

Critical Tenets of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry: A Perspective

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Abstract:

Indo Anglian Poetry which belongs to the era of post-independence comprises of a collection of poetry written on enormous variety and themes. It is an expression of varied experiences in the modern world. Cultural bewilderment, identity crisis, perplexity, introspection, rejection of old spiritual and religious values are the dominant themes in the contemporary Indian poetic scene. The rich contribution of the 'new poets' in an alien language but nonetheless an original idiom, has made a tremendous impact in the arena of Indo-Anglian poetry. Nissim Ezekiel was one of the renowned poets belonging to the post – independence era of Indian Writings in English, who contributed immensely through his poetic endeavors. Ezekiel enriched Indian English poetry through his modernist innovations and techniques, bringing forth themes associated with a wider range of concerns and interest. Ezekiel's style is lucid and impressive. This paper aims to bring forth the manifestation and treatment of varied themes in the poems of Nissim Ezekiel.

Keywords: Self-criticism, introspection, diverse experiences, irony, spiritual Self, emotional indulgence

INTRODUCTION:

Indo Anglian Poetry achieved new heights in the post-independence era of Indian Writing in English. The emergence of new poets brought forth volumes of poetry written in varied themes which were projection of diverse experiences and thoughts. Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, A. K. Ramanujan, K. N. Daruwalla were among the poets of eminence who chose new paths in the realms of Indo-Anglian poetry. Nissim Ezekiel (1942-2004) was a remarkable poet. His first two volumes appeared within five years of independence. The volumes of poems published by him include *A Time of Change* (1952) and *Sixty Poems* (1953) followed by *The Third* (1960), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982). He had his *Collected Poems* published in 1989 which consists of brilliant poems from his previous collections. Nissim Ezekiel's poetry reflects his "elegance and communicative efficacy" (Karnani, *EIEW* 82).

THEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS:

Ezekiel's poetry has the quality of authenticity with regard to Indian life and settings. The hue of Ezekiel's poem is the legitimate voice of modern Indian poetry. He observed Indian life in conventional tone, with different thought and style. His poetic themes include the experiences of ordinary man, and alienation. The striking feature of his poetry is irony. He is also self cognizant in a critical manner. Nissim Ezekiel had the capacity to organise his experience in words competently. He "is master of an enslaving irony in which skepticism puncture humbug..." (Patke 247). Ezekiel's poems in his collection *The Exact Name* are rich in irony. They are also included in the *Collected Poems*. In his poem "In India", from *The Exact Name*, Indian people are ironic representations of the pathetic circumstances in which they live:

Always, in the sun's eye,
Hear among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers
Hutment, dwellers, Slums,
Dead souls of men and Gods,
Burnt – out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animals,

All in noisy silence
Suffering the place and time,
I ride my elephant of thought,
A Cézanne Slung around my neck (1-12).

Adit Jussawalla remarks that “Nissim Ezekiel’s poems are the records of the moral aches and pains of a modern Indian in one of his own cities” (79). “Enterprise” written by Ezekiel depicts existential struggle in a cruel city:

When, finally, we reached the place,
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. (26-30)

According to K. R. Nair: “*Enterprise* is an allegory of the pilgrimage theme with a suggestion of futility. Journey from the city to the hinterland is a metaphor for contrived change from frustration to fulfillment” (www.trivenijournalindia.com). Ezekiel’s poetry represents an assortment of themes. One of the most recurring themes in his poetry is the portrayal of tyranny in a crowded civilization represented by the city of Bombay. It is the “Barbaric city” which is depicted in the poem, where the poet was born and brought up and where he lived. A recurring note in his poetry is the wound urban civilisation inflicts on unattached man. His poetry gives the impression of an oversensitive soul caught in the tentacles of a cruel city civilisation, unable to escape from its vagaries and consequently developing a love-hate relationship with its torment.

In his autobiographical poem, “Background, Casually”, Ezekiel brought forth his childhood memories. Communal issues were projected when the feeling of alienation was experienced by the poet among his classmates. The poet expressed lack of religious tolerance even in a modern Indian society. belonging to a city like Bombay. In a multi-cultural society, ethnic citizens who belong to minority communities come up against the difficulty of trying to belong to two cultures and challenges. Conflicts may occur when a minority doesn’t identify with the majority. Though coming from a minority race in India (the Jews), Nissim

Ezekiel defends his right to be considered Indian too. Many young people growing up in blended cultures face the same problems - they may be one person at school or at work, and another in the home. The poet has voiced the humiliations and victimization from those belonging to other cultures. He has expressed his sufferings in the poem. He felt estranged as he was a Jew:

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 prepositions always wrong
Repelled me by passivity
One noisy day I used a knife. (6-15)

The poem frames the question of identity at the beginning but the closing lines of the poem quite clearly take India as the place where the poet belongs. The view that raises the question of identity and the backwardness of the place, first of all, sets up a binary opposition. This binary opposition conveniently sets up two categories: something called India and something called foreign. With this opposition there is a termination of the question. The poem sets out to resolve the puzzle. It admits that the 'identity' of the speaker spills over a pure category and it is suggested by 'foreign' experiences in the poem. Therefore, the speaker has to point out the ambivalence in the identity of the self – critical yet committed to home. The binary invoked here deals with essentialisms. The perspective developed in the poem is comforting in a way, and often is seen as politically correct too. It confronts the question of identity in a reductive polarization between 'India' and 'the foreign':

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. (66-75)

Nissim Ezekiel is a poet of modern era, presenting the authentic crisis of existence of modern man. His poetry emerges from a self-questioning attitude. He remarked that, "A writer must make life difficult for himself" (Havovi 46). Life is seen as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction for maturity. The quest essentially concerns, how to live happy. Self-criticism and introspection, form basis of many of his poems. "Truth whether himself or about others is his objectives" (Rao 138). Ezekiel says, in "What Frightens Me...." in *The Third*:

My self-examined frightens me.
.....
I have long watched myself
Remotely doing what I had to do,
At times a shamed but always
Rationalizing all I do.
I have heard the endless silent dialogue
Between the self – protective self
And the self naked.
I have seen the mask
And the secret behind the mask... (1, 8-16)

The poem "What Frightens Me...." projects the fear of the poet in a manner that is candid. The poet introspects and confesses the weaknesses within him. M. K. Naik aptly remarks: "Another persistent motif is an obsessive sense of failure, leading to agonized bouts

of self doubt and self laceration, revealing the poet in exile from himself” (195). Going through his poems one can easily judge that his “verse is sharp and shapely, taut and austere, though occasionally a little bare” (Rao 138). He brought a sense of restraint, self-analysis, and mastery to Indian English poetry. Ezekiel draws inspiration from nature in some of his poems, and reflects his spiritual self too. In his poem “Morning Prayer” in *The Unfinished Man*, he prays to the Lord thus:

God grant me certainty
In Kinship with the sky,
Air, earth, Fire Sea—
And the fresh inward eye. (9-12)

CONCLUSION:

Ezekiel’s poems are personal, modest, ironic, self deprecatory, urban and skeptical. He avoids emotional indulgence. Ezekiel’s work “is clear of all historical and mythopoeic baggage” (Patke 247). Ezekiel had discipline and restraint. His contribution to Indian poetry was in the modern distinctiveness invented by him in the form of irony, critical self-consciousness, strong intellectual function, a diversity of tones, the creative distancing of sentiments through a persona. William Walsh has aptly commented thus: “Ezekiel’s poetry more than that of any other of these writers seems to be generated from within and to have within it a natural capacity for development. It is intellectually complex, mobile in phrasing, fastidious in diction, and austere in acceptance” (qtd. in Karnani, *Nissim Ezekiel* 183).

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