



UGC Approved Journal



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065

Impact Factor : 5.7



Editor-in-Chief

**Volume 6, Issue 5
May 2018
www.ijellh.com**

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Ezekiel's Poetry: A Rainbow of Paradoxes

Abstract

The paper is a study of Nissim Ezekiel's views about India and its values and culture. There is a discussion about the two different surroundings- urban and rural. The dehumanizing influence of the city on human individuality is clearly perceptible in the gloomy aspect of city life. As Ezekiel has been a city poet he has clearly presented the dehumanizing influence of the city on human individuality. He is quite frank and straightforward in exposing the ugliness, dirt, squalor, inhumanity and wickedness of the metropolis. Ezekiel asserts that the city is externally glamorous and dazzling but it provides no contentment to its inhabitants. His poetry is overflowing with Indian sensibility. The poetry of Ezekiel reveals a confluence of various trends and traditions of Indian English poetry and he becomes certainly a prototype of modern Indian English poetry. His poetry exemplifies the blend of the various trends of Indian English poetry.

“The recurring note in Ezekiel's recent poems the hurt that urban civilization inflicts on modern man, dehumanizing him and subjecting his varieties to pollution and devaluation. What is offered is dead-sea fruit, what we confront is the Medusa store, is here no remedy, then?”¹

K.R.S. Iyengar

¹ K.R.S.Iyengar, Indian Writing in English, New Delhi: Sterling.203,p.660

Nissim Ezekiel, born of Jewish (Bene-Israel) parents, is one of the most notable poets in Indian English tradition. He has so far published six collections of poems besides a considerable number of essays and articles. For much of his success he feels indebted to his parents who were sincerely devoted to the cause of education. Secondly, his profession as a teacher of English Literature for a number of years at Bombay University shaped his literary personality. Besides being a poet, he is a renowned critic of arts and literature. His poems have been published by Oxford University Press in 1989 in one volume under the title *The Collected Poems of Nissim Ezekiel 1952-1988*. He has also edited *Quest*, *Imprint*, *Poetry India* (Six Issues), *The Indian P.E.N.* and books including *The Emerson Reader*, *A Martin Luther King Reader* and *Writing in India*. His articles have appeared in prestigious journals and news papers like *Span*, *Quest*, *Observer*, *Fulcrum*, *The Sunday Statesman* *Free Press Bulletin* and *Indian Writers in Conference* etc.

It is beyond doubt to assert that Ezekiel's entire poetry is suffused with Indianness. The major theme of his poetical works is based on Indian values and ideals. According to K.N. Daruwala, he seeks his identity in the country and its incongruities. No doubt, his roots lie deep in India. He has availed himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs. He sees India through various angles – its culture, nature and progress.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most versatile Indian English Poets, who experimented with form and craft. He is essentially an urban poet, especially a poet of the city, Bombay. He is quite frank and straightforward in exposing the ugliness, dirt, squalor, inhumanity and wickedness of the metropolis. Ezekiel has depicted in words employing images and symbols of the city life with rapid growth, changes and developments, natural scenes, sea hills markets, stations and industries giving impression of progress on the one hand and the worn-out tracks of custom and conservatism on the other. The dehumanizing influence of the city on human individuality is clearly perceptible in the gloomy aspect of city life. To the city dweller 'cabined within ramparts of disillusion', the poet suggests 'Prayer and poetry, poetry and prayer'.

Ezekiel is a brilliant Indian poet, writing in English. He has in his poetry attempted to deal with Indian cultural as per suitability of the theme. Several other poets have also portrayed the Indian attitudes in *Swadeshi Angrezi* but Ezekiel has sought to exploit this national feature more successfully and artistically. Some of his famous poems include, "A Time to Change", "Sixty Poems", "The Third", "The Unfinished Man" etc. and these display his

varied tastes, interests and preoccupation. They proclaim a variegated canvas of life. Some of his poems are concerned with sorry sight of the metropolitan cities, as he puts it:

Barbaric city sick with slum,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child- like masses, many tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.²

K.R.S. Iyengar and V.A. Shahane, the pioneer critics of Indian English Poetry opine that Ezekiel's early poetry was haunted by the longings of physical union between lovers and the unrequited love affairs. It is important to note that love, city and the self are the major pre-occupations of the beginning of Ezekiel's poetic career. The mood of his early poetry is dominated by unrequited love and resultant disappointment. Torments caused by the desire of the flesh and the spirit resulting from the unfulfilled love governs Ezekiel's attitude to life. His desire to come to terms with reality seems to overwhelm his sensibility. Perhaps he is a bitter man as a result of his failure to achieve a goal. His wishful longing to be a successful poet and a lover worries him without end. He says:

Youth runs out of song
Until one learns to start again
Love of life can always be renewed.³ [CP, p.4]

As a journalist, he highlighted the evils of Indian urban life prominently and pertinently. The views of Rajeev Taranath and Meena Beliappa support the fact that the urban theme forms an important strain in Ezekiel's poetry. Explicitly, this theme is dominant in all the anthologies published by him. As a poet of the city, he is fully alive to dirt, squalor, ugliness and wickedness of the city like Bombay. Ezekiel depicts the scene:

Always in the sun's eye,
Here among the beggars,

2.Nissim Ezekiel:Collected Poems, Second Edition,New Delhi,Oxford,2005,Third Impression,2007,p.119.

³ CP, p.4

Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
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.⁴

He also depicted the life and activity of metropolitan city in an artistic manner. On the one hand, he witnesses the agony and anguish of the poor, on the other; he views the prosperous gentry rolling in luxuries. The have-nots are suffering while haves are enjoying their life. The paradox is present here in his world of poetry when he writes that city has its glaring and tempting breezes but it fails to give a single-willed direction. The inhabitants of city are helplessly, unable to escape this imaginary island. Still people are deeply attached to it. The poet watches life with pleasure, the hustle and bustle of the city. Tension-torn citizens are engrossed in cares and anxieties. He has succinctly attempted to expose the grim aspects of urban life. Surprisingly enough, the inhabitants of the city are helplessly unable to escape the imaginary island. Ezekiel portrays the scene in a picturesque manner-

Even now a host of miracles
hurries me to daily business,
minding the ways of the island
as a good native should,
talking calm and clamour in my stride.⁵

Ezekiel highlights the curiosity of the city-dwellers metaphorically like pilgrims in the initial stage. When the pilgrims start journey, they are happy and enthusiastic. After the first stage of their journey, differences arise among them, they begin to quarrel. Amidst

4 'In India' in Collected Poem, p.131.

5 Ibid.,p.182.

the harsh realities of urban life he perceives metaphysical truth and believes that Home is an important place: 'Home is where we have to earn our grace.'⁶

He wrote poems with ancient themes glorifying established values discarding the hypocrisy and hollowness. He was shocked to see that people are living an artificial life not caring for humanism which is universal appeal. K.R.S.Iyengar comments-

Existential commitment could be a mockery too,
for most of us are but the slaves of the city's
uncaring drive and banality and futility cabined
this within ramparts of urban disillusion, what
hope, then for man? Eliot's recipe is "humility
.....prayer' observance, discipline, thought and
Action"- in that order. Ezekiel's is "prayer and
poetry, poetry and prayer"⁷

Ezekiel's impatience is perceptible is his praying to God to grant him strength and patience to bear the brunt of city life and the difficulties which he is bound to face:

Let chapter of my single past
Be real as in honest books.
"Extending backwards to the very last"
Name of thinkers, poets, crooks
Let me dream the dream of Man⁸

Ezekiel can't tolerate people in cities who are generally cunning and wicked. They are involved in malpractices in order to maintain themselves and their sustenance in life. Nissim Ezekiel has protested against the erosion of values and undignified acts which are an insult to humanity. He does not like the ultra-modern trends which degrade the well-established value systems, which have proven their efficacy down through the ages. He has described the

⁶ Enterprise

⁷ K.R.S.Iyengar, Indian Writing in English, New Delhi: Sterling 203, p.660

⁸ 'Prayer II' in Collected Poem, p.55.

predicament of persons in the modern age, who are faced with problems which divert their attention from the basic values of life. Nissim Ezekiel says,

“Posters selling health and happiness in bottles,/Large returns for small investments, in football pools/Or self-control, six easy lessons for a pound/Holiday in Rome for writing praise of toothpastes”.⁹

Ibid., p-9

His some poems are directly concerned with metropolitan life in the post-Independence India. He presents homeless mass of people wandering about in the day and passing their nights on pavements. The gloomiest aspect of city life has been marked with great poetic intensity and in dept comprehension. S. Srenivasan maintains:

The nightmarish picture with its metaphors of sickness and purgatory is not made out of mere observation . It gives sign of the poet’s emotional involvement with what he describes. There is an identification of the self with the scene, but it is not a self which analyses and reflects or possesses a vision of an alternative social order or state of thing.¹⁰

He records horrible scenes of urban life in a realistic and artistic manner. But it doesn’t mean that he is an escapist, unable to face hardships of city life. His treatment of the incidents, situations and characters from the urban life reveal that he is not ready to be deceived by grand emotions or by conventional ways of life. He experiences the futility, bitterness and strangeness of city life through the senses of hearing, sight, touch and taste. The city leaves a poor impression on him. He feels sad to see that the city has a tendency to reduce human personality to insignificance. People feel tired of hypocrisy and dazzling life style. Ezekiel thought himself to be rootless and so does he think of everyone –the Bombaywallas. He finds people running to and fro and changing trains. Ezekiel observes that city dwellers have long association with city, its customs and convention; still there is emptiness in their eyes. They look dull, loveless, dry and insipid. Some of his poems deal with the worn-out, trodden paths of long

⁹ Ibid., p-9

¹⁰ S. Sreenivasan, op.cit.,p.152.

established traditions which city dwellers are reluctant to uphold. The river of their life is sandy, waterless and dry. They look morose, gloomy frustrated and dumb like effigies. They are 'hollow men.' They spare no time to look at the beauties of Nature.

Ezekiel asserts that the city is externally glamorous and dazzling but it provides no contentment to its inhabitants. His poetry is overflowing with Indian sensibility. It presents real life situations of Indian in general, Indian contemporary social scene, and modern urban life in particular. The poem "Background, Casually" exhibits his deep love for India wherein he declares that he is totally an Indian:

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 letter overstate the case,
I have made my commitments now
There is one: to say where I am.¹¹

His assertion that his real home is India and no other country approves of his Indian sensibility. He highlights the living style and life of the people belonging to different creeds. He highlights the glaring evils of the urban culture. The privileged sections of society roll in luxuries. Nissim Ezekiel though born in a Jewish family is an Indian poet writing in English. He has committed himself to Indian values, culture, people and language, and Indianness has always been in his blood and writing. In an interview with Frank Birbal Singh he says: "I am an Indian national I was born in India; my tribe of the Jewish community has lived in India for 2,000 years. If I had rejected my Indianness, which some other writers obviously have done, and if I had decided that I am so much of an outsider that I have to settle down in London or New York, and then, even if I did write about India, I don't know if I could be regarded as an Indo-English Writer. There would be some problems in that situation, though there are marginal cases."¹²

Besides epitomizing the soul of India in his poetry, Nissim Ezekiel ushered into the age of one-world-ness. But his works do not reflect the India which appeals to the West, but

¹¹ 'Background, Casually' in Collected Poem, p.181.

¹² Frank Birbal Singh. (Sum-Fal), 22(2), 130-138.

the India in to which he can, and does, merely belong to which he can really relate to. He does not glorify the Indian custom and culture but instead he sees it as it is. Even he is acutely and painfully conscious of the deficiencies and defects of the Indian people. In Ezekiel's poem Background Casually the Indian customs are reflected. It is generally believed that Indians talk loudly and knock at the doors heavily and this is portrayed very picturesquely:

When someone talked too loudly, or
knocked at the door
Like the Devil,
They hawked and spat¹³

Thus Nissim Ezekiel has deep attachment with India. Indianness dominates the fabrics of his poetry. However, he highlights the glaring evils of the urban culture. He presents an interesting conjunction of brightness and despair, darker shadows and sunny mornings. He regrets to say that in the dreary desert of wickedness, rascaldom and cunningness, humanism has lost its way. The privileged section of society rolls in luxuries. They seem devoid of the spirit of divine qualities- pity of heart and nobility of mind. India's ancient cultural heritage seems to have vanished from metropolitan cities.

Nissim Ezekiel writes about his spiritual predilections, "Judaism was my religion.....I develop the most positive attitude towards the Indian heritage. The Vedas and the Upanishads give acloser to the ultimate truth and the spiritual paradoxes of the Bhagvat Gita ". Ezekiel's poetry is basically humanistic. In the 'Hymns in Darkness' (1976) he puts emphasis on the human element and accepts failure as a part of earthly existence.

In the poem "At 62" the poet feels that the familiar human drama is no less engaging for being ordinary:

I celebrate the familiar.
the routine,
and unexpected.¹⁴

¹³Background Casually

¹⁴ At 62

The apprehension of the inevitable, however, finds a more poignant expression in the poem in different ways. Again the humanist in Ezekiel is endowed with extensive view and his concerns are not confined simple to homosapiens. Flora and fauna of the universe co-exist and have their meaning in togetherness. Ezekiel is far different from his earlier self who had been worried about finding his own salvation.

The poet has successfully identified himself with ancient tradition of India. Suffering purifies the flesh of its own sins and as such is never undesirable. In one of his poems Ezekiel realizes his temporal existences and works out an epitaph for himself:

Here lies a poet whose theme was human failure
For which he was praised in a dozen famous obituaries.¹⁵
(CP,p.275)

The poetic odyssey that began with his earlier poetry blossomed in his later poetry, which completes the circle of Ezekiel's evaluation as a poet. His death was nothing but a consummation of his unrealized poetic despair and vision. In one of his writing he confesses that-

“I have often personally.....carried out
exercises in direct observation of poverty and
affluence, urban and rural modes of living,
perceived and assimilated all thing Indian wherever
they could be found in India.....”¹⁶
(Ezekiel 38)

Therefore the poetry of Ezekiel reveals a confluence of various trends and traditions of Indian English poetry and he becomes certainly a prototype of modern Indian English poetry. His poetry exemplifies the blend of the various trends of Indian English poetry. Perhaps the poem entitled, “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” best described Ezekiel's concept of poetry, his vision and his perception:

“.....The best poets wait for word.

¹⁵CP, p.275

¹⁶ Ezekiel 38

.....

Who never spoke before his spirit moved.

The slow movement seems, some how, to say much more.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher