

Various Influences on Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry Including Autobiographical Elements

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Abstract

The father of post Independence Indian verse in English and the eminent Indo English poet, Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), is a man with vast knowledge. His poetry reflects his learning. Every poet or writer has various sources, influence his works. In another words, poetry is the outcome of one's own thoughts and feelings, the impact of surroundings, the experiences in life and the conflicts and tensions in the mind. In is also an instrument to soothe the wounded heart and console oneself. Ezekiel however, remained a continuing influence on Indian poetry as poet, literary critic, editor, publisher, teacher, adviser and friends of poets. About the influences of his poetry, in an interview, he tells Suresh Kohli.

“Some of my early poetry was influenced by Rilke. In did not succeed in assimilating this and eventually it. I have imitated Eliot, Pound, Yeats and other but never very well. My own voice has often been muffled or confused by random and temporary influences. That is the main weakness of my verse. A clear influence is no proof of a poem's merit. Every person has an impact of his surroundings. The atmosphere and people around him influence him. On a poet or an author his influence is deeper. The area in which he lives, its people, their occupations, all find an expression in his work. Various places, which he refers to, such as Harbour Bar, Apollo Room, Taj (Hotel Taj) etc. show that he is deeply attached to his city and completely familiar to every nook of it. In fact, all the above influences and the incidents of his life have contributed to enrich his poetry.

Key Words : Poetry, Nissim Ezekiel, Harbour Bar, post Independence, impact of surroundings, experiences in life, conflicts.

Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

“Life is only partly lived
Desires are half desires
Love is partley going to sleep
I often think of death.” (Sotto voce, 6 – 9)

Composer of these lines, the father of Post Independence Indian verse in English and the eminent Indo English Poet, Nissim Ezekiel was born on December 24, 1924, in Bombay of Bene – Israel Parents. Both of his parents were devoted to education. His father, Moses, was a Professor of Botany and Zoology at Wilson College; his mother, Diana, was a School Teacher. As a boy, Nissim started his Schooling in a small school run by Christian Missionaries which was known as a Convent of Jesus and Mary. In 1934, he got admission in Antonia D'souza High School. At this school, teachers encouraged him to write, and read poetry loudly. In 1936, when he was 12 years old, he wrote his first complete poem. The female teacher, to whom this poem was shown, recognized the talent of the forth coming great poet and exclaimed :

“Ah, ha, listen all of you we have a poet in the class.”

And at that point of time, he decided that he was going to be a poet whether good or bad. So, it becomes clear from the incident that he nourished a keen desire to become a poet from his childhood.

Every poet or writer has various sources, incidents and people who inspire him and influence his works. In another words, poetry is the outcome of one's own thoughts and feelings, the impact of surroundings, the experiences in life and the conflicts and tensions in the mind. It is also an instrument to soothe the wounded heart and console oneself. Dr. Sanjit Mishra remarks :

Every Writer is a typical product of age and the literary movements prevailing at the time substantially affect his work. Nissim Ezikiel has palpably been influenced by the contemporary poets like, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yearts, Ezra Pound and Phillip Larkin. These influences shaped his creative odyssey that stretches well over five decades. In fact, the huge bulk of his writings, creative as well as critical evidences a receptive personality prone to assimilate various impact. (13-14)

Ezekiel himself admits:

Rilke, Yeats, Lawrence, the English Poets of the thirties and forties (Auden, Spenser, Mac Neice, Day Lewis, the English Movement Poets of the fifties, the whole American poetic tradition from Pound and Eliot to Frost and William Carlos Williams etc. Many European poets in translation, Posternak to Yevtushenko among the Russian ones, for example – On the whole, my weaker poems are those in which an influence can be traced, except the poems in ‘The Exact Name’ which are under the influence of the movement but not “bad” because I feel my own voice is quite clear in them.

(Chindhade 155)

To start with the influences of T.S. Eliot, the impact of the Waste Land can be noticed in some of his poems. Tiresias, the bisexual creature in the Waste Land has prophetic vision. When he reads the thoughts of the people, he realizes the sordidness of their lives. They are spiritually sterile. They are ignorant and living only a sexual and materialistic life. Thus Eliot has depicted a morose picture of life which disgusts the mind.

Ezekiel seems to be agreed with Eliot in some of his poems – ‘Urban’, ‘A Morning Walk’ and ‘In India’, can be placed under this category, where a sense of disillusionment with this world occupies the mind of the poet. Ezekiel finds that like the Waste Landers, the dwellers of Bombay are leading a life which has nothing good. They are full of lust and carnal wishes like the Waste Landers as they admit in ‘At the Hotel’ where they want only to relish the nudity of the naked Cuban Dancer.

The influence of W.B. Yeats is also evident as one goes through the Works of Nissim Ezekiel. His early poetry is influenced by yeats. ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ centres around a journey to that City. This journey is the symbol of a search for spiritual life.

An aged man is but a paltry thing
tattered coed upon a stick, unless -
Soul clap its hands and sing and louder sing
for every tatter in its mortal dress. (9 – 12)

Ezekiel has also implied this symbol in the poem 'Enterprise' where the journey is 'Started as a Pilgrimage'. It is the journey with high aspiration and to achieve something noble. The poem also bears an imprint of T.S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'. Yeats had used the symbols of earth, air, fire, water and tree. Ezekiel also used such elemental symbols. In the poem 'Urban' he has used rain, river, wind, dawn and night as symbols.

W.B. Yeats 'Easter 1916' has the symbol 'stone' which stands for firmness.

Hearts with one purpose alone
through summer and winter see
Enchanted to a stone
to trouble the living stream. (41 – 44)

Philip Larkin also influenced Ezekiel. About this influences, Dr. Sanjit Mishra

Comments :

“Ezekiel’s poetry has an overwhelming impact of movement poets like Phillip Larkin and Donald Davie in its deft precision of phrase, common subject matter, self irony and allergy to hypocrisy.”

Ezekiel was born and brought up in a Jewish community. His poems reflect his Jewishness. Though he resided in India, he declares India as his 'Backward Place' or the Native Place but there are Jewish elements which influence his Works.

In an interview, Ezekiel admits about his Jewish consciousness:

There was a long phase in my life when I thought I have ceased to be Jewish. When I showed some knowledgeable friends some of the poems, written during an early part of that phase, they read them and said, “How Jewish!” I didn’t know what they meant, then, but I do now
Muslim, Christian and Other Writers,
Artists, Thinkers. Even if a Hindu
Writer does not use Hindu Themes

a Hindu Element in his writing may
dominate it or at least creep into it. (Hoskote 9)

‘Night of the Scorpion’ shows the concern of neighbours as well as members of family for each other. The poem origins of a personal experience and is the celebration of a mother’s love for her children:

My mother only said:
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
and spared my Children.

(46-48)

‘Jewish Wedding in Bombay’ is direct expression of his realization about his background. The poem is autobiographical too because it is the re-collection of Ezekiel’s marriage with Daisy Jacob on 23rd November, 1952. The Poem begins like this:

Her mother shed a tear or two but was not really
crying. It was the thing to do, so she did it,
enjoying every moment. The bride laughed when I
sympathised, and said don’t be silly. (1-4)

Every person has an impact of his surroundings. The atmosphere and the people around him influence him. One Poet or an author, this influence is deeper. The area in which he lives, its people, their occupations, all find an expression in his works. Thomas Hardy describes Wessex with all its rural traits. R.K. Narayan’s Malgudi, does not need any introduction. He describes the people of Malgudi, their simple joys and wishes, their professions, the natural surroundings with a great perfection. The impression of North of Boston is evident in the creation of Robert Frost. D.H. Lawrence’s novels bear an impression of his own life and surroundings in which he was brought up. Charls Dickens is another author whose childhood, its miseries etc. are described in his novels. Ezekiel is not an exception. ‘Background Casually’ presents a tableau of his life. He lived in Bombay, the City with contradictions. On one hand, there are sky crapers and on the other hand the joul smelling slums also. The city and its life is portrayed like this.

Barbaric city sick with slums,
 Deprived of season, blessed with rain,
 Its hawkers, beggars, iron lunged,
 Processions led by frantic drums,
 (A morning walk, 15 – 18)

Besides the city, Bombay, he gives the real picture of the society, to which he belongs. India, in its true colour, has been depicted in his poems. ‘Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.’, ‘Night of the Scorpion’, ‘In India’, ‘From very Indian Poems in Indian English’, ‘How the English Lessons Ended’, ‘Ganga’, ‘On Bellasis Road’, ‘Guru’, ‘Entertainment’ etc. are such poems. The following excerpt narrates the usual incidents about an Indian bride and her ‘Typical Indian Mother in Law’.

Typical India Mother-in-Law
 to the bride
 returning from her honeymoon,
 ‘Don’t worry, dear,
 I need no help in the kitchen
 Learn it to me please.
 (From Edinburg Interlude, XVIII, 1-6)

Besides such poems, the poet has composed many other poems which have an autobiographical touch. ‘Poem of the Separation’ deals with a love affair which ends with the separation of the lovers. In fact the poem is based on the end of an affair between Nissim Ezekiel and Linda Hess. The poem commences with the remembrance of these days when the poet was happy with his beloved.

To judge by memory alone,
 Our love was happy,
 When the bombs burst in Kashmir,
 My life had burst,
 and merged in yours. (1-5)

The time, he spent in London, had a great impact on him. The basement room of the flat of Alkazi, which witnessed the hard time spent by Ezekiel there, is mentioned in many of his poems. ‘A poem of Dedication’ starts with the reference of basements room:

The view from basement room is rather small,
 A patch or two of green, a bit of sky,
 Children heard but never seen, an old wall,
 two trees, a washing line between Windows
 with high Curtains to block outward eye. (1-5)

His autobiographical poem ‘Background Casually’ has also the reference of that room which gave him shelter in London. In the days of his poverty:

.....Philosophy
 Poverty and Poetry, three
 Companions shared my basement room (23-25)

Old age has its own effects. The strength, both Physical and Mental, is lost. Though he is ageing but, he doesn’t want the ‘ashes of the old fire’ but the flame itself:

I donot want want the ashes
 of the old fire but the flame itself.
 Interest in the secrets of renewal
 is a sign of age.
 No longer Secret (16-20)

In fact, all the above influences and the incidents of his life have contributed to enrich his poetry.

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