



## NISSIM EZEKIEL'S LITERARY SKILL IN DEPICTING INDIAN SENSIBILITY AND SOCIAL REALITY WITH A HUMANISTIC STRAIN IN HIS POETRY: AN APPRAISAL

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### **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to describe Nissim Ezekiel as the pioneer of "New Poetry" by his greater variety and depth than any other poet of the post-independence period and shows how Ezekiel brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English Poetry through use of simplicity of thought and lucid language style in modern poetry. No doubt, the Indian element in Ezekiel's poetry derives its strength from his choice of themes and allusions and his poetry does pasteurized the social aspects of Indian with a humanistic strain raising a bitter voice against the thoughts of injustice and inequality. Finally, it attests to the common fact that Ezekiel had been encouraging the Indian sensibility and Indian context through his poetic outpourings in verse forms.*

**Key Words:** *Indian Sensibility, Humanity, Introspection, Realistic Experiences, in justice.*

Indian English poetry is generally found to be remarkable for profound experimentation and vivid presentation of contemporary reality. The so-called political situation due to the partition of the country assassination of the Mahatma, the rapid urbanization and sound industrialization of the nation, the total disintegration of village community, the essential problem of cultural identity and the swift changes in cultural and societal values and issues did significantly compel the attention of the new poets all and sundry. Existentialism, positivism, surrealism and the new aesthetics of the West had equally a pivotal role in influencing their poetic cosmos. Totally discarding the influence of the Romantics and the Victorians, they ardently admired such reputed poets as Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats. The New poetry is nothing but the 'Poetry of Protest' thereby making a significant departure from the past not only in respect of the subject matter but also in the manner of expression K.R.S. Iyengar rightly holds thus:

"Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot and Auden have taught  
our poets the importance of taking their art  
Seriously ... the profession of poetry is a consecrated  
endeavour and an exactly discipline" (P 649).

Modern Indian English poets preferred originality and experiment in word craft, intensity and strength of feeling, clarity in thought structure and sense of actuality, freshness, sensibility, trained intelligence and vitality by availing the rights to change and recreate language. Keeping pace with the above facts and features, the poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, A.K. Ramanujan, P.Lal, Kamala Das, Parthasarathy, Shiv K, Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Daruwalla and A.K. Mehrotra are said to have enriched Indian English poetry, out of whom Nissim Ezekiel is acknowledged as the most outstanding poet of the post independent India.

Born of Jewish parents in the cosmopolitan city of Bombay in 1924, Nissim Ezekiel had his education in Catholic Mission school in Bombay and then at the Wilson college founded by Scottish Missionaries.



He stood first in the University of Bombay for his MA Degree Examination and studied various subjects ranging from psychology and philosophy to cinema, Art and Indian culture and penned a few poems that got readily accepted for publication in literary Magazines. In 1952, London 'Fortune Press' came forward to publish his first collection of poems. He was lucky enough to take up various assignments like serving as the editorial staff of the Illustrated Weekly of **The Guest**, giving regular lectures on Art and literature over All India Radio, Bombay, serving as Reader in American Literature, and special invitee for delivering lectures at America, Australia and England and giving poetry readings. He has to his credit publication of such notable poetical compositions as 1. **A Time to Change** (1952), 2. **Sixty Poems** (1953), 3. **The Unfinished Man** (1966) 4. **Hymns in Darkness**, (1976) 5. **Latter Days & Psalms** (1982) and **Collected Poems** (1988).

It is generally held that the person, most responsible for stimulating the development of Indian poetry in English from its beginning to the present is none other than Nissim Ezekiel. Even at the age of eighteen, he became a member of the Radical Party founded by Roy and Flung himself into the party's trade union activities thereby coming into close touch with a contemporary reality. The presense of Roy's influence is beautifully visualized in Ezekiel's poetic cosmos in such a way as to how a strong plea for social Justice, a deep regard for individual freedom, a questioning approach towards traditional beliefs and a sincere concern for the deprived and the oppressed are integral to the outlook of Ezekiel's corpus. Urban experience constitutes an important segment of Ezekiel's poetic composition. So does rural experience. It is said that "Ezekiel was the first poet to allow the significant entry of realistic rural experience into Indian poetry in English" (P 125)

Nissim Ezekiel is said to be one literary artist viewing from different fresh angles the themes which had been repeated handled by the pre-independence poets. The poetry before independence consists of love poetry. The poets generally avoided tracing the physical dimensions of the relationship between man and woman and Ezekiel set out to make up for this failure of his predecessor. Truly speaking, love was seen to be the recurring theme of Pre-independence poetry. The thematic content of Ezekiel's poetry can be split into three segments – themes of interaction, themes of introspection and themes being Indian in content and structure. City, village, Nature and women make up much of the first part. Ezekiel has spent practically his entire life in Bombay; it becomes natural that the city should have left its marks on his poetry. The wedding in "Jewish wedding in Bombay" takes place in the city. The island city in "Island" can be identified as Bombay: "Island":

Unsuitable for song as well as sense  
The island flowers into slums  
And sky scrapers, reflecting.  
Precisely the growth of my mind  
(However the poet says)  
"I cannot leave this island  
I was born here and belong" (Collected Poems 182).

Here when the poet says with a feeling of a good native sense that he cannot leave the island, it is understood that his sense of belonging to the city is found to be very strong:

"I was born here and belong" (CP 182) the poet's keen awareness of the menstrual mechanical pattern of city life finds expression in the poem "**Urban**": (Collected Poems 117),



“The hills are always far away  
He knows the broken roads...  
.....  
Before he wakes  
The river which he claims he loves  
Is dry and all the winds lie dead”  
.....  
Barbanal city sick with slums  
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains” (CP 119).

‘**Night of the Scorpion**’ is one of the most-famous poems of Ezekiel glorifying as Indian Mother. It is the narration of a simple incident located in the Indian Rural Setting. The poem creates the entire spectrum of Contemporary Indian life. The poem shows Ezekiel as a very Indian poet rooted in the Indian life. It is based on scorpion stinging the mother of a family. She suffers intense agony for full twenty hours. While all are eager to bring relief to the suffering mother, the mother herself is more concerned for her children unmindful of her own suffering:

“Thank God the Scorpion on me  
And spared my children” (CP 130)

The poem “**The Truth about the floods**” describes the agony of the rural victims of the devastating calamity very effectively:

“A villager speaks:  
I have eleven children  
Two I have left to the mercy of God  
The rest are begging, somewhere,  
At Badapal  
I heard the children  
Wail with hunger (P 186).

The interaction between man and woman is a major concern of Ezekiel’s corpus. Ezekiel’s women are multi-dimensional creatures of flesh and blood, neither lifeless hard board cutouts nor imaginary Cleopatra’s. One can come across a naive heroine in “An Affair” who is taken to a cinema to see a movie:

“I took her to a cinema  
The lovers Kiss, we saw the jealous man  
With subtitle comradeship up set their plan  
And how their love compelled him to withdraw  
We witnessed violence.....  
..... The End.  
And then she said; I love you just like this” (CP 11).

The poem “**Event**” does present a woman who is uncertain of what is expected from her and in an effort to please her lover speaks of an unread book called “Wine and Bread”, a film, a speech on ‘Art’:



“She lay and waited watching me,  
Like a child in her nakedness,  
Uncertain if it ought to be,  
Aware – inspired and motionless” (CP 122).

In woman, Ezekiel sees a butterfly of night who elevates and illuminates earthly existence. In “Poet, lover, Bird Watcher”, Women are called “Myths of Light” (CP 135). “Virginal” highlights the pain of loneliness in the absence of a lover and a child:

“You were not made.... Oppressed me too” (CP 139).

There are a few bootable poems which neatly celebrate the happiness generated by love. The opening of “Love Sonnet” presents the triumphant mood of the lovers:

“This cafe, on the hill, among the birds,  
Could house a passing cloud,  
The City’s lights  
Are coming on  
You and I wait for words  
Our love has formed like dew  
On summer nights” (CP 120).

The Indian element in Ezekiel’s poetry derives its strength from his choice of themes and allusions. For his entire poetry is stuffed with Indianness and more characters, objects and situations picturized in the poems “**The Third**” (1958) and “**The Unfinished Man**” (1960) breathe an Indian air in all respects. The site of the episode in “Episode” is out and out Indian where the speaker woos a woman on a wooden bench besides an artificial lake and a beggar approaches them.....

“A beggar’s whine approached his eyes,  
Shone in the darkness, fixed on us;  
To make him go we gave him half an anna,  
But then another came,  
And a third from a little distance  
Watched us give the second half an anna,  
He lunched towards us, dragged one foot  
And howled like a sick dog towards the moon” (CP 99).

“Urban” is a Bombay poem written an Bombay life:

“The city like a passion burns  
He drams of morning walks, alone.  
And floating on a wave of sand.... (CP 117).

The poem “Night of the Scorpion” is one of the finest poems in which Ezekiel has proved himself to be a typical Indian poet whose interest in the Indian soil and in ordinary human events of day-to-day Indian life sounds superb. Here in the poem the mother is stung by a scorpion one rainy night and all members of the family and neighbours are very anxious to bring her quick relief. “They are simple and well



intentional people who believe in the efficacy of prayer. Prayer can ward off the evil influence". The Indian element is seen obviously in the lines that follow:

“The peasants came like swarms of flies  
And buzzed the name of God a hundred times,  
To paralyze the evil one” (CP 136).

The poet also affects Indian superstitions. They search for the scorpion but are in vain. Being simple and ignorant people, they believe that if the scorpion moves, its poison will also move in the mother's blood:

“With every movement that the scorpion made,  
His poison moved in mother's blood, they said” (CP 130)

The rationalist and skeptical father tries “every cause and blessing, power, mixture, herb...”

“He even poured a little paraffin.  
Upon the bitten toe and put a match to it” (CP 130).

The poem, “In India” throws light on the unique relationship between literature and Indian environment, where he has to put up with poverty and squalor and other dehumanizing discomforts of Indian urban life. The very opening lines in the poem give a rather grim picture of India, a country populated by beggars, hawkers, pavement sleepers and others;

“Always, in the sun's eye  
Here among the beggars,  
Hawkers, Pavement sleepers,  
Hutment dwellers, slums  
Dead soul of men.....” (CP 131).

“Dhanya” is a time representative of poverty – stricken multitudes of India. His very purpose of existence seems to be lighting the positive aspects of poverty:

“His old skin  
is like the ground  
On which he sleeps  
So also his rags  
He cannot stand upright  
Or walk without pain  
Does odd jobs for the ten famines  
Of the Rotreat, collects  
A few coins every day  
Uses them for tea  
And smiling  
Given food, he eats  
Otherwise, he goes without” (CP 169).



In his famous poem “Background casually”, Ezekiel throws light on his total commitment to and healthy attachment with India;

“The Indian landscape sears my eyes,  
I have become a part of it” (CP 181).

In the following lines, Ezekiel is found evoking a grim picture of Indian Poverty:

“The villagers ran to them  
The slapped their bellies and whined;  
I have not eaten for three days  
My husband has been washed away  
My parents have abandoned me  
My son is dyeing.....” (CP 185-86).

Ezekiel essentially Indian sensibility is also revealed in a poem like “Entertainment” which describes a monkey shoe, a common sight in Indian bazaars:

“The monkey show is on  
Patient girl on launches  
.....  
A baby in her arms  
.....  
The master of ceremonies  
Drums frenzy cracks whip  
Calls the tricks  
To earn applause and copper coins” (CP 194).

In the poem “very Indian poem in Indian English” the poet points out the very essential Indian attitude to Indian English. How an Indian National believes in the glory that was ancient India deploring the fact that the new generation is going after fashion and foreign things...

I am standing for peace and non-violence.  
Why world is fighting and fighting  
Why all the people of the world  
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi  
I do simply not understand  
Ancient Indian wisdom is 100% correct” (237).

Ezekiel depicts the very typical tone of Indian English in the following lines:

“Every day I am reading Times of Indian  
To improve my English language”

The depiction of the Indian reality is an important characteristic of Ezekiel poetry. He is not critical of the Indian scene like Nirad C. Chanduri, for Ezekiel’s poetry does picturized the social aspect of Indian with a humanistic strain. He is essentially Indian in sensibility; he is a great Indian poet writing in English without losing his national identity.



He affirms that he is very much on Indian and his roots lie deep in India. Ezekiel evidently writes:” I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a national outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian”

There is also a strong autobiographical strand in Ezekiel’s poetry –for which “Background casually” may be cited as an example for autobiographical narration. It has been said of Ezekiel that “he treated life as a journey where poetry would be the chief source of discovering and organizing one’s life” and “there is a very connection between his life and his poetry” says Vasant A Shahana (P 254)

He had a hard and cheerless life in London. At last he found the bitter truth that he was a failure and decided to return to India. As he was too poor to pay his fare, he worked as sailor on an English cargo-ship carrying French guns to Indo-China:

“In everything, a better thought  
So in an English cargo-ship  
Taking French guns and mortars hells  
To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks  
And leaved to laugh again at home” (P 180).

His married life was not found to be a bed of roses. In the words of Anisur Rehman, “Marital failure is as much the theme of the poet as his other failures experienced from time to time” (P22)

“His marriage was the worst  
Mistake of all” (CP 125).

The tireless social human being in Hymns in Darkness” is....

“Destined always  
To know defeat  
Like a twin brother” (CP 223).

However, despite this, he is

“Cheerful  
In the universal darkness” (224).

Similarly Ezekiel’s poetry is full of humour. He generates humour by viewing from the outside themes which in real life are seldom viewed detachedly. But one cannot be a stranger to God if one is a reader of Ezekiel. In his poem “An Atheist Speaks”, God’s existence is not denied. But the poet is bitter at the thought of the injustice and inequality in God’s creation:

“He Made Hitler and Stalin  
He made the inquisition  
He Made the Holocaust  
It is all quite plain  
If you look into a mirror  
It is the Devil reflected  
And God remote” (CP 288).



Ezekiel's God can be very well spoken to with the familiarity, used in "the Egoist's Prayers":

"Let me be, O' Lord,  
The camel of higher income group,  
Who passes smoothly through?  
The eye of the needle" (CP 213).

Ezekiel was a strong theist, along orthodox Jewish lines who even entertained thoughts of becoming Arabic. He had visions of Christ, Krishna and various prophets and their remarkable visions swept aside his rationalism once for all. No doubt, the world of Ezekiel's poetry is visualized through art inflamed by a broad sympathy towards the human race in general and for the poor, the depressed, the oppressed and the suffering in particular.

To conclude, it may be stated that Ezekiel shares with his younger contemporaries a common belief in professionalism – Ezekiel sees the writing of poetry not as a hobby or a past time but vocation essential to the poet's life, a craft that demands the total dedication of the practitioner. His corpus is definitely the single most dynamic influence on Indian poetry in English which is intrinsic to it. However, the nature of the influence is extensive and general rather than intrinsic and particular. No doubt, Ezekiel's greatest achievement has been and will be encouraging the Indian sensibility and Indian context in his poetry so as to sprout roots into the social reality of the country all around in all respects. In a nutshell, Ezekiel is a good an instigator as a poet and his contribution towards the shaping of the poet in others is as significant as his own contribution to poetry.

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