

Delineation of Indianess in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel: A Study of Selected Poems

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Abstract:

Nissim Ezekiel is a very prolific poet of Indian Poetry in English. He is the representative poet of Post- Colonial Indian poetry in English and is thus regarded as the Father of Contemporary Indian English Poetry. He appeared radical and innovative both in his subject- matter and style of writing poetry. His poetry is characterized by simplicity of form and Indian in tone. Being an Indian, the depiction of Indianess is an important ingredient of his poetry. Cultural ethos, religious diversity, typical village life, natural descriptions and superstitious beliefs are the different attires with which Ezekiel dresses up his poems. Even though having a profound attachment with his country and his birthplace, he doesn't hesitate to highlight the various loopholes and drawbacks of Indian Society. He talks about poverty of the masses and their ignorance towards the better means of livelihood. Communal bias and discrimination with minorities within the Indian society is also an essential element of his poetry. He also highlights and laments the loss of religious faith of the modern man of Indian society as was done by T. S. Eliot. The endeavor in this present paper will be to explore Indianess and the depiction of Indian life in the selected poems of Nissim Ezekiel.

Key words: - Indianess, Cultural ethos, Communal bias, Superstitions, Representative

Nissim Ezekiel, a well- known poet all over the world was also a critic, dramatist and editor. The volumes of poetry from his pen made him a universally acclaimed poet. Ezekiel was a Jew by religion and Indian by birth and by heart. He was born in Mumbai on 14 December, 1924 in a well-to-do family. His father was a professor and mother the principal of her own school. Ezekiel was a distinguished student, who did his M. A. in English Literature from Mumbai University.

He also studied Philosophy at Birbeck College, London. Ezekiel did many jobs in his life time. He became the editor of The Illustrated Weekly of India. He also worked in All India Radio as a broadcaster on arts and literature. He entered the field of academics and became the head of the Department of English in Mithibai College, Mumbai. He also rendered his services as a visiting professor at University of Leeds and University of Chicago.

Ezekiel's famous and remarkable poetic collections include: *Time to Change*(1952), *Sixty Poems*(1953), *The Third*(1959), *The Unfinished Man*(1960), *The Exact Name*(1965), *Snakeskin and Other poems*(1974), *Hymns in Darkness*(1976), *Latter-Day Psalms*(1982) and *Collected Poems*(1989).

Ezekiel got world-wide fame and was duly felicitated from time to time for his great works. In 1983, he was honored with Sahitya Academy Award and in 1988, he got Padma Shri. He was born in India and he died in India on 9 January, 2004. Ezekiel believed in simplicity and straightforwardness of thought. His language is very plain and simple but always loaded with multiple layers of meaning. He thus became the pioneer of this new form of poetry and is generally regarded as the father of Indian poetry in English. Ezekiel has successfully expressed his own ideas in English language. He like Raja Roa succeeds and overcomes the fear of "one has to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own."(Preface to Kanthapura). He was deeply attached with his birthplace and this attachment is quite visible from his poetry. Though he exposed and brought into limelight the various social evils of Indian society like superstitions, ignorance, poverty, corruption etc, yet he was always proud of being an Indian. But, unfortunately, he faced discrimination and neglect at the hands of his own people just because of his belonging to a Jewish community. This alienation and discord within his own society is beautifully expressed by Ezekiel in the poem, Background, Casually:

I went to Roman Catholic school

A mugging Jew among the Wolves

They told me I had killed the Christ

That year I had won the scripture prize

A Muslim sportsman boxed my ear

I grew in terror of the strong.

Ezekiel has diversity of themes in his poetry. He like a true representative poet seems to believe in art for life's sake and not in art for art's sake. He has put in different ingredients of human life in his poetry. He talks about love as a prerequisite for human survival. He does not hesitate in talking about the dark side of life. He exposes the communal hatred and administrative corruption of Indian society in his poetry. Poverty and sufferings of poor people is also an essential element of his poetry. He also appears a true patriotic in his poems. Ezekiel also writes about city life and village life. He, like romantics, has profound feelings for nature. Women flock is a part of his poetry. Above all, he is the best representative poet of Indianess in the world of literatures.

The *Night of the Scorpion* is a very representative poem of Indianess by Nissim Ezekiel. It portrays the Indian village life; their rituals, culture, blind beliefs, superstitions and their poor life style in true colors. It also brings to the fore the brotherhood of Indian village people and their readiness to help each other in times of distress. A. Raghu writes about the poem, "The poem achieves a striking authenticity by bringing together, for the first time, the six elements that dominate the mimesis, in Indian poetry in English, of the Indian reality: poverty, superstition, violence, suffering, duplicity and communal effort." (The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel- pg. 49). The poet actually reminiscences about the past and thus presents a detailed descriptions of one particular day of his childhood. He recollects how his mother was bitten by a scorpion on her toe and how she suffered in pain for twenty hours. The poet being a child at that time still remembers that pathetic episode of his life. He remembers how the village people came running to express their sympathy with the poet's mother. Ezekiel here actually laments about the lost brotherhood of mankind, which in old times was a very essential thing for human survival. Poet says:

The peasants came like swarms of flies

And buzzed the name of God a hundred times.

To paralyze the Evil one.

With Candles and with Lanterns

Ezekiel here presents a very artistic portrayal of primitiveness and superstitious beliefs of Indian people. He highlights the typical Indian thinking. The villagers thought this biting of the scorpion as a good sign because they believe that it will relieve the mother of her sins of previous birth. In terms of reincarnation, they provide different interpretations for the previous and future birth and totally ignore the affliction of the mother of present birth. They also opine that the poison of scorpion and its pain will purify her of the worldly desires and ambitions. The poet says:

May the sins of your previous birth

be burned away tonight, they said.

May your suffering decreases

the misfortunes of your next birth, they said...

May the poison purify your flesh

Of desire, and your spirit of ambition.

Ezekiel is a perfectionist in terms of the versification. He employs innumerable figures of speech in his poetry. He seems distinguished in his use of alliteration, simile, metaphor etc. The structure of his poems is totally aloof, qualifying him an innovative poet. The poet in this poem addresses his father as sceptic and rationalist but, he too appears primitive in his approach of the problem. He too has no reliable medical treatment to overcome the pain. The poet as a child “watched the flame feeding on my mother”, when his father poured paraffin on the bite of scorpion and set it in fire. The poet exposes here the ignorance of the people and the absence of an antidote. He says:

I watched the holy man perform his rites

To tame the poison with an incantation

The typical Indian social life is beautifully presented in the poem, *Edinburgh Interlude, Lightly*. The poem presents an age old domestic situation where there is always bickering going on between a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. The mother-in-law assumes her traditional role of blaming the daughter-in-law that she does not help her in the kitchen. Then the father-in-law comes with all the traditional instructions for the daughter-in-law. He says:

You must try to understand your mother-in-law.

She's a very kind woman, you know. There aren't many who do

All the work in the kitchen.

The son also becomes a part of this discord and says to his newly wedded wife:

If you quarrel with my mother, you quarrel with me.

Similarly, Ezekiel shares his experience of Indian social set up and laments that this part of the world is flowering into slums and poverty is clinging the country like some destructible disease. The poet feels helpless and wants to cry over his helpless situation. However, his own faculty of reason comes to his rescue. He also expresses his deep regret over the mechanical life of a man of the modern society. The modern man claims to be a human, but is actually a dragon, which is very detrimental for the society. The best representative poem of these thoughts is *Island*:

Unsuitable for song as well as sense

the island flowers into slums

and skyscrapers, reflecting

precisely the growth of my mind

I am here to find my way in it.

Sometimes I cry for help

But mostly keep my own counsel.

*I hear distorted echoes
Of my own ambiguous voice
and of dragons claiming to be humans.*

Nissim Ezekiel though foreign by origin is a true Indian by birth. His poetry represents the true Indianess on the international level. That is why he is often regarded as the father of Indian poetry in English. He remained throughout his life dedicated to Indian society and culture. He talks about his commitment to his birthplace even when he received the indifference because of his belonging to a minority community. In the poem, 'Background, Casually', he says:

*I have made my commitment 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.*

While Nissim Ezekiel is proud of being an Indian by birth, yet he never appears reluctant in elucidating the social evils and negative side of Indian society. In the poem, 'The Railway Clerk', he presents a true portrayal of typical Indian housewife, whose demands know no limits. The meager income of the clerk does not allow him to fulfill all the demands of his wife. He wants to earn some extra money by unfair means, but there is no such opportunity as it is in other departments. Ezekiel here highlights the corrupt administrative system. The meager salaries of the government employees are also an issue in this poem. And indeed poverty is shown as a major impediment in the way of blissful conjugal life. The poet presents these thoughts beautifully in these lines:

*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.

The poem 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.' is a clear indication of indianization of English. The word to word translation from Hindi to English seems very funny. However, the Indianess is marked by the abundant use of present continuous instead of present simple tense. Here are some lines from the poem:

*Frieds,
Our dear sister
Is departing for foreign
In two three days,
and
We are meeting today
To wish her bon voyage.
You are all knowing, friends,
What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.*

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