people; Indian social-behaviour. Ezekiel proved that a poet can write about himself without being self-consciously Indian. He definitely started a kind of post-colonial poetry which expresses the Indian lives and identities. Of course, he was an outsider to Hindu-Muslim culture and this was nothing but this outsidership which made him an outstanding poet of great standard. He and his poetry became the voice of the urbanized, western-educated Indian. His search for ‘self’ was something he was always looking for. His first volume of poetry, *A Time to Change* (Fortune Press, London, 1952), reflects that in London Ezekiel suffered and struggled a lot: “We who leave the house in April, Lord, How shall we return?/Debtors to the whore of love/Corrupted by the things imagined” (CP 3-6). Perhaps being a Jew he was corrupted by unlawful desires. At the same time, was also defiled by foreign practices: “Through the winter nights, alone,/The flesh defiled by dreams of

flesh,/Rehearsed desire dead in spring,/How shall we return?” (CP 3-6). In the above lines, the subject seems to be a tortured soul; a mind tormented by following false Gods; disgusted by restlessness and at the same time he is desiring stability, discipline and a purposeful life. Ezekiel's poetic works show that to a great extent his concerns as well as his thoughts are manhood, loving, family and proper conduct. In his poem, Secret Faults Concealed No More, there are statements of resolution; he says about his desires that he wants nothing more than:

A bit of land

A woman too

Grapes or figs

And metaphors

Insight illumination (CP 6)

The above lines describe Ezekiel's quest for living a life with personal satisfaction encouraged by 'insight illumination'. He wants a satisfactory way of life with clarity, logic, world of words and verse. In order to identify himself with the language of the colonizers Ezekiel copied them and in this course of imitation he satirized men, women, their manners, behavioural norms, relationship with spouse, and the environment through which all the characters in the poetry have to go through. In doing the same he failed to identify himself with them and reserved for himself a superior position and tended to remain an alien to the masses.

A sense of roots and belonging is perhaps essential to every poet. The modern Indian English writers' alienation does not merely arise out of his use of an 'alien' language. It is a more complex and many sided phenomenon. First, the modern Indian English writer, mostly urban-based, is likely to be alienated from the traditional social, religious and cultural mores of the masses. Secondly, the general ethos of the post-Independence age with its prevailing

climate of opportunism and cynicism has further alienated the sensitive mind from the social set-up. Also, the stress of modern living deepens social, cultural and religious alienation in a poet. Neither the English language nor the fact of being a Jew was responsible to much extent for the sense of alienation in Ezekiel. He was always comfortable to live in his own Jewish surroundings, rather than anywhere else in the city. He accepted his minority status as given and as far as he was concerned, he related to people on the basis of their attitudes and values. His poetry evolved out of a conflict and tension between the two selves – the self that has been nourished by the feeling of a natural outsider and the self that strived to fully realize an identity that is Indian. Ezekiel's critical attitude towards Indian society is sometimes misconstrued by the critics. In an interview with A. Ramachander he reiterated that the sense of rootlessness is vital for reinforcing the need for roots:

Actually I would like to see some alienation among Indo-English writers. However undesirable from moral, social and other points of view, it has been aesthetically very productive provided it is geniuses you can't pretend, you can't play the game of alienation. (quoted in Shahane, JSAL: 261)

Ezekiel's poetry thus reflects his response to the frightening and sickening aspects of urban life. That is why one of the dominant notes in Ezekiel's poetry is the sensation of oppression in a crowded and crumpled civilization represented by the city of Bombay. He calls it a "bitter native city" (CP 224). Ezekiel began with a sense of alienation with the world around him. His poetry has been an attempt to establish some kind of recognizable order and relevance for his self in the world that surrounded him.

Ezekiel's *Sixty Poems* (Privately printed, Bombay, 1953) clearly reveals his quest for 'self'; his complex mind trying to integrate in which imagery and allusion were part of modern, urbanized thoughts. This collection of his also contains poems related to the crisis of

marriage and love since his own unhappy marriage, followed by friendships/relationships with women, was usually always there in his mind. The newer poems in this collection show the greater precision of language compared to the first collection. In this volume the poet has aptly used epigrammatic language, antithesis and paradox. To some extent, the quest for 'self' is also there in his later volumes of poetry like *The Third* (The Strand Bookshop, Bombay, 1959), *'The Unfinished Man'* (Writers Workshops, Calcutta, 1960), *'Hymns in Darkness'* (Oxford University Press, 1976, New Delhi) and in *'Latter Day Psalms'* (Oxford University Press, 1982, New Delhi). His collection *'Hymns in Darkness'* contains outstanding poems dealing with the themes of identity crisis, poverty, corruption and helplessness. In this volume, the poem *'Background Casually'* is said to be autobiographical.

A reader of Ezekiel must have noted that his concept was neither an idealist one (in which everything was the self) nor a materialist one in which the self is objectively part of the world. The focus of creation certainly became 'the experiencing self'. Ezekiel fully experienced the world and the world was around him. His view was really unique. In the poem, "Morning Prayer" (CP 122), he says: "Whatever the enigma,/The Passion of the blood,/Grant me the metaphor/ To make it human good" (13-16). Ezekiel believed that the essence of poetry lies in its power to render a situation bearable. His works are unique and incomparable because of such quest for 'self' expressed technically in his poems. He was, of course, a self-conscious poet and he had a firm way in which he bravely dealt with hurdles as a poet. As in – "In Retrospect" (CP 144), he says:

There is a point

In being obscure

About the luminous,

The pure musical

Phases of living

Which ought to be
Delicately improvised
And left alone (23-30)

Indeed, Ezekiel had a rich and imaginative perception which made him an intellectual poet of the contemporary age. In this context the following words of Milosz are very apt: “The purpose of poetry is to remain just one person, for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, and invisible guests come in and out at will.”

Milosz “ArsPoetica”

It is difficult for a professional modern poet to serve this very purposefulness but Ezekiel served it in a very justified manner; in a manner no other modern poet could do.

The place of Ezekiel is unique in the history of Indian English Poetry because of the uniqueness of his poetic works and this is why he is recognized as the pioneer amongst the modern Indian English poets. Bruce King introduces Ezekiel in the following words:

Ezekiel had his own distinctive personality, character, and themes which he expressed within the perspective of a modern intellectual. He brought to Indian English Poetry the skepticism, restlessness, feeling of alienation, openness to experience, self-consciousness and quest for some meaning to life that is as much a part of the modern mind.

‘Selfhood’ is one of the main concerns of Ezekiel’s poetry. He has written what a modern, self-conscious poet thinks, feels and experiences throughout his life. Ezekiel uses poetry as a means by which he expresses the existential dilemmas of living in the modern world and his self-refrential poems reflect his way of coping with a world hostile to earlier notions of art as revelation. Although Ezekiel has not brought out any specific volume on literary theories, his views on poetry and poetic process lie scattered in his essays, interviews, poems etc. He laid emphasis on the search for ‘self’. ‘Selfhood’ was his main concern which is found when observed through the lens of his poetry. He started his poetic career with a set of challenges

and conflicts but proved himself to be a worth poet whose poetry is worth reading not because of the ‘selfhood’ described in it greatly but also because of his stylistic virtuosity and poetic profundity.

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