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Portrayal of Woman in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract:

A study of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry brings out a gradual evolution of his art and genius. A number of major themes run through his poetry. The poets before him mainly preferred to write on themes which were considered 'Poetic'. It was Ezekiel who first time used 'unpoetic' themes into Indian English Poetry. The theme of love and sex recurs frequently in Ezekiel's poetry. 'Love' has always remained an irresistible theme for poets in all languages. It is a sentiment which is all pervasive in Indian Poetry, especially after Independence. The theme of love and sex cannot be imagined without existence of feminine character. So, it is but natural to find the image of woman in a characteristic manner. The interaction between man and woman is a major concern of Ezekiel's Poetry. There are highly sensuous descriptions of the human body and love - making in the bed. His treatment of the act of love, and of the charms of the female body is characterized by extreme frankness. Ezekiel speaks very thoughtfully about the physical pleasures that are quite necessary to the body; hence sex becomes the carrier of blessed moments.

Keywords: alienation, blessed moments, female anatomy, potboiler, fibres of flesh, sexism, chauvinism.

Nissim Ezekiel is called as one of the trinity of indo-Anglian poets. The other two are Kamla Das and A.K. Ramanujan. As a prominent poet, he has attracted enough critical attention from many scholars. He has also brought fame and recognition to a number of Indian English Poets. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel has keenness to realities of life, its sorrow, happiness, forms, varieties, vacillations, hopes and disillusion.

He was born in Bombay in 1924. He was a Jew by birth. His father was a Principal of a college and his mother of school. As his parents were teacher administrators, he got extremely academic atmosphere in home. Nissim Ezekiel was educated at Antonio D'souza High School

and Wilson College, Bombay and Birbeck College, London. In 1964, he was a visiting Professor at Leeds University. Under International visitor's program by U.S. Government, he was an invitee in 1974 and in 1975, to a Cultural Award Visitor to Australia. He was also the Director of Theatre Unit, Bombay for some time. During 1948-1952, he was in England. When he returned to India in 1952, he worked as Professor and Head of Department of English at Mithibai College of Arts, Bombay. Thus after trying various professions, he joined the English Dept. of the University of Bombay. He retired as a Professor in 1984.

This great poet in Indo-Anglian Literature had a charming personality. He always guided the younger poets who had dreams of becoming poets. There was hardly anything he would not do for an individual who deserved encouragement. He was more enthusiastic about helping women than men. R. raja Rao in 'Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorised Biography' calls him 'a ladies' man'. He had romantic relationships with quite a number of women. At Wilson College, he was the male student most chased by girls. He stayed for some months at National University of Singapore as poet-in-residence when he was in his mid 60's. He became popular among the students, especially the girls. He conducted a poetry reading and collected a group of female admirers. But such a person of towering personality was unfortunate as far as his married life is concerned. There was one woman with whom Nissim Ezekiel didn't have romantic relationship; and it was his wife, Daisy Ezekiel nee Dandekar. Their married life ended in separation. He had many extra marital relationships. But this was not the main reason for the break up to his marriage. Daisy could have neglected them, if he had been more attentive, considerate and responsible husband. Theirs was not a love marriage. It would be right to call it 'a semi-arranged marriage'. The proposal came from a community matchmaker. When Daisy's father introduced her to Nissim Ezekiel, he was not swept off his feet by his feelings for Daisy. And Ezekiel was a man who found himself repeatedly swept off his feet by feelings of women.

In Nissim Ezekiel's poetry, there is the confession of what is felt and experienced in its complexity, contradictions, pleasures, fears and disillusionments without preconceived ideas. He set an example of a poet; intellectually and morally concerned with living in the modern world and making poetry out of experience. Primarily, he is a poet, but his interests are not confined to poetry alone. He is also a great critic. He has also tried his hand at drama and has some good plays to his credit. He has played many roles, but primarily; he has always been a poet. He had a long creative span covering over 28 years. During this span, he has published six collections of his poems. Ezekiel's significance is not only as a promoter of poetry, it is his wish to be a poet. He made 'Poetry Writing' his vocation. He brought a sense of discipline, self criticism and mastery to Indian English Poetry. He brought openness to style and made his poetry contemporaneous. 'Life in city, 'sexuality', 'the problems of marriage', and 'alienation' are the various themes of his poetry. Woman's portrayal peeps into his poems dealing with the theme of Love, Sexuality and the problems of marriage etc.

A study of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry brings out a gradual evolution of his art and genius. A number of major themes run through his poetry. The Indian poetry in English before Independence consists of love poetry. But the poets generally avoided treating the physical dimensions of the relationship between man and woman. Ezekiel set out to make up for this failure of his predecessors. The poets before him mainly preferred to write on themes which were considered 'Poetic'; anything ugly or ordinary was taboo. It was Ezekiel who first time used 'unpoetic' themes into Indian English Poetry. The theme of love and sex recurs frequently in Ezekiel's poetry. 'Love' has always remained an irresistible theme for poets in all languages. It is a sentiment which is all pervasive in Indian Poetry, especially after Independence. Love and sex breathe in an atmosphere of rare frankness in Ezekiel's Poetry. Love is predominant theme in the most of his poems. The theme of love and sex cannot be imagined without existence of feminine character. So, it is but natural to find the image of woman in a characteristic manner.

Perhaps no other Indian poet has dealt woman so vehemently as Nissim Ezekiel. The interaction between man and woman is a major concern of Ezekiel's Poetry. There are highly sensuous descriptions of the human body and love - making in the bed. His treatment of the act of love, and of the charms of the female body is characterized by extreme frankness. Ezekiel speaks very thoughtfully about the physical pleasures that are quite necessary to the body; hence sex becomes the carrier of blessed moments. This experience is expressed in his poem *In the Queue*—

Insatiate the carnal sense
 Behind its stiff sartorial fence
 Though manners play the gentleman,
 A passing bosom lifts the ban.
 ... Adam in the busy street
 Is tempted to indiscreet. (Ezekiel 96)

He is often exposed to the charge of being a poet of the body, of the female anatomy, of wallowing in sex; but such criticism is superficial and unjust. He is neither a platonic nor a romantic dreamer, nor does he reject the claims of the body. He considered sex and love as a part of the universal plan. So he did not prefer the Victorian type of mentality. It is significant to note that nowhere is there any indication of the poet's falling a prey to putrid love. On the other hand, he tries to understand the nature of real love and passion through his indulgence in the act. In *An Affair*, one comes across the naïve heroine who is taken to a cinema to see a movie, which unfortunately for her escort, happens to be something of a run of the mill potboiler with its usual dose of sex and violence. The villain's efforts to frustrate the lover's plans prove abortive.

And then she said: I love you just like this
 As I had seen the yellow blondes declare

Upon the screen, and even stroked my hair.
But hates me now because I did not kiss (11)

The woman in *An Affair* shows lack of experience or judgment.

The woman in *An Affair* shows lack of experience or judgment. Commenting on the poem, A. Raghu says: "The poem can, because of its tonal levity, be compared with John Betjeman's 'A Subaltern's Love Song'. However, the comparison should not be pressed too far: the Betjeman poem concludes with the speaker getting engaged to Miss Joan Hunter Dunn. By using a visit to a cinema to highlight the chasm between reality and illusion and the human, especially feminine, inability to accept its existence, Ezekiel, then a young man in his twenties, was doing something which had never before been attempted in Indian poetry in English." (Raghu 31)

Nissim Ezekiel is acutely aware of the fibres of flesh and desire. He has strong liking for drawing the woman's features in different ways. They are sometimes extremely sensual, sometimes sacred, sometimes defiled. The woman's body to him is one of the wonders of creation. The poet has dealt sexual love in all its various forms and varieties; but always there is an attempt to transcend the physical act of sex and to transform it into something spiritual, something nobler and higher.

The poet emphatically negates absorption in sex which he confirms in *Conclusion* –
The true business of living is seeing, touching, kissing, the epic of walking the street and loving on the bed. (Rahman 27)

In *For Love's Record*, the poet has portrayed the woman who gathers men as shells and puts them by. She does not care for their love. The protagonist keeps his distance with her, but it is not too far.

Against my will but somewhat reconciled,
I let her go who gave but world not bind.
She grew in Love abandoning her ties,
No matter how they loved she put them by. (Ezekiel 111)

The thinking of the woman in *For Love's Record* is identical to the philosophy of personal relationships observed in *The Apple Cart* by King Magnus to his mistress, Orinthia.

Every star has its own orbit; and between
it and its nearest neighbor there is not only
a powerful attraction but an infinite distance.
When the attraction becomes stronger
than the distance, the two do not embrace: they
crash together in ruin. (Shaw 83)

In his poem *The Old Woman*, Ezekiel describes the old woman who takes to ‘Churching’ and to ‘Politics’ after a timid childhood and a cautious youth and after letting her husband ‘die of too much dying’. She subsists on ‘cornflakes’ ‘hate and sweetened milk’.

A woman in *Event* is uncertain about the expectations from her. She, in an effort to please her lover speaks of an unread book called ‘Wine and Bread’, a film, a speech and ‘Art’. But –

Remote from the exploring act
I knew that both were undefined,
Who lived in day-dreams, not in fact,
Reflections of the cheated mind. (Ezekiel 123)
On the other hand, there is the woman of whom *Haiku* says –
Unmasked, as the day
declined, she brought out her small
breasts to be caressed (174)

In *Situation*, Ezekiel has painted an image of ‘she’ who has sweet voice. She places one hand unconsciously upon the protagonist’s knee to press “home the facts I might have failed to see”. (43) Then both of them take coffee seated in the shade, she reveals that she knows her trade.

A girl, once a wife and a mother but now alone in *The Old Abyss* is a peculiar one as she takes pleasure in tormenting men. Her ‘magnificence in movement’ makes the men to see the old abyss again.

We find the vivid description of woman body in most of his poems. About Ezekiel’s attitude towards woman,

Ezekiel looks at women not merely as a lover looks at his beloved; but as a botanist looks at a flower. (Raghu 33)

It is true that as a botanist looks and dissects the flower in order to study it thoroughly; Ezekiel also looks at a woman and dissects the woman body with the help of his words. His words are his instruments.

In *Motives*, the poet refers to ‘your body’ and says –
I dwell on it
as on a landscape
or a beloved painting. (Ezekiel 154)

In poem after poem, he celebrates the female body. But in his celebration there is not the least desire to gloss over the unpleasant and the ugly.

Your skin is white

but black or grey
would do just as well. (154)

As Ezekiel goes on drawing image of woman in poem after poem, we find a strong realism at work behind the celebration.

His *Gallantry* is an ironic poem. It creates the vivid picture of woman body. The focus gradually moves from the face to the ankles of woman's body:

This is a face
A man may look upon
Do I stare too long?
Well, then, I shall
Lower
The gaze –
Your bosom likes me well.
Or let me be humble,
Taking in the thighs.
Forgive me, madam.
Now I bend my eyes
Lower still
To fall upon your knees. How
Low shall I fall?
Down to your ankles then –
But now
It's time to rise
And look again upon your face
Do I stare too long?
Well, then, I shall
Lower the gaze..... (105)

Similarly *Beach scene* brings the focus on the entire body, but it is viewed from a distance by male eyes. Ezekiel's *Beach scene* may be contrasted with Das' *The Looking Glass* wherein the male body is viewed through female eyes.

As in *Nakedness II*, Ezekiel, sometimes brings male body under observation –
He stripped and lay down on his bed
And watched his naked limbs, remote
As love and lonely as a dream.
He wondered why his torso seemed
So unfamiliar and his thighs
As though they were not part of him. (60)

Similarly, *Description* brings out the description of woman body –
I will begin – but how should I begin?
with hair, your hair,
remembered hair,
touched, smelt, lying silent there
upon your head, beneath your arms,
and then between your thighs..... (48)

The study of Ezekiel's poems discussed earlier depicts 'Ezekiel as a poet of woman body'. However it would not be right to call him merely the poet of flesh as –

To say that Ezekiel sees in woman nothing more than her physical fabric, is untrue.

(Raghu 35)

In *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, he calls woman 'myths of light'. (Ezekiel 135). For him woman is butterfly of light that elevates and illumines earthly existence. Ezekiel is keenly aware that there are some states in life more wretched than the state of being unloved. His pain of loneliness is highlighted in *Virginal*. In *Encounter* he seems to convey that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

In Several poems, he celebrates the happiness of love. Love and sex breathe in an atmosphere of rare frankness in his poetry. Love is predominant theme in the most of his poems. The need of love is paramount and this feeling is apparent in many of his poems. Love and sex in his poetry is directly related to the image of woman. The poem *Love Song* is enriched with frankness of love and sex. In many of his poems, he speaks about the recurrence of the desire for sex and love making. The poem *Old Abyss* clearly speaks about the recurrence of the temptation of sex. The celebration of the happiness generated by love is seen in *Tribute* where the narrator goes to see the lights at the invitation of a girl who knows the thing to see. It would be wrong to say that Ezekiel is unaware of the problems and pains that love generates. In *Situation*, he presents an extramarital relationship built on foundation of falsehood. She lies to be with him. So also he. Finally end of meeting is nothing but despair. It is much surprising that a poet who believes in frankness and, should believe in sanctity of the institution of marriage. But he believes that fulfillment in life can come only through marital bliss. It is fact that married life leads to quarrels as well as indifferences. However, the sanctity of marriage must be preserved at all costs, is the sense of many love poems of Ezekiel. Despite frequent breakdowns of married love, co-operation between the husband and wife is necessary. In the concluding section of *To a certain Lady* comes the philosophical realization –

Always we must be lovers,
Man and wife at work upon the hard
Mass of material which is the world. (30)

In *Report*, he says 'Love is essentially a vast and extremely complex emotion' –

And those who love are not,
As people think, happy
Because they love, but nearly
Sad because the sea
Of passion is nothing precisely. (84)

In some poems, Ezekiel focuses on the blissful aspects of marital and domestic life. The famous lines in *A Time to Change* express the desire –

To own a singing voice and a talking voice,
A bit of land, a woman and a child or two. (04)

The representation of woman in Ezekiel's poetry attains the sharpness and strength from the poet's personal experience lying underneath the verse. Most of the female characters depicted in his poetry relate to his life.

There is hardly any female character in his work who is not a counterpart of some real-life woman. (Raghu 39)

The charge of sexism in Ezekiel's poetry remains to be considered. Ezekiel likes the company of women. He is prepared to go to any length to help them. Male chauvinism is one of the aspects of his psychological make-up. He sees woman as woman rather than as person. Naturally, a trace of sexism remains present in his work. The representation of women in poetry is closely based on the reality around him. In his poems, he has drawn naïve girlfriends, the nagging wives, the untalented female artists from that reality.

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
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06

RELIGIOUS OUTLOOK IN NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

As the centuries passed by, the galaxy of Indian English Poetry became increasingly crowded. But the scenario was not like this during the early years. It is because only a few stars shine there, and Nissim Ezekiel is the pole star. His poetry contains so many aspects, themes, motives and symbols that sharpen and shape his poetic world. His poetry often shows irony, emotion, love, man-woman relationship, self-consciousness, a sense of discipline and self-criticism. He shows his concern for both modern and urban art and culture with the touch of Indian ethos and local colour. But as an Indian poet, he shows his thinking about God and religion in a vivid way. He also shows his changing view towards God and Indian theology in his poems. In this paper, I have tried to show Ezekiel's religious outlook and aspects through some of his verses.

Key Words: Myth, God, Lord, Prayer, Theology

PRESENTATION

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the greatest poets of Indian English Literature. He in his poems tries to show India's cultural heritage, identity, deep-rooted ideals. As an Indian, he has a deep sense of religion, man-God relationship, spiritual values and theologies. He shows how all these play an effective role in different kinds of socio-religious scenario. His reading of Indian religious books,

mythologies left a great impact on his mind, and he wants to penetrate this impact into his poetry. Before the start of this discussion about his theology, I want to show what God means to him. He uses the word 'God' so many times in his poetry. Sometimes like a modern poet, he takes God as a normal human being. But at the same time, he praises, advises and rebukes God. He wants to learn the Ultimate truth, and for this reason, he urges God to give him adversities and misfortunes in order to know the truth. As he says:

"Kick me around
a bit more, O Lord
I see at last
There is no other way
For me to learn
Your simplest truths."

(JSAL, 133)

But as a modernist poet, he sometimes shows that one can easily communicate with God in the day by day speech. And in these lines he shows how an urban man tries to contact with God in a simple, friendly way. As he says:

"Be drunk, occasionally
but not with gin
or whisky
may the Lord
use you up for ends
beyond your means
so you know what drunkenness
really means."

(Collected Poems, 280)

But he also shows that God is someone with whom we can share our depression, frustration and anger also. In these lines, he shows his attempt to correct even God:

"Lord, few there are that trouble me
fewer still that rise up against me
Be thou a shield for them as for me."

(Collected Poems, 253)

Even in 'Collected Poems', he is ready to rebuke him and even shows his anger and disgust. As these lines show:

"How can I breathe freely
if you breakfast the teeth of the
ungodly?"

(Collected Poems, 253)

Ezekiel even shows his disgust and lack of faith in God and his disciples. In his 'Guru', he shows that these Gurus are fake, diplomatic and don't know the actual meaning of prayer, religion, spiritual learning and salvation. In his 'Guru', he says about them:

"But when we learn
the saint is still a faithless friend,
obstinate in argument
ungrateful for favourite done,
hard with servants and the poor,
discourteous to disciples, especially
men."

(Guru)

In his 'Egotist Prayers', he shows how prayer changes its form now-a-days. Here he denies doing work without result that Lord Krishna says in Bhagwat Gita. Here he rejects all sorts of advice that God has given to man. Even he forgets his duty and duty towards God. As these lines clearly show the decline of religious faith from rural to an urban level and also show the naked truth of Indian society:

"Do not choose me, O Lord,
to carry out thy purposes.
I am quite worthy, of course,
But I have my own purpose.
You have plenty of volunteers
to choose from, Lord
why pick on me, the selfish one?"

(Egotist Prayers)

But it is not always same as he also believes in Supreme Being's power. He also shows Man's relationship with God and man's place in the universe. What a man can know about God is what God reveals to him and also to know God completely is hard, an unfathomable reality. As he shows in his 16th Hymns in Darkness:

"You are master
neither of death nor of life
Belief will not save you,
nor unbelief.
All you have
Is the sense of reality
Unfathomable
As it yields its secrets
Slowly One by One."

(16th Hymns in Darkness)

Ezekiel also wants to show that we have to remove veils that cover our outer image and existence in order to know God. He shows this in 'Theological':

"I've stripped off a hundred veils
and still there are more
that cover you creation
Why are you so elusive?...
Even as myself, my very own
Incontrovertible, unexceptional
Self, I feel I am disguised."

(Theological)

Often we find Ezekiel in a prayer mode in his poetry. He realizes that it is not possible for mankind to acquire virtue which they don't have and he knows that human being will always commit vices. And he believes that it is God who somehow responsible for it as he creates mankind. So it is God's duty to save man. As he says these in the second of the 'Poster Prayers':

"The vices I've always had
I still have
The virtues I've never had
I still do not have
From this human way of life
Who can rescue man
If not his maker?
Do thy duty, Lord!"

[JSAL, 133]

At the same time he turns to God to seek knowledge and wisdom. He prays to God to give him virtue, knowledge and power to understand him. As he clearly shows these in these lines:

"Give me as much knowledge

as I need, and then some more.

The extra since or two
from your bread of love and truth
is only for me greed.

You know what lies beyond my hunger.
Overlook, O Lord, my love of food."

(Poster Prayers)

Ezekiel knows that wealth, property and material pleasure are desirable things, and he wants to be rich by knowing the fact that a rich man can't go to heaven. He also knows that if a camel can go there through the eye of a needle, then he can also go there. So, he prays:

"Let me be, O Lord,
The Camel of the Higher Income Group
Who passes smooth through
The eye of that needle."

(JSAL, 134)

Apart from his religious outlook, he has also shown his theological aspect in his poems. Since his childhood, Ezekiel reads Bhagwat Gita and Upanishad. And his religious poems show these books' influence on him. Also, he shows society's changing attitude towards religion and God. In his 'Tribute to Upanishads', he shows how this book helps him to gain knowledge of real self. As he says:

"To feel that one is
to drive oneself
in a kind of hearse-
the destination is obvious."

(Tribute to Upanishads)

Indian mythology appeals him very much. Lord Krishna's preaching regarding the mystery of life and self left deep impression on him. He wants to search the mystery of life leaving the worldly life and the next life. He shows us what Lord Krishna shows to Arjun:

"The secret locked within the seed
becomes my need and so
I shrink to nothingness
Within the seed."

(Collected Poems, 205)

Vedic Hymns, Bhagwat Gita have left a

mark on him. As a result, he realizes that one can understand God after complete devotion and surrender before the Supreme Being. He also shows that it is God who can show how to come out of all chaos. Again he reminds us of Lord Krishna's advice to Arjun. Here he takes the form of a common man, a city dweller to come closer to his readers. In these lines, we find all these:

"He has lost faith in himself
And found faith at last
All forms of God
and God in all forms."

(Collected Poems, 219-220)

Ezekiel's spiritual quest, humanistic voice, his disillusionment caused by fake, false and unsubstantial world is found in 'Theological'. Here he shows two aspects of life. On one hand, he tries to rebuild man's relationship with society, Nature and God. And on the other hand, he tries to show that the realization of the ultimate truth of God is ultimate savior of mankind. And to achieve this, a broad framework is needed. As he shows these two aspects in these lines:

"Lord, I am tired
of being wrong
Your truth
is too momentous for man
And not always useful."

(Collected Poems.156)

Ezekiel also shows his anxiety for the modern man who does not believe God. But it is the God who can do everything. Indian myth and theology are well shown in his poem 'Counsel'. Here he wants to show man's knowledge of what he needs and what he does not need:

"Success at the moment
is not in your interest."

(Counsel)

Hindu Mythology can also be seen in his 'Morning Prayer'. In this period, he believes firmly in God and tell him to make him a good human being. He thus says here using the reference of 'Panchatava' theory of Hindu

Mythology:

"...certainly
in kinship with the sky
Air, Earth, Fire, Sea-
and the fresh inward eye."

(Morning Prayer)

Not only Hindu mythology, but Christian mythology is also seen in his poetry, Using the reference of Adam and Eve, he tells us to remove all false knowledge as knowledge is that thing which is tasted by First Man and Woman. Also he advises that the mankind should now fast as they have acquired so much knowledge whether good or bad. As he says:

"...Learn to fast
Do without, be absent
Keep the eyes closed."

(Collected Poems, 229)

In poems like 'The Cur', 'Enterprise', we find the same theme as God is everywhere, and we don't need to go to any particular place in search of God. It can be found in the home.

As he says:

"Home is where we have to earn grace."
(Collected Poems.25)

Ezekiel as a religious Indian poet wants to show even his natives socio-religious attitude. He shows the confusion and dilemma of a middle aged man as they have to divide their time into spiritual and material world. They can't choose only one world because both materialistic pleasure and spiritual bliss are needed in life. In 'At Fifty', he shows these:

"I do not want the ashes
of the old fire but the flame itself.
Interest in the secret of renewed
is sign of age.
no longer secret."

(At Fifty)

Ezekiel firmly believes in the power of God and he wants to warn all kinds of people about, not too proud and boast of them. God is the only controller and master of all. So, we have to be normal before the

Supreme Being. As he says:

"You are master
neither of death nor life
Belief will not save you
nor unbelief."

(Collected Poems, 222)

As a modernist poet, he is deeply influenced by English modernists' poets. He reads Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and echoes the same theme of selfless giving, Daan and Dutta. As he says:

"Express your gratitude
By giving what you have to give
You may get nothing in return
And bear your restlessness with grace."

(Collected Poems, 229)

CONCLUSION

So in the concluding lines, it can be said that his religious outlook is vast and deep rooted. He sees God in various ways with Indian ethos, mythology and sensibilities. But it is his God for whom he surrenders himself completely and wants his natives' complete surrender before God. Actually Ezekiel's religious outlook is also totally Indian in form and content. And I agree totally with what P.P.Mehta said about him: "As a poet, he is aware of his cultural milieu and native problems. His sharp sensibility enables him to grapple with the situation around him; without nostalgically recalling his stay in England or drawing of a foreign land. He gives careful thought to his ideas, medium of expression and form of words and phrases; and does not attempt to depict what is gaudy and inane and more adolescent. In him, the reflective and philosophical strains are predominant."

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Critical Tenets of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry: A Perspective

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4

Research Paper - English

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" (Kamani, 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).

Adil 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 civilization inflicts on unattached man. His poetry gives the impression of an oversensitive soul caught in the tentacles of a cruel city civilization, 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 mythopoeia 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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