Communicating Indianness in The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel

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One of the most important names in modern Indian poetry in English Nissim Ezekiel is perhaps the most widely known among our poets whose work reveals a consistent commitment to the craft, authenticity of articulation and sincerity of purpose. To Ezekiel goes the credit of having ushered in a new trend in the post-independence period, which changed the course of Indian poetry in English in theme and technique. (qtd. in Shukla 235)

The incisive quote by Krishna Sastri on Nissim Ezekiel is a tribute to his poetic vision, worth and contribution. So much so that from 1960 onwards, it has been the age of Ezekiel in Indian English poetry. A doyen of Indian English Literature, Ezekiel is credited with imparting modernist sensibility to Indian poetry in English as also deftly using English language as a means to explore the Indian mind and sensibility. He steered Indian poetry clear of the idealism and romanticism of the earlier Indian writers in English and strived to look at any typical Indian situation with an Indian attitude. His poetry marks the dawn of a new era.

A close perusal of Ezekiel’s poetry shows that it has strong cultural overtones which enable him to forge a link between his individual self and his surroundings. Ezekiel made significant observations on culture and its various aspects which facilitate an analysis and appreciation of his poetry. Unlike Eliot, Pound and Auden who came from a cultural ethos with Eurocentric ideology Ezekiel inherited a pluralistic heritage with decenter structure defying any common denominators, even serious attempts at defining Indianness and Indian identity have ended up with platitudes which have perpetuated the orientalist image of India with the age-old stereotypes of spirituality and idealism. One is prone to conceive of the idea of Indianness as a monolithic notion radiating from the core of Vedic antiquity. This Indo-centric bias creates a glorified construct of an imaginary India which glosses over all the cultural specificities and heterogeneities. In fact, the multi-centrality has lent the Indian
culture its predominantly syncretic character, its pluralistic tradition, its absorptive nature of internalizing alien influences. Cultural manifestations of these multi-centred peculiarities characterise what indianness would mean in contrast with monolingual, totalitarian and fundamentalist cultures existing elsewhere.

Ezekiel believes that “a writer needs a national or cultural identity, without that you become a series of limitations, echoes, responses but you do not develop because there is nothing at the core developed.”(3) As such, Ezekiel advocates broadening of the scope of culture: Culture doesn’t consist only of literature and philosophy and art and it is certainly not acquired by adhering to the beliefs of the past and conforming to its institutional demands. For him, its living presence is indicated in behaviour, by rich and poor alike and there are universal human standards by which it may be judged.

Ezekiel’s concept of culture is critical and dynamic. While elaborating on Indianness, he challenges the view that the Indo-English poets who, by accident of circumstance, imbibed English with their mother’s milk lost their prospect of producing that excellent flavour which is called ‘Native’.

Again, Ezekiel strives to put into proper perspective the cultural tradition of India when he says that Indianness is not to be confused with conservatism. The vastness of India in respect of cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity kinds it a mini-global proportion and Ezekiel’s confrontation with the culture of the country is the meeting of “the marginal with the mighty”. A poet’s perception is shaped not only by his upbringing, the social and environmental factors but also by the tradition and culture of the society. It is for this reason that ‘Indianness’ of Indian poetry in English is of crucial significance. A truly Indian work is one which is about India and Indians, presents an Indian point of view and is written in a language and style which fits well into the matrix of the Indian cultural ethos and way of life. The secret of a poet’s greatness lies in his being wedded to the physical and cultural ethos. Nissim Ezekiel observes, “there is no single Indian flavour which alone can claim the designation—Indianness. Its value depends on a host of generative factors which should never be simplified for purpose of praise or blame” (80).

Unlike Jayant Mahapatra, Ramanujan or Kamala Das who did not make an effort to acclimatize an indigenous tradition to English language, Ezekiel strives to relate himself to contemporary India. His major themes are the Indian scene, modern urban life and spiritual values. But basically his poetry is something that grows out of his own life and experience.
He is a poet of the city – Bombay, a poet of the body, and an explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delvings and twistings of the ego.

Typical Indian beliefs, situations and contemporary society attract him the most and he creates a new kind of poetry in Indian English idiom. His well-known poem, “Night of the Scorpion”, for instance, is typically Indian in its theme and its execution is befitting to the theme. The language of the poem is appropriate to the situation and evokes the actual scene in the minds of the readers. The arrival of the scorpion, the act of stringing, and the subsequent escape have been described with great skill and economy of language:

Ten hours

of steady rain had driven him

to crawl beneath sack of rice.

Parting with his poison— flash of diabolic tail in the dark room—

he risked the rain again. (130)

Then the chain reactions follow. Peasants who “came like swarm of flies” with candles and lanterns “buzzed the name of god hundred times to paralyse the Evil One” (130). The concept of sin, redemption and rebirth are all brought to bear. An important theme in the poem is the problem of evil and suffering which is a traditional Hindu and Buddhist belief. This point of view is appropriately enough represented by the peasants when they talk unconsciously about a fundamental metaphysical belief: “May the sum of evil / balanced in this unreal world / against the sum of good” (130).

The simpleton rustics raise the fundamental question regarding the very nature of reality. The lines, “May the sins of your previous birth/burned away tonight,” (130) refer to the doctrine of Karma and rebirth – typical Indian beliefs.

They express their faith as well as practical aspect. Thus “Night of the Scorpion” is one of the finest modern Indian English poems in its thematic richness and technical finesse, and it is a poem which only an Indian English poet could have written since the experience and the response to it recreated are rooted in the modern Indian situation. An art rooted in the soil has freshness and a vigor which no amount of clever pastiche dressed up in sheer technical virtuosity can hope to possess. It is a traditional poem with a thematic complexity as noted by Chetan Karnani. Thus the theme of the poet’s mother stung by a scorpion is given multiple treatments bringing in its sweep the world of magic, superstition, science, rationality and material affection. The poem gives a new direction to ordinary reality especially of Indian life unmediated by cold intellect. The poem ends on a positive note and finally
presents an embodiment of motherhood who is ready to sacrifice her life in order that her children may live. She is thankful that the scorpion chose her and spared her children: “My mother only said: / Thank God the scorpion picked on me / and spared my children” (131).

Ezekiel reveals typical Indian sensibility in “Entertainment,” while describing a monkey show. The poet brings out the poverty of the master of the show as well as the unwillingness of the onlookers. Beneath the ordinariness of the event is revealed the callousness of the people:

The monkey-show is on:

 anticipate time for payment,
 the crowd dissolves.
 Some, in shame, part
 with the smallest coin they have.
 The show moves on. (193-94)

English, the language of the coloniser and oppressor, has been instinctively imprinted in the Indian psyche with prowess, competence, status and elitism – all various manifestations of masculinity in some way in Indian context. Indians’ craze for speaking in English and their proclivity to grammatical in-correctness prompted Ezekiel to compose his “very Indian poems in Indian English” which exploit not only the Indianism in subject matter but the Indian way of thinking in English also. The language in three poems is based on India’s colloquial speech and the tone is conventional. Poems like “Healers,” “Hangover,” “The Professor,” “Irani Restaurant Instruction” are cases in point. Here, Ezekiel uses English the way most unlettered Indians write and speak:

No Indian whisky Sir all important this is Taj.
Yes Sir soda is Indian Sir.
Midnight.
Taxi-strike. George Fernandes.

Half the day hazy with the previous night. (232)

In poems like “The Railway Clerk”, “The Patriot”, “Soap” and others, Ezekiel presented a delightful specimen of unselfconscious Indian English at its best. “The Patriot” is a portrait of a confused mind which has withdrawn into a parody of Gandhism, mistaking platitudes for thought and action. The patriot’s aversion to “foreign thing” and goods is alive
even in post-colonial India. One fully remembers that Indian freedom movement was incited by anti-colonial sentiments and an abominable disgust with all that was foreign and injurious to national interests. The protagonist in “The Patriot” is alert to admonish the modern generation” of its potential hazards. The apprehension that imperialism might entrap the country again if lure for non-native goods is allowed to go unabated and unrestrained. The lure of the foreign things prompts the patriot to glorify whatever is swadeshi or indigenous.

The post-colonial situation enjoins upon the artist to devise a two pronged strategy to resist the temptation of imported goods in these global times and at the same time to serve as a watchdog of national imperatives threatened to subversion by colonising forces. If the artist is able to devise strategy to counter such subversive forces he redeems his duty towards his mother land and in a way prove his masculine credentials. In this sense Ezekiel stands out prominently. He exposes certain remnants of and habits of the colonial era which Indians cannot easily wish away. One such infatuation among Indians is to achieve proficiency and competence in English – the instrument through which the Empire transformed the thinking and tastes of the natives and exploited their resources. The urge to communicate in English is inherent in the colonized and at times it reaches ridiculous distortions in respect of faulty speech patterns and grammatical in-correctness. The protagonist in the piece, “Soap,” unabashedly voices this colonial fancy even at the cost of the national language, Hindi: “So I’m saying very politily – / though in Hindi I’m saying it, / and my Hindi is not so good as my English…” (209).

Ezekiel’s “very Indian Poems” are subtle comments on Indians’ fancy for English and the way it is used in India. The imposed overconfidence about accomplishments in English has been creatively exploited by Ezekiel with utmost transparency. He seems to have a repertoire of inaccuracies in the use of English language, prominent among them being dropping of articles, wrong use of prepositions, using imperfect or continuous tense in place of simple or indefinite one and above all Indians’ craze for employing idioms:

Whole world is changing. In India also
We are keeping up. Our progress is progressing.
Old values are going, new values are coming.
Everything is happening with leaps and bounds. (239)

The most recurrent feature, ‘ing’ form so common with Indian people, is seen in poems like “The Patriot,” “Goodbye Party to Miss Pushpat S.,” and “The Railway Clerk.” In “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.,” he writes:
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
   even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling.
Miss Pushpa is coming
   from very high family.

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. (190-191)

Have the poet has a dig at another colonial residue to visit abroad for career prospects. Ezekiel in this poem also disparages the distorted form of a colonial practice to deliver adulatory speech at farewell parties without really meaning them.

“The Railway Clerk” and “Irani Restaurant Instruction” are representative pieces of Indian English. The former is a moving picture from static to sympathy:

   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. (184)

“The Irani Restaurant Instruction” is again an illustrative piece:

   Do not write letter
   Without order refreshment
   Do not comb
   Hair is spoiling floor
   Do not make mischief in cabin
   Our waiter is reporting
Come again
All are welcome whatever caste
If not satisfied tell us
Otherwise tell others
God is great. (240)

Thus, the fragments of clerical life with deep colonial imprints form the thematic content of the poem titled “The Railway Clerk.” The protagonist complains against the apathy of the higher authorities who twice refused his leave application thus denying him the pleasure of sometime off the monotonous daily routine. Interestingly, he finds fault with his lot – “My job is such, no one is giving bribe, while other clerks are in fortunate position” (184). This longing for a corrupting gift has its origin in the colonial regime. By conferring honours on the native princes, landlords and influential people with decorative titles like Raibahadur and also by granting special privileges in terms of cash and kind to them which were nothing short of a refined bribery, the British enlisted their active support and thus the Empire sent down firm roots which took more than a couple of centuries to dislodge them. Given his pecuniary constraints, the ambition of the clerk to visit some foreign countries is a marriage.

Again, the colonial replica of the so-called steel frame— the Indian bureaucracy and its typical mindset— has been satirized in the poem, “The Truth About The Flood”, a flood poem based on a report in The Indian Express, 25 September, 1967. Its focal thrust is on the anger and annoyance of people against government officials, including the District Magistrates of Balasore and Cuttack. The poem delineates them pitiably lacking in their pre-independence predecessors’ efficiency and competence, yet these white – collar job men retain all aura of colonial hangovers, used to enjoying all prerogatives, these vestiges of British regime do not hesitate to move out in all paraphernalia even during the calamities like flood only to show off their positions. The refrain “until I convinced them I wasn’t a government official” underlines the villagers’ hatred against the officials who were simply interested in collecting statistics and doing paperwork. To pass the back on others is the secret of success in governmental positions tenaciously handed down to post-colonial India. The district authorities at Balasore while admitting their failure to provide proper relief to the flood-affected people blamed nature for manipulating their fiasco:

Nature, they said,
had conspired against them.
‘Write the truth’, they said,
‘in your report.’
And so I did. (188)

Nissim Ezekiel deserves full credit for honestly reporting the truth which lies in the exposure of colonial mode of governance. The poet also exposes the method in the pretended politeness which again is an English vestige as expressed in “In India”. Nissim Ezekiel argues that the British try to endear themselves through superficial things like courtesy, though they render grave harms such as violating chastity. The English boss sexually assaults his Indian subordinate and offers her a safety pin to organize her disarrayed clothes by way of showing his civility and affability:

The struggle had been hard
And not altogether successful.
Certainly the blouse
Would not be used again.
But with the true British courtesy
He lent her a safety pin
Before she took the elevator down. (134)

The British acquired India not as much through violence and wars as through politeness and civility. The British courtesy was a powerful weapon in the hands of the colonisers and its effective use dates back to the Mughal emperor, Jahangir’s era when Thomas Roe presented himself as an English ambassador all humble and courteous, asking for trade permission. British colonisation was a slow and steady but calculated design and India was taken over through quiet, treachery, deceit and deception cloaked in suaveness, civility and courtesy.

The poet also dwells on another legacy of the colonial rule – inordinate delay in legal system. After independence, when India had to frame its constitution anew, ironically enough, it was modeled on British parliamentary system. There is certainly some logic when they say habits die hard and one would add colonial habits never die. In the piece, “Undertrial Prisoners,” in “Songs of Nandu Bhande,” Ezekiel disapproves of existing colonial Jail laws with their complex and circuitous procedures to meet the ends of justice especially from the humanist point of view. The under trial prisoners have to rot in jails for years together before trial against them gets initiated:

We have our rules
made long ago
he’s got to wait,
the law says so.
it’s not our fault
he lives in jail. (CP 241)

The rules and regulations made long ago in pre-independence days need to be modified and recast in view of the changed situations when the ex-colonized themselves have to administer justice to the guilty from amongst them. The poem, however, does not plead for reducing the quantum of punishment. It lays all stress on the quick and speedy disposal of litigations to ensure that the victim gets relief at the earliest and the culprit brought to book with the barbarity of his heinous crime still fresh in his memory. The red-tapism best defined colonial strategies and this satire on officialdom demonstrate how persons involved in it forget to distinguish between their office duties and their personal lives. They conduct themselves mechanically so much so that even a solemn institution like marriage calling upon emotional impulses gets the typical official treatment in their hands. Instructions to the prospective husband through living as a neighbour at the moment exhibit that human element has completely dried up and Macaulay’s design to “produce English knowing clerks” in 1933 has achieved something still in that the traces of Empire are too deep to be effortlessly bleached out:

When the female railway clerk
Received an offer of marriage
From her neighbour the customs clerk,
She told him to apply in triplicate,
And he did. (275)

It seems colonial imprints run too deep in the psyche of Indians which colour their general demeanor. Ezekiel emerges truly a postcolonial poet whose poetry portrays post-colonial attitudes of Indians as reflected in their typical use of a foreign language, mannerism and general demeanour. In his very Indian poems Ezekiel succeeds in creating the authentic impression of India, its people and places, and in giving the peculiar flavour of the language as used by English loving and status conscious Indian belonging to the middle class Indian society. His experiment in the levity and frivolity of Indian English has a more serious purpose than ridiculing these people’s inordinate craze for foreign things, manners and language. Joseph Furtado was the first to try his hands in 1920 in Pidgin or Bazar English.
But it was Nissim Ezekiel who made serious efforts to exploit the resources of Indian English and its nuances and eminently succeeded. A substantial part of his success goes to his meaningful experimentation with his medium, his constant endeavour to find the right medium – the exact name for his self-expression. Nissim Ezekiel thus imparted the Indian English poetry a distinct character and gave it its own authentic voice and rightful place. Herein lies Ezekiel’s strength as an Indian poet in English.
Works Cited:


