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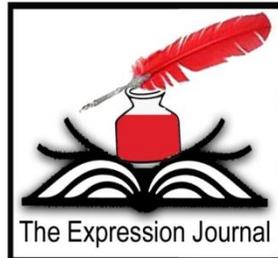
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NISSIM EZEKIEL'S POETIC ART AND UNIVERSALITY OF VISION AND TECHNIQUE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Nissim Ezekiel, hailed as the Father of Modern Indian English poetry and elulogized as a trend - setter not only giving direction to it but also teaching other poets how to write poetry in English, is one among those poets who prefer originality and experiment in word craft, intensity and strength of feeling, clarity in thought - structure and sense of actuality. Born in Bombay of Jewish parents, he is said to have wielded great influence as a leading poet, editor of many journals and a consistently bright critic. He emerged as a successful Indian poet through the publication of his notable poems such as **Sixty Poems** (1953), **The Third** (1959), **The Unfinished Man** (1960), **The Exact Name** (1965) and **Hymns in Darkness** (1976). This analysis attempts to show Nissim Ezekiel as one of the best poets of the Post - Independent India, whose writings are nothing but records of life and he is totally committed to art, for art is inextricable from his life because for Ezekiel, life and art are one and the same. His literary output has been significant and of almost consistently high quality from the point of view of craftsmanship as well as subject matter. In this analysis, he is shown to be one who has brought a sense of discipline, self - criticism and mastery of Indian English poetry. Life in the city, sexual relationship, the need to overcome alienation and to create integration among the various aspects of one's life and character are Ezekiel's recurring themes which all get reflected and projected in all his poetic creations.

Key-Words

Nissim Ezekiel, Poetic Art, Vision, Technique, Recurring Themes.

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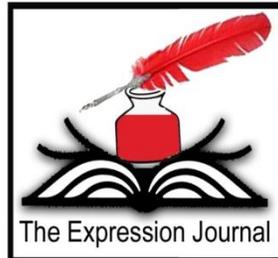
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Nissim Ezekiel has been hailed as the Father of Modern Indian English poetry and eulogized as a trend – setter who not only gave a direction to it but taught other poets how to write poetry in English. All his poetic collections help one to trace the growth of his mind at the various stages in his life. Poets are variously influenced during their process of writing. But a good poet treats these influences as vital and necessary for his own poetic development, as does Ezekiel. At the centre of all remains his sincere devoted mind that wants to discover itself. In the process, he manages to forge a unique achievement of his own. No doubt, he is one among those poets who prefer originality and experiment in word craft, intensity and strength of feeling, clarity in thought structure and sense of actuality.

The Post – Independent poets, released from the politically induced unnatural pressure of the English language, began to follow the modernistic techniques rather than to write in the Romantic tradition. They worked with confidence and without inhibition and the modernist as well as neo - symbolist trends were strengthened by them and they formed a movement called **Calcutta Writers Workshop** of their own with the inclusion of poets like **Nissim Ezekiel, P.Lal, Kamala Das, A.K.Ramanujan, V.D.Trivedi, Mary Erulkar, S.Mokashi Punekar** and a few others. They all argued and agreed in principle that English has proved its stability “as a language to play a creative role in Indian literature” (Bose 106) and felt that in whatever language they write, they should make the language live. As Amalendu Bose observes, “the only thing to say about an Indian poet’s choosing English as his medium in preference to his mother tongue is that he has knowingly chosen to walk

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Comparing the merits of both the Pre – Independent and the Post - Independent poems, many critics came out with their views in praise of the Post - Independent poems. The genuine Indian poetry in English really began in the 1950's. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar calls this as "a new generation" coming up with a striking individuality of its own, a sharpness in its features, an angularity in its gestures, a tone of defiance in its speech, a gleam of hope in its eyes – a new ardour perhaps, and even new rhythms and nuances and acerbities of speech" (p 164). Of all the poets of this 'new generation', "Nissim Ezekiel as Chetan Karnani says, occupies a position of considerable importance in post – Independence Indian English literature" (p 7).

Born in Bombay of Jewish parents, Ezenkiel was educated primarily in Missionary Institutions of Bombay University in 1947. For a year, he taught English literature at Khalsa College, Bombay and then moved to England. It was in England that he published his first book of poems namely **A Time to Change** (1952). Ever since he came back from England in 1952, he has wielded great influence as a leading poet, editor of many journals, an occasional playwright and a consistently bright critic. His notable other contributions to Indo - Anglian poetry are **Sixty Poems** (1953), **The Third** (1959), **The Unfinished Man** (1960), **The Exact Name** (1965), and **Hymns in Darkness** (1976).

What is generally held is that Nissim Ezekiel, one of the best poets of the Post – Independent India, has acquired considerable importance as a poet whose writings are nothing but records of life and he is totally committed to art and art is inextricable from his life. For Ezekiel, life and poetry are one. His literary output has been quite significant and of almost consistently high quality from the point of view of craftsmanship as well as subject matter. He believes that " poetry is essentially a method of organising oneself through words". (Karnai 169).

His environment is Indian but his religious background is Jewish of his work, Ezekiel himself writes :

"I have written in the traditional verse forms as well as in free verse some of my recent poems are in Indian English. Major themes : Love, personal intergration, the Indian contemporary scene, modern urbanlife, spiritual values. I am at clarity above all. I like to make controlled, meaningful statements, avoiding extremes of thoughts and expression" (Karnani 180).

It is said that Nissim Ezekiel made poetry central to his life and he wrote poetry when others wrote poems. The difference gets reflected in his craftsmanship and purposefulness; this is as much a matter of will as of talent. He brought a sense of discipline, self - criticism

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and mastery of Indian English poetry. He was the first Indian poet to have such a professional attitude. Ezekiel has more passion for form and precision that is so rare a quality among contemporary poets as to be quite unique and it is what sets him apart from other Indian poets.

Being a Jew and raised as a secular rationalist, his scientist father made him an outsider to Hindu – Muslim Culture. The very “outsiderness” automatically made him a representative voice of the urbanized Western educated Indian. True to this fact most of Ezekiel’s poems deal with the city of Bombay or any urban area, as in “A Morning Walk” :

**Barbaric city sick with slums,
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 (CP 119).**

It may be taken as a description of any city life. But this does not mean that Ezekiel has completely devoted himself to the city life. He is always aware of these charges and uses rural life also in his poem like “**Night of the Scorpion**”. Here he portrays the actions of the peasants on the night when his mother was stung by a scorpion. Thus Ezekiel disproves the charge against the Indian poet in English to be “a city poet” alone.

Life in city, sexuality, problems of married life, the need to overcome alienation and to create integration among the various aspects of his character are Ezekiel’s early and continuing themes. There is a distinct personality expressed in the voice, theme and style. Life is seen by him through his poetic creations as a quest for wholeness, for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction, for matured vision and aspiration. The quest essentially projects the concern as how to live happily, calmly, ethically as an integrated human being. Ezekiel is said to have been greatly influenced by W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and other British poets of the thirties. It was under the influence of the great Irishman that he treated poetry as a method of discovering oneself at the various stages in one’s life. In other words, he treated poetry as the record of the mind’s growth. He also followed the same principle in his life and poetry. He strongly believed that his poetry continues to be in the ascending order. “He has emerged as most outstanding in craftsmanship, maturity, range and depth of sensibility” (Iyengar, 657).

A study of his poetry reveals a gradual evolution of his art and genius. A number of major themes run through his poetry gaining depth and intensity with each successive volume that he has published. He is, no doubt, a man of varied tastes, interests and preoccupations. In almost all his writings, he is seen laying stress on the centrality of man

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in the Universe and universality of poetic art by preferring poetry of statement and purpose.

What is to be remembered is that Ezekiel takes poetry as a craft. It would be worthwhile to take note of his imagery while considering his poetic art and technique. One can find rather undoubtedly the image of city in his important volumes like **The Unfinished Man**, **The Exact Name** and **Hymns in Darkness**. No other Indian poet stands in comparison with Ezekiel in the use of the image of the city as central to his poetry. In this respect, Ezekiel resembles English poets like **T.S. Eliot** and **W.H. Auden**. The City has moved forward to a prominent position in his poetry. He makes important observations in poems like **Morning Walk in India** and **City song**. Thus, the barbaric city has become his beloved city and the sense of belonging to it is absolute and final. Ezekiel states this clearly and emphatically in one of the poems of Edinburgh Interlude:

**"I have not come
to Edinburgh
to remember
Bombay Mangoes
but I remember them
perhaps it is not the mangoes
that my eyes and tongue long for
But Bombay as the fruit
on which I've lived,
winning and losing
my little life.**

He identifies himself with Bombay and sees India through it. He knows that no good poetry can be written without a live contact with the common people. He has expressed his commitment to his self and land of birth in two important poems namely **Background Casually** and **Island** before and now in **The Egoist's Prayers** :

**Confiscate my passport, Lord
I don't want to go abroad
Let me find my song
here I belong.**

It is through metaphors and images that Ezekiel expresses his self and views of poetry. He once said that scores of poems were written obviously for personal therapeutic purposes. Enterprise is one such poem. The journey reminds one of Chaucer's **Prologue to Canterbury Tales** and more recently Eliot's **Journey of the Magic**. The shadow of Eliot looms large in the following lines:

**We noticed nothing as we went
A struggling crowd of little hope,**

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**Ignoring what the thunder meant
Deprived of common needs like soap
some were broken, some marelly bent (Enterprise 13).**

The concluding stanza almost annuls all the difficulties they have undertaken to reach their destination. It comes as pathos :

**When, finally, we reached the place
We hardly know we were there
The trip had darkend every face,
our deeds were neither great nor race.
Home is where we have to gather grace. (Enterprise 13).**

The last quoted line has assumed a great significance over the years and it has become a proverb. The journey described in the poem **Enterprise** is taken as a metaphor for life. The difficulties encountered during the journey symbolically stand for the difficulties, failures and frustrations one comes across in one's life. The point worth noting here is that even when life seems to be devoid of meaning and purpose, one should face it boldly and live it to the fullest.

Simplicity is the cardinal virtue of Ezekiel's poetry and decoration is reduced to the minimum. He uses imagery but he does so only sparingly, and when used, his images are not decorative, but strictly functional. In **Night of the Scorpion**, flash of diabolic tail in the dark room is symbolic of the evil that pervades the world and against which all created things have to wage an ever continuing struggle and which can be overcome by an integrated approach. The woman, the city and nature are the ever-recurring images in Ezekiel's poetry and by repetition, they acquire symbolic overtones.

As far as the language is concerned, Ezekiel is more well - versed in English than any other language such as the Jewish or the Marathi language. It is for him, "the product of natural instinct rather than an artificial taste" (Walsh 128). This is because in his own family English was the domestic language. Hence he has a high fluency and depth in the English language. This is very obvious when one distinguishes the English he was in other poems with the "Indian English" he uses in poems such as "**The Railway Clerk**", "**Good Bye Party for Miss Puspha T.S**" and few others:

Ezekiel keenly observes even the minute details taking place around him and gives them the form of art. Right from the beginning, he is said to have celebrated the ordinariness of most events with his disillusioned vision. Here Ezekiel's honest commitment to art is obvious. Hence he condemns those who write for snobbery in an artificial way in According to him, there must be a moral purpose in poetry and it should not mislead anyone.

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When learnt that Ezekiel has expressed his valuable ideas on literature and life in his letters, critical writings and interviews, it is essential to know his critical credo in order to evaluate his poetry in the right perspective. He looks at literature in relation to society. In the essay entitled **Censorship and the Writer**, Ezekiel says that writers should enjoy absolute freedom acting as witnesses to the truth within them the aim of literature is discovery and expression of truth, which is entirely personal experience for the writer. The society that promotes literature should aim at the development of human sensibility. A writer, according to him, should be a man of conviction upholding human values. As critic and poet, Ezekiel advocates cultural synthesis. In his own writings a noticeable synthesis happens between the Jewish and the Indian, the Western and the Eastern, the urban and the rural. The synthesis is beautifully expressed in **Later Day Psalms**. Literature, according to him, not only strengthens cultural contacts, but it also promotes the understanding of humanity and its future. He also opines that a poet divorced from his milieu and cultural ethos cannot create genuine poetry. He carefully avoids the sophistication of the rootless and the parochialism of the native.

Poetry, love and marriage are the three major themes in Ezekiel's poetry. Ezekiel considers poetry as a way of life, a continuous flow. It is an integral part of life. It is out and out wedded to life. All his six collections of poems published separately are related to one another and form one organic whole. The volume **Sixty Poems** shows Ezekiel's gift of verbal portraiture at its best. Ezekiel may be said to be the first Indian poet consistently showing that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject matter. What distinguishes him as a first – rank poet in Indian English poetry is the 'Exquisite Craftmanship' the rich, supple rhythm, capable of suitable modulations; the wry ironic tone which can change easily and naturally, into the impassioned; mastery over a variety of style and modes; the poise and precision of language.

A study of Nissim Ezekiel with regard to the influences, his adherence to the conventional and free form of verse and the expression of the native indigenous self seems to be amply rewarding. As a poet with a rich academic background, Ezekiel is reasonably conscious of his moorings and he has studied the various poetic movements in order to discover, enrich and nourish his own authentic voice. Being recognised as a major Indian poet writing in English, Ezekiel is found best representing the national identity and universal vision at all levels. A study of his poetry reveals a gradual evolution of his poetic genius. The greatness of Ezekiel as a poet lies in the fact that in his poetry he is constantly bringing together opposite concepts and trying to reconcile and harmonise them. To conclude, it may be said that an analysis of above mentioned features would reveal that Nissim Ezekiel is a poet of fine sensibility, remarkable craft, praiseworthy poetic craft and universality of theme and technique which all join together in assuring him a place as the great modern Indian English poet. As the man in his poetry and the man in his art show,

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Ezekiel is 'a great poet and a humane person'. It is really a Himalayan task to analyse all themes and aspects projected in his poetic creations. But it has to be acknowledged rather universally that Ezekiel is unlocking a box full of "unheard whispers", while talking about poetry. In Ezekiel's career as a poet, there is a movement, a growth and as Srinivasa Iyengar points out, 'Something is gained, but something is lost also'.

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