

India and the Poetic Voice Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract:

The article explores the conflicting voices of detachment and involvement in Ezekiel's those poems that depicts India and Indian life exclusively. The Essay focuses on how family background, Jew identity and higher education In England moulds his identity as an Indian poet. Ezekiel's poetry provides a new lens to review Indian life and context.

Nissim Ezekiel stands as a flagship in the stream of modern Indian poetry in English which whenever is discussed always starts with him. A reader In American literature at the University of Bombay, Ezekiel is not only a poet, but also a promoter and publisher of poetry. Born in 1924 and brought up in pre-independent Bombay, raised in a Bene-Jew family led by a secularist rationalist scientific father, schooled in western education at home as well as abroad Ezekiel with its root dipped physically in Indian soil yet he is not absorbed by so called Indianness. His western education, highly esteemed job at university bars him to be categorised as 'aam admi', and his Jewish family background makes him an outsider to the vast Hindu-Muslim cultural milieu of India. The poet himself is aware of his marginal identity in the country of his birth, as he says of himself as quoted by Parthasarathy,

"I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me a natural outsider: circumstances and decisions relate me to India". (p28)

In a culturally inclusive country like India, Ezekiel's queer existence among the dominant Hindus and the Muslims makes him feel grounded in the soil, yet not a part of it wholeheartedly. He is a detached involver of the Indian life as Philip Larkin was of the British life. His existence in Indian scenario is brilliantly depicted in very Ezekelian style in 'Background, Casually'

"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 strong

But undernourished Hindu
Their prepositions always wrong,
Repelled me by passivity.

One noisy day I used a knife". (Parthasarathy, *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* p35)

At 22 young Ezekiel went to England to pursue his dream and there 'philosophy/ poverty and poetry', were his constant faithful companions. A bitter thought that I had failed in everything' forced him to take a painful decision of returning home. No spontaneous will, but hurting circumstances generate a hurting reconciliation. So he 'learned to laugh again at home'. In India he still could not feel home instantly; hence 'how to feel home was the point.' This in-between situation colours his mind, forges his outlook of home and abroad, characterises his poetry. A poet who cannot feel home at home, whose birth place does not naturally become his background rather he has to accept it with pain as his background, his voice cannot be full of sentiment and unbridled praise for it. He is a cynical observer, mentally at distance from it yet a 'part of it, to be observed by foreigners'. This play of physical closeness yet mental and spiritual distance is quite prominent in Ezekiel's poetry. The country's outlook does not become the poet's outlook, that's why he has to find out his very own outlook-

"I look about me and try
To formulate a plainer view:
The wise survive and serve- to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and the outer storms".

Driven by unfortunate circumstances the poet neither gives himself up to sentimental melancholia, nor vents his severe apathy towards his uncomfortable surroundings, like a clown of comedy he mocks at background, laughs at his own compromising existence. Therefore irony, self-mockery, humour, satiric touches become his tools. His irony has no acidic-effect, it has a rationalistic critical sharpness. He displays the backwardness of the background, yet accepts it as an unavoidable reality as an inseparable part of him.

My backward place is where I am.

There is conflict in the very heart of the poetic voice, but the poet never goes to showcase it, rather he tries to bury it in veneer of poetic craft.

This play of rejection and acceptance is one of powerful forces in Ezekiel's poetry particularly his poems exclusively about India and Indian life. Ezekiel is basically a poet of city life, to say in Bruce King's words, 'a representative voice of urbanised, western educated India' he goes on depicting ordinary events of Indian life in a satiric tone to show the littleness of little events that get some extra-ordinary stature, or over-sentimentalised in farcical way and thus lose their original significance.

In his most anthologised poem 'Night of Scorpion' he gives in an intellectualised emotion-free way, the slice of Indian life in critical emotional moment in which everyone is seen seriously concerned for other in their respective idiosyncratic way. The God-fearing, religious-minded villagers who come to see the mortal victim of the diabolic scorpion, instead of doing anything practical to mitigate the poison, they pray to God a thousand times, convey their anxiety for the imaginary sin of last life, misfortunate next birth, 'the flesh of desire'. They appear more concerned with 'the unreal world' than the real pain of the poet's mother. The very portrayal of the rustics in the light of 'swarms of flies', 'scorpion shadows', and the mechanical repetition of the phrase 'they said' convey the poet's resentment to the ignorant villagers. The poisonous scorpion stung the poet's mother the nocuous tongues of the villagers stung the heart of the little boy who only sees his mother rolling under pain-

"My mother twisted through and through
groaning on a mat."

A deliberate contrast between a son's feelings for mother and the neighbours' concern for the mother's unreal past and future birth and their silence on present suffering is presented. Yet the matured poet knows that the villagers are not as much callous as they are ignorant and superstitious. That's he says,

"More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
More insect and the endless rain"

It is noticeable that the pheasants of line-8 now become 'neighbours' who are still pouring in on ignoring rain to see the poet's mother. The poet recognises both the villagers' merit of helpfulness as well as their solemn faulty habit of neglecting material world for a non-existing world. The depiction of the modern-minded father is also ironic. Though the rationalistic father himself tries 'every curse and blessing/Powder, mixer, herb and hybrid', even little paraffin, he lets his anguishing wife to be treated by a ritual performing Holy man.

The final lines of the poem contain more sharp ironical twist –

"My mother only said
Thank god the scorpion picked on me
and spared my children".

The typical motherly concern for her children's safety nullifies all the previous feverish activities of the villagers' verbal babbling, father's scientific effort and the holy man's religious rite.

In 'The Visitor' the 'poet –rascal-clown' presents himself as a fool caught in the decrepit tradition; by misguided its irrational worldview. With a crow cawing thrice the poet as 'folk belief befits' waits anxiously all day for a visitor. He struggles within to 'cope with the visitor' who may be 'An angel in disguise, perhaps/ Or else temptation in unlike shape'. When the actual visitor comes 'only to kill a little time' all the previous concerns and thoughts appeared inflated, 'miracle of mind' mythicised in a culture. The poet realises his own blunder-

"I see how wrong I was.

Not foresee precisely this: . . .

The ordinariness of most events.”

‘In India’, it is not age-old tradition with which the poet is at discomfort, but incongruous imitation of western culture is the butt of Ezekiel’s mockery, satire-

“The men are quite at home
Among the foreign styles.
(What fun the flirting is)
I myself, decorously,
Press a thigh or two in sly innocence
The party is a great success.
Then someone says we cannot
Enjoy it somehow, don’t you think?
The atmosphere corrupt,
And look at our wooden wives.”

At parties foreign Indian wives ‘do not talk/ of course, they do not kiss’, some feel atmosphere so corrupt yet some enjoy flirting. A totally chaotic picture of Party-culture in India. In other poems of The Exact Name, ‘A Virginal, Progress’, ‘Beachescene’ he is equally balanced, crafty, witty and ironic.”Ezekiel takes a realistic and human view of love sex, stripped of sentimentalism and romantic illusions”. (Harish Raizada in the article ‘*Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry of Love and Sex*’, Prasad p-74) He is never shy of talking of sex as in ‘Progress’

“The former, suffering
Self declined the use
Of woman who were
Willing but unlovable:
Love was high-minded stable.
Now he wears a thicker
Skin upgraded from
the Goddess of virtue
to mocking, sexual eyes
whose hunger makes him wise.”

In ‘Love Poem’, the poet encounters a woman whose ‘sad and thoughtful love’ he hears ‘Above the tumult of despair’

“You bend your head, I touched your
Hair, the sign was timed without a word”
On further exploration, he discovers-
Great woman-beast of sex you are
I see you now as myth and dream
Completed, more than what you seem.
The friendly-foe, the near and far”.

In poem of the separation (hymns in darkness 1976) when lovers feel grown up, passion comes out spontaneously-

“One day you said,
`Suddenly, I feel
grown-up’. The price was only
a thousand kisses.”

After separation when the male lover wants his ladylove back not out of romantic sentiment only and platonic love, he wants her back with the very physical pleasure she gives

“I want you back
With rough happiness you lightly wear
Supported by your shoulders,
Breasts and thighs”

In midnight’s children Salman Rushdie describes that, in a movie named ‘The Lovers of Kashmir’ directed by Hanif Aziz the leading, couple planted an indirect kiss on an apple as direct kiss on screen was a taboo in India. It was the year 1948 in which Gandhiji was assassinated. Two decades after in Ezekiel’s poems bodily passion, hunger for flesh, passion come out nakedly. Yet in backbone he feels to be confined unlike his great Sanskrit poetic maestros

“How freely they mention
breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited?” (‘Passion poem3’, Hymns in Darkness)

Ezekiel’s some poems on India particularly ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Puspa T.S.’ and ‘Very Indian Poem in Indian English’ shed light on the funny side of Indian English and Indian mentality. Use of present progressive form in place of present indefinite form of verb, vain

repetition for the sake of emphasis, abrupt digression from the main topic, wrong use of word lead to comic self revelation of the speaker's confusion of mind .

“Puspa Miss is never saying no
Whatever I or anybody is asking
She is always saying yes.
And today she is going
To improve her prospects
And we are wishing her bon voyage.”

Use of saying, asking, growing, wishing instead of the present indefinite form of the verb is more funny in 'A Very Indian Poem in Indian English'

“I am standing for peace and non-violence
Why world is fighting and fighting
Why all people of the world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi
I am simply not understanding”.

Besides, the odd Indianised spoken English, other noticeable things are the vague sense of Indian brotherhood. Though the patriotic speaker admits the Gujratis, the Maharastrisans, the Hindiwallas are brothers yet he is strongly aware of their difference and behavioural peculiarity. It is clear that one does not love other rather tolerates other being located in a single geographical territory. That's the stark Indian reality beneath the veneer of glorified Indian nationalism and communal harmony – the sentimental love of the one brotherhood is up to lips only, in the heart is only thin vulnerable layer of tolerance. The same picture we can find in 'Cows'. The poet's 70-year old school-mistress mother is aware that Hindus worship holy cows, she cannot but hate the earthly foolish animals for making pavements dirty-

“She knows that cows are holy
Worshipped by the parents
of children in her school.
Even Gods ought not clutter up
The pavement – that's her view
She is not against believe
What you like, she says
But get out of my way.”

The old lady does not hate the Hindus for their belief, she does not respect also their belief, and she is disgusted of them. In other poems such as 'the Truth about the flood,' 'Rural Suite' 'Under trial Prisoners' 'Poverty Poems' he turns his attention from ordinariness of ordinary events to littleness of big social issues. In 'The Truth about the Flood' the flood-victims got help neither from the Govt. Officials nor from the student -rescue party. The formers are busy in only supplying statistics and the latters are more interested in taking photos of rescue service than the real rescue operation. The poet knows the scenario will not change easily soon; he does not claim to revolutionise, bring a sea change in a day. That's why he says –

“We are used to it

These people never learn”

The hesitant reception of a jaundiced background is always felt in the mind of the reader. Being an alienated part of the Indian life, the poet does not feel like Kamala Das the urge to brew up a revolution against the demonic society. Kamala Das has to alienate herself from her chocking background for survival, but Ezekiel has to compromise and adopt it for survival. In his poems we do not get inflated picture of India as we find in the 19th century romantic poets the cynical dissection of Hindu rituals and myths as we get in the poems of Parthasarathy and Ramanujan and the local colour of Jayanta Mahapatra. Like other modern poets Ezekiel is also critical of Indian life, but position makes him distinguished. His poems are valuable to us because they show India from a different angle, from a privileged marginalised perspective.

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