

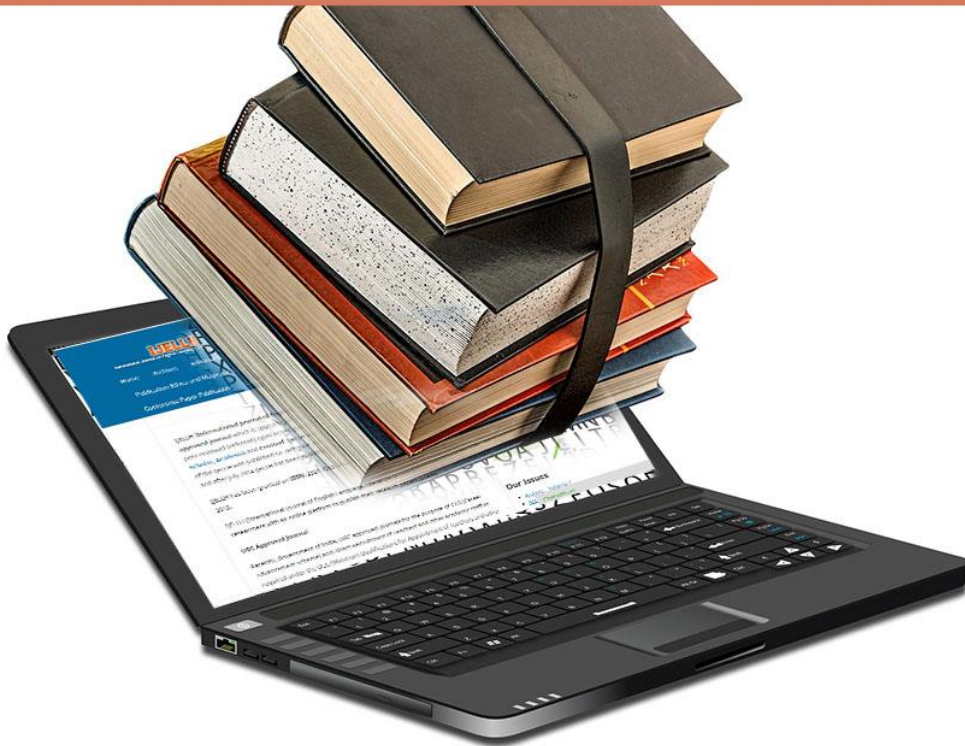
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Chandni Rani

Research Scholar

TMB Bhagalpur University

Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

anuchandni90@gmail.com

The Poetic Sensibility of Nissim Ezekiel: A Study of Select Poems

Abstract

The greatness of Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) lies greatly in his poetry of Indian sense and sensibility. He emerged as a brilliant Post-Independence English poet of India when Indian poetic scenario was suffering for existence. Ezekiel came with an entirely new poetic technique and it was his outstanding poetic sensibility that could communicate the future dreams and aspirations of India in view of the changed scenario. The present paper deals with Ezekiel's poetic sensibility which is thoroughly Indian in style and manner. In his poetry, Ezekiel has depicted Indian life and Indian subject matter with Indian sense and sensibility. Indian concerns have been the major themes of Ezekiel's poetry. His poetry is significant as it reveals Indian modes of social behaviour in all its multiplicity presented in English language. The paper also focuses on Ezekiel's use of Indian idioms, Indian beliefs, Indian myths, the depiction of Indian rural and urban societies and Indian philosophical ideals in his poetry which justifies his poetic sensibility to be truly Indian.

Keywords: Poetry, Indianness, Poetic sensibility, Indian concerns, Indian idioms

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was born in Bombay. He was a child of Jewish parents who belonged to the Bene Israel sect of Jews. Ezekiel's contribution to Indian writing in English is remarkable since in his poetry Ezekiel has identified himself with India. He has

used his poems as ‘experiments’ and these experiments are full of ‘Indian sensibility’. In the words of KN Daruwalla: “Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom” (Quoted in Acharya 141). So far as Indianness is concerned; it is the feeling and sensation of being an Indian. As an Indian poet, Ezekiel has strong feelings for India: his native place as reflected in most of his poems dealing with the theme of Indianness. His poetry is a clear portrayal of Indian atmosphere, Indian culture, Indian people and the ordinariness of Indian life. Pre-Independence Indian English poets failed to gather and express sufficient experience of Indian lives into their poetry. The year 1947 witnessed a turning point in the growth and development of Indian poetry in English since earlier the Pre-Independence poets had to face a lot of criticism from older nationalist intellectuals but with the attainment of independence, situation had now changed. By this time the new Indian English poets became concerned of the fact that they had to face the challenges thrown at them by some critics and readers that English was inadequate to express the Indian lives and situation. And this is how Modern Indian English Poetry got poised to meet such demands with poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla. The new poets answered the critics with their significant poetry and proved Indians could too write genuine poetry in the English language describing Indian lives and conditions. The pioneering of Nissim Ezekiel was seen by the early 1960s. Magazines like *Illustrated Weekly of India* and *Quest* made Ezekiel noticeable among the readers. He emerged as a rising star in the history of Indian English Poetry and faced the poetic scene of India with all his heart and employed a completely new poetic technique. His poetry deals with Indian modes of social behaviour. He had a Jewish background yet he opted India as his native place; his homeland. Jewish community till the mid 20th century strongly maintained their identity of being Jewish. They were staying in India but had separated themselves from Indian culture; still they regarded their Jewish culture and tradition. In case of Ezekiel he never thought of

himself being a refugee; Indianness was there in his heart and soul. He recognized himself with nowhere but India. He says: "I have never been a refugee except of the spirit" (CP 209). The above line speaks of the poet's Indianness. Although with this feeling of Indianness he also had a sense of alienation within and that sense was there because of the widening gap between the vast Hindu people in the rural areas and the articulate urban middle class minority but Ezekiel proved himself to be an outsider to all this and stood as a great Indian poet. No matter whether he was in India or in abroad; he stood with Indian identity and beliefs. His first volume of poetry *A Time to Change* (Fortune Press, London, 1952) reflects Ezekiel's Indianness: "We who leave the house in April, Lord, How shall we return?" (CP 3-6). The line says of the fact that while staying in London Ezekiel is missing India- his home. In the poet's mind there is a strong desire to return to India. He is looking for his this wish to come true. After his return to India Ezekiel focused more on Indian subject matter since he had accepted the realities of life. As in *Night of the Scorpion* he says: "My mother only said/Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children" (CP 131). These lines express the common issues of daily life of ordinary Indian people. Being an Indian poet of great standard Ezekiel beautifully observed these common things of Indian life and converted his observation into poetry. Bruce King says:

Ezekiel's focus had shifted from the quest for integration to an acceptance of the actualities and the ordinariness of life. The senses, survival, even worldly prizes became worthy of attention. The task was now to describe the real and this led him to a greater use of Indian subject matter.

The crisis for identity, theme of alienation and sense of belongingness are found everywhere in his poetry. His early poems deal with the theme of loss and insecurity whereas later poems reflect his strong affiliation and increasing identification with his society as well as environment. Ezekiel's first two volumes of poetry written during his stay outside India - A

Time to Change (1952) and *Sixty Poems* (1953) show his exilic experience and explain the feeling of isolation and emptiness. The poems of these two volumes have anger, compassion, concern and even contempt for the place he is staying at. But the fact can't be denied that while living in abroad too he considers India as his homeland; his native place; his own environment. The impact of Indian culture and languages can be found in his use of Indian imagery, Indian content and Indian style in these volumes. The use of such expressions and imagery makes him a typical Indian poet. In *Background Casually*, a poem from the volume *Hymns in Darkness*, Ezekiel says: "I have made my commitments now/ This is one: to stay where I am" (CP 181). Here in these lines Ezekiel shows his deep attachment to India. He feels honoured to live in India and commits to stay here only. Doubtlessly he is proud of being an Indian and is happy enough about his decision to stay in India.

Ezekiel began to write Post-Colonial Poetry reflecting Indian lives and identities. His later volumes of poetry *The Third* (The Strand Bookshop, Bombay, 1959), *The Unfinished Man* (Writer's Workshop, Calcutta, 1960), *Hymns in Darkness* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1976) and *Latter Day Psalms* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1982) reveal the poet's beautiful approach and observation of Indian socio-cultural background. In these volumes, Indianness has been one of the main themes. The portrayal of poverty, rural life, urban scene, the average Indian people, Indian myths and much more can be observed here. Ezekiel's personal exploration of crisis of Indian rural people, corruption, helplessness etc is depicted beautifully in his poetry. The use of Indian imagery, such as the images of "river", "animals", "mythical elements" etc reveal his sense of Indianness more. His poem *The Railway Clerk* describes the situation of a helpless Indian clerk who suffers because of poverty. The character-"the railway clerk" symbolizes the poverty of India when he says: "My wife is always for money/ Money, money, where to get money/ My job is such, no one is giving bribe" (CP 184). The clerk no doubt represents the pathetic condition of many

Indian lower middle class people who suffer from such problems of responsibility along with poverty. The clerk further says: “My wife’s mother is confined to bed/ And I am only support” (CP 184).

Ezekiel’s commitments to Indian culture, environment and people have always been the matter of concern in his writing. Indianness is seen in the depth of his poetic soul through the lens of his poetry. In one of his interviews with Frank Birbal Singh he says:

I am an Indian national I was born in India; my tribe of the Jewish community has lived in India for 2000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some other writers obviously have done, and if I had decided that I am so much of an outsider that I have to settle down in London or New York, and then, even if I did write about India, I don’t know if I could be regarded as an Indo-English writer. There would be some problems in that situation, though there are marginal cases.

Among all his poems, *Background Casually* is considered to be autobiographical one. Here in this poem, Indian customs are presented well. It is the greatness of the poet that he does not only express Indian custom and culture with all its originality but also presents the deficiencies and defects of the Indian people. The loud Indian talks and knocking at the doors heavily are sincerely explained in *Background Casually*: “When someone talked too loudly,/ or knocked at the door/ like the Devil,/ They hawked and spat” (CP 180). In his poetry Ezekiel’s depiction of Indian peasants, Indian mothers, voice of Indian children, suffering of lovers, condition of poors etc is quite noteworthy.

Thus, Ezekiel’s poetic sensibility is Indian in every way. He is certainly a prolific Indian poet with Indian sense and sensibility. His poetry reveals true Indian life, culture, temperament filled with Indianness all around. Even the characters of his poems are typical Indian masses living a typical Indian life. While reading Ezekiel’s poems, an Indian reader

feels as if he too is filled with Indianness and this fact says of Ezekiel's greatness as a true Indian English poet.

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