

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)

UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Contemporary Reality and Indianness in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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Article History: Submitted-13/07/2017, Revised-22/08/2017, Accepted-24/08/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

All eyes are riveted and roved on Nissim Ezekiel since his advent on the horizon of Indian English Poetry blazingly after Independence, and he's become the cynosure of them. Like a light pole, he has served as the inspirational, guiding and goading force for the poetasters to hone their poetic skills and harness their endeavour. His unflinching Indianness is one of the irresistible charms of his poetry. Indian myth, history, traditions, culture, philosophy, politics, poverty, corruption, social reality, religion, love, frustration, spiritual barrenness, industrialisation, and globalisation are the dominant themes of his poetry. He is a prolific poet and his poetic Oeuvre consists of *A Time to Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1958), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Later Day Psalms* (1982).

The present paper foregrounds the contemporary reality and Indianness underlying his poetry. He emblazons vivid vignettes of Indian life vehemently in his verses. He weaves his experiences around the warp and woof of fathomless Indian consciousness inextricably.

Keywords: Myth, culture, Philosophy, altruism, politics, corruption, poverty, moral deprivation, spiritual barrenness, love, passion, sex, and globalisation.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most accomplished poets of India who has erected the edifice of Indian English poetry so majestically. He is also acclaimed as the father of modern Indian English poetry, hailed as the harbinger who paved the way for other poets to bloom. His poems are highly appealing and touch inner core of our hearts. He has enthused great vim, verve and vitality into English poetry. By virtue of his poetic prowess, competence and excellence, he has carved a niche for himself in the firmament of Indian English poetry. Like T.S. Eliot, he has felt a responsibility towards the nation and society to serve being the part thereof. His native sensibility brings a fresh fragrance and fervour to his poetry. Bruce King is quite quotable here:

His main significance is not, however, as a promoter of poetry; it is in his will to be poet, his continuing involvement in the poetry scene and the ways in which the developing body of his work expresses his quest for a satisfactory way of living in this world. Whereas previously Indian English verse was a hobby, something done in spare moments, Ezekiel made it central to his life. Others wrote poems, he wrote poetry. The difference is reflected in his craftsmanship and purposefulness; this is as

much a matter of will as talent. Ezekiel brought sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry (91).

Nissim Ezekiel has developed great proclivity towards his country India, its landscapes and its social environment. Originally he hails from Bene-Israel Jewish clan that had taken refuge long ago but assimilated in Indian culture. He adopted India his country, its culture, philosophy and permeated enormous chunk of Indianness through his poetry. C. D. Narsimhaiah succinctly eulogises him: "... to the extent he (Ezekiel) has availed himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs, he must be an important poet not merely the Indian context but in a consideration of those that are writing poetry anywhere in English(40).

Like his mentors T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden, he too exhibits the native sensibility profusely; it is Indianness that is the pervading charm of his poetry. He entwines his experiences and observations with his emotions wonderfully. History, myth, politics, philosophy, superstitions, cultural vibrancy, traditions, displacement, impact of globalisation and other contemporary issues are some dominant themes that he incorporates in his poetry. He brought the spirit of realism into Indian English Poetry nonchalantly. He looks upon India, its virtues and vices with keen observant eye. His poems are the pictorial and picturesque depiction of the all aspects of Indian life immersed in different colours, aroma and melody. His abundant use of Indian words and symbols add another charm to his poetry-pure and indigenous. Though he is not Hindu, we see full respect, regard and reverence to the knowledge inherent in scriptures and Upanishads. He has fully hybridised by abiding all cardinal components of Indian culture avidly. M. K. Naik rightly observes:

In a more generous mood, he gives himself the testimonial of being 'a good native' and tells himself (perhaps more loudly than is necessary) 'I cannot leave this island I was born here and belong.' Then despair takes over and he ruefully accepts his failure (in Rilke's words) 'to weave himself more closely into things' and confesses, 'My backward place is where I am' (204).

Nissim Ezekiel is indomitably Indian in sensibility. He is deeply rooted in Indian soil. His Indianness is revealed in his thought, feeling and imagery. He has dealt with the theme of Indianness in his own peculiar way. He goes abroad but returns where his lies to. Like a realistic poet, he showcases panorama of Indian life vividly and vociferously. He unravels the different hues of modern existence and firmly presents his belief, motif and conviction. He counts on fanaticism, religious bigotry and intolerance, love, sex, myth, history, politics, cultural dilemmas, contemporary reality unabashedly. Like a reformist, he touches upon all contemporary important issues. He is a poet laureate of common masses: it is his skill that he creates poetry out of trivial situations achieving acme of excellence. He writes both in metrical and free verse with equal adroitness. K. R. S. Iyenger is apt to state:

Ezekiel's poems are as a rule acid-amerit these days-and are splendidly evocative and satisfyingly sensuous. In his first two volumes, persons and places, memories and situations, literary echoes and moments of vision, all inspired Ezekiel to poetic utterance. He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its

stark ecstasies, it's disturbing filiations with the mind. In his later poetry, however, there is revealed a more careful craftsmanship, a more marked restraint and a colder, a more conscious intellectuality than in the first two volumes. There is a gain in quality and integrity, and he is able to achieve conversational directness and ease without losing himself in discursiveness (658).

Ezekiel's poetry is the limpid pool of distinct Indian ethos. He delights the reader with his novelty and ingenuity of approach, his flawless treatment with Indian community, familial relations,, hollowness and hypocrisy of our civilised world. He emphatically depicts the pain, poverty and predicament of Indian society. His forceful and ironical sketches leave the imprints of morality and wisdom on the psyche of the readers. Altruism, humanity, Irony, compassion, prosperity in Indian context are the hallmarks of his poetry. Bijay Kumar Das observes:

Ezekiel unlike Jayanta Mahapatra, R. Parthsarthy, A. K. Ramanujan and Kamla Das does not make an effort to acclimatize an Indigenous tradition to English language. Instead, he seeks to relate himself to the contemporary India. Typical Indian beliefs, situations, and contemporary society attract him most and he creates a new kind of poetry in Indian English idiom (18).

“Background, casually” is an autobiographical poem, indispensable part of his philosophical treatise *Hymns in darkness* pinpoints some of his experiences of his life. The poem gives us the graphic account of his life- the shabby treatment meted out to him by his classmates, his concern for his future prospects, his disillusionment with London life, and his eventual return to his native country India and marriage. While during an interview with Adil Jussawalla, he opens his heart out:

I am an Indian national. I was born in India. My tribe of Jewish community has lived in India for 2,000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some writers have obviously done, and if I had decided that I am so much of an outsider that I have to settle down I or New York, and then If I did write about India., I do not know if I could be regarded as an Indo-English Writer (167-68).

In the poem “Background, casually”, he describes himself as a blend of the poet, a rogue, and a jester. The poem vindicates that he has developed love and harmony with the Indian milieu and belongs to it heart and soul. The poem shows his mountain resolve to be fully committed to his native country where he was born in. Mark the following lines of the poems:

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. (*Collected Poems* 181)

Like W. B. Yeats, Ezekiel understands and uprightly upholds the sense of belongingness. He identifies himself with India and presents painstakingly the spectacle of his of his weal and woes, failures and success in life. He looks like an actor performing his role on the typical Shakespearean stage. Sense of belongingness and establishment of his own identity strikes his mind incessantly. He wants to reconcile with his position. Mark the following lines of the poem “A Small Summit”:

Perhaps there is another way

But I will find it: concentrate,

Concentrate, make the mind a fist.

Why should I be reconciled

to middle-aged spread and rigmarole?

If nothing else, I'll keep my nerve,

refuse the company of priests,

professors, commentators, moralists,

be my own guest in my own

one-man lunatic asylum,

questioning the Furies, my patron saints.

About their old and new obscurities (*Collected Poems* 153).

“Night of the Scorpion” is one of the finest pieces of verses of Indian English poetry in terms of felicity of expression, beauty of image, sweet flow of the verse and a satire on Indian superstitions. It is a tribute to his mother and asserts the superiority of poetry over philosophy. The poem enunciates the credulous and sympathetic nature of the village folks in India. The poem describes how a scorpion enters a house because of rain outside and stings the speaker's mother. The people residing in the neighbourhood thronged the house to express their sympathy and relieve her of excruciating pain she underwent. They chanted the name of God innumerable to diffuse the effect of poison. The speaker's father applied some herbs locally to his wife's flesh and some hours, the effect of poison diminished. The poem shows the warmth of the Indian people. See the following lines of the poem that highlights the care and concern of an Indian mother for her children:

I watched the flame feeding on my mother

I watched the holy man perform his rites

to tame the poison with an incantation.

After twenty hours

It lost its sting.

My mother only said:

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

And spared my children (*Collected poems 130*).

“Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S”, is a luminous poem of his scintillating collection *Hymns in Darkness*. The poem is a satire on semi educated people of India who commit errors in the correct usage of the words, syntax, grammar and idiom in conversation miserably. The background is given in a party hosted by Miss T. S. Pushpa to her friends to bid her adieu when she is heading headstrong to pursue higher education abroad. The poem is written in light mood. Mark the following lines of the poem:

Whenever I asked her to do anything,

she was saying, ‘just now only

I will do it.’ That is showing

Good spirit. I am always

appreciating the good spirit.

Pushpa Miss is never saying no.

Whatever I or anybody is asking

she is always saying yes,

and today she is going

to improve her prospect,

and we are wishing her bon voyage (*Collected poems 191*).

Being a social realist, no aspect of malpractice and corruption that is rampant in all public domains goes unnoticed by him. In the poem “Truth about floods”, he has depicted the apathy and indifferent attitude of the volunteers and government officials towards the people who are rendered helpless because of natural calamity like floods. Students are helping the victims out in their duress whereas government officials remain passive towards their needs. He takes umbrage for the suffering of the poor, and laments on the corruption spreading its menace at Badapal:

At Badapal

I heard the children
Wail with hunger.
An atmosphere of despair
pervaded the village.
I asked the men to help me
organise relief,
but they turned their backs on me
till I told them I was'nt a government official (*Collected poems* 188)

“The Railway Clerk”, brings forth the pitiable conditions of the poor, and how they are turned morally depraved. These people insatiate their appetite by any means, fair or foul. The railway clerk is a symbol of helplessness and desperation of the poor in India. He toils hard; he overworks but doesn't get his due to meet the expenses of the family. His wife is a greedy soul, always demands more money, and he puts her husband in a tight corner:

My wife is always asking for more money.
Money, money, where to get money?
My job is such, no one is giving bribe,
while other clerks are in fortunate position,
and no promotion even because I am not graduate.
I wish I was bird (*Collected poems* 184)

In “Morning Walk”, Ezekiel mirrors the poor people who are losing their identity in the glamour of riches. In “Ganga”, he underpins the precarious and pathetic position of a poor maid servant. He knits all his experiences with words into an organic tapestry which is highly evocative and picturesque. The following lines of the poem “Morning Walk” are the testimony of this:

The garden on the hill is cool,
Its hedges cut to look like birds
Or mythic beasts are still asleep.
His past is like a muddy pool
From which he cannot hope for words.
The city wakes, where fame is cheap,
And he belongs, an active fool ((*Collected poems* 120)

Like W. H. Auden, he carves a new image of city in his poems. The city and urban life is bedrock of his poetry. He is fully committed to city Bombay; this brings a new dimension in his poetry. He now sees the image of India through Bombay. Bombay is the Wessex of his poetry. Ezekiel through his poetic endeavour showed that good poetry can be written hovering around the contemporary reality. He sees life as it appears to him. However, he depicts the pathos, anguish, poverty, angst, indifference, and absence of humanistic values but soon he develops harmony with urban life. Mark the following lines of his poem “India”:

Always, in the sun’s eye,
 Here among the beggars,
 Hutment dwellers, slums,
 Dead souls of men and gods,
 Burnt-out mothers, frightened
 Virgins, wasted child
 And tortured animal,
 All in noisy silence
 Suffering the place and time,
 I ride my elephant of thought,
 A Cezanne slung around my neck (*Collected poems* 131).

Ezekiel’s good response to the Indian landscapes, his sense of the conventions and culture of the land determines his identity. His poetry stems from life as he sees it. India is a developing country, and its economic backwardness and poverty finds full expression in his “Poverty Poems”. He presents pictorial description of beggars begging near public places. Like a reformist, he finds a leverage to show the pathetic condition of poor sleeping on the railway platforms and on the sidewalk of the roads risking their valuable life. He also describes that some beggars are cunning, and they befool people to get alms. The poet recalls an incident at restaurant with a foreign lady when beggar came close the lady, smiled and got a coin from the lady reflective of this:

‘Before he released me,
 he smiled and I smiled back
 I turned and gave him a coin,
 Past belief in that or anything.’
 She didn’t know beggars in India
 Smile only at white foreigners (*Collected poems* 231).

In the poems “Guru” and “Healers”, he gives a graphic account of the false and fake holy men who hoodwink the innocent people out of their blind faith and ignorance. He penetrates through the veneer of hypocrisy, sensuality and moral deprivation hiding the faces of these hollow men underneath. In the poem “Guru”, he gives a very horrible picture of these so called god men:

But when we learn
the saint is still a faithless friend,
obstinate in argument,
ungrateful for favours done,
hard with servants and the poor,
discourteous to disciples, especially men,
condescending, even rude
to visitors (except the foreigners)
and overscrupulous in checking
the accounts of the *ashram*.

He is also rather fat (*Collected poems*192).

Though the poet is a Jew himself, he has much regard, reverence and respect for ancient Indian scriptures, Upanishads and Philosophy. This fact is discern when we read his poems like “Tribute to the Upanishads”, and “Very Indian Poems in English”. In the poems, like “Minority poems”, “Songs for Nandu Bhende”, we see him longing for his roots- the soil of the native Indian ethos. He is staunch supporter of Gandhiji, his policies and concept of Ram Rajya. The poet is pained at seeing the young generation hankering after the west and getting enamoured of. While the west itself is seeking solace and peace of mind in Indian spiritualism. Mark the following lines of the poem “from Very Indian poems in Indian English”:

All men are brothers, no?
In India also
Gujaratis, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs
All brothers-
Though some are having funny habits.
Still, you tolerate me,
I tolerate you,
One day Ram Rajya (*Collected Poems* 238)

Unlike his contemporaries, he doesn't strive to enthuse Indigenous tradition to English language. He endeavours to relate himself to the contemporary reality of India. Indian beliefs, traditions, scenes, and contemporary society is very close to his heart, and he pens new kind of poetry in Indian English idiom. Like William Shakespeare, he takes liberty to play with words. His poetry is inundated with innumerable Indian words. For example, words "mantra", "bhikshuk", "Kundilini", "Pan", "chapatti", "ashram", "Sai Baba", "Mukuktanda", "Gita classes", "burkha", "Ram Rajya", "Mea-kulpa", "Guru", "Ganga" etc. are beautifully used in Indian English poetry. He has also employed some colloquial Indian words to aesthetic effect to his poetry. For example, words like "air-hostess", "honeymoon", "tree-trunks", "Iron-lunged", "many-tongued", "sun-baked", "burnt out", "sex-frustrated", "actor-bridegroom", "muffled tumult", "plopping breasts", "breast roes", "unruly thighs", "mid-riff moist", "mythic breasts", "erotic cops" etc. are used suit the background of the poem and the characters. He has developed filial love with India. My discussion will be incomplete without quoting the following line of the poem "The Egoist's Prayers":

Confiscate my passport, Lord,

I don't want to go abroad.

Let me find my song

Where I belong (*collected Poems* 213).

In conclusion, I may assert that he begins writing poems reverberating the voice of T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden but eventually he has evolved his own voice. His evolution as a poet proved revolution on the horizon of Indian English poetry. He is deeply rooted in Indian soil. The images of India permeate through his poetry. His poetry evokes the Indian panorama, recreates Indian contemporary reality, and reflects Indian sensibility and Indianess. U. S. Rukhaiyyar quotes the words of Dr. K. Balachandran in the book *Studies in Indian Poetry* which are quite mentionable here: "Ezekiel is essentially Indian in his sensibility, without losing his national identity his writings appeal internationally. As a painstaking craftsman his poetry is simple, introspective and analytical. Highly disciplined and unpretentious with skilful of language in a conversational style and mastery of irony with simple diction and perfect control over his emotions, he occupies an important place on the top of the modern Indo-Anglian poets and his 'Indianness' no doubt has brought him this coveted crown (92).

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